

Balloon Flights



Michael Pierre de Villiers

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Title page: Adventure Balloons: Fire in the belly and safely landed, misty enroute. Virgin Balloon Flights: Fire in the belly, nearly upright, Coombe Park and Coombe Abbey Hotel.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michael Pierre de Villiers was born in Durban, South Africa. He was trained to World Meteorological Organization class one meteorologist and multi-discipline weather forecaster in the South African Weather Service where he reached the rank of Director. He served on a weather ship in the South Atlantic. He served on World Meteorological Organization expert teams and was World Meteorological Organization rapporteur for the Africa region. He was also a commercial pilot and flying instructor. More recently he was a weather forecaster in the United Arab Emirates, then in England. Now retired.

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2026-08-26

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Tethered balloon at Marina Mall, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates

Our first balloon flight was in a tethered helium aerostatic balloon at the Marina Mall on the reclaimed island of Al Kasir at Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the 10th September 2004. (Also described in the article Travels while living in the United Arab Emirates.) One reaches the Marina Mall along a causeway. On the island is the biggest flag I've seen. It is a landmark that can be seen for miles and gives a good idea of the wind (land or sea breeze).

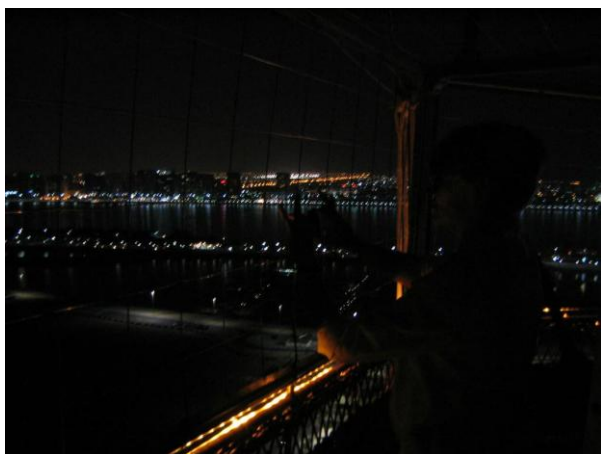
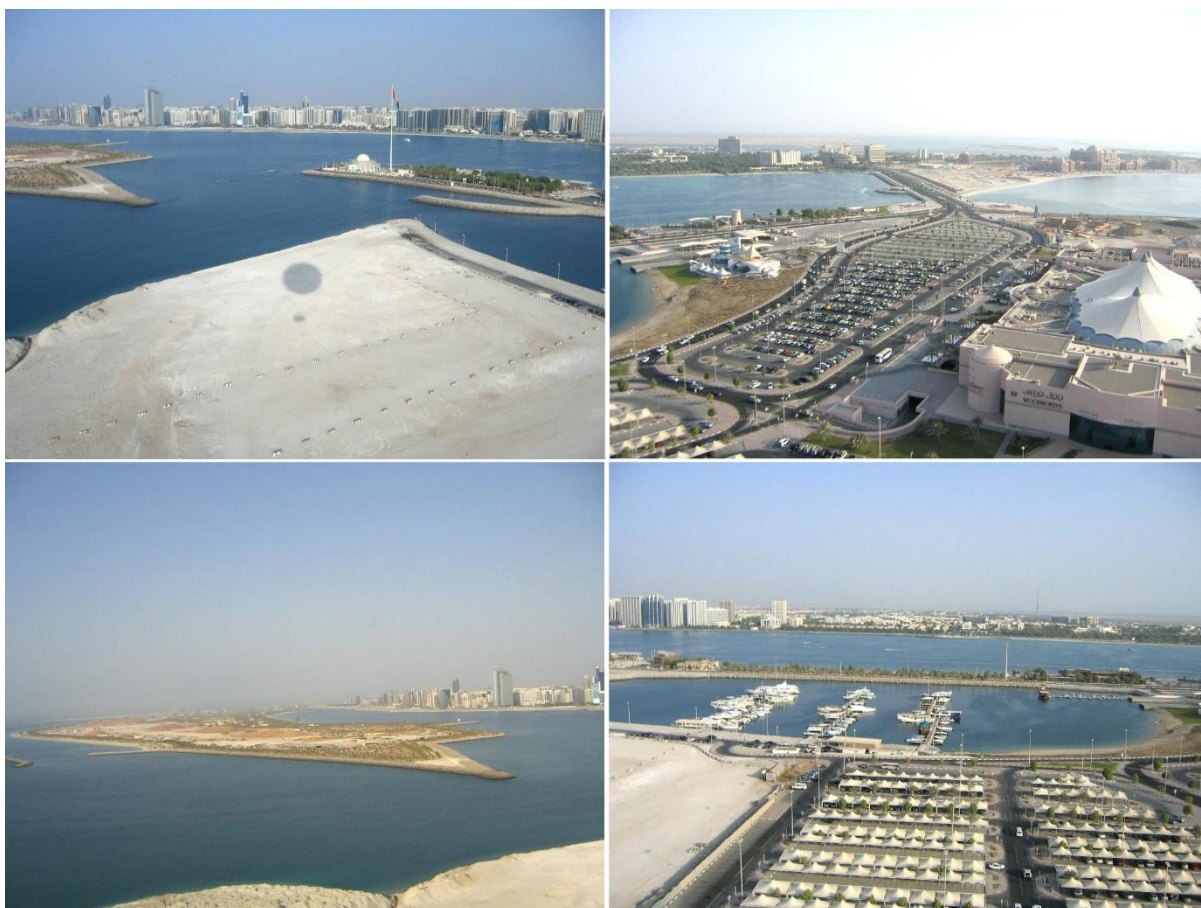
The balloon is mechanically winched up and down on a reinforced steel cable, rising to a height of about 300 metres during the about 10 minutes flight, if one may call it that. An aerostatic balloon is one that contains a lighter than air lifting gas, normally hydrogen or helium. Hydrogen is the lightest and most abundant gas, but highly combustible. Helium, the second lightest gas, is stable and inert. Therefore, the safest to use in balloons. Working with and filling meteorological balloons with hydrogen many years ago, one was well aware of the necessary safety precautions.



