



## An Uplifting Experience at the Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta

A childhood dream comes true with ride in a hot air balloon

[KIM FOLEY MACKINNON](#) • MARCH 20, 2018



*Nearly 600 balloons launch from the 365-acre Balloon Fiesta Park.  
(Photo: Kim Foley MacKinnon)*

When I was around 7 or 8 and lived in a farmhouse in the Virginia countryside, one afternoon something magical happened: A hot air balloon landed in our neighbor's cow pasture. I had, of course, seen "The Wizard of Oz" and was beyond excited to see a hot air balloon appear next to my house. I wanted nothing more than to go up in one.

It took a while, but I finally got my wish in a big way when I went to the [Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta](#) in New Mexico in 2017.

The self-described largest ballooning event in the world has pretty humble beginnings. It started in 1972 with 13 balloons launched from a mall parking lot. Now, almost 600 balloons launch from the 365-acre Balloon Fiesta Park, with more than 887,000 people attending the 2017 event, according to organizers.

The nine-day balloon festival features all sorts of ballooning activities, including mass ascensions (when all the balloons take to the sky), morning and evening "glow" sessions, fireworks, balloon rides, a special shape rodeo and a day full of live music. There's also an International Balloon Fiesta Museum, which features a variety of exhibits about the history of ballooning and is open year-round.

After getting up before dawn, I made my way to the balloon festival site with two friends who were traveling with me. We sipped coffee in the early morning chill while we waited for the Dawn Patrol pilots, who take off before sunrise to check out the wind and weather and give the all-clear to the other balloonists.

Once they did, the field of waiting pilots and assistants moved into action, filling the hundreds of balloons with hot air as spectators watched. It was a noisy and bustling scene.



*A balloon is prepared for launch at the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta.*

*(Photo: Kim Foley MacKinnon)*

Our balloon was black with a colorful image of a Day of the Dead sugar skull on it. Once it was full, we were quickly ushered into the basket.

Veteran balloonist Bill Lee of X-Treme-Lee Fun Balloon Adventures instructed us on where to stand (one to a side), what to hold on to (waist-high straps) and what not to touch (anything else), and off we went. It took very little time to get aloft. We waved to the people on the field below us growing smaller every second as balloons floated up around us.

It was surprisingly stirring to be in such a large company of balloons so far above the Earth. I found myself tearing up, something I didn't expect. We kept pointing to different colorful balloons, some in improbable shapes like Darth Vader's head and funny-looking cartoon characters we didn't recognize. As we drifted higher, the balloons on the ground looked like so many beach balls scattered around.

After about 45 minutes in the air, we landed in a large field nearby. Once again, I was surprised: Standing there watching the balloons descend was just as amazing as watching them ascend. It brought me back to that moment of childhood wonder, of watching a balloon land in a cow pasture. Happily, it was just as spectacular decades later.

**The 2018 Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta will be held Oct. 6 through 14. Experience the [balloon festival](#) with AAA Exclusive Vacations.**

*Have you been up in an hot air balloon? Tell us about it in the comments section below.*