

Interpreting the Sport of Ballooning

Known as the ballooning capital of the world, Albuquerque, New Mexico is home to the Anderson Abruzzo Albuquerque International Balloon Museum. The museum chronicles the history of ballooning from the first manned flight in 1783 to the present and includes all aspects of lighter-than-air flight including hot air balloons, helium and hydrogen balloons and powered airships. While the museum's interpretive programs often focus on the history and science of flight, there is another part of ballooning known best to Albuquerque, the sport of hot air ballooning.

Ballooning in Albuquerque began in 1882 but it was not until 1972 when the sport became part of the culture and life style of the city with the advent of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta. It is this culture that we attempt to interpret in our tours by introducing the visitor to the sport itself. Docents do this the same way interpreters everywhere interpret their sites, through exhibits and hands-on activities. Two exhibits feature the culture of the sport, presenting posters, clothing, pins, patches and other ballooning memorabilia. There is a flight simulator which allows the visitor to become a pilot without leaving the ground, learning the fundamentals of flying a balloon to a target. A hot air balloon basket, envelop and fan are displayed in "balloon school", the hands-on area of the museum. The visitor is invited to touch the fabric of the balloon, study the burners and tanks and learn about the process of inflating the balloon. Children are particularly fascinated by this and the docents will talk the class through the inflation by showing them how to hold the throat of the balloon open, operate the inflator fan and fluff the fabric.

The real "sport" of hot air and gas ballooning is in the competition. Hot air balloon pilots compete for cash and prizes by demonstrating their flying skills. Balloons are steered only by the winds and pilots soon learn that winds blow in different directions at different altitudes. By playing the winds, pilots can maneuver their crafts to targets on the ground. Other competition events include: a hare and hound race, judge declared goal, and "key grab" competition.

Flying gas balloons is a whole different world and involves long duration and distance races. The Gordon Bennett Race is held every year and invites the best three teams from several different countries to compete. The winner is the balloon team who flies the furthest, regardless of time in the air or landing site. In the United States the America's Challenge Race is held annually as part of the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta and determines the Gordon Bennett competitors who will represent the US.

Ballooning can be tranquil, beautiful, fun or exciting but it is a sport with a unique culture all its own.

Karen Brown
touchogold@msn.com