Balloon registration A6-XBA grounded and tethering cable visible.

The open waist high circular gondola, that one walk around within, provides an excellent unobstructed 360° view, particularly of Abu Dhabi spread to the south. We went on two trips. The first in the afternoon returning for a night trip then to dine at a restaurant. While we lived and worked in Abu Dhabi, the island was extensively enlarged. The balloon is no longer there.

In the photograph top left, on the next page, one is looking south-eastward. The balloon's shadow can be seen on recently dredged reclaimed land with the Abu Dhabi skyline in the distance. The large UAE flag, next to the mosque (centre of the photograph), is limp in the calm air. The edge of the newly dredged Lulu Island to the north-east, is visible in the top left of the photograph. It is seen in more detail in the photograph below left. The tent domed Marina Mall, car park and causeway to the island are visible in the photograph top right. In the distant top right of the photograph is the under construction five-star Emirates Palace.



The marina, below right photograph above, is situated next to the car park. Each parking bay has a tent like dome to provide shade and keep the car cool (or less hot) while shopping. There is a causeway on the opposite side of the marina that leads to the mosque and flag seen on the top left photograph. One can drive along the causeway to the flag.

On the left the nighttime view looking south toward central Abu Dhabi.

Hot air balloon flight from Hemel Hempstead, England

Now resident in England, on the 23rd of September 2011, we went for an early morning Adventure Balloons balloon flight from Hemel Hempstead south of Luton. This time it was a not tethered hot air balloon. We drove there in the very early hours in the dark. We enjoyed the flight very much, but it was not the best of weather. When we neared Hemel Hempstead, we could see low cloud and fog patches and already concerned that the flight would be called off.

At Gadebridge Park, in the north-west of Hemel Hempstead, passengers had to help getting the balloon laid out ready for inflation that also required passenger assistance. We became airborne with a layer of low cloud that we had to stay under and had to land in fields on two occasions to wait for it to lift, brushing the top of trees on one occasion.



