

A world of difference



As I stare out at the thrashing trees and lashing rain in Bristol, it is hard not to wish I was living in a more benign climate for ballooning. Where? Italy? Southern Germany? India maybe? I've trained students in all these. How about... Libya?

Now Libya might not be on most people's list of "must have" holiday destinations – it's "dry" in every sense of the word, with no alcohol permitted and several thousand miles of the world's largest desert, plus a government which considers tourism an irritating sideline to their central policy of cultivating "big oil".

But once the good Colonel has put his imprimatur on your ballooning project at least you aren't likely to have any serious obstacles or angry farmers! We

Allie Dunnington, just back from training a PuT in Libya, considers whether some countries are better than others for a beginner

nevertheless narrowly avoided being caught up in Libya's spats with Switzerland over arrests and minarets but luckily the UK is not a Schengen country, so Brits were welcome whilst the rest of Europe waited at the gate.

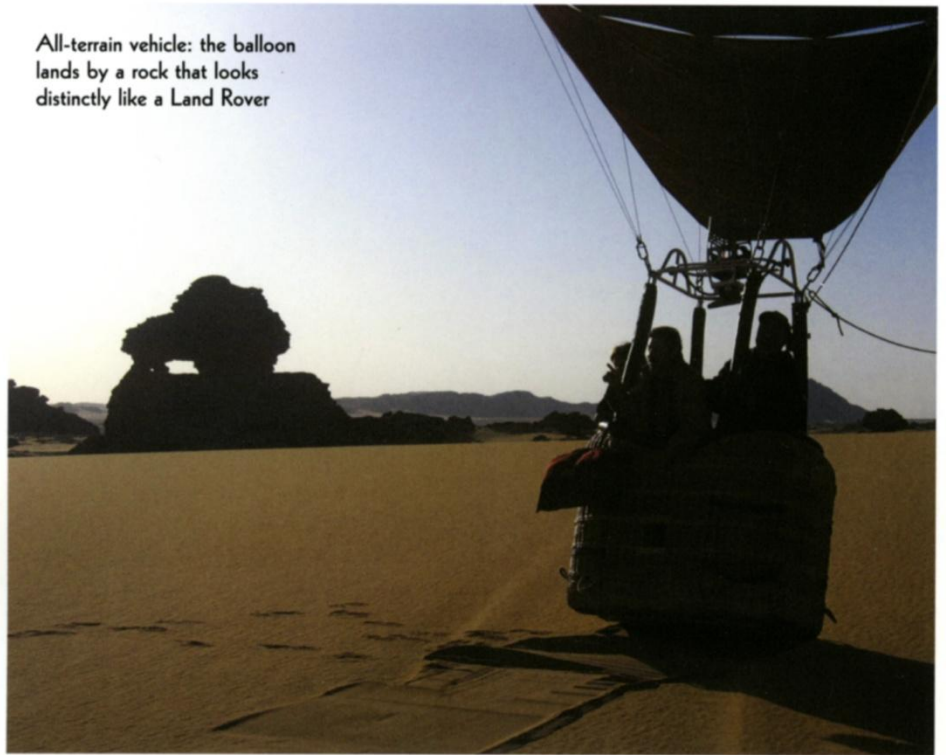
Looking for the perfect balloon nursery, what do you need? Italy's benign weather? India's open spaces perhaps? Or Bavaria's wonderful scenery and friendly farmers.

Well our initial research on weather patterns suggested March was the windiest month in North Africa. Hmmm, a promising start.

Sam Rutherford, an ex-military pilot living in Belgium and running an adventure company, was our intrepid PuT candidate. Being also the organiser of this expedition, he was keen to learn to fly balloons, hoped to study for his balloon ground school exams and wanted to assess whether Libya could be used as a base for future training or similar balloon rallies. With Paul Spellward and Phil Dunnington as qualified instructors plus myself and Chris Davies and Chris Wood as pilots he was well surrounded by a solid team to help him achieve his goals.

Always check your student's training

All-terrain vehicle: the balloon lands by a rock that looks distinctly like a Land Rover



continued to howl and sandstorms greeted us every morning. What did our guide books tell us about March?

Never mind. Sam wanted to see a balloon and so eventually he and the crew learnt the first lesson: sometimes it is better to stop before you even start! There is no way you can safely inflate a balloon in winds gusting more than 15kt without shelter!

The next attempt though was more successful: a morning take-off near the huge sand dunes of Terikba. Winds had been howling all night long, but calmed down slightly at sunrise. Chris Davies offered Sam a training flight and I believe our fearless trainee managed to get a tick in his training log book for "landing in more than 8kt (demonstrated by P1)" easily!

This flight certainly was remarkable and lifted all of our spirits enormously as it also marked Phil's 100th country (and my 36th). To all of our great relief, Chris Davies had developed the supernatural powers of turning red grape juice into something much more substantial and alcoholic!

Training needs time and preparation. Choice of launch site, load calculations, passenger briefings, flight planning, fuel management, all those very important issues mostly fell short due to delayed departures, our devout crew's prayers, a forgotten quick release or very windy conditions. If you want to train in a more structured form, I'd certainly recommend a more benign climate like Italy or maybe India.

But if you are prepared to experience the "uncertainties" of ballooning – as indeed we often encountered even on our flights in known territory – Libya and its challenging scenery will certainly fulfil your hopes. Should you carry on flying towards 800km of inaccessible sand dunes, some as high as 600ft, or better call it a day? Can you risk flying on over those mountain ridges into the next valley when you may not be retrieved for several days? The temptation is always there, especially if the sun shines, the winds are good and you think "this is best thing in the world".

