

Colours of Umbria



After a lengthy one-thousand-mile drive from the UK, the Elmer Balloon Team reached Todi, in Italy's beautiful Umbria region, for the International Balloon Grand Prix, writes attendee **Hannah Wadey**.

After handing in my dissertation and graduating in Aerospace Engineering in my degree apprenticeship at Airbus, I thought I'd avoid writing for a while, until Marisa D'Alessandro, the Umbria Mongolfiere photographer, approached me to write an article for *Aerostat* about my experience of the International Balloon

Grand Prix 2023 in Italy, and I was more than willing. Let me set the scene: For the Elmer Balloon Team from West Sussex, the meet was the second half of our ballooning holiday. We'd spent a week at the Grand Est Mondial Air Ballons meet in France, getting in five successful flights. On the morning of Thursday 27th July, my Dad (Ian), Mum (Laura), Sarah Copley (PuT)

and I made the long drive down to Umbria. We planned to stay overnight in Como. As we approached the centre, the GPS was still saying we had forty minutes remaining until we reached our accommodation. Up and up and round and about, we made our way up the mountain between Como and Milan. The roads got narrower and the vertical drops got less bearable, with

a trailer on the back! We arrived at the accommodation, the second building at the top of the mountain, and Dad, the driver, was handed a beer: 'Well done, you survived'. Needless to say, Mum learned a lesson about booking accommodation without looking at the location first!

EARLY START

The name 'Grand Prix' would suggest a fast pace. However the organisation and flying conditions offer quite the opposite. Ralph Shaw's relaxed nature as organiser is echoed in the light regional winds, allowing for really enjoyable flights. The

only constraint is a 07:29 landing time, but this was never a real problem for us.

The team woke up bright and early at 04:30 on Saturday 28th July for our first flight, and we'd been joined by my boyfriend, Nathan. We were all excited to see the vibrant colours rise into the Umbrian sky. Ralph asks all pilots to fly passengers, which we had agreed to do. We began setting up, and as I did the burner test, Dad walked over looking rather concerned. The words "I don't think I'm going to be able to fly. I've just trapped my thumb in the car door," were not what I was expecting. I glanced down and there he was with his not-so-

Above: (bottom L) Hannah Wadey pilots the 2004 Lindstrand Balloons 105A G-ITVM amongst other aerostats at the Parco Acquarossa take-off site.

white hanky wrapped around it. "Right, well, okay, looks like I'm P1 then." Our two passengers hopped in and we climbed to join the seventy-seven other balloons.

VARIABLE WINDS

The valley contours around Parco Acquarossa, light winds and variable direction provide a fun challenge to play with; working out which way you will go



Above: The Elmer Team's balloon reflects the colours of the gorgeous Umbrian countryside.



Above: Graeme Scaife's 'Wake up to nature' balloon, the 2021 Cameron Sport 105 (G-CLXE) adorned with flowers and bees, heads aloft in a colourful mass ascent.



as you approach a ridge. Once landed, Dad jumped out and took a photo of our passengers with me, who appeared unbothered by flying in a balloon. We pulled the balloon down, and that was the last we saw of them, leaving us to pack the balloon away and complete the retrieve. Although I'm not sure my Italian would stretch to "how to pack a balloon away" anyway.

The first Sunday offered a new experience for me as I was P1 for Sarah, as Dad was doing a recency check flight. And what an excellent flight it was from Parco Acquarossa; short but sweet! I'm sure Sarah agrees that the location offers a fabulous training ground, with the hills around Parco Acquarossa and the plateau north of Todi. This wasn't just a ballooning event for us, so that evening we explored Montefalco and Gualdo Cattaneo, two

Above: Precision landing. Hannah touches down on a hay bale after a magical flight with passenger Helen, and Nathan Scammel.

old towns with great panoramic views.

Sarah relished the low-level flying over the lake near Pantalla, north of Todi, on Monday. I think Dad made her sweat, but there was no splash-and-dash for us. Nathan and I were able to relax and enjoy the flight. It was only his second balloon flight ever (his first the day before) and had a very different pace, slower than the fixed-wing flying he is used to. Wednesday was a rest day for all teams, even if it was a beautiful morning. I took full advantage of this, staying in bed until 10:15, as opposed to getting up at 04:30 daily to fly at any of the three designated locations: Parco Acquarossa at Gualdo Cattaneo, Ponte



All photos © Marisa D'Alessandro / Umbria Mongolfiere

Naia at Todi or Pantalla, just outside Todi.

