

Hot Air Ballooning

By Um Mubarak

Hot air ballooning is one of those sports that can be enjoyed by anyone; it offers many different things to different people. For some the greatest pleasure is floating in a basket thousands of feet up just admiring the view. For others, it is a matter of pushing themselves to the limit, competing with one another in international championships, or taking on the challenge of setting new records. Anyone who can drive a car can learn to fly a modern hot-air balloon, but the key to flying a balloon well is experience.

Ballooning is the earliest and perhaps the purest form of flying. Its origins go back more than two hundred years to 1783 when the Montgolfier brothers first demonstrated manned flight. In the late 1950s, there was renewed interest in the hot air balloon from a most unlikely source - the US Navy. The result of their research brought together the two essential elements of the modern hot air balloon – man-made fabrics for a lightweight and airtight ‘envelope’, and propane gas as an efficient and safe source of heat.



The hot air balloon is a simple flying machine, and the advances made in recent years have resulted in one that is very reliable. Accidents are extremely rare and when they do occur it is almost always a result of human error and not because of equipment failure. From top to bottom, the balloon consists of an envelope (which contains the hot air), the burner (which generates the heat) and the basket (which carries the people). The fuel is carried in gas cylinders strapped inside the basket and hoses take the fuel from them to the burner.

In ballooning it is always necessary to get the right size envelope for the job and this depends on many factors: how many people you need to lift, what the climate is like where you fly most often, and the number of people available to handle the balloon and equipment. It is the difference between the internal and external temperature that makes a balloon fly, so a bigger envelope is needed when flying in hotter countries as the amount of available lift is reduced. Most balloonists choose something around 77,000 cubic feet, as this will enable them to fly three to four people in most conditions and is small enough to easily handle on the ground and to transport. However, as a general trend balloon sizes are creeping up gradually.