

It's what your PPL is for!



Seven aircraft and 17 souls set out on a grand adventure, and Pat Malone belatedly discovers where his licence can take him. Photos: Bea de Smet, Janie Cowham and Terry Earl

“This is it,” I said to Keith on the tarmac at Sanliurfa, close to the Syrian border, as we checked out the Robin in the broiling sun and made to fly north to Cappadocia. “This is what it’s all about.” Keith lifted his head from his iPad and nodded agreement. “This is the reason people have planes,” he said. “Why didn’t we do it years ago?”

By our own hands and in our own aircraft we had navigated across Europe into Asia, through the snowy mountains of eastern Turkey and down to the fringe of the Arabian desert. We set out seven aircraft strong – four fixed-wing and three helicopters – bearing 17 merry souls on one of these ‘prepare2go’ tours you’ve probably seen advertised. No way in the world would I have flown 2,000 miles from Bodmin to this remote frontier had it not been for Sam Rutherford’s outfit, who arrange everything down to the last detail and make up new plans on the hoof when the original ones break down. Entry permits, flight plans, landing and handling, avgas in remote places, hotels, ground transport to truly remarkable off-the-beaten-track sights that few tourists ever see – all is handed to you on a plate, in a big flight book with a picture of your own

aircraft on the cover. Just bring a plane, and do what Sam says.

In Sanliurfa Sam said that we should not infringe Syrian airspace. His influence there was limited; if we found ourselves hanging upside down being beaten on the soles of the feet, we were on our own. The Syrians are sensitive about infringements, and our track took us within a few miles of the border. In truth, everyone around Turkey is sensitive about something; the Syrians, the Iraqis, the Iranians, the Armenians, the Greeks, and especially the Turks, who have issues with all of the above, plus the Kurds. Given the political situation it’s extraordinary that we were able to fly about as freely as we did. Several airfields were closed to us, but

there were always alternatives and our objectives were reached, even if sometimes by bus.

It’s worth noting that eastern Turkey is seriously mountainous, higher than anything the Alps has to offer, and there’s more of it. The weather was un-summery, and the flying was more challenging than any I’ve ever done. But the real joy was doing this in the company of a mixed bag of pilots who began as strangers and, melded by shared experience, ended the trip the fastest of friends. Many times we commented how much *less fun* the business would have been had we been on our own. I suspect the group dynamic on tours like this can either be fantastic or awful, and you take pot luck. Ours was magical. Several of the group had flown with Sam to Africa, and some had flown with him all the way to Cape Town. It speaks volumes that so many people come back for more; I certainly will.

G-HXTD is a Robin DR400 based at Bodmin, and it carried us – myself and Keith Hayley – faultlessly on this 4,500 mile epic into Asia and back in 42 flying hours. The tour is billed as VFR but for peace of mind we took along our secret weapon, Terry Earl – 16,000 hours on Shackletons, Nimrods, BAC-111s and other impressive kit, instructor, examiner, all-round aviation enthusiast and fallback position when the weather turned grim. Keith has an FAA IR and I have an IMC rating, neither of which could be used under the circumstances, but with Terry in the right seat – where he stayed while Keith and I took turn about in the left – we could ask for an IFR upgrade if it became necessary.

Which it did on the very first day, a murky May morning when we left Biggin Hill and plunged straight into grey, gloomy overcast. Terry asked London Information for an IFR upgrade, which was forthcoming within minutes. Manston handed us off to Lille mid-Channel, and they gave us direct Charleroi, which was in the clear. I swear, if the ‘sensible IR’ really does turn out to be sensible, I’m having one.



