



National Geographic

Traveler

An Educational Travel Resource

Summer 1985
VOLUME II, NUMBER 2



Banff—Canada's First National Park

Mississippi Steamboating • Saratoga Springs

• Oshkosh Fly-In • Wales Trains •

San Francisco's Golden Gate Park and Alcatraz • Chincoteague •

Missouri River Canoe Trip • Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta



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A Ballooning Interest: Albuquerque's Hot-Air Fiesta

By Tony Hillerman Photographs by Charles O'Rear

THE DEPUTY SHERIFF seemed unreasonably happy for a person who was manning a roadblock in the darkness of a cold October morning.

"Good morning. *Good morning.*" He glanced at the card admitting me to the parking lot at the Cutter Balloonport. "Keep to the right and no speeding."

Speeding on Edith Boulevard on the opening morning of the 13th annual Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta would have been downright impossible. Traffic was crawling, bumper to bumper, toward the place where dawn would bring to life one of America's most colorful and most photographed spectacles.

Except for the 9 days of the fiesta, the Cutter Balloonport is an empty expanse of grass beside Interstate 25 on Albuquerque's north side. For this event, however, the field metamorphoses into a carnival-like boomtown. More than 80 concession stands rise almost overnight, centered on a cluster of command posts—for "balloonmeisters," safety officers, launch officers, scoring officers, propane officers, and press. Surrounding this nucleus, the grassy knolls of the balloonport are laid out in a grid of launching sites.

Despite the expensive equipment (a hot-air balloon costs from \$10,000 to \$25,000), the frenetic schedule of events, and the swarms of balloonists and spectators, the AIBF remains remarkably relaxed. The public is welcome here, with only a few "no-nos": No walking on a balloon envelope (the balloon's fabric skin) when it is deflated, no pets, and no smoking around propane tanks.

By 7 a.m., with dawn bright behind the Sandia Mountains but the field itself still in gray half-light, the launching area buzzed with activity. You could hear the blasts of propane burners, scores of them, expanding the air inside the first flight of balloons.

I was looking for balloon captain Joe August, who had promised me a ride. When I found him, his crew had already unloaded the wicker gondola and nylon

envelope off a pickup truck and laid out the balloon—named *Under the Rainbow*—on the ground. While two crewmen held the mouth open, another blew air into it with a motor-driven fan. About 20 spectators had stopped to watch. As the nylon bulged upward, crewmen straightened out the last kinks in the nylon folds.

"Stand back a little now," said Joe. The wicker gondola lay on its side, its propane burner aimed into the balloon's mouth. Joe fired a few shots from the burner and *Under the Rainbow* soon heaved itself half-erect, then swung up in full glory—ready to fly. *Under the Rainbow* was as colorful as its name. The brightening dawn shone through its vertical panels of red, blue, yellow, green, and purple.

Around us other cloth envelopes had undergone the same astounding transformation. Suddenly we were surrounded by a landscape of fantastic Fabergé eggs, some as tall as seven-story buildings.

It was a perfect morning. A single strand of clouds, reddened by dawn, hung over the crest of Sandia Peak. The temperature was 62°F with a touch of breeze. Sunlight had not yet reached us, but we could see it reflected from a Caribou transport plane circling high above us. Suddenly a parachute demonstration team—the Army's Golden Knights—leaped out to perform their intricate gliding maneuvers.

Moments later, 50 balloons rose into the air around us, then hundreds. The blue New Mexico sky had blossomed like a giant's colorful garden.

The mass ascension represented an unlikely revival of a 200-year-old science-sport that, logically, should have been killed as dead as a dodo by the invention of the airplane. Instead, ballooning is prospering anew. After the pioneering experiments of the 18th century, hot-air balloons lost headway to those inflated with hydrogen and later with helium, but the hazards of using highly flammable hydrogen, the high cost of helium, and the manpower required to inflate the contraptions

Luminaries in the predawn dark, two members of the Dawn Patrol squad drift through the New Mexico sky, heralding a day of ascensions, competitions, and demonstrations at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta.



left balloons primarily in the hands of scientists, who used them for weather and atmospheric experiments. Only in the early 1960s, with the development of strong, lightweight fabrics and the refinement of propane burners, did hot-air ballooning become more practical—and popular. The first fiesta in 1972 drew 14 balloons to Albuquerque. Last year the number passed 450, and scores of other balloon races and rallies were being held all over the country and the world.