As part of the social schedule, an amazing vineyard called La Veneranda invited all balloon teams over three nights to enjoy a selection of their wines accompanied by bread, cheese, cold meats, bruschetta, and barbecued meats. This was a great opportunity to meet and enjoy an evening with fellow balloonists. We were seated next to the Wrigglesworth family, and toddler James entertained us with jokes, even if they didn't quite make sense. If you are a sober, gluten-free vegan, the food and drink might not be to your taste, but it was a fabulous evening all the same.

CHARIOT RACING

I was fortunate enough to fly with Kevin Cooper in his 65 racer chariot on Thursday. The weather conditions

Above: Balloons shine against cloudless azure skies, typifying the conditions at the International Balloon Grand Prix.

were not favourable that day, so many teams did not fly. I love the challenge of learning the quirks and controlability of new balloons, in a racer especially, as they are very reactive. We bimbled over the medieval walled hilltop city of Todi, playing with the wind to head towards Pantalla. I think Graeme Scaife had told Alex Court to follow us in order to get good photos of his pretty 'Wake up to nature' balloon covered with flowers and bees. As we approached the river, the two balloons were drawn together, until they 'kissed'. Alex captured that all-important photo. Thanks for the great flight Kevin!

That evening we spent with Kevin,



Above: After an early-morning flight, pilot Hannah attends to the rigging while the crew pull down the envelope.



Above: Splashes of colour adorn the Swiss Wicki Partners envelope.

Graeme, Richard Ashford, and Bruce Pottinger at San Terenziano. A light buffet and music were provided, and again, another opportunity to meet new and old friends. The emphasis is on the word 'light' buffet, so we made our way to a local restaurant around the corner. As the evening progressed, the quiet village became bustling with a live band and stalls.

Friday morning, we helped Graeme's team get away, making them the only balloon to fly that morning due to weather conditions again. Whilst they were having fun in the air, we were having fun trying to find a mechanic to replace a wheel bearing on Sarah's trailer, which at 07:30 was rather difficult. In the afternoon, we visited Assisi in the middle of a thunderstorm - well worth a visit minus the rain. We ended the day trying to find Nathan his first authentic



Above: Symbols and colours of nature adorn many of the balloons at this year's event.



Above: The beautiful Umbrian terrain offers bountiful landing sites for balloonists.



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Italian pizza in Bevagna – a tick on his holiday bucket list.

If you are thinking of participating in the Umbrian balloon meet, or haven't done much exploring in the region, I would recommend visiting Spello after a morning flight. Bursting with glorious bright flowers, the old town consists of winding roads on the side of a hill which lead to a panoramic view and monastery. We marvelled at the vastly different churches that can be found there, and enjoyed a well-deserved ice cream at the top. For museum lovers, there is an old Roman villa housed at the bottom.

TOUCH OF MAGIC

Our final flight of this hot air balloon vacation was magical. It was Sunday 6th August and rain the day before brought fog in the morning. As the balloons climbed out of Parco Acquarossa, the fog slowly drew in. I'd made the decision to stay low over the airfield, creating a

Above: Balthasar Wicki's balloon is an early riser, while a neat line-up prepares to follow.

spectacle for the crowd and a low level flying challenge for myself. We travelled from one end of the airfield to the other and back again. Looking across towards Bastardo, the balloons were silhouetted from the gorgeous, already boiling morning sun. A truly 'mystical' flight. Right on the edge of the fog, we landed in a field of hay bales. Marisa had joined me for this flight, so we had fun taking photos on top of one of the bales, which helped burn a little more fuel before Dad drove the kit back. He would be leaving later that day to make the trek across part of Europe, back towards home in the UK.

INSTRUCTOR DAD

From a young age, Mum, Dad and sister Amber and I spent many holidays in Tuscany. However, in 2018, we travelled to Umbria for something a



Above: Balloons frequently fly past, or over, the medieval hilltop town of Todi.



