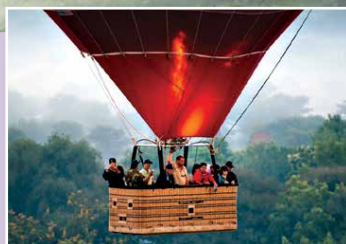


# routes

## Hot air ballooning in Goa



The balloon free flight flies like an aircraft along with the wind at heights up to 3000 ft. and can cover up to 60km in an hour, informs Preeti Verma Lal



It is not often that one flies at 3,000 ft in the sky in a 6,500-metre nylon envelope with a LPG cylinder spitting fire to keep it afloat.

This is no ordinary envelope made of usual nylon, though. It is a 25-30 metre tall balloon, the lower portion of which is made of Nomex, the anti-inflammatory material used to make suits for car race drivers. A wicker basket hangs from the balloon and people stand in it unharnessed. Picture this. You are flying standing in the basket with fire being pumped right over your head. Imagine this. You are flying but the balloon has no steering wheel. But no fear. It is not unmanned. There is a pilot. Though the wind is really the captain here. The balloon's take-off point is definite but not the landing. You could land anywhere. It all depends on how calm or fiendish the wind is. The flight begins with the inflation of the balloon by motorised fans. Once the envelope is filled with air, the propane burners are ignited to heat the air inside. In about 30 minutes the balloon is ready for flight. Upon inflation, you join your pilot in the beautiful hand-crafted wicker basket. The luxurious, over-sized basket has plenty of room to allow everyone to enjoy the flight to the fullest. Inflation usually commences at 6.15 am with the majority of the balloons launched prior to 7.00 am. The early bird catches the worm. So one early November morning, with a heart laden with calm-wind hope, I drove through Goa's verdant landscape in darkness for my first hot air balloon ride in the country's tiniest state. Stars were still sequined in the sky and the morning sun was still asleep. I was feeling like the rooster that, in September 1783, was the world's first hot air balloon pas-

senger along with a sheep and a duck, who had then landed safely in Paris. Maybe I would too. Hope was luring me on and as the car screeched to a halt in south Goa's Assolda village, I found an overturned LPG cylinder spitting fire into the balloon. A large motor fan was whirring and with it, by every passing minute, the 6,500 metre inflated higher like a mighty giant. If you wished, you could help with the balloon's inflation. Minutes later, the balloon stood upright against the Sahyadri mountain range. The ground crew, dressed in black, held on to the tethers as Colonel Mukesh Yadav, our pilot, instructed us on how to hop in. "Left foot first. Then, right. Sit on the edge and then jump in. The landing can be tricky. Follow my example." Six passengers listened attentively as the rust/blue balloon rose above the ground.

One inch higher.

Another inch. Then, another. Soon, the balloon was cruising at nearly 2,000 ft in the sky. The higher the balloon went, the smaller the ground looked. The long Kushwari river that cuts through Assolda and Chandor turned into a blue sliver, the church became a miniature of itself. Green, however, refused to fade from the canvas. Miles and miles of coconut plantations and mangroves, interspersed with turmeric yellow houses with sapphire blue roofs, stretched before us. As you gently leave the Earth, you are amazed at how light the balloon feels. During the flight you have unobstructed 360-degree views, allowing for breathtaking photographs. The pilot explored a variety of altitudes, up to 900 feet in the air for a marvellous overview of Goa, to just under 400 feet from the ground where you were able to see the sights and sounds of the beautiful state. By changing altitude, the pilot is also able to change direction by finding a shift in wind currents at another level. I was amazed at the excitement and curiosity generated by the passage of our balloon. Occasionally, cars followed us over the roads in the city to rendezvous with us after

landing. Throughout our flight, our ground crew also followed us. The wind was kind and the balloon was sailing smoothly at nearly 70 kmph. After nearly 45 minutes in the sky, I had travelled 6 kms away from the take-off point. Now, it was descent time and Colonel Yadav looked for a safe landing point that was not a pond or a crowded plantation. Or next to someone's doorstep. Faraway, he noticed a flat grass field and soon the gigantic balloon tried finding its land legs. GS Rathore, of Tiger Balloon Safaris, was leading the chase vehicles. We finally found our spot. The crew held on to the tethers, so we didn't zoom away again. I recapped my knee-bent landing trick and within a blink the balloon landed. Safely on a grassy knoll. The wind was kind and my first hot air balloon ride in Goa was over. It had lasted for a little over an hour. I hopped out onto the dewy grass and was presented with a certificate signed by our pilot, verifying I had completed my flight. We were invited to assist with the deflation of the balloon and transported to our original launch site.

But my adventure in Goa was not over yet. A

seaplane and amphibious vehicles were waiting, the tour organised by a US based consortium, along with D'Souza Leisure Pvt. Ltd. Now I would hop into a seaplane and be a crocodile-dumdee, as the amphibious vehicle took me for a ride on water and land. Who says Goa is only about beaches? This 'hop on hop off' tour along Goa's inland waterways uses its chain of jetties and ferry ramps, for bird watching and eco-tourism tours. 34 passengers can be accommodated for a 30-minute trip.

Fact file: Price for ballooning is Rs 10,000 per person (right now, there is a 20 per cent discount offer). From 22 Dec to 31st Jan, the prices are Rs 12,000 per person. Couples can book an exclusive flight for Rs 50,000. Insurance is part of the package. Pick up/drop from the hotel is extra charge. Bookings can be made at [www.hotairballooningingoa.com](http://www.hotairballooningingoa.com) and [www.goa-tourism.com](http://www.goa-tourism.com). Goa Tourism has partnered with Tiger Balloon Safaris for the balloon flights. Tiger Balloon Safaris is the hot air balloon brand of Camping Retreats of India and a multi-product brand in adventure tourism, headquartered at New Delhi. One of the largest hot air ballooning companies in India to have been authorised by DGCA (Directorate General of Civil Aviation), to conduct hot air ballooning on a commercial basis, it has successfully completed more than five years of commercial operations with more than 5,000 satisfied passengers who have carried back memories for a lifetime.



### ALL ABOUT HOT AIR BALLOONS

The first hot air balloon passengers were a sheep, a duck and a rooster. In 1808, two Frenchmen took part in a hot air balloon duel to win the heart of a famous opera singer. They took to the skies above Paris and shot at each others' balloons.

During the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln established the Balloon Corps that had 7 balloons. It was disbanded in 1863.

Cameron Ballooning, based in Bristol, England, is the world's largest maker of hot air balloons.

The wicker basket is made of willow and cane. The largest basket maker is Somerset Willows in Somerset, England.



SELECT PHOTOS: PREETI VERMA LAL

