

flying high

Feel like a bird, letting the gentle wind guide your hot air balloon to

experience the unseen, untouched and unthought of, says **Phil Dunnington**





I was captivated by a hot air balloon flight at Woburn Abbey, an English stately home near London, on a golden spring evening in 1971. And I decided to progress from a part-time private flier to a fully committed professional pilot and consultant in ballooning tourism.

While operating a balloon for an international airline in the 1980s and 1990s, I thought of flying in many countries and eventually it became a world record of 94! The magic number will be 100 soon. I have flown ambassadors, ministers, film stars, musicians and more happy children that you can count in the most unlikely of locations—Antigua, Macedonia and Kazakhstan.

VIEW FROM THE TOP
 Balloons of different shapes pull enthusiasts from all over the world

I can't even begin to recount the wonderful scenes Allie (my wife and also a pilot) and I have seen. Its so exhilarating.

In the recent Pushkar Fair in Rajasthan, we piloted 19 flights, drifting over the *ghats*, temples and sand dunes. Passengers included Indians from Agra and Mumbai to overseas visitors from Belgium, Spain, UK, USA and Australia.

Flying takes place in the first and last two hours of daylight on most days. Every time we get ready for the flight, passengers and the people around watch awestruck as the shapeless mass of nylon fabric fills first with cold air and is then heated with an LPG burner to rise majestically to its full height, glowing in the dawn or dusk light.



In the balloon

Hot air ballooning and airshipping doesn't involve a lot of instruments (a Global Positioning System (GPS) and altimeter are normally the only instruments used on a flight). Though it involves some physical work in lifting and dragging the envelope or the basket, it can all be managed through team work. Each balloon is individually crafted in European factories to the highest aeronautical specifications, and consists of a basket, woven traditionally from cane and willow, stainless steel fuel tanks, a LPG burner, and a nylon envelope in which the air is heated to 100°C. The activity brings sounds and scents of dozens of landscapes within reach.

They clamber aboard the hand-woven cane basket, which rises gently as more heat is added. Although balloons drift with the wind, their height above the ground can be accurately controlled so passengers can have a conversation with the 'earthlings' below or see the far horizons from several thousand feet up.

In India, ballooning on a large scale is just beginning but our experience around the world suggests it has a great future. I am also the chief consultant with Sky Waltz, the first company in India to offer hot air balloon flights with the base at Jaipur, Ranthambore and in the Delhi region. Rajasthan and the Golden Triangle (Delhi-Agra-Jaipur) is our core region, but we have plans for new destinations in the north and south too.

Indeed there is hardly a better way of getting in touch with the people around you than by setting up a balloon flight: putting together your crew, inviting and meeting your passengers, acting as a tour guide during the flight and landing in some villages where the locals surround you with amazed smiling faces!

Our experience here has been wonderful. All

WAYS OF FLYING
Hopping provides a different thrill; hot air airship; inflating the balloon

operations are approved by India's DGCA and are conducted to international standards including insurance, pilot qualifications and flight equipment. Now we are training two young Indians—Dhawal from Pune and Rishi from Jhunjhunu.

Probably the most spectacular sight in my ballooning career was the 2,000 plus Buddhist temples and monasteries of Bagan in Myanmar, glistening gold and red in a huge sweep of the mighty Ayeyarwaddy River. Almost equally stunning is the view of Chomolhari in the Himalayas on a flight over Punakha Dzong in Bhutan. It was on a hot air balloon flight in Myanmar that I met Allie.

She was on a tour guiding through Myanmar and I invited her on a flight over the 2,000 temples of Bagan in central Myanmar. Allie says that 'the feeling of drifting gently with the winds and viewing the area from low level was simply stunning. Good fortune comes in showers as I discovered a new passion in aviation and also found a man to share my life with'!

Since then she has been training with me and





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also other pilots. Allie obtained her private licence in 2005 and has flown in 30 countries, Thailand being the latest on her list. She is one of the few female balloon pilots in the world. Out of 100 male balloonists you would find just five or six women.

That is surprising, because ballooning is quite a 'female' activity involving a lot of multi-tasking (who can take care of screaming kids, washing up and being on the telephone at the same time?), intuition (assessing the winds) and getting a feeling to fly with them.

Even more multi-tasking is required when flying a hot air airship. But Allie has taken flight training on a 2-seater DP 70 in Mondovi, Italy, and recently got her licence. She discovered to her surprise that she is the second woman in the whole of Europe

TOUCHING THE RUINS

Flying in Bagan
over the green
fields and ancient
temples

holding a hot air airship licence.

Flying an airship has the advantages of being able to steer against the wind and to navigate it to exactly where you want it to be. So it's great for filming projects, sightseeing of specific areas and promotional aspects. But airships are quite expensive to operate and even more susceptible to strong winds. Nevertheless, Allie is hoping that she could fly over India and other parts of the world.

