

Champagne at 2 000 feet

Douglas Lendrum

Kromdraai - It may be the most primitive form of flight, but to stand in a basket suspended by hot air, sipping champagne and watching the angry red sunrise in absolute silence is the most poetic and civilised feeling a person can experience.

Air Ventures recently launched their new Hot Air Balloon Safari at the Lion and Rhino Nature Reserve.

The idea behind the safari, according to one of the owners of Air Ventures Adam Fillmore, is to provide a complete experience, including a game drive and a bush breakfast.

What an experience it is. The safari begins before the sun has woken up. Passengers are picked up at the entrance to the Lion and Rhino Nature Reserve and are driven through the reserve, in the darkness, to the take-off site.

As the horizon begins to grow lighter, coffee or tea waits on a table, with a dash of Amarula for those who need a bit of extra warming up.

Within moments the balloon, which is already hovering as the passengers arrive, is being held down only by its tether and one or two straining game rangers.

Two holes in the side of the basket make it easy to climb aboard and, after a quick safety discussion, eight passengers and one pilot, Adam Fillmore, drift upwards in silent defiance of gravity.

At first it is difficult to imagine anything has happened at all. The only indication of flight is the sensation that the ground is further from your feet than usual and a slight forward movement even though you haven't taken a step.

With a deceptive sense of sluggishness the balloon moves with the wind to greet the sunrise.

Completely at ease in the safety of the sturdy basket the passengers get to know each other and ask Fillmore questions about ballooning.

"The highest we are allowed to fly is about 5 000 feet above sea level, which means today our ceiling will be roughly 2 000 ft (600 metres)," he said in explanation.

"We can cover about 10 kilometres in a one hour flight, depending on the wind.

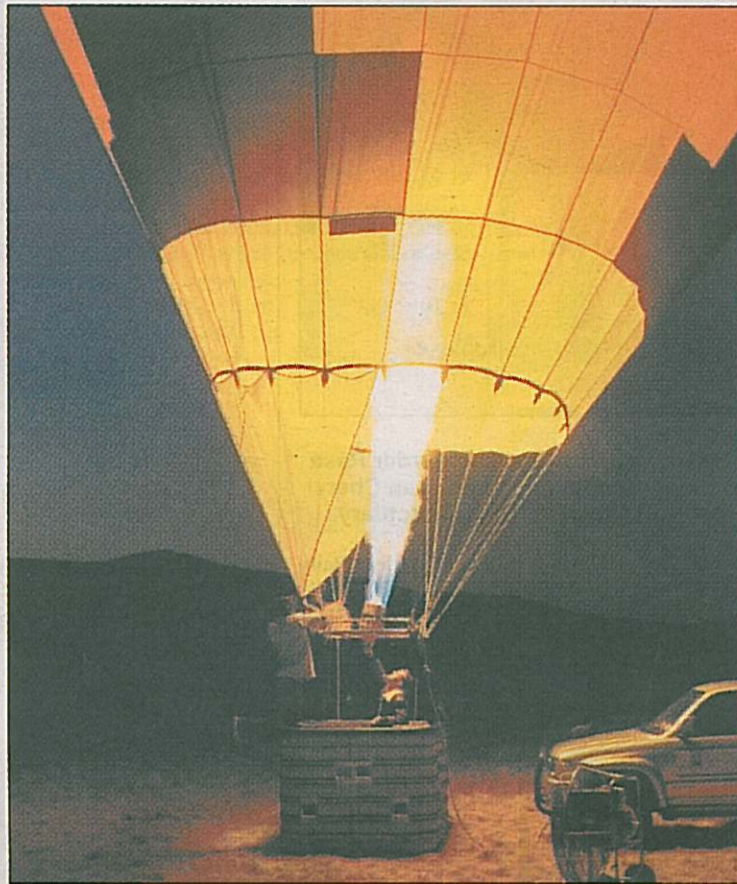
"It isn't possible to steer a hot air balloon to a specific point, but you do have an element of control. Because of different wind direction at different altitudes you change direction by changing altitude," he said.

The silence during lulls in the conversation is a deeper quiet than being underwater. While the passengers stare silently at the sunrise, Fillmore takes out champagne flutes and begins to pour. For those who prefer orange juice with their early morning champagne, that is provided as well.

Rhinos, wildebees and other wild animals gaze up curiously at the balloon or run ahead of it, until game reserve gives way to farms and plots. Excited children and even more excited adults wave and greet as the balloon glides overhead.

All too soon an hour has passed and the balloon descends for a landing. Fillmore communicates with the ground patrol to ensure a vehicle will be on its way to pick up his passengers.

On this launch flight the ground wind is blowing the balloon at almost 10 knots. The passengers are warned to brace themselves for a rough landing (which he assured is not the norm) and eight heads



Preparing the balloon for flight in the early hours of the morning.



Elize Vorster enjoys a contemplative moment as the sun rises to meet the balloon.



Adam Fillmore leaves nature in the pilot's seat as he pours.



Moments after the thrilling landing. The passengers can't stop grinning with excitement.

disappear into the basket and grab the handholds in front of them.

After one, two, three jolting bounces a small termite mound brings the balloon to a jarring halt and silence erupts into excited chatter.

While Fillmore heads off to find the gate to the farm on which the balloon has landed the passengers stand around eagerly recounting their experience. The reserve vehicle arrives and the passengers are whisked off to meet the game drive

vehicle at the gate of the reserve.

A journey through the reserve with a very knowledgeable field guide follows. Water buck, rhino, warthogs, lions, wild dogs and ostriches are just some of the animals to be viewed up close in an open game viewing vehicle.

After this incredible air and bush experience the passengers are treated to a traditional breakfast of bacon, eggs, orange juice and a muesli and yoghurt treat.

The breakfast is eaten under the trees in the game reserve and brings the tranquil experience to a nutritionally satisfying conclusion.

All of the passengers who experienced the launch of the new balloon safari expressed their excitement and enjoyment of the unique experience.

Even Fillmore, seasoned as he is at balloon flight still feels wonder when he goes up.

"No flight is ever identical. It is always a different experience, which is why it is such fun," he said.

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