

Fear? It's all hot air

The experience of being adrift 1,000 feet in the air in a basket can be nerve-wracking. Or you can savour the bird's eye view and experience something spell-binding.

Updated - March 24, 2016 02:52 pm IST **Published** - December 09, 2015 09:06 pm IST

T.K. ROHIT



Dawn is just about an hour away. It is dark and cold. There is a nip in the air. I've been waiting to do this for a week, but now I just want to stay in bed.

At 5.45 a.m., draped in a scarf, woollen balaclava, a sweater and a jacket, I sit freezing on the pillion of a bike, strongly reconsidering the wisdom of signing up for this.

Five minutes later, though, I forget about the weather as the Pushkar 'mela ground' comes into view. Full of bustle, there is a sea of onlookers — including villagers and locals — milling around to watch the spectacle. As I enter the ground, a jeep arrives with many other people, cameras dangling down their neck.

I go in search of the event organiser. But then I forget about him as I cross the number of hot air balloons that are being readied for take-off. I walk around clicking pictures, watching as large fans pump air into these mammoth balloons lying on their sides and spread across nearly half of the ground's area. I begin to feel that braving the weather this early, that too after sleeping for just four hours, might be worth it after all.

Finally, I realise I have to meet Samit Garg of E-Factor Adventure Tourism, who has to put me on one of these balloons. "Be there at 6 a.m.," he had told me the previous night.

"But what can I see in the dark? I want to take pictures from the top, of the camels and horses and generally of the mela ground," I had put forth.

"We sail at sunrise," he had retorted.

I am at Pushkar to cover the much-famed annual camel fair. And the international hot-air balloon fest happening on the sidelines was not to be missed.

"I have a seat for you. Be there," Samit had said, settling the issue.

*

The pilot introduced himself. "Hi! I am Euan." There was one other passenger in the balloon, from the marketing department of another media organisation.

"So, how long have been a.... pilot?" I asked Euan, not sure if pilot was the right word. "25 years," came the reply, almost immediately. He pulled something above and fired up the balloon. "What does this work on... I mean, what makes the fire... something like that?" I ask him, fumbling around for the right words. Maybe I was more nervous than I realised.

"The balloon is filled up with air. The fire is from liquid propane and butane... LPG," he

said.

How does a hot air balloon work? The principle is that hot air is lighter than cold air and hence rises easily. But the balloon can travel only with the wind and not against it. The top part of the hot air balloon resembles a large parachute, but enables levitation.

Once the balloon is filled with air in a horizontal position, the balloon and the basket are made to stand vertical. The pilot then pushes hot air from cylinders to fill up the bottom part of the balloon, so that the heat allows the balloon to fly. The balloon keeps rising as the pilot pushes fire in.

As another balloon took off, I looked above. It looked so effortless, unlike an aeroplane. There were no stewards and stewardesses, no safety manual or instruction, no 'fasten your seatbelts till the sign is on'. It was just... well, open.

Asking curious bystanders to step back, Euan pulled at a cable and there was a small jerk. "Hold on to the side rails," he added, as we faltered. Before I knew what was happening, we were airborne and slowly launching into space. The onlookers waved to us in a frenzied manner and the three of us waved back. A few metres in the air, it came to my attention that I was slightly scared of heights. Tinkering with an iPad to chart our course, Euan tugged at strings to steer the balloon.

My mission was to shoot pictures of the camels and horses from above. A minute into the flight, I realised that was going to be a bit logistically difficult. I tried gingerly to stick my camera hand out beyond the railing, but my head reeled from being so high up with just a basket propping me in the open sky.

Wondering how my co-passenger was holding up, I introduced myself to him. "Yes, it is slightly scary," he confirmed.

“If you want, I can spin this balloon around. I can turn this in whichever direction you want,” the pilot said as if on cue.

“Err...I think we will turn around ourselves while clicking pictures,” the two of us replied as we start clicking warily.

Whenever the balloon jerked the tiniest bit, alarm bells went off in my head. I ventured, with my heart in my mouth, to take a selfie, pulling my arm back in as soon as the deed was done.

