

# Up, Up and Away

Bristol  
Balloon  
Fiesta

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WE HAVE LIFT OFF !

# Up, up and away

## Bristol Balloon fiesta

'Phew gas was getting low, had me worried for a minute or two ' said our hot air balloon pilot after he had spent considerable time searching for a suitable landing spot away from power lines and livestock. Next came the call to 'brace and prepare for a bumpy landing' but fortunately we landed upright with just a few kangaroo jumps as we touched down. Most balloon rides are uneventful but it made me appreciate the importance of the pilots briefing which I was lucky enough to attend before the mass ascent at Bristol's Balloon Fiesta. It gave a great insight into the skill required by the aviators and the importance of getting precise local weather conditions.



*EARLY MORNING ASCENT*

*INFLATING A BALLOON*

Only when conditions are safe do balloon-ist take to the air so despite the sunshine and crowds of thousands the mass lift off that Thursday was delayed for half an hour while gusts of wind subsided. Balloons usually lift off around 6 am and 6 pm when the thermals are good and Fiestas usually last three or four days to allow for some inclement weather. This



## GETTING AIRBORNE

ensures that the balloonists, who travel from the four corners of the globe, can guarantee some time aloft. It also means that spectators are not disappointed either.

### BALLOON FIESTA FLIGHTS

It costs a premium to fly during a Fiesta but the sight of other balloons around can be intoxicating. On a mass ascent up to one hundred and fifty balloons inflate and ascend within a very short window from a small grassy arena. In the evening or early morning light the colours seem to intensify and the vibrant multi coloured balloons seem to jostle in the sky and at times move so close together that they almost touch as they fly over the city. On board there is much waving, calling, laughing and photo taking with selfies being the order of the day.

The pilot pulls a small valve which fires the burner and aims the flame into the mouth of the balloon to heat the air inside whenever he wants to make it rise. A shield deflects most of this searing heat but when the balloon drifts in complete silence over the landscape with the burners off it can get

quite chilly even on a sunny day. In the UK balloons tend to fly over verdant green fields and forests with great landmarks of antiquity and heritage but in other places in the world, the scenery can be so different. It may even be desert or one of the most magical places our pilot told me was amongst the alps with the snow glistening against a blue sky.

Hot Air Balloons are dependant on the winds direction and speed so the final landing site can be unpredictable. Hence the 'chase' vehicle which follows it on land. A bottle of brandy had been stowed on board our balloon for the farmer on whose field we might land. Most farmers are seldom phased by the intrusion and few appear with shot-guns! A bottle of brandy in most cases is adequate compensation but our farmer demanded a bottle for his wife as well ! So while we all fell about the billowing mass of the deflated ballon in order to pack it away the driver of the chase vehicle went off to find the nearest off license to purchase a second bottle.



## SHAPED BALLOONS

Shaped balloons stand out from the crowd. Larger than life they make great promotional statements. Often they are instantly recognisable like Bertie Basset but when a giant hot air balloon in the shape of a pair of testicals flies overhead it can cause some amusement. When people learn however that it has been created to raise awareness of male testicular cancer its impact is long lasting!



They are harder to fly due to their size and unconventional shape and their complex construction often challenges the designers, engineers and seamsters to the full but they seldom fail.

## ENTERTAINMENT

Only a small number of people get to fly at a fiesta but the thousands who attend testify that a Fiesta has plenty to offer those who remain earth bound. In Bristol Ashton Court is a perfect location because on the grassy slopes which surround the level arena everyone can get a great view. It is awesome to watch as the balloons rise slowly overhead almost within touching distance and for those who lay back on the grass and gaze skyward there is an endless sight of burners being engaged to lift them over the trees. The flames causing the inside of the 'envelopes' to pulsate with intense brilliance.



During the day a carnival of activity keeps everybody engaged. There are aerial displays, fairground rides, food stalls and bars, balloon tethering, model aircraft displays, craft stalls, ice-cream, and copious piles of candy. A music stage showcases local talent and Bristol's own Cirque Bijou - a mixture of acrobatics, street theatre and circus stunts- are also popular.

## CHECKING INSIDE A BALLOON

## VIEWS FROM THE SKY

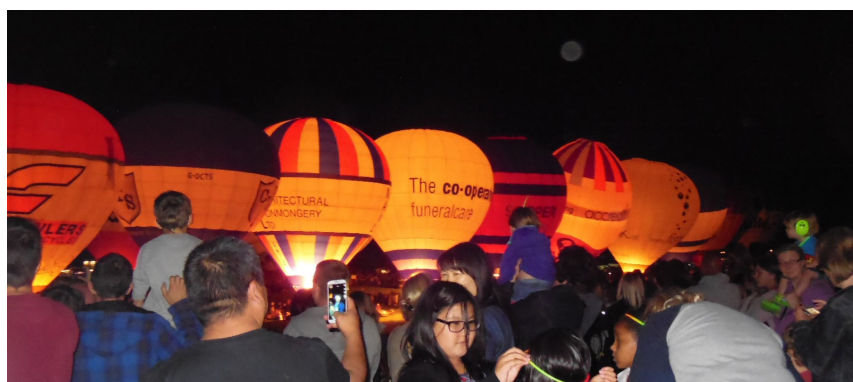
Picnicking and ballooning seem to go hand in hand. From above we saw many visitors fling out a tablecloth and within minutes fill it with a gourmet feast. Some enjoyed a bottle of wine, others opened their thermos flasks filled with coffee. Then there were those who come empty handed and were attracted by the aroma and tantalising offers at the food stalls and waited patiently in line for their treats. Others gathered at the beer tent and glasses filled with wine chinked in the VIP enclosure.

### NIGHT GLOW

Over the years the Night Glow has become so popular that it now takes place on two evenings in Bristol and is usually included in other fiestas. Tethered balloons illuminate the night sky as choreographed sequences are set to music. As the beat changes so the balloons pulsate with light as the burners are lit and extinguished. It is a great spectacle. As the balloons do not fly it is also less dependant on the weather and seldom has to be cancelled. As a climax fireworks explode overhead but care has to be taken so that sparks do not fly into the billowing balloons.

### FINALE

No one in Britain can be sure of their event being blessed with great weather conditions and balloonists are affected more than most but being a three day event gives more opportunity to get into the air and with night glows and so much more on offer the Bristol Balloon Fiesta is always a great success. For me it was especially memorable as I was able to join the mass ascent but I shall be back again and again as there is something about hot air ballooning that attracts us all.



ANOTHER VIEW FROM  
THE SKY

NIGHT GLOW

ACTIVITY ON THE  
GROUND





BALLOONING

