

UP AND AWAY

Floating in a hot air balloon across the countryside in Jaipur,
Preeti Verma Lal wanted to make the sky her home

IT IS A waltz in the sky. Kind of. If you are ready to take cue from the name of the company, that is. They call it Skywaltz. Prosaically put, it is the first commercial hot air balloon ride in the country. Beautifully put, it is a ride in a humungous balloon that goes where the wind takes it, climbing high enough to converse with the angels, the balloon so gentle in its drift that you would forget you are 1,000 ft up amidst the clouds. Unharnessed, standing in a wicker basket. There is no clamour of a revving engine, the whirl of the take-off or the thud of a landing; the ride is so silent that you can even hear your heart's bruits. Well, it is almost a waltz in the sky. All you need is to bring along your Prince Charming.

I was on assignment in Jaipur. Without the Prince Charming, of course. But I was ready to waltz. I had been on a hot air balloon before and knew the drill – the balloon made of 6,500 metre of silicon-lined fabric would be first laid flat on the sand, the inflator fan would pump in the air, the passengers

would jump in and the pilot would have you rehearse the landing drill even before take off. On that nippy winter morning, the beginnings were exactly the same – just the backdrop was a little different. This time we were taking off from the ancient Samode Palace that sits smug amidst endless brown hills and a fort lording over a large hilltop. And I was ready for my one-hour ride that costs a princely Rs 14,000.

The balloon was packed – there were the four propane cylinders, Steve Trieber, the chief pilot, not just with years of flying Boeing but also with a funny bone the size of, well, a 1,80,000 cubic ft balloon, four other passengers and an attendant adding that royal touch with his turban and piping hot tea. As we flew over innumerable villages and hills, minutes ticked away. We were going wherever the westerlies were

taking us – the basket grazing against trees on hilltops, the birds flying inches away and the sun waking up lazily from behind the hills. Where the clouds live, there is amazing silence, the calm broken by the din of the hot air being pumped into the balloon. Everything below looks tiny, the huts like dots on a large brown canvas and acres of wheat fields like a swatch of green. The ground beneath has never so looked so beautiful before. The breeze was flirting with my hair and I wished I could float eternally.

It was time to land. That is when uncertainty steps in. You never know where the balloon would land – that makes the balloon ride different every time you fly. We flew roughly six kilometers and landed in a barren field sandwiched between a wheat and tomato crop. As the balloon landed, the entire village buzzed with excitement – nobody had seen a balloon so big and village head was proud that the “miracle had landed in his field.” He was thrilled to the bones, incredulous at his own luck that nippy winter morning. He was not the only one feeling lucky, though. As I hopped out of the basket, I looked up in the sky where I was till a moment ago and thanked the stars. You cannot hop into the balloon basket in tulle gowns or tuxedo, but when the balloon sways with the wind, it does feel like a heavenly waltz. I had forgotten mine, but you might want to bring along the Prince Charming. And the champagne.

Fare: US \$350 or INR 14,000 per passenger; the cost includes door-to-door pick up and drop, snacks & beverage and flight certificates.