Above: high mountains and dodgy weather make you feel small in a Robin. Turkey’s mountains are higher than the Alps and less well charted
Right: are you Victor Mike Charlie? No, we’re Pat, Terry and Keith from Bodmin

'Weather's good, fly direct.' Sam Rutherford briefs the crews at Linz



Formation take-off, fastest-first, photographed from Sam's Maule



**Above: Keith, Terry and Martin in the MiG graveyard at Tököl outside Budapest
Below: Keith with rows of dead Mil-24 helicopter gunships in the Tököl graveyard**



At Charleroi we met Sam, Turkish pilot Tufan Sevinçel and Martin and Annette Gosling in their DR400, did the Schengen thing and hit the road again heading for Linz in Austria. This was our introduction to formation flying, although the elongated gaggle we created might not be what you think of as a formation. Martin and Annette made the running – they race their Robin and it can make 146 knots flat out. TD with three up was a few knots slower, and Sam and Tufan came along behind in Sam's Maule. The joy of formation flying is that only one aircraft makes the radio calls, and everyone else talks to that aircraft on a discrete frequency. The weather stayed with us, and the German controllers were slick, handing us off, arranging crossings unasked, giving us traffic long before we saw it. Linz was three and a half hours from Charleroi, and there we caught up with Nigel and Rosemary Jackson, with their curious-looking Walter Extra 400, and two of the three Robinson R44s on the tour – William Cortazzi in G-DNKY and Tony Phillips-Page in G-CCWJ. Helicopter pilots are a different kettle of fish from fixed-wing pilots, and these rotary chaps were party animals who sometimes came on like Hell's Angels at a church picnic. The social mix proved to be an extraordinarily happy one.

Next day, two easy hours to Budapest. At Linz we had our first formation take-off; four fixed-wings on the runway, fastest-first, all rolling within seconds of each other while the helicopters ran alongside. We climbed to 9,000 feet to get over the Alps south of Vienna listening to the rotary chaps down among the bushes.

"Am I following you or are you following me?"

"I'm following you, but are you going to Budapest or Venice?"

And:

"Is it Hungarians who shake their head when they mean yes, and nod when they mean no? Or is that Eskimos?"

"Are you practising chat-up lines?"

MiG graveyard

Tököl, our destination in Budapest, was shown as disused on the chart and didn't appear in Jeppesen's database, but Sam had checked it out. It's a former military airbase with a massive concrete runway, rusty HAS shelters and buildings falling into disrepair. Hidden in the bushes was a stunning MiG graveyard, with lines of MiG-21s and Mi-24 helicopter gunships mouldering with their innards ripped out. We were taking pictures when a bored guard came out of a caravan and chased us away.

The third R44 owner, Marcus Tancock, joined us in Budapest, and in the party stakes he made the rest of us look like nuns. Marcus brought with him Sloane Majorca instructor Dan Vickers and professional photographer Janie Cowham,

who was to make a fabulous video record of our trip.

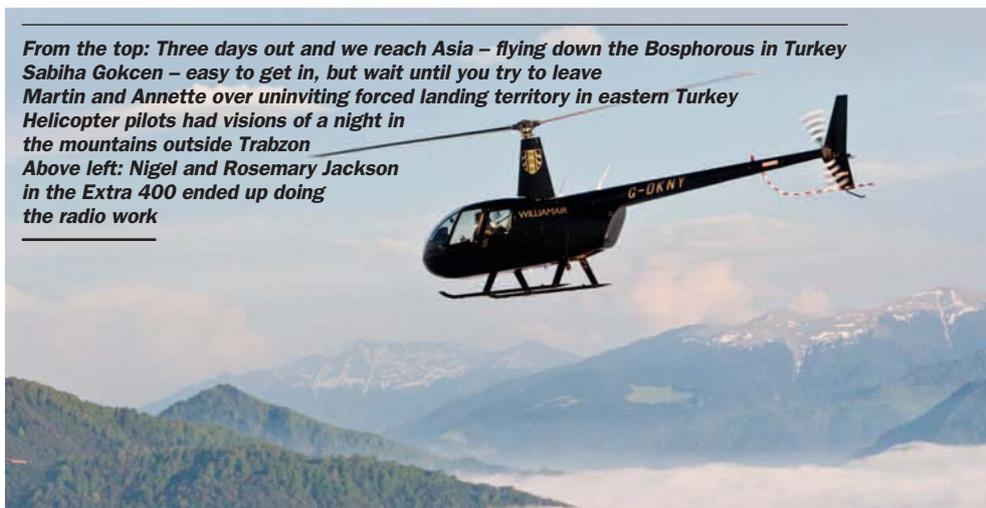
Next morning we were briefed by Sam on the flight to Bucharest. The briefing ended: "Weather's great, fly direct." This became a running gag; even when thunder was rocking the terminal and hail was piling up in the streets the briefing never changed... Sam is not by nature a pessimist. The helicopters left first and put down in Arad, Romania, to refuel. The fixed-wings left two hours later and caught up in Romania, the idea being that we'd all arrive in Bucharest at the same time. There followed a bit of slapstick when a minibus turned up to take seven people to the airport; we jumped in and didn't twig that we were the wrong seven people until it pulled into the international airport, miles from Tököl. Trying to resolve the issue involved a lot of loud Hungarian, but Sam had given Keith a number for the airfield manager, Gabor, who got things back on track, and we were treated to a breakneck tour of the back streets of suburban Budapest before finally reaching our planes.

