

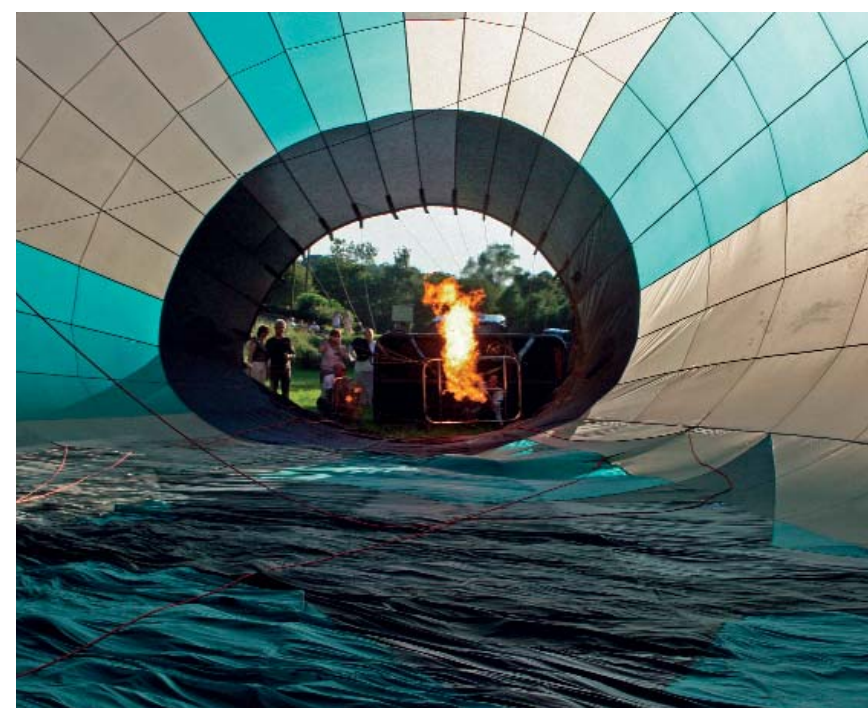
Up, up and away



Flying over the Forest of Bowland



Above: Allyson Barnes fires the burners to inflate the balloon
Below: From inside the balloon as it is attached to the basket



Photographer Linda Viney gets a bird's eye view of the Forest of Bowland as she floats over the countryside in a hot air balloon

Words: Amanda Griffiths



Above: John Fenton, balloon owner

FOR most of us a trip in a hot air balloon is a special experience we will never forget. But for Allyson Barnes it is a way of life. Allyson is one of the few female balloon pilots in Britain, though being a girl in a man's world does not faze her. She describes herself as 'one of the lads' and is completely at home in this male dominated environment having gone on trips with her dad from a young age.

And her enthusiasm for the sport is evident. As she talks about it her brilliant bright blue eyes sparkle, a



'It's the freedom I love. When you're up in the air it's very still, quiet and calm'

smile creeps across her face and you almost feel that she is floating on air.

'It's the freedom I love,' she says. 'When you're up in the air it's very still, quiet and calm. Many people are surprised that you don't get that climbing feeling you do in aircraft – it's like you're floating. As we prepare for take off there is usually a lot of chatter between the passengers, then all off a sudden it goes strangely silent because people are totally awe struck at the experience,' she says.

'When you leave the ground it's as if the ground is leaving you rather than you're leaving it. Reality is what is happening in the basket and the outside world is surreal.' The silence is only broken by the sound of the burner firing the balloon.

'Even when I go on holiday it's usually a "busman's holiday" flying the balloons abroad,' Allyson added.