On the first flight *Under the Rainbow* was filled with photographers, so I joined its chase crew. We raced away in a pickup truck, keeping a collective eye on "our" balloon in a skyful of others. Our goal was to be as near as possible when it landed. This time it was easy. *Under the Rainbow* was flying the "Albuquerque

Box"—a local term for a common weather phenomenon in which cold, low-altitude air flows southward from the mountains and along the Rio Grande Valley, while warmer higher-level winds blow northward. Balloonists love it. It gives them a low-altitude ride south toward downtown Albuquerque and then allows them to return near their launching site by simply rising into the wind blowing north.

Under the Rainbow came down in an open field not a quarter mile from the balloonport. My turn. I climbed into the gondola, the propane burner roared, and we were airborne.

No other form of transportation is like this one, where you ride mostly in silence, a creature of the wind, part of the flowing air. The calm robs you of any



Like Sindbad commanding his ship of the air, balloonist Terry Cooper guides his craft in an effervescent sky during the fiesta's opening-day mass ascension. "I fly to enjoy the tranquillity of open spaces and to taste the thrill of adventure," says Cooper, whose lofty interests have taken him to Europe, Turkey, India, and Madagascar on scientific ballooning expeditions. Balloon Champion of Texas for 1984, Cooper earned his title for piloting skills in competition.

ward so silently that a jackrabbit under a tumbleweed below us wasn't alerted until our shadow crossed him.

We came down—bumping briefly—in the pasture of Pete Craig, who sauntered over with some neighborhood children to get acquainted. Craig was offered the traditional bottle of champagne. Those of us completing our first flight were presented with pins commemorating the occasion and then doused with beer in a new American tradition.

Though the AIBF would last nine days, nothing matched the experience of that first ride—nor the spectacular sight of the opening mass ascension. Like me, a number of lucky visitors had the chance to experience the unearthly sensation of a balloon ride. And those of us who continued to make predawn trips to the balloonport collected other memorable impressions.

Each day genuinely early risers could enjoy the eerie sight of the Dawn Patrol, a group of balloonists whose craft were rigged with navigation lights and burners that produced a flaring yellow flame. Like something out of a dream, their colorful envelopes glowed like gigantic Japanese lanterns as they floated in the blackness between earth and stars.

Those who wanted a closeup look at a different side of ballooning could watch the traditional gas-balloon race. Inflating the envelopes for that event took all afternoon and consumed as much as \$2,000 worth of helium per balloon.

The game of trying to outguess the wind drew me and thousands of others to watch the competitive events. Top honors for excitement went to the "Key Grab" events. A new Pontiac, a hot tub, a 16-foot powerboat with trailer, and \$1,000 in cash were the prizes. These would go to the pilots who, starting no less than 2 miles from the balloonport, could guide their balloons close enough to a 25-foot pole to grab the car's keys from the top, drop a Ping-Pong ball into the hot tub or the boat, or prick a tethered weather balloon with a metal skewer.

A teasing wind pushed one balloon after another

sense of motion. Instead it seems that you are the fixed point, and it is the earth that is moving below you.

Within minutes *Under the Rainbow* was engulfed in a sea of balloons. A scarlet globe dotted with white stars sank past us. Just beyond was *Raggedy Ann*, which seemed to be made of patchwork quilting, and above that rode *Love Balloon*, its envelope belted with red and pink hearts. *Freedom* drifted past—a patriotic pattern of red, white, and blue stripes. The Rio Grande Valley below was dappled with our round shadows.

We drifted southward above the Santa Fe Railway, and Joe began to look for a landing place. He vented hot air as the tops of cottonwood trees reached toward us, the bottom of the gondola just above them. Another burst of fire slowed our fall. We sank ground-



Winds of self-expression prevail at the fiesta, where it seems anything goes. Even competitions show a sense of humor. In the "Key Grab" event (above), a pilot maneuvers his balloon toward a metal pole, as a passenger tries to snatch the keys to a new Pontiac. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Albuquerque's "big A" forms a target for Cindy Van Hese, who takes aim with a giant Kodak box, while the towering beer bottle awaits another contest, an oversize-hula-hoop throw. A beguiling caricature of Carmen Miranda, Chic-I-Boom sports two 50-foot bananas and matching pears, oranges, apples, and grapes. A pickup truck owner uses poetic license to proclaim his partiality. Initiation rite: After their first flight, neophytes endure a new American ballooning tradition. Proving mime triumphs over matter, a costumed entertainer helps to steady a balloon.





Lilliputians among bobbing, restless giants, fiesta visitors press for a closer look at the inflation process.

toward the target area, then yielded to a brisk but errant ground breeze that pushed them away. Finally a kaleidoscope of colors named *Flying Circus* sailed directly into the target zone and slid past the weather balloon. Pop! Its crew had won \$1,000.

