



# SOARING HIGH

THE FIRST EDITION OF THE ARAKU HOT AIR BALLOON FESTIVAL IN ANDHRA PRADESH UNDER THE 'LETS VIZAG' BRAND GAVE VISITORS A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE.

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO

**THE BUZZ IN THE AIR** is palpable. The crowds are swelling by the moment. There are couples, singles, families and kids all waiting with bated breath, braving the cold winds. I am at the NTR Grounds in Andhra Pradesh on a cold winter evening to join a motely group of locals and tourists to witness the night glow at the first edition of the Araku Hot Air Balloon Festival. And soon enough I hear a child's excited voice, "Look at the back". And as I turn around, I see the sight of a balloon being inflated and soon it is towering above everyone present.

As everyone is awestruck, comes the next spectacle. The balloon is lit up and the colours magically come alive and glow in the night and everyone's cameras and phones go on an overdrive mode. Well after all we are looking at one of the

specialty shaped balloons called Neptune that has a fiery red colour and is shaped like a sea horse that sways next to regular striped balloons. "We have created this experience merging ballooning with glamping to give visitors a unique experience under the brand 'Lets Vizag' which is primarily a leisure and entertainment destination. It is important that we create events that have the potential to draw people who are then attracted to the DNA of the locale," says Kaushik Mukherji, Lead Consultant, Andhra Pradesh Tourism.

A three hour drive from Vishakapatnam through a circuitous road gets me to the camp site at Araku Valley for balloon festival. With 16 teams, the festival saw participation of 13 countries including India, Australia, USA, South

## EVENTS BALLOONING



Korea, Brazil, Switzerland, Japan, Malaysia and Taiwan.

Samit Garg, CEO of E-Factor and SkyWaltz that has organised the festival in association with Andhra Pradesh Tourism, explains, “Araku is being promoted as an ecotourism hub and we have got this zone to ensure that we create experiences that will attract people to come here. And when you see the valley from the balloon it gives you a fantastic perspective as you get wowed by the valley scape. Aviation sports like ballooning and para motoring will be the right activities we will add to create these experiences.” As you get on the balloon, the sight you see is bewitching – a riot of all shades of green interspersed by the bright yellow flowers of the Niger plant against the mountainous Eastern Ghats.

The landscape from the top has a magical charm that is one of pristine beauty and you just cannot stop yourself from using superlative adjectives. I spoke to Ram Kumar an employee with a private firm in Visakhapatnam to get his

thoughts on the festival and he was agog with excitement, “It is a first-of-its-kind festival that I did not want to miss so I landed a day before it started with my family.” Apart from the morning flight, the event has tethered flights and night glows in the evening.

I also had a chance to interact with many of the pilots on their take on flying in Araku and a uniform response I got was that the people here were very warm and friendly. “This is the first time a model balloon is here in India called Weba and the name of the character is Arsene and it is well known in Belgium and we have had a great response to this balloon. The specialty of this balloon is that it can be flown in tough weather conditions too and the audience can touch and feel the balloon. After we inflated the balloon, we went close to the audience who were thrilled to bits,” said Luc De Wulf a pilot from Belgium. Interestingly, the festival also had participation from women pilots like Izzati Khairudin from Malaysia, who said, “Flying in Araku is amazing and it is stunning to see such beautiful locations in India and ballooning is an amazing way to see a location’s actual beauty.” Incidentally, with ballooning, the concept is to follow the wind and as such the weather is most important – you can fly only in calm weather when it is not raining and when it is not too windy.

Peter Dutneall, a pilot from Australia who has been ballooning since 1990 adds, “When you see the farmlands from the top it looks like a patchwork quilt. There are so many different colours that the sight is really amazing. Also there are lots of places to land so it is wonderful.” With its dense coffee plantations, valleys covered with thick foliage and stunning waterfalls, Araku is a destination that has many secrets up its sleeve. And what better way than getting on a hot air balloon to savour these wonderful sights for yourself? ■