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Edyth Schoenrich scales the Swiss Alps almost every winter. She takes in the same bird's-eye view that backcountry skiers and mountain climbers do—steep, dangerous rock formations covered in deep powder snow. But the 83-year-old medical professor from Baltimore never breaks a sweat—and gets to enjoy crackers and warm brie with a glass of Burgundy, served en route. "It's so serene," she enthuses, "so spiritual."

Conquering the Matterhorn in January isn't generally a tranquil experience—unless you're doing it from the basket of a hot-air balloon. And more folks are doing just that. The Balloon Federation of America sees a steady inflation in the balloon business. "Winter ballooning is the bright spot," says President Phil Bryant. Fueling the interest: the promise of a smoother, longer ride; new tour operators who hope to get you naturally high; and a series of ballooning festivals that aggressively promote this cold-weather activity.

Peak season. Summertime balloonists can, of course, see the same magnificent landscapes—the Swiss Alps, the Colorado Rockies, and the New Mexico desert are prime launching pads. But conditions in winter can be better. Gone are the dreaded thermals—rising columns of air that are warmer than the surrounding air—that can make for a rough ride in summer. "Everything is just so clean and fresh with the winter air," says Tina Reeves, editor of Balloon Dispatch, an online magazine. How about the cold? No need to worry about the wind chill, because you're flying with the wind. Plus, the burners that heat the air inside the balloon and keep it aloft also keep passengers warm and toasty.

Ballooning isn't without risks. Over the past decade, there have been 174 hot-air-ballooning accidents and 21 deaths, according to the National Transportation Safety Board. A Mayo Clinic study of hot-air-balloon crashes concluded that pilot error was a leading cause; so was collision with power lines. The researchers suggested that more training could lead to fewer accidents—in other words, look for an experienced flight crew and operation.

The price can be stratospheric. Adventurer Buddy Bombard, the luxury-balloonist patronized by Schoenrich, charges about \$1,400 a day for six- or nine-day packages; the rate includes meals, a deluxe hotel room, and a daily 3 1/2-hour balloon excursion. Stateside, a half-hour in a balloon can set you back more than \$100, a price that can include champagne and breakfast. But to really get some altitude—and see why this trend is about more than hot air—you'll typically spend twice that to stay aloft a few hours.

A wintertime balloon ride is usually slow and quiet. Merlin Sagon, who runs Camelot Balloons near Beaver Creek, Colo., pilots his eight-person balloon to a deliberate takeoff in the Vail Valley on a late-winter morning. He sails more than a thousand feet into the deep blue sky until he reaches an inversion layer where air temperatures can be as much as 30 degrees higher than on the ground. The Gore Range looms on the horizon, covered by a generous blanket of powder. "When it snows a lot, we see so much wildlife here," says Sagon. "It's magnificent." He wraps each excursion with a soft landing and servings of snacks with sparkling white wine and hot cider.

Air voyeur. A winter balloon trip just isn't right, some would argue, unless it's done en masse. Balloons are impressive

things to look at, cutting a sharp profile against a winter landscape with their bright colors and designs. Events such as the Snowdown Balloon Rally in Durango, Colo., are mostly admired from the ground. But if you're lucky enough to know a pilot, it's worth begging for a ride. "The world is a different place when you're up there, and there are balloons all around you," says Doug Lenberg, a sponsor of February's Snowdown event.

Ballooner Bombard takes a few customers to the International Chateau d'Oex Alpine Balloon Festival near Lake Geneva. Even with burners igniting and shutting off, he says, it is peaceful, even a little surreal. Up on alpine ridges, above the timberline, black chamois mountain goats let you float within a few hundred feet of them. The balloon seems to climb the slopes effortlessly and comes so close to snow-covered trees you can pick a pine cone. Best of all, you don't need a rope and ice pick to see it all.

High Times

Camelot Balloons

Beaver Creek, Colo.

www.camelotballoons.com

1 1/2 hours: \$225 adults, \$190 seniors, kids

Balloons Above the Valley

Napa, Calif.

www.balloonrides.com

One hour over wine country: \$185

Alexandria Balloon Flights

Milford, N.J.

www.njballooning.com

One hour: \$165

Northern Light Balloon Expeditions

Sedona, Ariz.

www.northernlightballoon.com

One to two hours over the Coconino National Forest: \$145