Ready to light the fire. The balloon is propped open and heat fired inside.



Nearly full with the gondola about to tip upright. En route just below cloud and getting mistier. The Land Rover is a year 2000 Defender 110 TD5.



About to land after clipping the top of trees and airborne again.

Drifting in the wind our route took us toward the north-east over the north of Hemel Hempstead, across the M1 and over Redbourn to land in a field on the north-east of the town where our flight was called off.



Passing over the M1 and descending over Redbourn to land in a field.



Deflation after another successful landing.

We had to wait some time for the mini bus to get to us to take us back to our cars at Hemel Hempstead. Of course, by then the weather had cleared.

In the meantime, passengers helped with the deflation of the balloon and packed with glasses of Champagne when the Land Rover and trailer arrived. I did not have any, because I was driving us home. And our flight certificates. A most enjoyable and interesting time well spent.

Hot air balloon flight from Coombe Park, England

We were booked to go on another hot air balloon flight on the 7th July 2012 courtesy of Virgin Balloon Flights from one of three sites, namely, Telford Golf & Spa Hotel, Hawkstone Park Hotel or, Weston-Under-Redcastle, or Battlefield Farm, Battlefield both in Shrewsbury. At the last minute the flight was cancelled. After obtaining a refund, the first date we could manage was nearly a year later on the 18th June 2013 with Virgin Balloon Flights.

This time it was near to home from Coombe Park to the east of Coventry. We had some time



Nearly ready.

previously visited Coombe Park on a day trip. Being summer with sunset late in the evening we went on an evening flight. Starting from the park the flight north-eastward, passed over the M6, the village of Withybrook and the A5, ending in a field at Sharnford in Leicestershire,

Usual procedure helping to inflate the balloon. Lovely Land Rover. My favourite. Always wanted to own a long wheel base station wagon. Drove many, but never owned.

After lift-off at about 18:30 BST (British Summer Time) from near the Coombe Country Park Visitor Centre and an excellent aerial view of Coombe Abbey, which we visited in January.



Lift-off near the Coombe Country Park Visitor Centre and a view of the Coombe Abbey Hotel complex.

We then floated passed a place that I photographed with a small light aircraft parked next to the buildings and a nearby grass runway. Later found out it is the Peter Pan day nursery and pre-school. The latest satellite imagery reveals a small aircraft hangar where the aircraft was parked with the grass runway still visible.



Hazy view of the Peter Pan nursery and pre-school. The white dot next to trees is the aircraft. Another hazy view. This time the M6 and railway line with a freight train and diesel-electric freight locomotive, probably a British Rail Class 66.

Not much further we crossed the M6 motorway and railway to the north-west of England. Next to it were roofless fabricated buildings, a fake bridge and other items that looked like they were for military house to house combat training. Or in military parlance FIBUA (Fighting In Built Up Area). Although it looked too small an area to be a full size FIBUA village. Among the buildings were what looked like mock Land Rover snatch vehicles, a protected patrol vehicle based on the Land Rover Defender 110 chassis. By coincidence, the Land Rover that pulled the balloon trailer to Coombe Park was a year 2001 Defender 110 TD5. Nearby is the Warzone Airsoft and Paintball Ltd. Recently looking at their website the site is now obvious that the site is used by them for paintball and airsoft guns war games. The buildings on their website now look very dilapidated and much changed site.



The FIBUA with a small two street village fake bridge on the right. Unidentified items in the two fields. On the right, a closer view of the roofless prefabricated buildings.



On the ground. The balloon pilot calling for ground support.

We landed at about 20:00 BST in a most inaccessible field near to Sharnford. We eventually found our way out to a road where, after quite a long wait, two taxis arrived to take us back to Coombe Park. The drivers had a job finding us.

It was a long drive and dark before we eventually arrived back at our cars, clutching our certificates.

How the balloonist and crew got the kit out of the field I do not know. All in all, a most enjoyable and interesting trip.