To date she's flown in France,

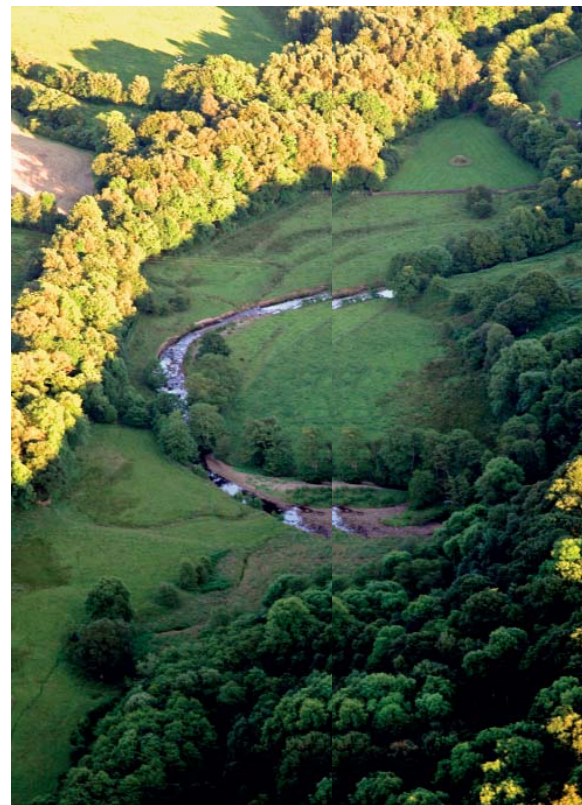
Belgium, Italy and Germany to name just a few and would like to travel to America and Australia and fly across their magnificent landscapes as well.

'That's the beauty of ballooning,' says Allyson. 'When the British season comes to an end you can go abroad. It all started from around the age of nine or ten. I'd attend balloon rallies up and down the country and abroad with my dad who had been flying for 30 years or so. When I got my driving licence he started using me as a retrieve driver (part of the ground crew who follow the balloon and pick up its pilot and passengers when it comes back down). Getting my flying licence meant I got out of those duties.'

But it wasn't until September 2004 that Allyson took the plunge and decided to make a career as a balloon pilot.

'I'd had a full time office job for 16 years and for ten of them I'd been

Above: The shadow of the balloon across the open countryside
Right: The River Hyndburn meanders through the countryside



ballooning as a hobby,' she says. 'It all got too office based so I decided to bite the bullet and give the big boys a run for their money, she laughs.

She now works for Balloons over Lancashire owned by John Fenton and based in Croston.

'I knew John from the balloon circuit,' she says. 'It was all quite strange how it came about. I'd made the decision to leave and was talking to one of my friends about it who suggested I call him and see if he had any use for me. I called him the next day and the rest is history.'

So in October last year Allyson joined John's business and started training to fly the bigger balloons. She upgraded her licence at Christmas and now has the pleasure of flying over the countryside at heights between 500 and 3,000 feet in one of the biggest balloons in the area at 240,000 cubic feet.

John and Allyson concentrate on flying over the Forest of Bowland because of the magnificent views from the air. They have four launch sites; Stonhurst College, Garstang

Right: Looking down at Allyson's balloon from a second piloted by John



High School, Bridge House Farm in Wray and Kirkby Lonsdale.

'The site we choose normally depends on the weather conditions,' says John. These ideally need to be light winds and good visibility.

'A flight usually lasts about an hour,' says Allyson. 'But we like to market it as an "experience" and get everyone involved as much or as little as they want to be. Passengers are usually strangers at the beginning, but we often find they end up swapping email addresses and telephone numbers.'

'Just at the weekend there were two ladies who I'd have sworn were best friends,' says John. 'However, they both came along separately and just got chatting.'

In fact the company has also been responsible for at least one marriage. 'A man and woman met in the balloon and got talking on the way back. We were invited to their engagement and their wedding and now they've got their first child on the way,' says John.

Ballooning of course does have a



Left: Stocks Reservoir
Below: Packing the balloon away
Bottom: Views across the Bowland landscape

romantic reputation. 'I've had three couples propose this year,' says John. 'Some people tip us off before hand, others don't and all of a sudden you're aware that a proposal is happening mid-air.'

'One man proposed using a ring he'd bought in Woolies. He rested it on the side of the basket and when she said "yes" he knocked it off! Thankfully the real one was in his pocket all the time.'

But it's not all proposals and romance. Passengers start from 12 years old and come from every walk of life and every lifestyle. Some people have been brought the trip as a special present, or a treat, others are more wealthy, but as John says, 'Everyone is equal in the basket.'

Each balloon can take ten passengers plus the pilot and often two balloons (piloted by Allyson and John) will go up at the same time.

'Passengers book a particular date, but if the weather is not right we transfer them to another flight during the season (April to September),' says John.

'I get a total buzz from taking

people up who have never been up before,' said Allyson. 'There's a danger you can get blasé about the whole thing, but then when you're taking the first timers you're reminded just how incredibly special it is – after all, for most people it's chance in a lifetime.'

For more information visit www.balloonsoverlancashire.co.uk or telephone 01772 601525. ■

