

Up away &

Ballooning is a pastime that's inflating among the over-50s. Meet the late-life adventurers who are flying, crewing and even hand-building hot air balloons

by REBECCA NORRIS

Have you ever fantasised about escaping to the clouds, away from all the hustle and bustle of the world below? The owners of the around 1,500 hot air balloons registered in the UK get to do just that, revelling in the peacefulness of wafting through the sky. And 60% of those who hold a Balloon Pilot's Licence are over the age of 50.

Britain's first modern hot air balloon, the Bristol Belle, was created in 1967. Throughout the Seventies and Eighties, ballooning became a popular pastime, creating familiar polka dots in our skies. Now, the pilots who trained during this boom are late lifers. And those who grew up admiring them from the ground have time to get involved as they embrace, or approach, retirement.

'We are definitely an older age group,' admits Don Cameron, 84, a celebrated aeronaut who helped develop the Bristol Belle. He is director of Cameron Balloons, the world's leading manufacturer, established in 1971. Around 60% of his direct sales are to pilots over 50.

'There's an indefinable magic to rising into the sky and defying gravity,' says Don, who still flies today. 'Curiously, you don't feel high up – you feel that the world is small.'

Hot air balloons offer one of the safest forms of aviation, and balloonists prize the sweeping views, stillness, and sense of adventure. We speak to the enthusiasts who are riding high. ➡



☛ The pilot

Sue Kidd, 74, has been a balloon pilot for almost 25 years. Since qualifying at the age of 50, she has clocked up nearly 300 hours in a basket. 'It's exhilarating,' she says. 'It gives me an enormous amount of pleasure to introduce people to the wonderful world of hot air balloons.'

She booked her first ride in 1989, at the age of 40. 'When I was younger, I would see a balloon in the air and think how fabulous it must be to be up there,' says Sue. But as the flight took off, she suddenly remembered she wasn't too fond of heights. Still, she built up the courage to look over the side and fell in love with gliding through the sky. She discovered there were balloon clubs all over the country, like the London Region Balloon Club, her local group. She joined in



Frequent flyer
Sue Kidd (above) – a balloon pilot for 25 years – takes to the skies once again (top)

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1993. Today, the group has around 15 members and two thirds are over 50.

After five years spent helping existing pilots, occasionally wangling a flight, Sue decided to go for her pilot's licence. This required at least 16 hours of flight instruction and written exams. Once qualified, pilots can fly whenever the weather is on their side, with clear visibility, light wind, and no rain. 'For it to rise, the air inside the balloon has to be hotter than that on the outside,' says Sue. In the summer, this means an early start ('you want to be taking off by 6am') or waiting for the heat to subside in the evening. In the winter, she doesn't often fly as the ground needs to be solid – muddy fields are no good for taking off and landing.

Governed by the elements, then, Sue manages anything from ten to



25 flights a year. Some are at balloon festivals, where pilots come together to create a spectacle – the UK's largest is held in Bristol in August and attracts 100 balloons and 500,000 spectators. A crew of three to five is usually required to lift a balloon off the ground. 'If it's a beautiful day and everyone knows what they're doing, we can be ready to take off in about 20 minutes,' she says.

The effort is richly rewarded. 'You see patterns of the countryside,' says Sue. 'By spring, all the lovely greens are back after winter. In the summer, you've got the yellow rapeseed fields, then you've got the golds and reds of autumn.' From the air she has seen large flocks of deer and, her most prized sighting, boxing hares.

But while enjoying the scenery, there is much to think about, such as steering (by moving the balloon up and down to catch wind directions) and navigating (Sue uses both paper and digital maps). Early in her ballooning journey, she roped in a friend, Edward, now 79. After hiring the club's two balloons for a couple of years, they bought their own second-hand one. Large enough to carry four to five passengers in the basket, it cost them £12,500.

Sue, who now owns a smaller balloon, has shared her love for the sport via talks delivered to organisations such as the u3a and Women's Institute. 'Ballooning changed my life,' she says. 'Now at almost 75, I hope I have at least another five years flying in me – with a little luck.'

The crew member

You don't need to be a pilot to call yourself a balloonist. Mike Brown, 65, is chairman of the Nottingham and Derby Hot Air Balloon Club, which has around 20 active members. Of these, two thirds are over 50.