For an hour after that we oohed and aahed over near misses and lost opportunities by countless other balloonists. At last *Moonshadow* slipped into place near the pole, adjusting its altitude with short blasts of the burner. Its bombardier hit the hot tub with a neatly dropped Ping-Pong ball. Then *Cowboy Jack* loomed over the target area, and a passenger picked up the car keys as easily as lifting them from a table. Nothing left to win now except the powerboat. *New World* drifted directly over the boat's bow, a cinch winner. But the pilot had misplaced the ammunition. The balloon drifted away; the boat remained unclaimed.

There were other events composing a schedule three pages long. Each day offered band music and the aerial acrobatics of Jim Franklin's agile biplane, as well as such special features as kite-flying demonstrations, a flight of paper balloons, parachuting exhibitions by the Golden Knights and the Navy's Leapfrogs, square

dancing, a parade, a marathon, and a public picnic.

The event also brought its share of bad luck. Gusts of wind blew a balloon into electrical lines, where a short circuit burned away the support cables and dropped the gondola 30 feet to the earth, injuring both occupants. Hard landings sent eight others in for treatment of bruises and abrasions. But the winds that make ballooning a risky sport were minimized by Albuquerque's near-perfect autumn weather.

The atmosphere was near perfect, too. On that first fiesta day, a block away from Craig's friendly pasture, I saw two balloons that had landed on opposite sides of the road, so close that their envelopes touched across the narrow pavement. Carloads of laughing fiesta spectators were driving under this impromptu nylon bridge. Kids and dogs were everywhere. The sun was bright, the sky blue and brilliant with balloons, and everybody—absolutely everybody—was happy. □

Tony Hillerman, professor of journalism and writer of mystery novels, moved to Albuquerque in 1953 and is used to living with balloons.

Charles O'Rear, a resident of St. Helena, California, is a private pilot. His work has appeared in National Geographic publications since 1972.

Travel • Wise



The listings below are provided as a service for TRAVELER readers and are not intended as recommendations. The & symbol indicates that entrances and rest rooms are accessible to wheelchairs. All information is accurate as of press time. It is, however, subject to change.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The 1985 Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta takes place Oct. 5-13. For a schedule of events and additional information, contact AIBF, 4804 Hawkins St. N.E., Albuquerque, N.M. 87109; (505) 344-3501. For additional information about the city, contact the Albuquerque Convention and Visitors Bureau, P.O. Box 26866, Albuquerque 87125; (505) 243-3696 or (800) 321-6979. Note: All telephone numbers below have a 505 area code; all addresses are in Albuquerque, unless otherwise indicated.

HOW TO GET THERE

By air To Albuquerque International Airport.

By Amtrak To the Albuquerque Railway Station, from Chicago, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

By bus By Trailways; Greyhound; or Texas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma Coaches.

By car Albuquerque is located in central New Mexico at the junction of I-40 (east-west) and I-25 (north-south).

ADMISSION

AIBF ballooning events take place at the Cutter Balloonport, located north of the city off I-25 between Osuna Rd. and Los Angeles Dr.; access to public parking from Osuna Rd. Admission to the grounds (daily): Adults \$1, children (under 12) free. Parking \$1. Special parking section available for handicapped visitors.

GETTING AROUND

Mass ascensions take place on both weekends of the fiesta. On those days, Sun-Tran, the city bus system, runs special service from the south parking lot of the Coronado Shopping Center, Menaul and Louisiana Blvds. Buses to the fiesta run 5-7:15 a.m.; return buses 9-11 a.m. Adults \$2 round trip, students \$1, 1 child (un-

der 5) free per adult fare. For information, call Sun-Tran; 766-7830.

BALLOON RIDES

Visitors interested in a balloon ride or in learning more about ballooning can volunteer for chase-crew duty by writing to AIBF or by contacting the information booth at the field. A number of commercial operators offer balloon flights, \$100 for 30-60 min. trips.

ADVENTURES IN BALLOONING Skyland Dr., Star Rte., Box 200-G, Tijeras 87509; 281-3430

AERCO BALLOONPORT 3321 Princeton Dr. N.E. 87107; 884-1944 or 1947

ALBUQUERQUE BALLOON EXPEDITIONS, INC. 2721 Hermosa Dr. N.E. 87110; 888-3378

ALBUQUERQUE HOT AIR TOURS 10612 Hagen Rd. N.E. 87111; 298-4063

BALLOON RIDES 4740 Pan American Fwy. N.E. 87109; 883-4601

BEAUTIFUL BALLOONS 6432 Esther St. N.E. 87109; 821-0056

WORLD BALLOON CORPORATION 4800 Eubank Ave. N.E. 87111; 293-6800

OTHER THINGS TO SEE AND DO

Albuquerque Museum 2000 Mountain Rd. N.W.; 766-7878. City, state, and regional history. Tues.-Fri. 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Sat.-Sun. 1-5 p.m. Adults \$2, children (6-15) \$1, under 6 free. &

