

Sky's the limit for hot air balloon ride

Experience of floating through Magaliesberg puts **Sheree Bega** on an all-time high

WE LANDED with a bit of a thump. Then another. And then our hot air balloon toppled over.

When I opened my eyes, still giggling—somewhat nervously—I saw my husband lying on the ground, grinning.

Our two fellow passengers had the same look of surprised excitement on their faces as our pilot, Frank Boucher, explained our sudden, dramatic landing.

“Flying is a matter of keeping your head together, but landing is a different area altogether... A hot air balloon doesn't have wheels or brakes.”

Boucher told us he had been drifting to a patchwork of fields,

spread out like quilts in the distance, when he was suddenly told to make his landing here in a ploughed up farmer's field where the rest of our group had landed nearby. We arrived on the farmer's land without warning, but he was friendly enough, and allowed us a drink of early-morning champagne on his field. “Some farmers are friendly, but others are not,” our pilot pointed out.

It was early August and we had just spent an hour floating through the Magaliesberg in a hot air balloon during the course of a weekend organised by De Hoek Country House, a luxury country hotel in Magaliesburg, and Air Ventures Hot Air Ballooning.

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A hot air balloon against a sunrise over the Magaliesberg.

Pictures: Michel Beg

As Bouwer deftly ascended into the skies, we drifted above tree tops – so close it felt like we could reach out and touch their leaves – and marvelled how the wildlife passing below in game farms appeared like tiny specks.

We were heading where the wind took us, explained Bouwer, a game ranger in the Pilanesberg and a former Hout Bay skipper, who regaled us with stories of his fascinating career and acquainted us with the technique of hot air ballooning.

“On a hot air balloon, there is no real sense of flight but rather of moving with the wind,” he said, often stopping in mid-conversation to adjust the powerful, roaring burner. “That is really how you fly a balloon. You go up and down looking for favourable wind.”

It was an hour we didn’t want to end. We had been up before sunrise eagerly anticipating our flight, as we stood on De Hoek’s expansive grounds, sipping coffee and enjoying homemade rusks, entranced as the massive, colourful balloons were being inflated.

We had been told that the Magaliesberg and surrounding Cradle of Humankind, a World Heritage Site, is prime ballooning country, offering ideal weather, and a pristine location. As we flew, hot air balloons jotted in the skies around us.

Adam Fillmore, the director of Air Ventures, explained that the Magaliesberg is one of the oldest mountain ranges in the world – older than Mount Everest. “You generally get away with 90 percent of your flights here. The valleys are protective and protect us from the wind.”

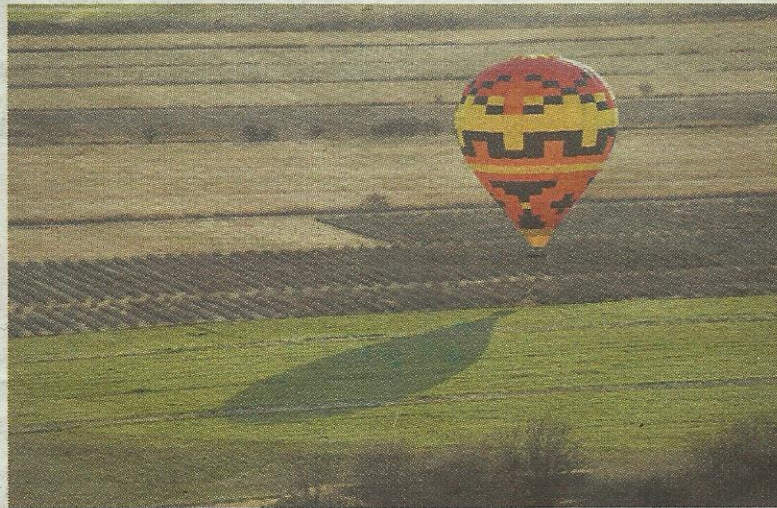
Hot air balloons are a regular feature at De Hoek, but this was the first time so many had taken off here. It attracted an array of guests, among them a 93-year-old and his 86-year-old wife, who had described the experience as “wonderful”.

Filled up with champagne, we drove back to De Hoek, our charming country retreat, hidden like a pearl in the Magaliesberg where we enjoyed a delicious, and divinely prepared breakfast. De Hoek is an award-winning five-star hotel, that prides itself on offering a “gracious and luxurious environment, filled with peace and tranquillity, ensuring guests feel pampered”.

That we did – from the treats gingerly left on our pillowcases to the surprise rose-sprinkled bath run by dotting staff while we ate supper. The rooms are elegant and the hotel is renowned for its scrumptious,



A hot air balloon pilot prepares an early morning take-off from De Hoek.



A balloon lands in a farmer's field.

and beautifully tended, candle-lit five-course meals served on crystal and silver. On our last night, an insightful stargazing evening was held, with the only disappointment a buffet supper that did not seem on

par with the rest of the fine fare.

Our highlight was undoubtedly our hot air balloon adventure, a pursuit, which it seems, still leaves experienced pilots like Fillmore, of Air Ventures, entranced.



The picturesque De Hoek farmhouse

“Hot air ballooning is the oldest form of aviation and it’s unique. In a hot air balloon, you are always floating in the currents. You never feel turbulence. It’s always gentle. You are just floating in the air.”