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JR RHINO

You don't need to grow wings to fly nor do you have to develop any special skills. Just choose a form of flying that suits you and from there, drift upwards and gulp in the delectable fresh air.

Flying is not necessarily about an adrenalin rush, that is that option too, but overall it's about experiencing the world from a different perspective.

By Jennifer Crawford

One of the oldest forms of flying is hot air ballooning. More specifically, the hot air balloon is the oldest successful human-carrying flight technology. In 1783 in Paris the first untethered manned flight was made by Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier and François Laurent d'Arlandes in a hot air balloon, paving the way for a form of flying that has not lost its sense of romance.

We had to wake up far too early on a chilly Joburg winter morning for our hot air balloon flight and leave the warmth, comfort and luxury of our room at Kloofzicht Lodge at the foothills of the Zwartkops Mountains in the Cradle of Humankind. We'd heard the jackals



No Steering

the night before in the mountains, the same mountains we'd soon be soaring above.

You can't escape an early morning start because as Adam from AirVentures explains, hot air balloons are generally flown within the first hour of sunrise. "This time of day provides the cool calm conditions needed for a hot air balloon flight. Wind speeds and thermal activity start to increase as the day heats up, which aren't suitable for a balloon flight," says Adam.

Three giant brightly coloured balloons lay billowing on their sides teth-

ered to wicker baskets. The baskets, from a distance, looked too small to accommodate the group of people huddled around in anticipation of drifting into the sky. AirVenture's balloon fleet was designed as a tribute to an African sunrise, with the warmth of the colour spectrum reflected in the use of reds, oranges and yellow. The pattern used for the balloon or "envelope" as is the correct terminology, incorporates the geometric design of tribal artwork, and the baskets are woven in the traditional manner.

Crew were firing up the gas, blasting

hot air into the balloons. The balloons were on the field on the property at Kloofzicht so it was a stroll from the lodge for us. Other guests staying elsewhere had to get up even earlier to meet here and I thought it was good planning on our part to stay at Kloofzicht Lodge. I'd soon learn that the departure and arrival points of a hot air balloon are not an exact science and vary depending on where the wind takes you.

The sturdy wicker baskets are chest high, have foot holes to climb in, and are sectioned off so three people stand in one section. There were 13 people on



On a Balloon

our flight and to my surprise we fitted in just fine. You can book a romantic flight with just you and yours which a couple had chosen to do and quite appropriate as there is something dreamy and romantic about floating up into the sky carried by a giant balloon, suspended in a wicker basket.

No Steering on a Balloon

The takeoff is so gentle you barely notice as the basket eases off the ground. Hot air rises as we all know, so the hot air inside the balloon lifts it up, up and away following an invisible pathway of wind that our experienced pilot used to guide us into the gorge in the Zwartkop Mountains. You can't steer a balloon, you are dependent on the wind activity and directions. The height though is controlled with blasts of gas heating the air inside the balloon from time to time. The balloon is made from fire resistant material and the gas used is propane, because it burns hotter and cleaner than any other gas.


Floating up gently at sunrise in a hot air balloon is one of the most magnificent ways to start your day. As we emerged gracefully from the gorge we were treated to panoramic views of the Cradle of Humankind. AirVentures is the only balloon operator to launch balloons centrally within the Cradle of Humankind, and to offer a full flight experience within the 47 000 hectare world heritage site predominately made up of private game reserves.

We spotted giraffe in the distance; they looked so fragile from the sky. It was silent and peaceful; the early morning sun warmed our cheeks, the sky was clear, it really was a good day for flying. The hour long flight came to an end and we had flown a little more than 10km. Adam was planning a landing point and called the ground crew to confirm approval from a land owner. The winds dictate where you land, more or less, and even though AirVentures knows the majority of land owners it's not unusual to have to phone the land owner to confirm before landing. "What if they say no?" asked one of the guests.

"Well, we will just have to keep flying," said Adam with a grin.

We all secretly wished we couldn't get permission to land in order to extend our flight, however permission to land was granted and we floated down to a gentle stop.

As we sipped on orange juice and champagne in the middle of a field, I lifted my glass to Pilâtre de Rozier and Laurent d'Arlandes for this incredible invention of the hot air balloon, the oldest and surely the most romantic form of flying.

The ground crew drove us back to Kloofzicht Lodge where we spent the day lazing on the deck looking at the magnificent mountains. The dam on the property glittered in the afternoon light, and with guinea fowl foraging at the edges, and aquatic birdlife it enhanced an idyllic picture and seemed surreal to think that we'd been soaring high above all of this. 



FACT TRACKER

AirVentures

AirVentures is a commercial air transport service registered with the South African Civil Aviation Authority and abides by the same regulations for commercial airlines - License no. G874D/N837D.

AirVentures use the latest and safest equipment maintained to the highest safety standards with qualified and experienced pilots.

Cost: From R2000 per person.

Email: info@air-ventures.co.za

Tel: 083 356 2435

Scan to view Wildside's video of this ballooning experience.



Kloofzicht Lodge

Location: Situated at the foothills of the Zwartkops Mountains in the Cradle of Humankind, Kloofzicht Lodge is a 40 minute drive from both Johannesburg and Pretoria and is the perfect place to stay to go hot air ballooning with AirVentures.

Kloofzicht comprises 18 deluxe suites, 10 superior suites, 20 executive suites and 12 family and executive twin suites, overlooking either the six fly fishing dams or

the unspoilt Zwartkops gorge and mountain. Five star conference and wedding facilities.

The small nature reserve upon which Kloofzicht is built, is home to kudu, impala, blue wildebeest, eland, red hartebeest, springbuck, gemsbok, zebra and incredible bird life.

Cost: From R950 pppns.

Email: reservation@kloofzicht.co.za

Tel: 011 317 0600