As we soared higher, we caught sight of the other hot air balloons, each rising in different heights and directions. A green angry bird glowered at us from below and seemed to flare up every time its pilot pumped fire into its belly.

After a point in the balloon's trajectory, the chillness of the air subsided. The atmosphere became fresh, calm and serene, exuding a sense of peace.

At this vantage point, the pilot held off on the flames and let the balloon drift. And we were struck by a spellbinding sight as the sun emerged majestically from behind the mountains. No amount of watching the sunrise from aeroplanes can measure up to the glory of this experience. The glowing gold light was yet to hit the ground, and it was like we got a front seat for the premiere of a yet-unreleased movie. As the balloon dipped a few minutes later, we saw that the sun had not yet risen for people at this height.

“How high are we now?” I asked Euan a while later. He looked at the iPad.

“About 1,000 feet.”

“What’s the maximum height can this go to?” I asked, gulping.

“Well, depends. About 10,000 feet,” Euan replied, giving me numbers that I probably didn't want to hear when travelling up into stratosphere in an open basket. I am not

even sure there were any safety vests on board. I decided to take this up once we landed.

The thing with heights for me is, I never realise it when I'm on a cliff or standing on a ledge or dangling my legs over a waterfall a few hundred feet high. It hits me after I am back on the ground and run through the memory in my mind later.

A survey by Statistic Brain Research Institute shows that nearly 10% of the United States's population suffers from Acrophobia — the fear of heights. Another 6.5% suffer from the fear of flying, Aerophobia. This hot air balloon produced a paralysing blend of both these fears.

According to Health Research Funding, “between 2% and 5% of the entire population suffers from acrophobia, most of which are women. Twice as many women suffer from this mental disorder in comparison to men”.

I didn't know that I had either phobia — acro or aero. But I was seriously re-evaluating this fact now. I recalled how I once managed to climb a small hill and found it extremely difficult to climb down — looking too far down or at a distance compounds the fear factor; one, it can paralyse you and two, you keep thinking of the distance to be covered, which amplifies the magnitude of the task.

“Don't look down. Just look at the next step you are taking,” my friend who was with me then had advised. It had worked. Sometimes, it is about just taking that one step at a time that eats away slowly at any fear — it's the same with swimming, for instance. Or driving.

Even as I steeled myself with these bracing reflections, Euan began descending: “We will land in some time.” Soon, we were taking final sips of our airborne experience as a vast patch of sand rose to meet us. At the last moment, we — including Euan — saw tiny beads of green and realised all too late that we were in fact homing in on a piece of agricultural field.

Standard landing procedure for hot-air balloon rides dictates that the passenger holds on to one of the four pillars that connect the basket to the balloon. I was holding on for dear life, let alone for the sake of compliance with procedure. Euan held on to the railing in the middle, frantically pulling at one of the strings to slow our fall.

We had assumed the balloon would land in a dignified vertical manner. It was not to be. The basket hit the ground and turned on its side. I held on to the pole like a lizard stuck to the ceiling. Momentum dragged our carrier sideways for about 10 feet before coming to a stop. As we tumbled down and crawled out of the toppled basket, a flurry of villagers rushed on to the scene.

Numbers flew around. "Fifty thousand rupees," said one. "You have damaged this crop," caviled another. Some, though, found it hilarious that something so strange had dropped from the sky into a farm. Soon, the owner of the crop was upon us, as he charged in screaming. Threats were flung around — "I will call the cops!", "The village sarpanch will hear of this!" The onlooking villagers couldn't control their laughter.

As back-up arrived a half-an-hour later, I and my co-passenger were asked to leave. I learnt later that a small compensation was paid to the owner of the farm and the issue settled amicably. Though there wasn't much damage to the crop, the whole experience was a bit nerve-racking for all concerned. Imagine something dropping out of the sky into a farm early in the morning. Imagine suppressing acro/aerophobia for three-quarters of an hour and then nearly landing on our faces.

It's a million-dollar question whether I will try this stunt again. But you can try. Maybe you'll land vertically with dignity!