The skies weren't busy and the controllers were laid back; Nigel and Rosemary in the Extra, being the fastest and first to each ATC boundary, did the radio work and we pattered along behind.



Beyond the Alps in that quarter lie the Carpathians, and they are every bit as daunting. We climbed initially to 9,000 feet to clear three octas of cloud which kept on rising; each new request for 'higher' was approved and at 10,000 we were above the sector safe altitude on the IFR charts. We squeezed briefly up to 12,000 to remain VMC over the highest peaks – TD was down to 300 fpm. (As an aside, EASA says no aircraft can fly above 10,000 feet without oxygen; in fact it's eminently sensible to do so for limited periods when safety demands it. Under EASA, we would have had to descend among the rock-stuffed cu-nims to stay legal. Well, I'd rather be alive than legal...

**From the top: Three days out and we reach Asia – flying down the Bosphorous in Turkey
Sabiha Gokcen – easy to get in, but wait until you try to leave
Martin and Annette over uninviting forced landing territory in eastern Turkey
Helicopter pilots had visions of a night in the mountains outside Trabzon
Above left: Nigel and Rosemary Jackson in the Extra 400 ended up doing the radio work**





Above: think density – TD's altimeter shows 5,800 feet on the apron at Erzurum
Below: fine body of men – pilots in local garb. Fingers correspond to 'Carpet' numbers

there are few things that serve more starkly to illustrate EASA's knuckle-headed stupidity than its inflexible oxygen requirements, which it resolutely refuses to change.)

Baneasa Airport lies cheek by jowl with the main Bucharest international airport and the controller was hopping from foot to foot to make sure we didn't interfere with their traffic. We cruised down to 2000 feet between late morning thunderstorms and remarkably, all seven aircraft landed within minutes of each other. Baneasa was very welcoming, and quite slick with the fuel, and we took a minibus downtown to another top quality hotel for a congenial evening on the toot.

Istanbul's Stansted

Due to a mix-up by an agent who had sought clearance for an IFR formation we still didn't have permission to enter Turkey. Tufan had gone ahead on a scheduled flight to bang on doors, and thanks to his efforts our permissions came through next morning. Again, the helicopters got away

early to refuel at Burgas in Bulgaria, and we left after a leisurely lunch. The Baneasa controller hadn't quite got the hang of VFR and treated us like IFR departures, but we got clear with a minimum of dog-leg routing and struck south east across flat plains which slowly rose into wooded hills devoid of human settlement. Then we cruised down the Bulgarian Black Sea coast – actually it's very blue. ATC at Istanbul's Kemal Ataturk Airport was frantically busy and blanked by hills, so we were well into Turkish airspace before we got a word in. No problem – continue as per plan. We dropped down to 1500 feet to fly down the Bosphorus, the waterway that separates Europe from Asia. Enormous towers either side of the channel carried vast numbers of cables across the strait; at 1500 feet you don't clear them by much, and they don't have marker balls. Even in the haze the view of Istanbul was stupendous; we exited into the Sea of Marmara and followed a VFR route across some islands to Sabiha Gokcen airport.

