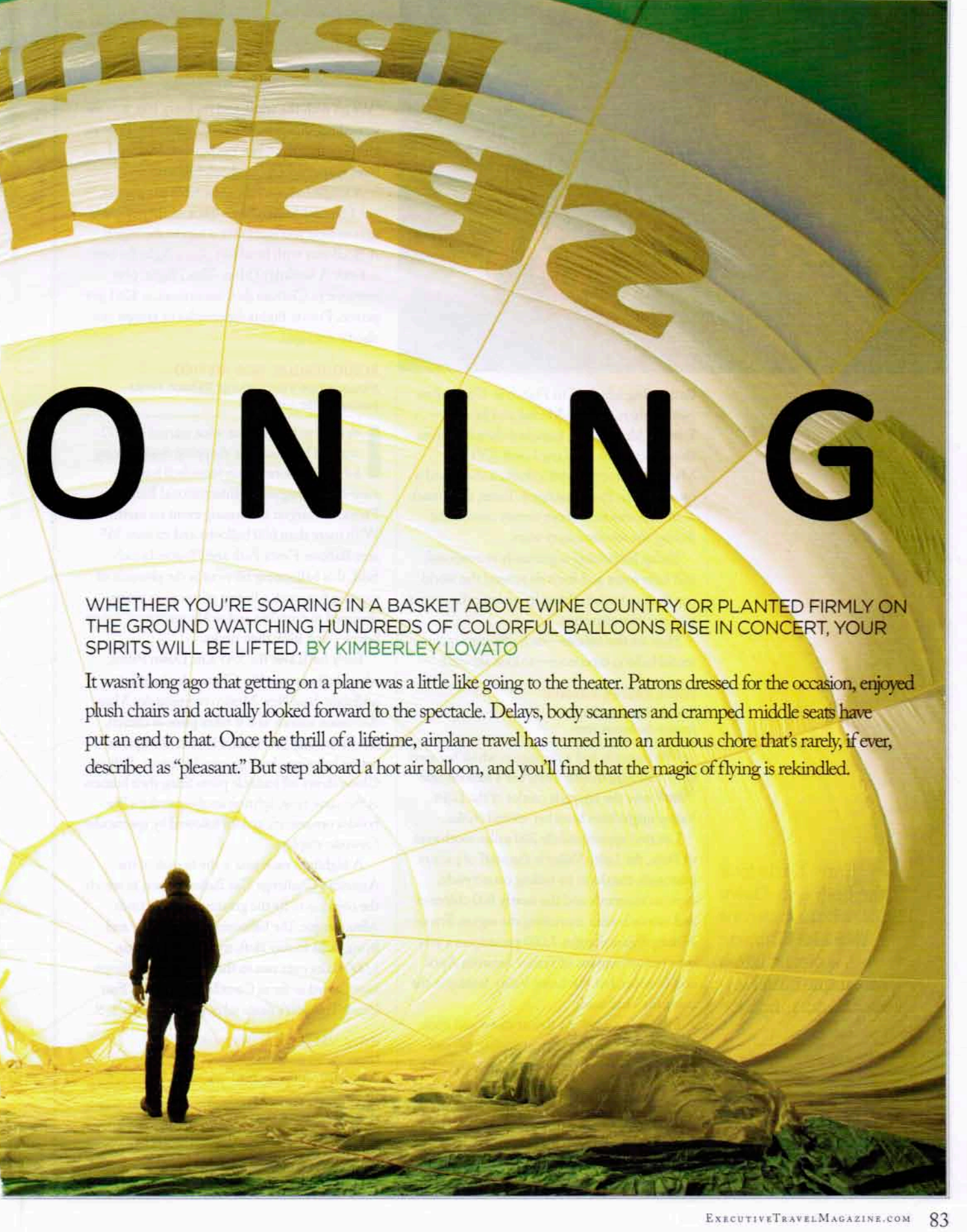




BALLOON

Inflating a hot air balloon is a simple process. An inflator fan is placed at the neck, and the envelope starts to fill up with air. The basket is then attached to the envelope and the burner secured in place. When the balloon is half-full of air, the burner can be fired up and the rest of the envelope filled.



