

UP, UP AND AWAY!

Not much can get me out of bed at 4am on a winter morning...a small explosion, perhaps, or a good news call from the Lotto organisers. Hot air ballooning certainly makes the grade.

The scenic drive out to the Magaliesberg is a fitting precursor to this airborne adventure. The tranquillity of passing crop fields puts one in the right frame of mind for the thrill of being hoisted into the air by metres and metres of brightly coloured fabric. Bill Harrop's Original Balloon Safaris boasts one of the largest commercial balloons in the world, accommodating 18 passengers in comfort. I half expected rickety wicker in the style of one of Baron von Munchausen's great tales. The reality is very different - plush, padded and discretely opulent. We arrived shortly after 6am and warmed ourselves with coffee and hot chocolate while watching the balloons inflate. Plenty of photo opportunities - the process is fascinating. Once aboard, our pilot, Sam, gave us a quick safety lesson (including directions to the emergency exits) and before we knew it, we were off the ground. No taxiing take-off here. Just a serene shift in altitude as the ground melted away from us, with the occasional growl of the burners to disturb the silence.

Flight paths are determined by the wind, so there's no telling where your balloon will take you, but you can be sure it'll be a spectacular ride. Our trip over a game farm yielded abundant wildlife viewing, which is unusual since most livestock find the balloon a little startling. Balloon safaris are often booked for special occasions and ours was no exception - a proposal set a tone of celebration and our party continued in high spirits. Somehow the world seems like a different place when viewed from above - definitely a good way to develop some lofty ideals.

In spite of being prepared for a bumpy landing, we touched down with the gentlest of jolts. We ended the adventure with champagne and laughter in a field inhabited by some very confused cows. Constant communication between the pilot and the ground team ensure that a bus is waiting when you land. We were shuttled back to home base where breakfast awaited. Healthy appetites were well catered for with

a generous array of all things delicious and in an impromptu ceremony, travellers were presented with a certificate confirming that they'd joined the elite ranks of the balloon brigade - cause for more champagne consumption. After eating our fill we took to the road, with solemn promises to return soon. An uplifting experience well worth repeating.

By Brigitte

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