

Taking to the Skies

Text: Julie Graham
Images © Bill Harrop's Original Balloon Safaris



For thousands of years, humanity stood, stranded, trying to understand the dynamics of flight and dreaming of taking to the skies. Today, all over the world, due to a somewhat recent phenomenon in our history, we are exposed to a constant ebb and flow of air traffic, and flight has become not only a possibility, but a necessity.

Hot air balloons, unlike their engine-powered flying counterparts, are unique in that they have managed to not only achieve massive feats in terms of voyages across the globe, but have done so while maintaining a sense of timeless romanticism and magic. It is no wonder that these giant, colourful orbs in the sky have become the perfect way to see vast, panoramic landscapes and experience an unmatched flying experience.

The idea of applying the principle of hot air rising to create flight dates all the way back to the third century BC when the Chinese invented sky lanterns, traditionally launched during festivals. Then, 19 September 1793, the scientist, Jean-François Pilâtre de Rozier, launched the very first unmanned hot air balloon into the sky, carrying three passengers: a sheep, a duck, and a rooster. The balloon managed to stay airborne for 15 minutes before it came crashing to the ground. The first attempt at a manned flight was some two months later when French brothers, Etienne and Joseph Montgolfier, launched their balloon from

the centre of Paris that flew for a total of 20 minutes - this is considered to be the birth of hot air ballooning.

Since then, hot air ballooning has featured on bucket lists and continues to be something many people wish to experience. And, according to internationally praised Bill Harrop's Original Balloon Safaris, "If you are going to do it - do it in unassailable style."

Bill Harrop's Original Balloon Safaris has been taking to the skies since 1981 and is the preferred choice for many when it comes to quality ballooning. Bill Harrop's employs the best professional pilots and crew to ensure maximum safety (they have won five aviation safety awards to date), so all you have to do is relax and enjoy the unbeatable experience of this unique form of flying.

The rides begin at sunrise, a time of stillness in the countryside, taking off at Bill Harrop's exquisite Clubhouse Pavillion and Restaurant in the Magalies River Valley in the Cradle of Humankind World Heritage site bordering the Gauteng and North West Provinces. Once up in the air, and the powerful burners are turned off, the silence is punctuated only by *oohs* and *aahs*, as well as the occasional bird call and glass clinking while guests sip on champagne and marvel at the views below. On landing, guests can enjoy a delectable champagne breakfast and bask in the afterglow of the adventure.

The hot air balloon experiences offered by Bill Harrop's include soaring over the Magalies River Valley, as well as game viewing at either Entabeni Safari Conservancy or Mabula Private Game Reserve.

Arguably one of the best ways to take in the landscape of this magnificent country, and a truly magical experience, a ride in a hot air balloon will remain in your memory forever. Taking to the skies in this way, floating high above the ground with uninterrupted views of the countryside, will give you a new perspective of the world.

For more information on Bill Harrop's Original Balloon Safaris, please visit www.balloon.co.za. ■

Did you know?

It is tradition to share champagne each time a hot air balloon lands. It is said that back in the day, local farmers believed that hot air balloons landing in their fields were in fact dragons descending from the heavens. In order to calm their nerves and soothe their fears, the hot air balloon pilots would offer them a bottle of champagne as a token of peace for trespassing on their land and disturbing them.