



A hot-air balloon prepares to land near the Colossi of Memnon, two sandstone statues of Amenhotep III, that stand on the western bank of the Nile River in Luxor. (Mohamed Abu Shanab)

Hot-air balloons soar in the skies of Luxor

Mohamed Abu Shanab

Luxor

As they slowly rose into the early morning light, colourful hot-air balloons filled the sky in a few minutes, giving passengers a matchless view of the world's largest open-air museum.

While people on the ground admired the mosaic of colours formed by the balloons, lucky balloonists flew for kilometres and soared hundreds of metres above Luxor, enjoying a rare sight of the ancient southern Egyptian city.

"This is why everybody coming here is so keen to enjoy the experience of flying over Luxor in the balloons," said Mohamed Ezz, a hot-air balloon pilot. "The flights are a new way to enjoy the beauty of the antiquities of this part of Egypt."

Not quite new, however, because balloons have been flying in Luxor's sky for years. However, to some, they top all other means of exploring and enjoying the pharaonic city. Hot-air balloon activities thrive in the winter when weather conditions are most appropriate for the rides.

The flights usually start at dawn to allow passengers to have a sunrise view of the spectacular scenery of the desert, the greenery, the Nile and the ancient monuments that make up Luxor's landscape.

Visiting Luxor landmarks, including the Temple of Karnak and the Valley of the Kings, is a memorable experience but seeing the monuments from above is truly a thrill, said Mahmud Merghani, an anthropologist from Cairo. He said he



Hot-air balloons during a ride over the ancient city of Luxor. (Mohamed Abu Shanab)

never visits Luxor without taking a hot-air balloon ride.

"The ride above and past these landmarks gives you a deep insight into the greatness of the ancient Egyptian civilisation," he said. "Every time I take the balloon flight I discover new things about Luxor, its monuments and its landscape."

Among the main monuments that balloonists can explore from above are the Temple of Montu, about 5km north-east of the Temple of Karnak; Medamud, an ancient settlement north-east of Luxor; Ramesseum, the memorial temple of Pharaoh Ramses II, and Medinet Habu, the mortuary temple of Pharaoh

Ramses III, which is a key structure from the New Kingdom phase.

Hot-air balloon rides were suspended in Luxor for months in 2013 following an accident in which a balloon caught fire and plummeted to the ground, killing 19 passengers.

An inquiry into the tragedy found

● **The scenery of the desert, the greenery, the Nile and the ancient monuments that make up Luxor's landscape are unbeatable.**

out that it was caused by a fuel leak from a gas hose connection. Since then hot-air balloon safety measures have been revolutionised, Ezz said, with attention paid to every detail in the operation of the balloon.

"Before taking off, specialists check the safety of all gas hoses, the strength of the ropes attaching the basket to the balloon and weather conditions and wind direction. The safety of those on board is our top priority," he said.

The balloons usually travel 30-45 minutes above Luxor for each ride, giving passengers ample time to get a glimpse of almost everything worth viewing from above in the city.

Companies organising the flights usually pick up clients at hotels and transport them to the balloon centres where they receive detailed information about the rides, safety instructions and the sites they will fly over. On the way from the hotels to the centres, the travellers are offered hot and cold drinks and snacks. The flight package usually includes a cultural programme featuring folklore or other performances.

Flight prices depend on the time of the year with winter being the busiest and more expensive season. Prices range \$50-\$100 per person.

Ahmed Aboud, the manager of a tour company, noted that an increasing number of visitors are taking hot-air balloon rides.

"Those who take the ride once tell their friends about it, which is the best promotion for our business," Aboud said. "This is why the rides are becoming an essential part of the packages of almost all those who visit Luxor."

Mohamed Abu Shanab is an Egyptian reporter.



Hot-air balloons prepare to take-off in the ancient city of Luxor. (Mohamed Abu Shanab)



Agenda

Beirut:
Through December 28

Events associated with Sursock Museum Late Nights occur noon-9pm each Thursday at the Sursock Museum. The events include exhibitions, collection displays, late-night talks, performances and screenings.

Dubai:
Through December 31

"La Perle" features 65 artists performing amazing stunts and aerial antics above an on-stage pool filled with 2.7 million litres of water in a state-of-the-art, custom-built theatre. The show takes place at Al Habtoor City.

Dubai:
Through April 7

Global Village is a large seasonal cultural event that offers visitors an array of festivals, shopping and entertainment in an open-air theme park. This entertainment and shopping destination involves more than 70 participating countries presented in more than 36 pavilions. Participants can enjoy more than 50 rides and 26 restaurants offering food from around the world.

Beirut:
November 16-18

The seventh Beirut Cooking Festival is to take place at the Biel Pavillon Royal. The event brings together the best in cuisine, wine, beer and spirits. Celebrity chefs will be on hand to meet people and share recipes, entertaining dishes, cocktail courses and new trends in cooking.

Cairo:
November 21-30

The Cairo International Film Festival, established in 1976, will have its 39th edition at the Opera House over ten days. The programme includes world cinema projections, seminars, workshops, debates and tributes.

Algiers:
December 1-8

The eighth Algiers International Film Festival takes place in El Mouggarr Theatre and the Cinematheque of Algiers. Documentaries and fiction films are scheduled in an event that brings together independent movie producers from all over the world.

Egypt:
December 1-31

The Sphinx Festival explores and promotes the cultural arts of Egypt. It includes music, dance and poetry performances, traditional ethnic costumes, workshops and Egyptian dance classes. The festival takes place at various venues, including the ancient Abusir Sun Temple, Cairo and the Egyptian oasis.

Dubai:
December 6-13

Dubai International Film Festival is a celebration of Arab and international cinema. In its 14th edition, the festival will showcase more than 120 films from Hollywood, Bollywood and elsewhere. A parallel programme will include seminars, debates and meetings.

We welcome submissions of calendar items related to cultural events of interest to travellers in the Middle East and North Africa.

Please send tips to:
editor@theArabweekly.com