Allie is also planning to organise the first female balloon event back in the UK, which will hopefully promote this wonderful form of aviation to other women.

I have flown so many times, but each flight is different. In Antigua, we could see the endless string of islands which make up the



Leeward group like pearls surrounded by the turquoise of the Caribbean, whilst Kazakhstan's grassland steppes stretched from the ancient wooden orthodox cathedral of St Nicholas in Almaty to the borders with China in the Tian Shan mountains.

But there are two simply unforgettable flights. The first, in the late 1980s, was over the English Channel near Dover in company with 15 other balloons. The nominal 21mile crossing sounds easy, but wind direction and fuel duration are critical in any flight, more so after drifting silently over the famous White Cliffs and settling about 10m above the wave tops. After nearly four hours of flight parallel to the French coast near Cape Gris Nez and Boulogne, we

INFLATING AND DEFLATING

The team helps keep the balloon steady; man in Rajasthan watching the balloon

landed at the Le Touquet Airport, very relieved, and enjoyed a splendid French lunch at the airport terminal.

More challenging was a crossing of the north-west passage in Arctic Canada with British adventurer David Hempleman-Adams in 1999. We set out across several hundred miles of sea-ice from a spot at Little Cornwallis Island near the Magnetic North Pole and landed six hours later near Limestone Island off the mainland of Canada itself. This record-breaking flight concluded with two days in a tent on the ice pack, awaiting rescue from the white-out sub-zero temperatures with polar bears roaming outside.

My flights in balloons of special shapes,



PHOTOGRAPHS: ALLIE AND PHIL DUNNINGTON

almost all of which are made by UK—based Cameron Balloons, extend from promotional drinks and oil cans to some of the more imaginative designs belonging to the late Malcolm Forbes of *Forbes* magazine. His Faberge Egg and Japanese Temple replicas were my responsibility during his famed weekend parties at Chateau de Balleroy in Normandy, France.

Allie and I have seen varied sub-tropical jungle canopies and deserts with minimal disturbance to the flora and fauna. In a world tour in 2007, we flew in Namibia, New Zealand, Australia, Bolivia and Costa Rica.

After India, now the target is to fly in the skies of Mauritius, South Korea and the Indo-China countries. 🇮🇳

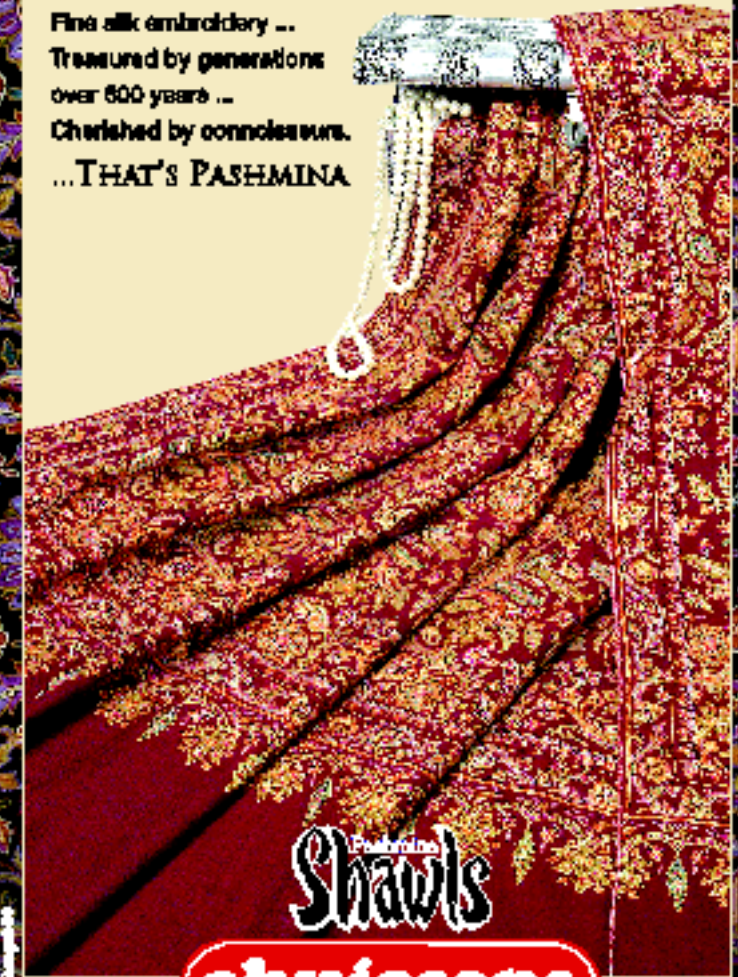
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