

# Winter at Tantora: An Adventure in Saudi Arabia



A hot air balloon festival held in a UNESCO world heritage site in AlUla, Saudi Arabia, gave the unprecedented opportunity to fly amid amazing rock formations carved with ancient tombs, reveals Allie Dunnington.

Here I was: a woman on her own, sitting in a car, driving through this vast rugged, mountainous scenery. Nothing particularly special, you might think. Except that this was not somewhere in the US or Africa. No, I was in the middle of Saudi Arabia. A country where, only two years ago, women were not allowed to touch a steering wheel or they were sent to prison. Where women couldn't travel without a male minder, and had to cover up with a hijab or even niqab, and wear a full-body long abaya or burqa. Times are changing, though, and for the good! I was lucky to be one of the first tourists to enjoy this

freedom of movement, but even better, to fly in our hot air balloon over one of the world's most secret, but at the same time, most amazing historical sites.

## DESERT BALLOON FESTIVAL

AlUla or Mada'in Saleh, a UNESCO world heritage site with hundreds of rock-carved tombs similar to well-known Petra in neighbouring Jordan, is situated in western Saudi, some 700 miles from Riyadh, the capital of this enormous desert country. To get here from Ngapali, Myanmar, where I had been working, I had to take four flights via Yangon, Dubai and Riyadh to AlUla. I guess, despite it taking nearly three days, I

was lucky to be a 21st century traveller, as I imagine our explorers only 100 years ago slowly moving on camels, boats and horses.

We were here, with over 200 fellow balloonists, for a balloon festival forming part of the wider cultural event, the Winter at Tantora Festival – staged each weekend between 19th December 2019 and 7th March 2020 – previewing the opening of AlUla to the public in October 2020. We were there by invitation of Rien Jurg Promotions, the Saudi Tourism board, and the Royal Commission of AlUla (RCU), which has big plans to attract visitors from around the globe. And indeed, it was well worth the long journey, the hassle with the

balloon shipment and some of the hardships that followed in the next few days.

## AMAZING ROCK FORMATIONS

As 100 balloons took to the skies in the gin-clear but freezing cold morning hours – husband Phil and I taking part in the mass launch in our red-golden Cameron C-100 with two local guests on board – we could hardly believe our eyes: as far as the horizon stretched there were bizarrely shaped rocks and spiky pinnacles displaying a light-show with their reflections between shade and bright sunshine. But it got even better as the entire balloon fleet gently drifted towards the tombs of Mada'in Saleh: we

were coming within metres to catch a rare bird's-eye view of the intricately carved massive tombs built around 2,000 years ago by the Nabateans. The Nabateans extended their Kingdom from the ancient city of Petra in Jordan to this area in northern Saudi Arabia and buried their most respected military and civilian citizens in those temple-like tombs, whilst ordinary peasants were buried in simple graves on top of the rocks. Lost to the outside world for many years due to the restrictions for tourism in the Saudi Kingdom, Mada'in Saleh was only announced as a UNESCO world heritage site in 2008, and is now heavily promoted by the RCU.

Our local guests were from Riyadh and they had specifically travelled here to watch the balloons and see their own cultural heritage. They seemed to thoroughly enjoy their first ballooning experience as they



Above: What the heck is that? A camel looks back at Allie's balloon on the approach.

Main photo: Balloons play with the light winds over amazing rock formations.

took loads of selfies and played traditional Arabian music.

Winds were gentle with only 3kt at the surface, but climbing to higher altitudes (we were launching already from 3,000ft AMSL) we found a very useful faster 'box' wind to allow us to fly back to base. I radioed our ground crew.

The truck drivers were mostly local Arabs, and their enthusiasm for getting up at 04:00 in the dark cold early morning, loading and off-loading heavy balloon kit and chasing the balloons through the desert, ranges from hiding in their heated cars and not lifting a finger, to offering warming hot tea and delicious local dates! The same could be said about our Arab passengers, of whom we encountered some really helpful and enthusiastic ones, whilst others preferred to stay in their limousines and talk business over a coffee. But what would we would have done without the team from the Showforce organisation? These young, strong guys, mostly from Pakistan, were allocated to our balloon teams to help with the humping and heaving and balloon

Both photos © Allie Dunnington





Above: The incredible tombs of Mada'in Saleh, carved into huge rock formations.



