



Marco Polo Film AG

The World's Greatest Balloon Adventures

Interview with Allie und Phil Dunnington

How did you become a hot air balloon pilot and how long have you been flying a balloon?

Phil Dunnington: *Even as a child I was interested in everything that flew. While I was working for British Airways one of the very first balloon meetings in England was taking place. I had heard that journalists were being offered free balloon rides and, as I had written some articles for the British Airways company magazine, I applied for acceptance for the event, which was indeed cheating a bit, But I succeeded and on the very last day of the festival I was allowed to take a flight. It turned out to be a rather bumpy flight and after we landed very hard I had a bloody nose and my glasses were broken, but my enthusiasm was roused. When all of a sudden three pretty Swedish stewardesses appeared out of the retrieve car and offered us champagne, there was no question anymore that my future career would be ballooning. That is what I have been doing now for more than 40 years in more than a hundred different countries worldwide.*

Allie Dunnington: *In one of these countries, Myanmar, I met Phil in 2002. I worked there as a tour guide and my guests had booked a balloon flight. Phil, whom I had met before in the hotel lobby, offered me a free flight, which was my very first, and I enjoyed it tremendously. The soft gliding through the fresh air and of course Phil's company! Everything seemed to fit! Shortly afterwards I started the training to become a pilot, too, and got the professional licence in 2005.*





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Having flown in more than one hundred countries what is it that still fascinates you about hot air balloon flights?

Phil Dunnington: *By now I have collected 106 countries and I am striving to add more to my list. I have turned into a real 'collector of countries'. Only recently we were the very first pilots to fly in Kosovo. Now only the Vatican state and Monaco are missing on my European list.*

Fundamentally every balloon ride is something special wherever we take off. There is always uncertainty because you never know where the wind will carry you and where you will touch down. Each ride is in some way a voyage of discovery exposing you to the elements of nature. And when you land on difficult terrain you often need the help of strangers, which gives us the opportunity to meet many interesting people all over the world.

Almut Dunnington: *Also the friendship amongst the balloon pilots is great. You are part of an international community who all share the enthusiasm for the same passion. The feeling of freedom and being in close touch with nature is fantastic. And from the basket you enjoy a very special view of the ground below, which is ideal for taking pictures and filming.*





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How did your cooperation with Marco Polo Film come about?

During recent years we have taken part in several smaller film projects and have carried photographers and camera people in our baskets. We live in Bristol only in a few minutes walking distance from the BBC. We asked them whether there was a chance to take part in a bigger project and they recommended Marco Polo. This turned out to be a very good relationship. In the beginning we had hoped for one film and now it has become a whole series.

What was the special challenge of this project?
Were there special demands on your balloon flying skills?

There were several issues: the films were intended to show special countries like Mongolia and Venezuela, where ballooning was unknown. That made it very difficult to get all the permissions to enter the countries with our equipment and be allowed to fly there. The transportation of our balloon equipment into these remote areas was also very complicated, as we had to try to keep the costs low, but on the other hand we had to move on fast from one spot to the next.

There were also new demands on our ballooning skills: in order to offer the camera teams the best possible angles we had to take some risks like extending the duration of the flights and flying in extremely high terrain. Wind and weather conditions were also not always easy, with no forecasting available in most places. If we had just been flying for fun we certainly would have cancelled some of these flights. There were several difficult landings in inaccessible and unknown areas, and often we had no maps. As an example: in the Alps Allie got stuck in her little hopper over a frozen lake because of lack of wind. She ran out of gas and was forced to land on the lake, but fortunately was still able to skate over this very thin layer of ice with the balloon carrying most of her weight.





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Is there a country which has impressed you most of all?
Which was your most exciting, emotional, wonderful adventure?

Phil Dunnington: *I found Venezuela most impressive. To see from above the vast extent of the savanna and in between the fascinating table mountains with their rocks rising vertically was something extraordinarily special. And we were honoured by the presence of famous producer Werner Herzog in our basket. Another highlight was our meeting up again with Alan Root in Kenya, whom I had taught to balloon there 30 years ago. This brought back memories of old times, when our first flights in this country were not quite as professional as they are nowadays. In Sri Lanka two military parachutists jumped from our basket. It is rare to have two jumpers on board, because, when they leave the basket, it becomes suddenly so much lighter and the balloon rises fast. So, before they jump, the balloon has to descend slightly. But these guys were real experts and very good.*

Allie Dunnington: *The most dangerous situation I encountered was when I had to land on a frozen lake in the Bavarian Alps. What a relief, when I at last managed to reach solid ground under my feet! Mongolia has been for many years the country where I wanted to fly a balloon. So, when I managed to organize the whole journey for several balloon teams and the Marco Polo Film team in 2010, this was the fulfillment of my dream. The film producer Annette Scheurich suggested getting a group of Mongolian riders to accompany the launching of the balloon. I was convinced that the horses would shy away when the burner started to hiss and spit fire, as every horse on earth will do. But not so the Mongolian horses who stayed calm and allowed us to get some extraordinary pictures.*

Which special place in the world would you still like to cross in a balloon?

Allie Dunnington: *Ah, well, my most urgent goal is to reach Phil's number of countries, which is rather difficult, as he is so far in the lead. But earnestly: I would like to hire a car with a balloon trailer in Central America, where several countries are still missing in our list. Two months should be enough to cross all of them.*

Phil Dunnington: *True, that would be great! Two more countries, which tempt me are North Korea and Cuba, both very beautiful and have ideal landscape and the weather conditions, but impossible from the political point of view. Or – again – Monaco and the Vatican, which would complete my European map.*