Members work as part of the ground crew – preparing a balloon for flight, chasing it as it flies, then packing it away. In exchange they take it in turns to fly in the basket with the pilot.

'You see a lot from the air when travelling at three or four miles per hour,' says Mike, a retired hotelier from Leicestershire. He was first enchanted by hot air balloons aged eight when he watched the 1956 film *Around The World In 80 Days*. But only in his fifties did he indulge this

To find your local hot air ballooning club and get involved, visit bbac.org

Helping hand

Mike Brown (right) helps prepare a balloon for flight, ably assisted by his grandchildren, Jack and Sophia

The builder

Jo Scott celebrated turning 50 by taking to the skies in a balloon she built herself. An education manager from Suffolk, now 51, she had secured her pilot's licence ten years before. 'The magic draws you in,' she says. 'There's nothing like it.'

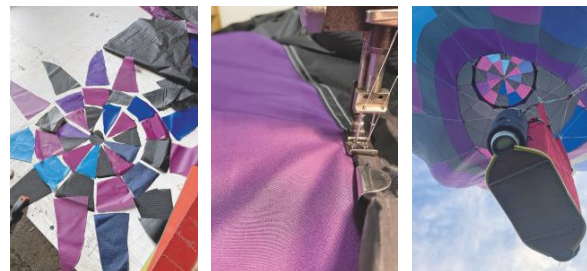
In August 2021, a friend asked if she wanted to see the balloon he had built in his spare room. Baffled, Jo watched as he pulled it out, telling her to not look too closely at his stitching. 'It was beautiful,' says Jo. 'All pink and blue.' He said he had been to Sackville Airfield in Bedfordshire, where there is a community of amateur balloon builders led by Tim Wilkinson, 72, who has built – or helped build – 30 balloons since 2010.

'I'm a nutter about flying,' says Tim, whose grandfather founded the airfield in 1946. 'I'm



Sky's the limit
Jo Scott (above) made her own balloon from scratch (below)

'You have to be a certain kind of mad to fly a balloon you've sewn together'



happiest when I'm in the air.' Having spent 18 years as a commercial airline pilot, he began flying balloons in his late fifties. The desire to build one came five years later. 'It's a hobby that got out of control,' he says.

Now, Tim has templates for other budding builders. Jo explains, 'You buy the fabric (ripstop nylon), cut it out by hand, then stitch it together with a sewing machine.' Her balloon, which has room for two people and features blue, black and purple stripes, was insured and ready to fly by her 50th birthday. Her basket is homemade too

– by Tim – but it's not the bulky wicker type you may well expect. It's lightweight and collapsible, made from heavy duty cloth on

a steel frame. In total her balloon cost about £6,000, so was significantly cheaper than buying from a manufacturer. The whole process took about eight months from start to finish.

'I don't think I've ever been as scared as I was when I took off in the balloon I'd made myself,' says Jo. 'I looked up at it and thought, "Is this going to hold?" I knew it would as it had been inspected – I was being completely irrational.' But she soon relaxed. 'I loved learning its little quirks – it was like learning to fly all over again.'

'You have to be a certain kind of mad to build then fly a balloon you've sewn together.'

interest and sign up to the group. Three years later he convinced his wife, Hilary, 69, to look past her fear of heights and join as well.

It's the job of the ground crew to help set up and inflate the balloon. 'There's real camaraderie to it,' says Mike. When it is up and away, the crew hop in a truck for what they call the retrieve – pursuing the balloon on its travels. 'There's a driver, navigator and someone communicating with the pilot via walkie-talkies or mobile phones. It's all good fun.'

The balloon will have around two hours' worth of gas. In that time, it can fly between three and seven miles an hour. Once they

find where the balloon has come to rest, they must first locate the landowner to get permission to drive onto the field. Then it's time to pack the equipment – the envelope, the basket, the burner, the fuel tanks – into the truck.

Members of the group pay an annual fee of £300, plus around £20 extra each time they fly, to cover the cost of the gas. 'It's a cheap way to fly,' says Mike (a ride from a commercial operator will usually cost around £150).

But while he loves crewing, for Mike nothing can beat flying. 'It's that feeling of weightlessness,' he says. 'You're up in the air and there's nothing stopping you.' ☼

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