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WHETHER YOU'RE SOARING IN A BASKET ABOVE WINE COUNTRY OR PLANTED FIRMLY ON THE GROUND WATCHING HUNDREDS OF COLORFUL BALLOONS RISE IN CONCERT, YOUR SPIRITS WILL BE LIFTED. BY KIMBERLEY LOVATO

It wasn't long ago that getting on a plane was a little like going to the theater. Patrons dressed for the occasion, enjoyed plush chairs and actually looked forward to the spectacle. Delays, body scanners and cramped middle seats have put an end to that. Once the thrill of a lifetime, airplane travel has turned into an arduous chore that's rarely, if ever, described as "pleasant." But step aboard a hot air balloon, and you'll find that the magic of flying is rekindled.



Ballooning lifted off in France in 1783, when two brothers, Joseph-Michel and Jacques-Étienne Montgolfier, launched their invention above Versailles for King Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette, with a duck, a sheep and a rooster as the first passengers. Later, the French used balloons to observe enemy movement during the revolutionary wars.

Today, ballooning is primarily recreational, and lofty tours and festivals around the world put the fun back in flying by making the journey into the true attraction.

Here are five reasons—each offering a quintessential balloon experience—to look skyward.

LOIRE VALLEY, FRANCE

France-Montgolfières
france-balloons.com

Cinderella had a carriage to whisk her away to happily ever after, but a balloon ride over the fairytale castles of the Loire Valley might have been her second choice.

Located approximately 200 miles southwest of Paris, the Loire Valley is the stuff of picture postcards, thanks to its rolling countryside, copious vineyards and the nearly 800 châteaux and manor houses encrusting the region. France-Montgolfières dangles 7,000 passengers a year over various regions of France between April and October, but the Loire Valley fantasy is the company's hallmark.

Flights leave twice a day, at dawn and dusk, from several takeoff spots, including the awesome Château de Chenonceau—an architectural masterpiece dating from the 16th century—and spanning the Cher River. Balloon pilots can control altitude with heat burners, but, says Jane Janvier, a pilot and partner at France-Montgolfières, people are not the real guides.

Early birds love the 5:45 a.m. Dawn Patrol, where balloons rise like Chinese lanterns into a midnight-blue New Mexico morning sky.

“We go with the wind, and on every trip, you see something different. We could see rivers, beavers, jumping fish, churches, sunflowers, deer, wild boar, grape pickers or schoolchildren.”

A single balloon ride costs \$277 per person, but France-Montgolfières has a medley of packages to help you maximize a trip to the region. A B&B stay with breakfast plus a flight for two is \$785. A weekday (Mon.–Thu.) flight, plus entrance to Château de Chenonceau, is \$261 per person. Private flights for couples or groups can also be arranged.

ALBUQUERQUE, NEW MEXICO

Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta
balloonfiesta.com

It's hard to believe that what started in 1972 with 13 balloons in a shopping mall parking lot has ballooned (pun intended) into the nine-day Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, the largest ballooning event on earth. With more than 600 balloons and its own 365-acre Balloon Fiesta Park and 78-acre launch field, this ballooning blowout is the pinnacle of viewing fun, with a lineup of must-see events designed to tantalize and tickle spectators' funny bones—and kink their necks.

Early birds love the 5:45 a.m. Dawn Patrol, where balloons rise like Chinese lanterns into a midnight-blue New Mexico morning sky. Mass Ascension sounds as if it takes place in church, but it's actually the massive launch of all participating balloons, choreographed to music. Balloon Glows shows off multiple pilots firing their burners at the same time, lighting up their airships like holiday ornaments, and it's followed by spectacular fireworks displays.

A highlight each year is the launch of the America's Challenge Gas Balloon Race, in which the object is to fly the greatest distance from Albuquerque. The balloonists use weather and flying skills to stay aloft, traveling more than 1,000 miles over two to three days. Past winners have landed as far as Canada and the U.S. East Coast. This year's fiesta takes place October 1–9.