© Alex Court

Above: The Farer chariot, a 2019 Kavanagh Ex-60, with Kevin Cooper and Hannah Wadey in the duo seat, meets the 'Wake up to nature' balloon in a gentle kiss.

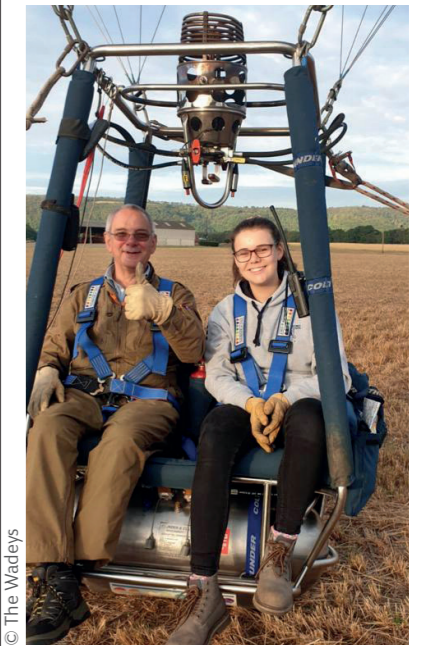
little different from the rolling hills of Tuscany and embarked upon a new landscape of vineyards and olive groves to the flat plateaux and crops in Umbria. This Umbrian balloon meet holds a special place in my heart, as in 2018 I

was learning to fly with my Dad as my instructor. For most daughters, they dread the thought of learning to drive with their Dad, let alone fly with them. Not for me. The flights I shared with my dad, family and friends, are my most treasured memories. I am fortunate to have my father's experience and knowledge as he started to learn to fly in 2003, and has since flown internationally in France, Germany, Belgium, The Netherlands, Italy and Ireland. In 2020, the year that shall not be mentioned, I continued flying with my Dad, mostly in our two-seater chariot and built my hours, having lots of fun and not too many arguments along the way. The best feeling, of course, was when I was right and Dad was wrong. I got my licence in October 2020. I feel so privileged to have been able to turn that year, such a challenge for so many people, into something positive.

On reflection, it may have been easier to write a 12,000 word dissertation on resonance in hydraulic check valves, than it has been to sum up ten days at the International Balloon Grand Prix 2023. However, Marisa's wonderful photos describe 1,000 words in themselves.

Now over to Dad, Ian Wadey, for...

DRIVING TO UMBRIA THE WADEY WAY



© The Wadeys

The logistics of getting to Todi. An early morning ferry is recommended and then from Calais, it's a long-haul trek, especially if you are pulling a trailer. In round figures totalling a 1,000 miles, basically 24hr driving including pee breaks (not too many) and a three-hour snooze in a lay-by. To do it, so called, 'non-stop' is possible if you have a few drivers, but many will not like sleeping while on the move.

Ideally you can spread it over three, seven-hour days' driving, but that costs. Around Metz and Como are places to consider for overnight stops. The route to minimise tolls with relatively flat roads to aid towing is Lille, Tournai, Mons, Charleroi, Namur, Arlon, Luxembourg, Metz (not quite), Saverne (avoid Strasbourg), Molsheim, Colmar, Mulhouse, Basel (through Switzerland), Como, around Milan, Bologna, Firenze, Arezzo, Perugia, and Todi. This avoids the expensive tolls in France, just one at nine euros around Metz/Saverne, but you can't easily avoid tolls in Italy, totalling around sixty euros.

Also there is a 40 Chf vignette to buy for Switzerland, one for the car and one for the trailer. The Gotthard Tunnel is about halfway on the journey and the queues can be considerable time-wasters if you hit it at peak times. That's why I like doing the journey in one hit, getting to the tunnel late evening/early morning both ways. You can benefit from buying cheap fuel in Luxembourg, arriving with a near-empty tank. From Calais it is 225 miles to a Luxembourg fuel station. It is then just short of 500 miles to Italy, and I suggest you avoid buying relatively expensive fuel in Switzerland.

Enjoy planning your journey to minimise the costs of getting to Todi!