Decision making, and especially making the right decision at the right time, is a quality that all pilots need to

log however. In this case, his few previous flights in a big rides balloon suggested limited training value.

The first three days were spent convincing the gas refineries to let us fill up our tanks – another useful training thread – though it took about four hours of paperwork and 40 minutes of actual refuelling for 20 tanks! We then drove 1,200km heading south through quite desolate and flat deserts, whilst the winds



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Men in drag: Phil and Sam emerge dusty from their landing

Sharp lesson: it's not advisable to inflate next to spiky rocks



possess or acquire. Teaching that skill can well be done in a country like Libya, but what about map-reading and proper navigation? Our only navigational aids were our GPS and common sense of direction. Map-reading, interpretation of features, signs and SAs (sensitive areas)



Running repair: at least, I don't think it's a nasty accident - Ed.

certainly are best learned in the UK where flying within a very tight and intense countryside.

But expeditions like this one also teach the student to watch out for errors and omissions by their instructors: taking off in the middle of the desert at 3pm (when sunset is at 7pm), at a temperature of 27degrees certainly doesn't lead to a nice stable flight!

When you hit the ground with some force after putting on all burners, you know it's actually still VERY thermic and balloons don't like thermal activity. So why take the risk?

Or, second scenario: it's late afternoon, still very windy with gusts up to 15kt. You have some fantastic rock formations around your camp – or the endless desert. Because the rocks look so amazing you decide to take off amidst those tight and sharply-edged rocks. Strangely you completely forget what your instructors have always taught you about choosing a wide open space, especially in windy

take-off conditions. The next minute you find a big hole in your envelope and you realise that yet again the spirit of adventure has overtaken your normally very rational mind!

Another lesson learnt as an instructor: you as the trainer always need to be aware of the margin between your own limitations and those of your student. That means if you find yourself with your PuT, hands on the burner, racing along with 32kt (not a joke!) over rugged escarpments with the Algerian/Tunisian borders fast approaching, you might want to take over to do the landing yourself! As we all know, in flying, split seconds can make all the difference between a safe or very risky flight. In that sense I definitely could see Phil's long-standing experience in training and examining when we as a trio (Sam the PuT, me the "trainer" and Phil the examiner and instructor) landed in 17kt with a 50m drag!

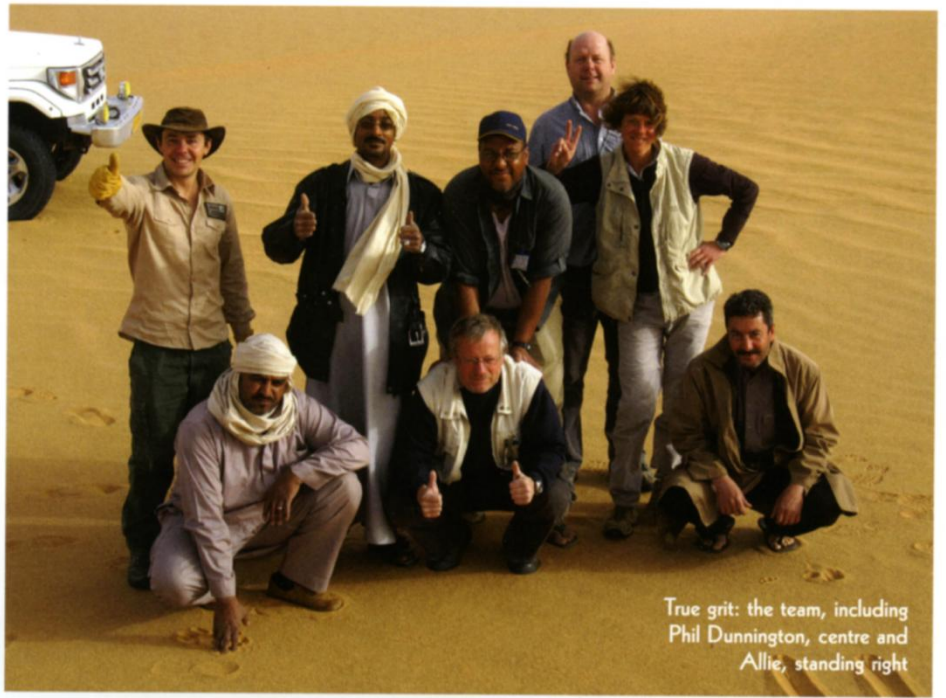
So where would you go to learn flying then? Libya, Italy, India, the UK or

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 ...but English pubs in general
 are still better and more fun!
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Germany? There are certainly lessons that can be learnt in any of these locations but probably better in some and less good in others.

If you want to be able to fly within airspace, tight restricted areas, in very changeable weather conditions, you best stick to training in the UK. If you are happy to fly along some vast and spacious landscapes and love fast landings, then maybe you should head for Libya. If you like to properly prepare yourself for your flight and learn approaches from various altitudes and low level flight, then Italy is your destination. As for India: you'd certainly pick up a range of lessons but yet again, you probably won't learn how to read a map or how to talk to air traffic. And Germany: well, having done most of my training out in the lovely countryside of Bavaria with its lakes and mountains, I must admit, it's a great place to get your hours in – but: English pubs in general are still better and more fun!

The key is always to balance essential content of the BBAC PPL (B) training syllabus – carefully developed over 30 years – against opportunities to broaden your student's experience. Nowhere in the world is absolutely ideal for balloon training. A carefully planned mix can bring both good instruction and exciting challenges.



True grit: the team, including Phil Dunnington, centre and Allie, standing right



Colonel's presence, above, can't be forgotten.
 Right: Allie with the daughters of their driver