Sabiha is Istanbul's Stansted – in recent years it has become home to the low-cost airline Pegasus. Years ago, only the Istanbul Flying Club flew from here – they had 17 members and the airport had 300 staff. Those days are gone. We were orbited one after the other while they slipped the 737s in and out; finally we were given an expedite and dived for the runway, landing halfway along and ducking off to the GA apron. We topped off with avgas at \$4.50 a litre – pricey, but not as bad as we'd feared. It seemed exotic and exciting to have flown all the way to Sabiha Gokcen from Bodmin; little did we know that we were destined to become sick of the sight of the place.

In Istanbul Tony, William and Sam were joined by their wives, Mary-Anne, Annie and Bea who'd flown in scheduled to join the adventure. After a day off in the bazaars we prepared to depart for Ankara in manky weather. It was forecast to be better downrange, but getting out of Sabiha Gokcen was a marginal VFR proposition. The overcast began at 1000

feet and the vis below it was nothing to write postcards home about. ATC, all at sea with VFR traffic, wanted the helicopters to climb to 3000.

"Negative," said their spokesman.

"Kilo Yankee, climb maintain 3,000," the controller insisted.

"No!" said Kilo Yankee.

There was a bemused silence. "Okay, Kilo Yankee, proceed Ankara VFR."

North of Istanbul we'd gone off the Jeppesen VFR charts and now we were relying on Michelin road maps, which came in handy for spot heights. But the spot heights seemed random... small mountains got them when big ones didn't. Beyond Istanbul we used our own call-signs on the formation frequency – we were 'Carpet One' through 'Carpet Seven'. The chat among the helicopters was edgy.

"Where are you, Carpet Six?"

"I've just gone over a pylon... it looks a bit brighter to the south... I might try that."

The fixed-wings topped the overcast at 2,500 in a sea of cloud punctuated by forested hills, still with crescents of snow in May. Once again Nigel was forging ahead and did the RT. He'd found the Ankara zone VFR routes on his iPad and read them out to us; Ankara gave us Whisky One VFR route to Esenboga, and we didn't even have to ask for vectors. The leg had taken the last helicopter an hour longer than the first fixed-wing.

We refuelled with all speed and hurried off – our destination, Trabzon on the Black Sea coast, was still 360 miles distant. Trabzon lies beyond serious mountains which rise out of the sea up to 14,000 feet, but an inbound Dutch freighter was able to relay the weather – scattered at 1500, scattered at 3000 and all the nines. As we got closer, it became clear this was the merest fantasy; it was solid overcast at 2000 feet and rubbish below that. This time it was the fixed-wings that were groping around underneath, following the coast; the helicopters stayed above it, eyeing the Turkish mountain villages that stood clear of cloud and weighing the possibility of a night drinking arak with shepherds. Sam had landed at Trabzon with the lady in the tower still giving scattered 3000 and all the nines, but she was kind enough to allow him to talk directly to the helicopters. The helis found a hole to seaward and ducked in at the end of a challenging day.

It says 'JetA1'

Trabzon has no avgas but Sam had arranged a truck. Interestingly, it had 'JetA1' written on it. The driver assured us, in Turkish and with much waving, that it was the real thing, but we stood around him like a gang of muggers as he decanted a couple of pints for proof. It looked right, smelled right, tasted right and was blue... refuelling commenced.

