



# UP, UP & AWAY!

A RECENT BALLOONING EVENT IN AGRA SPARED NO EFFORTS IN BOOSTING LEISURE AND ADVENTURE TOURISM AND AVIATION-BASED ENTERTAINMENT IN UTTAR PRADESH BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

**I**t is my first hot air ballooning experience and I know just why Samit Garg, Founder-Director, E Factor & Sky Waltz, is so gaga about the sport. I arrive at the PAC Grounds, one of the venues of the 2nd Taj Balloon Festival held at Agra recently. It is evening and the grounds throb with activity; gigantic hot air balloons burst in a riot of colours even as I wonder at their

sheer size. Trigger-happy people throng the place, armed with smart phones and cameras, and soon, I am drawn into posing for a selfie with a young man possibly in his 20s.

Organised by Sky Waltz, in association with Uttar Pradesh Tourism, the festival was aimed at boosting leisure and adventure tourism and aviation-based entertainment in the state. The reason Agra was the chosen destination is the presence of the Taj Mahal which renders hot air ballooning an especially exhilarating and unique experience. As Garg says, "Even Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan did not see his creation like you can from a hot air balloon..." The basic premise of a hot air balloon is that hot air, being lighter than cool air, rises in cool air and so, air trapped inside a balloon is heated up using a burner, making it less



latest aviation and adventure sport for discerning tourists. This festival is the first step towards creating a world-class ballooning centre in our state.”

I have seen the Taj by day and by night, but viewing the monument from 700 feet above is something indescribable. These flights take off early and I reached the grounds by 5 am, equipped with a boarding pass (yes, you read that right). Our pilot, Richard N, hails from Sri Lanka and has been flying for seven years now. I wondered if the winds would play spoilsport (balloons don't fly in windy conditions) but Richard was in no mood to cancel the flight. He warned about the possibility of a bumpy landing though, adding that it is perfectly normal.

Mini trucks holding the equipment lined up and I watch with childlike wonder as a few small helium balloons were first released to check the direction of the wind and the trajectory of the flight. I noticed that all take-off sites were outside the 500 metre heritage periphery as mandated by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI).

Seven of us were on the flight and Richard told us that we must put away all our cameras and duck down when so instructed, prior to landing. The balloon took off quite seamlessly. Soon, we were over 700 feet high and I could see the Taj and the city of Agra right below me. The rising sun made it all the more ethereal. Luckily, the visibility was great and the wind speeds just right.

I felt like I was floating on a cloud and wanted the experience to last longer but soon it was time to land. I could see almost the entire village running up to the spot where we had landed to gawk at the balloon. Here on, the festival is set to become bigger and better. In Garg's words, "We are looking to have 22 to 25 balloons next year and up to 100 balloons in the next five to seven years." ■



dense than the air outside. One of the safest forms of aviation sport, hot air ballooning has been gaining currency around the world.

There were tethered flights with hot air balloons rising only a few metres high, giving enthusiasts a touch and feel of them. I found it a great place to interact with the pilots and see how they make the balloons fly. This edition of the festival was organised on a larger scale than last year and showcased 15 hot air balloons from 12 countries including

the US, UK, Spain, Germany, UAE, Canada, Netherlands, Turkey, Switzerland, Belgium, Poland and Malaysia.

Balloons in the shape of three iconic cartoon characters - Bob the Lobster, Happy Egg, and the Smurfs - dotted the skies and grounds. According to Amrit Abhijat, Secretary/Director General, Tourism, Uttar Pradesh, "UP is a unique state providing various adventure sport opportunities to tourists. We are introducing hot air ballooning as the