NAPA VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

Napa Valley Balloons
napavalleyballoons.com

Napa Valley is recognized the world over for its fine wines and excellent cuisine, but it's also the busiest hot-air-balloon flight corridor in the world, and brightly colored

bubbles can be seen floating through the valley's sky practically year round.

Founded in 1980, Napa Valley Balloons was one of the first such companies in the area, and it has been taking dreamers over this celebrated region ever since. It has also been featured on numerous television shows, including *Oprah* and the *Today Show*, but the everyday adventurers give the company its status as one of the premier balloon companies in the country.

Pilots take spirited fliers up, up and over the green and gold patchwork of Napa's vineyards. Rides last about an hour, but most guests choose to prolong the experience and combine the air adventure with

an earthbound one. Add a minibus journey to smaller offroad wineries for \$299 per person, or go active and pedal from winery to winery along scenic country roads (nothing strenuous) on a mountain bike for \$369 per person. Both options include a catered picnic lunch and plenty of photo ops.

If you're planning to pop the question or mark a milestone occasion, rest assured that Napa Valley Balloons has witnessed countless such celebrations. There's no better way to make a moment memorable than from above California's famous wine country.

SERENGETI, TANZANIA
Serengeti Balloon Safaris
balloonsafaris.com

The word *safari* in Swahili technically means "journey" in English, though it has come to represent an African wildlife viewing adventure. But for guests of Serengeti Balloon Safaris, a safari is both.

Serengeti Balloon Safaris have lifted up more than 100,000 adventure-minded passengers since 1989, carrying them over the Serengeti plains and woodlands, known for the variety and number of their animal population.

A balloon journey offers a different perspective on this quintessential African landscape of yellow plains and acacia trees. Neely Main, of Santa Clara,

Calif., says that for her, it was the experience of a lifetime. "As we lifted into the sky, the scenery mesmerized us. The hills came into view, and the hippos were running below us. We could see several lionesses, followed by zebras, and in the distance giraffes were eating their breakfast of treetops."

Departures take place at sunrise, around 5 a.m., and flights last about one hour. Touchdown is followed by an *Out of Africa* breakfast of fruit, bacon, sausage, eggs and freshly baked bread at a table set with china and silver, below the shade of an acacia tree. The total cost for the package is \$499 per person, and the company works with ground safari operators in the area to collect and return guests to their organized itineraries.

MONTREAL, CANADA
International Balloon Festival of
St-Jean-Sur-Richelieu
ballooncanada.com

This inflatable theme park and balloon festival is not just a destination unto itself—it's also the biggest balloon bonanza in Canada and a family favorite. The nine-day festival takes place just outside of Montreal each year, welcoming hundreds of thousands of visitors who come not only for the balloons but also for the entertainment.

"Year after year, we set up new and surprising elements to improve the experience of festivalgoers with activities and events that tweak the imagination of young and old alike," says Guillaume Poirier, the event's communications coordinator.

Concerts are a highlight (Adam Lambert drew more than 70,000 fans in 2010), as are rides, games and shows by the likes of Bimana, a Columbian group due to return by popular demand, thanks to its giant inflatable marionettes, which dance in the air above the festival. A thrill for kids is Creature, the inflatable haunted house with spooks and scares around every bounce. And, of course, there are the more than 100 balloons that take to the skies each morning and evening in a flotilla of color, as well as special shapes such as animals and cartoon characters.

Watching is fun, but riding is a must at this riverside fest. Spectators can arrange private balloon tours starting at \$210 per person, which includes one-day entry into the theme park. This year's festival takes place August 13–21. **EI**

KIMBERLEY LOVATO is a travel writer and white-knuckle flier who was surprisingly calm when she sailed over France in a hot air balloon two years ago.



SAFE TRAVELS

In many countries, including the U.S., hot-air balloons are controlled by the same regulations as commercial airliners, including requirements for pilot experience. Before you book, ask the company for its safety record and precautions.