Next day's flight was short but



indescribably sweet. We were heading inland to Erzurum, and on our morning visit to the fabulous Sumela Monastery, 4000 feet up in the mountains, we realised the coastal cloud dissipated after 20 miles and thereafter it was CAVOK. The helicopters took off in line astern and headed up the valley we'd used to reach the monastery, while the fixed-wings went up through the cloud and came out in brilliant sunshine at 3,000 feet with snow-covered peaks as far as the eye could see. We climbed to 9,500 feet and flew through passes with isolated villages even on the highest slopes, each with its own mosque. This strange, jagged vista will stay with me as long as I live, I hope. Erzurum lay in a wide valley between 10,000 foot peaks, and having GA flying in was like having aliens from the planet Zorg land in the garden. The staff came

out to have their pictures taken with the aircraft; they were friendly and endlessly accommodating. The airport bus picked up each crew and conveyed us all of 40 yards to the terminal.

We headed for Kars and the ancient ruined city of Ani on the Silk Road through the border with Armenia, closed due to mutual antipathy. The bus had seen better days, and toiling up a bit of a slope it exploded, raising the engine cover some distance off the floor and surprising Martin Gosling, who had his feet on it. 'Expect the unexpected' is the prepare2go slogan. The bus was enveloped in a cloud of steam, which seemed okay until someone spotted burning embers falling underneath; we got our luggage out too-sweet while the driver poured our drinking water on the engine. Through it all, Annette Gosling looked as though she had just stepped out of



R44 climbing out of Erzurum to clear high mountains in passable weather

No reason why not

Sam Rutherford is one of those characters in whom it's easy to repose absolute faith – whatever the problem, Sam will sort it. His motto, 'never say never' is written on his aircraft. I suppose 'just do it' was already taken.

A former Army Air Corps Gazelle pilot, Sam's main business is providing security for people who have to travel in dangerous places. Film and TV companies turn to Sam to advise and protect crews in unfriendly parts of the world. If you call the Royal Geographical Society to ask for security information on countries with a lot of jungle or names ending in 'stan', they'll give you Sam Rutherford's number.

'Prepare2go' is a pleasurable sideline through which he encourages pilots to stretch themselves, to realise that an aircraft opens up a vast, fascinating world to them, and

to know that there really is no reason why not! It's a far-reaching embodiment of AOPA's Wings Scheme – try something new, you won't regret it.

Sam bought his Maule in Texas and flew it home across the North Atlantic. He's taken it to Cape Town and back, and he plans to fly it to the North Pole. Why not? His boredom

Left: Sam Rutherford and his wife Bea in their Maule over Turkey



threshold reaches up to about where normal people start to get over-excited. He's at his happiest roughing it, squatting in some pitiless desert with his knife in his teeth, skinning something unspeakable to cook over a camel-dung fire. This is where his wife Beatrice de Smet comes in. Bea looks at all Sam's plans, then crosses out his choice of accommodation and substitutes the nearest multi-star hotel. Thus prepare2go creates an experience which allows you to feel a little bit intrepid without depriving you of your creature comforts.

And he makes it all seem so effortless. I'm sure he was burning the midnight oil in his hotel room, telephoning hither and yon as bureaucracy and obstruction blocked our path, but by morning it was all sorted, almost. 'Weather's great, fly direct,' he'd say.

Have a look at www.prepare2go.com and click on 'aviation'. When your span is spun, the things you'll regret are not what you did, but all the things you didn't do.

Harrods. As the trip went on some of us started to look ragged, but Annette was always perfectly turned out, never a hair out of place. Martin has flown the Robin to Cape Town with Sam, and even in the primitive bush camps in the Sudan Annette looked like she was shopping in Bond Street, they said.

Two days later we were back in Erzurum in one of the most intense hailstorms I have ever seen; several inches lay in the flooded streets and the prospect of flying next day looked poor. The TAF included '-TS'. What on earth is a light thunderstorm? In the morning the wind was howling down the valley above our ski lodge and the mountains disappeared into scudding cloud, but the wind was a local adiabatic feature and the sky to the west looked passable. Our next destination, Sanliurfa, lay over more high mountains and we circled overhead Erzurum to gain height before heading south west at 9,000. Soon we were among the zebra-striped upper slopes, with the highest mountains disappearing above us into the murk and the visibility nothing special. We used all the resources at our disposal – the two Garmin's, the Michelin map with a carefully worked out dogleg route on it, the IFR chart and the iPad. Sanliurfa had been forecasting 4km vis in DU (dust) but in fact the weather there was CAVOK and you could see almost to Damascus.

