

RIDING HIGH OVER LUXOR A BALLOON REVIEW

BY JIMMY DUNN

It was 4:45 am, dark and chilly on Crocodile Island as five of us met up on the [Nile](#) side shore of this [Movenpick resort](#). We had discussed taking a balloon ride at [Luxor](#) even before our tour began, but that was an on again off again proposition, as the government investigated how safe this particular activity was for tourists. However, after new regulations were established, the balloons were once again permitted to fly, but I had managed to book our place on one of them only the day before this particular adventure. Arrangements were then made by my friends at [Flats in Luxor](#) to pick us up by boat that early morning. Only morning flights are allowed, because later in the day, winds could pose problems for these lighter than air crafts.

Though rather dark, we spotted our boat soon after arriving at the shore, just a few yards from the [Movenpick hotel](#). It was a bit of an adventure just boarding the small vessel, as one of our members who was using a cane after some recent hip surgery, and the rest of us had to make our way down the rocky shore in the dark. Then, there was the small (thin) gangplank we had to navigate in order to board the boat, no small feat particularly for our disabled member. We nevertheless made it aboard with only a few grumbles and complaints, and were soon headed down the [Nile](#) in the chilly darkness towards a dock on the [West Bank](#). It was about a fifteen or twenty minute ride, and I was not really dressed for the morning whether, but the captain loaned me a headscarf that certainly made things a bit more comfortable. However, I also had considerable reservations about how cold it would be up in a balloon this time of the morning.

In fact, I had not planned on making the ascent myself, but rather photographing the adventure from below. However, one of the original members of our tour, who had scheduled the balloon ride, had ended up sick and was unable to make it that morning. Since the reservation was for five, I decided to go up with the rest of our small group. Now, I am very happy things worked out as they did.

We were met on the [West Bank](#) at [Luxor](#) by several busses that would carry my group and others to the launch site. It was a relatively short ride, which included a brief safety discussion. Then we made a turn and suddenly, in a clearing, found our balloon. I'm not too sure what I had expected. Coming from West Texas, I know a few balloonists, though I had never ridden in one, but I have seen their rigs, which usually consist of small baskets capable of holding from one to maybe four or five people. I guess I expected a much smaller contraption than the big, metal basket capable of carrying perhaps as many as 16 or more of us early morning adventurers, plus the pilot. There were numerous personnel around working to inflate it this crisp morning. We could also see a few other balloons nearby that presumably belonged to other small companies.

While the final preparations were being made for take off, we were given more precise safety instructions. Most of this orientation was concerned with landing, and the main idea was, just prior to landing, to face away from the direction of flight, grab hold of small straps attached to the inside of the basket, and squat.

Soon, we were boarding the balloon's basket, which consisted of several compartmentalized units. Our small group was able to take up one of these, though it was probably only meant for four people. There were no doorways, so many people had to be lifted into the basket by the support personnel, though I managed a bit more dignified entrance on my own. Once again, we were given safety instructions, and this time practiced our landing positions.

As several other balloons were already soaring above us, we soon took to the sky ourselves. I found that there was no reason to be concerned for the cold morning air, as the heat from the flame that controlled the balloons altitude was quite warm, and in fact sometimes a little hot. As the balloon took off, there was none of the stomach wrenching effect one feels in a fast elevator. All was smooth, with the only noise coming from the roar of the flame and some chatter from my fellow passengers. There were, of course, some oohs and aahs from them as we gained a little height.

Though we rose with the dawn, the sun itself had not yet broken the horizon, and so it was still just a bit dark below, light enough to see, but really too dark for my digital camera at first. Actually we were told that one is not allowed to take pictures because of nearby military or security posts, but this was said with a wink of the eye, and soon everyone was clicking away, dark or not.

In the distance, we could see other balloons, sometimes ascending, sometimes descending, and our balloon reached a moderate elevation before once again descending. I should have asked, but I remain unsure whether this was to catch currents of air, or to give us various views of the monuments. In fact, at one point we got so low that I presumed that we would soon land, but afterwards we shot back up reaching our maximum altitude of 4,000 feet. In all, we spent about an hour and a half in the air, bobbing up and down in the still air above a magnificent vista of mountains, ancient monuments and modern village houses.

I had visited the [West Bank](#) of [Luxor](#) (ancient [Thebes](#)) on many occasions, but had never witnessed the great Temples of a Million Years, and other monuments from above. Its a nice view, and on this occasion, with almost no wind to carry us away, we remained during most of the flight just above these monuments, though our position and elevation varied considerably.

There below, in the morning light that was yet too soft for my camera, was the [Temple of Hatshepsut](#), and there, the [Ramesseum](#). We passed over all of the ruins, some more visible than others, but then there was also the mountains to see, the villages and the course of the [Nile](#), particularly as we rose up to our highest elevation. Many of our group thought that, as we looked down on the children waving at us from villages, that the rural houses were particularly interesting, with their open rooms on the second story, and sometimes the first. Doubtless, many of these are not so very different than those of ancient times, built to hold both family and livestock.

During the flight, I never felt any safety concerns, even at 4,000 feet, other than wondering why the flame didn't burn a hole through the top of the balloon. Oh well, I figured that was a problem worked out long ago in ballooning, and I knew that our pilot had been thousands of times without suffering such a fate.

As we made our final descent, I guess I was a little concerned, but that was soon put to rest. We were soon floating over a sea of sugar cane, and it seemed as though we would touch down in the middle of it, though we were not moving fast enough for me to worry much about that. However, abruptly the sugar cane gave way to a turn row and even as we passed over the last stalks, the ground crew was there grabbing ropes hung from the basket. We all followed the safety procedures so redundantly set out before the flight, but there was never a bounce, as the balloon was literally pulled from the sky by the waiting Egyptians.

Soon, the basket was de-boarded in much the same way it had been boarded in the first place, with many of the people being helped over the side by the ground crew, but that was not the end of this particular adventure. There had to be a small ceremony as well, to commemorate our flight, and with some drummers hammering out a beat, everyone danced while the balloon crew sang a rhythmic chant. We were then given T-shirts and a certificate testifying to our ascent above the ruins of the [West Bank](#).

As we rode back on the bus to catch our boat to Crocodile Island, I think everyone felt that they had just made a memory, a special experience that would remain in their minds as other vacations come and go. Even though I frequently travel to Egypt, it must certainly be ranked as one of the high points of any of my visits. There was even regret that others in our group had not joined us for this Egyptian adventure in the skies of ancient [Thebes](#).