Above: Allie (R) on a training flight for PuT Tara Taylor with two local Arab passengers.



Above: Phil (L) and pilot Rob Macdonald prepare to board the Stinson Gullwing.

chase. Huge thanks for their enthusiasm, strength and passion.

After an hour and thirty minutes we landed in the soft sands near the main road. With our driver and the crew chief, 'Prince Cheema', on the spot to help deflating, we were one of the first teams back to base to refuel. This was efficiently organised by Rien's support team and not too long after we were all sitting at our



Above: A mass ascent of one hundred balloons takes to the air as the sun rises over AlUla.



All photos © Allie Dunnington

'dining' tent enjoying a delicious breakfast buffet with fresh salads, fruit, and hot Arabian dishes such as *ful medames*, a stew of cooked fava beans served with spices and vegetables.

**VINTAGE FLIGHT**

A highlight of the event for Phil and me was the opportunity to hitch a ride in one extremely rare vintage aircraft: a 1942-built Stinson Gullwing. Rob Macdonald, a British expat living in Bali, took us over the main highlights of the area, flying a close circuit

Above: One of the branded Winter at Tantora Balloon Festival balloons, a Cameron Z-105.

over famous Jabal Al-Fil (Elephant Rock), then Mada'in Saleh, before climbing over a mountain range to show us the opera house. An opera house in the middle of the desert? Yes indeed, the Maraya concert hall – a massive glass construction that reflects the surrounding rocks and mountains – is staging concerts with world-stars such as Andrea Bocelli, Yanni, Lionel Richie and Omar Khairat.



Above: An early morning take-off for a flight over the ancient tombs of Mada'in Saleh.



**STRANDED**

Returning to base we spotted the private jet of the Japanese prime minister flanked by two big jets of the Saudi King, and we also admired the sister to our own aircraft, a Beech D18S (G-BKGL) and a beautiful Stearman Kaydet (G-CIOC). The vintage aircraft had flown from the UK for the festival, offering guests scenic rides over this fascinating landscape.

With five unforgettable flights in our logbooks – and participation in a Guinness World Record of the longest nightglow in

Above: Allie and Phil's balloon drifts over sparse trees in the desert environment.

the world of 100 balloons – and country number 126 for Phil and 102 for me – it was time to go back to AlUla airport.

With heavy rains and flooding in Dubai on our return, many of us were stranded for days without luggage. But by then we had learned one important Arab word: 'Insh'allah!' Nothing quite went according to plan, but we all had tales to tell and it had been an unforgettable experience.

**WHAT WOMEN CAN AND CAN'T DO IN SAUDI ARABIA**

- Women are allowed, since September 2018, to drive a car
- They are allowed to watch a football match.

However, they are still not allowed to do the following without a male guardian or chaperone:

- Open a bank account
- Apply for their own passport
- Travel on their own
- Marry or divorce
- Sit on their own in public restaurant areas (there are separate 'family' areas).

**TOURISTS**

Female tourists can now hire a car, drive around the country without a male companion, and might even be tolerated to share a hotel room with their non-married partner (which is not accepted for local couples).

**VISAS**

Tourist visas have become easy to obtain since November 2019. You just need to fill in an online application form, available from the e-visa homepage, pay, and then take your document with you. Formal invitations are no longer required, and the new rule applies to most European countries, including the UK. See [www.saudiarabiavisa.co.uk](http://www.saudiarabiavisa.co.uk)

**ALCOHOL**

Alcohol is still strictly banned from import and there is nowhere in the Kingdom that will have it, but non-alcoholic beer is widely sold and accepted – you can survive drinking it!

AlUla, opening to the public in late 2020, will offer visitors a range of sports and adventure activities, lavish musical and cultural events, and the opportunity to explore its rich historical and archaeological sites – and of course hot air ballooning over this amazing landscape. For more information, visit the website: [www.experiencealula.com](http://www.experiencealula.com)