Batman and Robin

This is where I got all crossed up. The trip was to take in Mt Nemrut, which is near the town of Batman, so I was childishly pleased about going to Batman by Robin, geditit? But there are two Mr Nemruts in Turkey, it turns out, and ours is not near Batman but near Adiyaman, so I was denied my foolish caprice. The real Mt Nemrut is, however, a sight to see, but this is about flying and not visiting sights, so you'll have to go and look for yourself.

Next day we headed for Nevsehir airport



Above: Erdogan Menekse of AOPA Turkey met us at the airfield in Cappadocia
Below: almost home – crossing the Alps in Austria en route to Linz

in Cappadocia, an area of extraordinary volcanic geology where there's an underground city on eight levels which dates back 4,000 years and once housed 10,000 people. The best way to see Cappadocia is from the air, which about a thousand people do every day, by hot air balloon – see sidebar on next page. Getting

there was interesting... once again there were high mountains and intermittent rainstorms, and the ground features looked nothing like what was on the road map. Visibility improved enough to give us occasional close-up views of scary mountains as we letter-boxed through passes at 8,000 feet. Eventually we broke out into open country and decent vis, skirted a thunderstorm and once again landed within minutes of each other. Waiting on the apron was Erdogan Menekse, Secretary General of AOPA Turkey. There are 70 AOPAs worldwide, and if you ever have any problems, they'll go out of their way to help you. We didn't need help, but Erdogan was a welcome guest at dinner and joined us on the balloon ride next day.

White cliffs

Two days later we drove back to the airport to head for Istanbul, 280 miles away. Cloud was building to the west and the helicopters, scouting ahead, were reporting rain and diminishing visibility. By the time we'd caught up with them they were sitting on a ridgeline, barely able to see each other in driving rain. We climbed to 10,500 and got clearance from Ankara to follow our flight-planned route at that height. Sam and Martin reported slight icing and heavy snow; we had rain, very loud rain, hard IMC and no little turbulence, on one occasion dropping a wing to the vertical in the blink of an eye.

Eventually we came through it – it was like flying out of the white cliffs of Dover, and the visibility suddenly opened up to 50 miles.

Now we were homeward bound. William, Annie, Tony and Mary-Anne were flying scheduled to London for a party, and William was going back for his helicopter the following week. Marcus and Dan were making for Majorca via Greece, while Sam and the two Robins were heading for Linz via Belgrade and Nigel was filing IFR to Linz to meet us. Turkey, however, wasn't finished with us; we spent the whole morning trying to get out of Sabiha Gokcen, meeting one blank-faced box-ticker after another, filling in forms in triplicate, paying for services we didn't want, need or get, and being fined for overstaying our five-day aircrew visas. Our bags were X-rayed so often I'm surprised they didn't burst into flames. Then the VFR flight plans were rejected; N-reg aircraft couldn't enter Serbia without special permission, and it seemed the only way they'd let us go was via Bucharest. By that time, if the only way out of Istanbul had been via hell we'd have considered it a golden opportunity, so Romania it was. Five hours late we set off, and in Bulgaria we met our old friends – crackling thunderstorms, lashing rain and discomfiting turbulence. The welcome at Bucharest's Baneasa airport could not have been more different from the experience of Sabiha Gokcen. Fuel was rushed out, vans were sent for us, hotels were procured, staff were offered for early shifts to see us away first thing the following day. I'd recommend Baneasa to anyone.

Next morning we ran into IMC after 100 miles and Bucharest let us climb to 10,500 to top the Carpathians. We picked up a little ice, which stopped accreting as the cloud thinned, then as had happened often we suddenly broke out into bright sunshine and could see for ever. We reached Linz within five hours, while Sam and Martin ducked into Graz for fuel. Another four and a half hour leg brought us to Kortrijk in Belgium for fuel, and again the weather had turned against us. The crossing to Biggin ended with Thames Radar vectoring us onto the ILS, and we were home.