Indian Pueblo Cultural Center 2401 12th St. N.W.; 843-7270. History and culture of the Pueblo Indians. Dance performances weekends April-Oct. Year round: daily 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Adults \$1.50, students (6-18) \$.75, children (under 6) free. &

Maxwell Museum of Anthropology University of New Mexico, facing University Blvd.; 277-4404. Southwestern archaeology and anthropology. Mon.-Fri. 9 a.m.-4 p.m., Sat. 10 a.m.-4 p.m. &

Old Town Historic core of old Albuquerque, located roughly between Mountain Rd., Rio Grande Blvd., Central Ave., and 19th St. N.W. Historic buildings, shops, restaurants.

Sandia Peak and Tramway Located northeast of Albuquerque, the peak offers a panoramic view of the Rio Grande Valley. Base terminal of the tram is located on Tramway Rd.; 298-8518. Trams run every 20 min. Mon.-Tues., Thurs.-Fri. 9 a.m.-9 p.m.; Sat.-Sun. 9 a.m.-10 p.m.; Wed. 5-9 p.m. Adults \$7.50, students (6-17) \$5.50, children (under 6) free. &

PLACES TO STAY

The accommodations listed below are classified **Budget** (\$45 or less for a double room), **Moderate** (\$46-85), **Expensive** (more than \$85). Hotels fill up quickly at fiesta time. It's best to book early.

AMERICAN BEST WESTERN MOTOR INN 12999 Central Ave. N.E. 87123; 298-7426 or (800) 528-1234 & (B)

COMFORT INN 13031 Central Ave. N.E. 87123; 294-1800 or (800) 228-5150 & (B)

LA QUINTA MOTOR INN 2424 San Mateo Blvd. N.E. 87110; 884-3591 or (800) 531-5900 & (B)

ROYAL MOTOR HOTEL 4119 Central Ave. N.E. 87108; 265-3585 (B)

BARCELONA COURT 900 Louisiana Blvd. N.E. 87110; 255-5566 or (800) 222-1122 & (M)

HOLIDAY INN-MIDTOWN 2020 Menaul Blvd. N.E. 87107; 884-2511 or (800) 465-4329 & (M)

RAMADA INN 25 Hotel Circle N.E. 87123; 296-5472 or (800) 272-6232 & (M)

SHERATON OLD TOWN 800 Rio Grande Blvd. N.W. 87104; 843-6300 or (800) 325-3535 & (M)

ALBUQUERQUE HILTON INN 1901 University Blvd. N.E. 87102; 884-2500 or (800) 821-1901 (E)

ALBUQUERQUE MARRIOTT 2101 Louisiana Blvd. N.E. 87110; 881-6800 or (800) 228-9290 & (E)

REGENT OF ALBUQUERQUE 201 Marquette Ave. N.W. 87103; 247-3344 or (800) 545-4444 & (E)

PLACES TO EAT

The restaurants below are classified **Budget** (\$10 or less per person for dinner, excluding alcoholic beverages), **Moderate** (\$11-25).

ABEYTA'S MEXICAN KITCHEN (New Mexican) 2805 San Mateo Blvd. N.E.; 881-5314 & (B)

MAMA MIA RISTORANTE ITALIANO 1430 Carlisle Blvd. N.E.; 265-4557 & (B)

MONROE'S MEXICAN FOOD (New Mexican) 1520 Lomas Blvd. N.E.; 242-1111 & (B)

POLLO FIESTA (Mexican) 5308 4th St. N.W.; 344-5400 & (B)

COOPERAGE RESTAURANT AND LOUNGE (Steaks and seafood) 7220 Lomas Blvd. N.E.; 255-1657 & (M)

HIGH FINANCE (American) Sandia Peak; 243-9742 & (M)

LA HACIENDA (New Mexican) 302 San Felipe St. N.W.; 243-3131 & (M)

LAUNCH SITE (American) Montgomery Plaza Shopping Center, San Mateo and Montgomery Blvds.; 883-8176 & (M)

MARIA TERESA'S (American/Mexican) 800 Rio Grande Blvd. N.W.; 242-3900 & (M)

STEAKSMITH (Steaks and seafood) Coronado Shopping Center, Louisiana and Menaul Blvds.; 883-3883 & (M)

WAYSIDE INN (Regional) 2nd and Tijeras Sts. N.W.; 247-3001 & (M)

Crew member untangles a balloon's expanding envelope.

