



Unexpected Flying Object: a local horseman is surprised to see a balloon

Air of adventure

THERE IS only one way to appreciate the vastness, beauty and impressiveness of a country like Mongolia and that is from the air. Of all the means of aviation available to us to do so, the hot air balloon has to be top of the list. Silent, open, sedate, you literally hang above the scenery and feast your eyes on a quite extraordinary landscape.

And so it was that I found myself doing just that. Above the Gobi desert at 2000ft agl and with outstanding visibility, I imagined I could see forever. The landscape was vast and empty, save for our ger camp nestling below us, an ordered arrangement of incongruous small white dots.

The Great Mongolian Balloon Adventure was the brainchild of Allie and Phil Dunnington. They are both commercial balloon pilots of considerable experience and it had been Allie's dream to fly her balloon in Mongolia. Phil had already ticked

Stephanie Giles, a fixed wing pilot, tries a spot of hot air ballooning in Mongolia

that box some years ago. However, there are no balloon operators in the country, in fact no balloons at all, so to organise a 3,000 km tour, hauling balloons, gas, equipment, people and supplies, something that had never been done before, was no mean feat.

It took nearly three years to arrange, I believe, and was done in conjunction with Panoramic Journeys (PJ), a tour company with years of experience operating in Mongolia. They provided trucks, guides, accommodation, knowledge, the route and Phil and Allie organised the balloons. Four of them had to be shipped out by air to Ulaanbaatar (UB), the capital, ahead of the

teams while 3,000 litres of propane gas had to be shipped in from Russia.

And of course there was the tricky problem of the Mongolian CAA. They put every up every objection to the trip, I suspect because they did not quite understand what it was all about. All the negotiations had to be done through the Mongolian office of PJ so they had a steep learning curve as well. Finally, permissions were given to fly at specific launch sites, however we had to contact them before and after we flew. Mobile telephone communications being what they are in Mongolia, well, that sometimes didn't happen. Not that it stopped us flying of course!

There are no direct flights to Mongolia from the UK; you enter via China or Russia. I opted to fly to Beijing in order to take the Trans-Mongolian Railway to UB, part of the Trans-Siberian network. It was a 30-hour journey through north China, across the

Feature

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Stalinist purges of the 1930s put it out of business. It was only after the collapse of communism in Mongolia that the monastery began a slow restoration and today 50 monks live there.

We had permission from the head monk to launch two balloons from inside the complex in the late afternoon. See what I mean about bizarre? The idea was to have a cameraman in one of the two balloons launched outside to film the lift-off of the two inside. I was part of the retrieval crew for the outside balloons but later heard various tales of monks dragging baskets into place and laying out the envelopes. A most unusual break from their religious studies I imagine!

Pretty soon all four balloons were airborne over the town and the entire population must have come out to watch. The first balloon down was quickly surrounded. The second one down was set

upon by dozens of the local children and the pilot spent the next hour or two doing tethered flights giving as many of the kids a go as he could. An enduring memory is seeing this balloon in the near distance light up his burner to get aloft once again. It was dusk and the burner lit up the inside of the envelope. Just above and to one side was a full moon. Magic.

During the course of the holiday we managed to take all the guides, film crew and drivers aloft and joined them in their combined terror and delight! They also had to endure the infamous "virgin balloonist" ritual – a baptism of earth, fire and water! One suspects they had never had a tour quite like this one before.

None of us had and for me, a balloon "newbie", it was extraordinary on many fronts. The chance to have several flights, and some hands-on time on the burners, the



Heavens above: the balloons fly from the famous monastery at Karakorum

chance to learn more about this branch of aviation I knew nothing about before, meeting some amazing people and above all seeing the most astonishing county that is Mongolia.

Stephanie is a member of the British Women Pilots' Association and this article was first published in the BWPAs newsletter in November 2010.

Another expedition is planned for August/September 2012. Email Allie at balloonjourneys@alliedunnington.co.uk

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