The flying was only one facet of this extraordinary adventure. The places we saw, the people we met, the people we were with, the things we did, all added up to a life-affirming experience, never to be forgotten. We felt battered by marvels, any one of which would have *made* the trip, but they came at the rate of three a day. And it was all made possible by possession of a PPL. This truly is what general aviation is all about, and if you possibly can, you should do something like this before you pop your clogs – once is great, twice would be better. →



Balloon goes up

If I got through life never having flown in anything made of wicker, I'd not complain. There's something unsettling about hot air balloons; no wings, no prop – it ain't natural. The prospect of seeing the extraordinary volcanic geology of Cappadocia from a drifting aerostat induced me to overcome my distaste and climb into a 20-man basket which rose into a golden sunrise in company with an armada of multi-coloured companions – more than sixty, I counted – and wafted downwind in some sort of slow-motion rapture. The stillness of it stays with you; no breath of wind, just these giant inverted teardrops rising and falling, drifting and turning. Each pilot fires his burners, some close by, some far distant, and it sounds like dragons breathing. And the view was beyond my powers to describe.

Our pilot, Ismail Keremoglu, was a real artiste... we'd descend into this jumble of biomorphic geology, a cross between Walt Disney and Barbara Hepworth, then rise so slowly you'd swear we were going to drag up the cliff, but we



always cleared the rim by inches. Ismail makes the same trip around 320 times a year, so he's got it down to a fine art – he can pick the apricots when they're in season, he says.

You can control direction, within limits, by climbing and descending; the wind backs as you go down, so if you go up you'll drift to the right. At the end of an hour, after we'd flown at a snail's pace over a ridge, Ismail applied the burners to take us up to about 2,500 feet in order to move right towards the spot where he'd positioned his recovery crew. Looking down from the basket you get the same sensation you get when you're standing on the edge of a tall building, and it's not a sensation I like. Ismail chose this moment to tell us of the accident that

had befallen the occupants of a balloon which rose up under another a couple of years ago. Only one was killed – but everybody was badly injured, he added, with too much relish for my liking.



I was surprised at the steep descent angle. Once Ismail had identified his landing spot, we went down like a lift. He dropped a couple of ropes, his ground crew hauled against the balloon's inertia

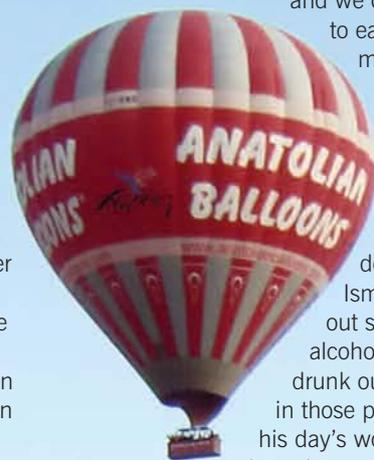
and we came gently to earth with the merest

bump. All around us, balloons were sagging and deflating.

Ismail broke out soft drinks – alcohol cannot be drunk out of doors in those parts – and his day's work was done. It was 7:30 am.

More than 80 balloons can take off at the height of the season. Ismail thinks there will have to be a limit, because it's getting too crowded. Eighty balloons, each with twenty folk at €150 a head, times 320 flying days... that adds up to a powerful incentive to pile more balloons in.

Me, I think it was a once-in-a-lifetime thrill. With the emphasis on the once.



Floating at low level above the extraordinary geology of Cappadocia





*Far left: balloon pilot Ismail makes the same dawn flight 320 times a year
Left: passengers delight in the extraordinary vista opening up below the balloon
Above: don't look down – 'it's like leaning off a particularly tall building...'*



Left: Balloons fill the sky, with more than sixty lifting off around dawn

