

Getting it Right...Hot Air Ballooning by D.V. Berkom *(originally written for Indies Unlimited)*

Once upon a time in another life I worked for a premier hot air balloon company in the Napa Valley. In between selling rides, acting as crew, and working as the morning ‘hostess’, I toyed with the idea of flying a hot air balloon for a living and took lessons from a patient and really brave pilot. Needless to say, when I realized the time and monetary commitment involved I soon abandoned my dreams of guiding passengers on a floating tour above the region that I had grown to love so much. In those days, even though you only needed to complete 10 flights and 35 hours to be licensed as a commercial pilot, most balloon companies in the Valley required a minimum of 500 flight hours before they’d even consider hiring you. Five hundred hours takes a LONG time to add up when most flights don’t last more than an hour or two, and several companies required 1000 hours of flying in the Napa Valley itself.

So, in case you’ve been looking for that unusual element to include in your nascent manuscript, here are some pointers to consider when writing a scene which includes your character riding/piloting a hot air balloon. First, some terminology:

Envelope: the fabric (usually rip-stop nylon) part of the balloon (the pretty, colorful part)

Gondola: the basket (usually wicker) underneath the envelope that carries the pilot, passengers, and the fuel to fly the balloon (some gondolas can hold as many as 16-18 passengers plus pilot)

Propane: the fuel used in flying a hot air balloon

Propane tanks: fuel tanks filled with propane kept on board the gondola

Burners: the mechanism used to burn propane to create hot air, providing lift

Ground/Chase Crew: the unsung heroes of the hot air ballooning industry.

Point #1: If they’re gonna fly the balloon, your character will need to know something about wind and weather. Much more so if they’re going to be a commercial pilot. These pilots sleep, eat, and breathe the job. Typically, flight takes place early in the morning or a little before sunset, when winds are calmest. After checking weather reports, the pilot releases a small balloon filled with helium in order to determine wind direction at various altitudes. Calm but moving is best. Too calm and the balloon won’t go anywhere. If you want to make the scene exciting, conjure up a storm front or have the balloon launch during a microburst. I guarantee the ride will be memorable and probably deadly.

Point #2: Hot air balloons don’t have a rudder or steering wheel. When you climb into the basket, it looks like there’s no way to steer—just some serious looking propane burners suspended above your head (propane tanks are secured to the side of the basket or in their own separate section depending on the size of the basket.)

Remember the small helium balloon the pilot released earlier? Well, that showed the pilot which way the wind was blowing at various altitudes. The commercial pilot will have several landing spots in mind and will ‘steer’ the balloon by either climbing or descending to take advantage of wind direction. The pilot burns propane to create hot air inside the envelope allowing the balloon to rise, and then lets the air cool or releases it through a vent located near the top of the envelope in order to descend. You could have several things happen to make it more exciting for your

character: they could mistakenly hit a fast cross-current and head toward a power line, a tall building, or a mountain; they could climb too high and lose oxygen (generally above 15,000 feet); the vent could fail to work properly, releasing the hot air and causing the basket to hurtle toward earth; or they could fall out of the basket ☺

Alternatively, if you're writing a romance this could be a romantic interlude with your hero and heroine. I know of many couples who said their vows while several hundred feet up in a hot air balloon. Just make sure there's someone to carry the bride if she's got heels on. Takeoff and landing sites can be pretty rough terrain for high-heeled shoes (e.g., recently plowed fields or grassy meadows).

Point #3: Your character will not feel the wind in her face or hair, except for a brief moment when ascending or descending and crossing different air currents. There's no sense of movement because a hot air balloon flies *with* the wind. It's serene and quiet, punctuated only by the intermittent burst of the burners (unless you decide to use one of the ideas I mentioned in Point #2). They will hear dogs barking, people talking, and wildlife tends to flush from their hiding places at the flare of the burners.

I remember several instances where passengers who claimed to be afraid of heights were ecstatic at the end of the ride because they hadn't been scared at all. I've heard many reasons for this, but the ones that sounded the most logical to me were because of a) no sense of movement, and b) the gondola itself is free of the earth. For some reason, being connected to the ground and high up (like in a building or on a bridge) is what makes things scary for folks suffering from acrophobia.

Point #4: Propane fuel is mostly safe to be around except in a couple of circumstances: a) when filling the tanks and, b) when there's a leak. (In case of a leak, there's an additive in propane that makes it smell like garlic.) Obviously, crew is not allowed to smoke near the tanks, especially when filling them, but we also had to be careful not to use our cell phones, and wearing polyester clothing wasn't advised. Static electricity and propane just isn't a good combination, but makes for interesting novel fodder.

Point #5: Landing can be tricky. The main concern for pilots and crew (other than safety and weather, of course) is to have a clear landing site. Occasionally, winds will change direction without warning and the balloon can drift into areas where it's not welcome. If you're not familiar with the Napa Valley, it's populated with expensive homes, but more importantly it's a premier grape growing region. If a pilot has a rough landing in a vineyard and ends up taking out some vines, the balloon company's liability could very well include the monetary value of the vine or vines damaged and what they would have produced during a normal lifetime. That can add up to some serious coin—especially if the wine made from the grapes is award-winning.

Which could be an interesting twist if your hero is the pilot...

So, that's ballooning in a nut shell. If you ever have the chance to take a hot air balloon ride, I highly recommend it. They're fairly expensive but often include an hour flight followed by a traditional champagne breakfast, either at the landing site or a restaurant depending on the

company. If you're lucky enough to live in an area that has hot air ballooning, try getting to know your local company. Follow the balloons when you see them and watch what the crew does when the balloon lands. Wait until they're done packing up, then approach a crew member and let them know you'd be interested in crewing for them (for free, of course). Depending on the pilot, you might become their next ~~victim~~ volunteer crew member and eventually wrangle a free ride out of the deal. Be sure to tell them you're a writer and are doing research for a novel you're working on and will include them in the acknowledgement section. They'll love the publicity.

Balloon festivals are another way to get to know pilots and their crew. Smaller festivals are easier to navigate than, say, the giant fiesta in Albuquerque, although seeing hundreds of hot-air balloons ascend at the same time is an experience not to be missed.

Alternatively, you can apply for a job to work for busy companies, usually starting out as crew. Often, the pay isn't high but the work is fun and getting to know the folks involved in ballooning is a kick. You'll need to be a morning person, though. Days start hella early.

What are you waiting for?