

VAIL VALLEY

SUMMER TIME

YOUR COMPLETE GUIDE | 2007

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SKY

REMEMBER THAT DREAM YOU USED TO HAVE

when you were a kid? That one where you were flying, soaring weightless above everything? Now, remember how disappointed you were when you woke up and realized flying wasn't real? Well, communing mid-air with the feathered kind can be a reality. All over the Vail Valley, men and women are searching out the best peaks, strapping on a bit of nylon fabric and launching themselves into the wild blue yonder. And they're inviting you to take a ride too.

Into the abyss

On a bright, blustery morning, a handful of people made their way up to Bellyache Ridge, a registered launch site for paragliders in Eagle County. I, the only newbie in the group, went along for the ride.

Now, I've never been great with heights – climbing ladders turns my legs to jelly – and the thought of throwing myself off the side of a mountain seemed absurd. But then again, I've also never been very good at saying no to a dare.

"I think everybody should try this once in their lives," said paraglider Alex Hintz. "I think it gives you a very peaceful feeling."

Then with a leap and a bound, Hintz became the first one in the air that morning. As the first, Hintz acted as the "wind dummy," testing wind conditions and reporting via radio to the rest of the pilots waiting their turn on the hill.



Danielle Carrillo waits for the fans to fill the hot air balloon during a 10-balloon launch in Gypsum.

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The best views of Vail are from above

BY NICOLE FREY | PHOTO BY SHANE MACOMBER





ABOVE | Because of the air pressure, early mornings are ideal for flying over the Rockies. PHOTO BY SHANE MACOMBER
OPPOSITE | Alex Hintz prepares his chute for lift off from the top of Belly ache Ridge in Wolcott. PHOTO BY DOMINIQUE TAYLOR

One after another, the pilots let the wind lift their colorful wings and took flight until it was my turn. Strapped into the harness and hooked to my paragliding instructor, I was ready to go. But while I may have been ready, the wind wasn't. And so, I embarked on the hardest part of the journey – the waiting.

I stood there, willing myself to take deep soothing breaths like my instructor, David Champaign of Vail Valley Paragliding, recommended, and trying to conceal how hard my legs were shaking. Then suddenly the time to fly was here.

"Ready?" Champaign asked.

"Yup," I answered.

"OK. Run, run, run!" he cried out as we hurled ourselves down the hill.

Looking down, I saw my feet begin to leave the earth, but gravity wasn't ready to release us yet. A couple more paces and we were airborne, soaring like the hawks that shared the sky with us.

"It's a great way to start the day," said

Champaign, who flies just about every day. "This is the best view of your backyard. This is where we work and play. When you're doing a sport like this, you're not thinking about anything else – in a good way. It's a time to forget about all the stress."

With that step into the abyss, my fears vanished. The ride was smooth and the harness was as comfortable as that cushy recliner at home. The deer below regarded us, but didn't run.

"They can't figure us out because we're not making any noise," Champaign said.

Gradually, we descended, crossing over the fast-flowing Eagle River before gently touching down in an Edwards field about 15 minutes after takeoff.

"Wow," was the only word that came to this writer's mind.

Brotherhood of flyers

In addition to the morning flights, Vail Valley Paragliding also hosts a longer sunset flight out of Wolcott. Just about

anyone can take a tandem flight, though the ideal weight range is 90 to 240 lbs. For those who are bitten by the flying bug, Vail Valley Paragliding also offers lessons and certification.

"There's no feeling like the freedom of paragliding," said Vail Valley Paragliding instructor Greg Kelley. "There's no noise, low impact on the environment and you're up there with the eagles and the hawks. It's a passion. There's a kinship with those who fly."

Included in that kinship are those who fly a larger vessel – hot air balloons.

Whether you want a romantic outing or a journey with friends, hot air ballooning is an adventure through the skies under a canopy of color. Be prepared to wake up early. The air pressure in the wee hours is ideal for flying.

"The mechanics of flying a balloon are relatively simple," said the self-named Merlin, sorcerer of the morning skies and president of Eagle-based Camelot Balloons. "You

put heat in, you go up. You take heat out, you come down. Sounds simple. The tricky part is the fact that hot air balloons are the only registered aircraft in the sky without a rudder. That combined with the fact that my biggest balloon is larger than the Goodyear blimp, and that I do my flying in some of the most difficult terrain to 'catch' and retrieve a balloon in the world, and you end up with a situation that requires a lot of learning of the micro-meteorology involved with the area."

But with more than 18 years of experience under his belt, Merlin is a pro. He and other local ballooning companies, including Balloon America, promise nothing but smooth sailing.

"Since the balloon goes with the wind, there is relatively no breeze," Merlin said. "It is a very peaceful and serene way to fly. For me, it's a true Rocky Mountain high."

Balloon America instructors boast if you held a candle in your hand, it wouldn't flicker during flight.

Plan at least a couple hours for the shortest of tours, which will take you over the picturesque Vail Valley at a leisurely pace of 10 to 20 miles per hour. The balloon will hover at anywhere from treetop level to 5,000 feet above the ground.

"There's absolutely no sensation like it," said Ron Miller, an FAA certified commercial pilot with Balloon America. "Floating peacefully above the ground without any special purpose or destination – we never know where we're going to land or when. It's a true soft adventure and one available

to anyone from ages 3 to 100."

There is some idea of where the balloon will go. While Camelot Balloons lifts off in Eagle, Balloon America starts in Edwards and flies over Arrowhead and Edwards, and all tours promise to get you home by supper.

Flying in a box

For a trip through the air with minimal financial and time commitments, you can't beat a ride on the Eagle Bahn Gondola. The whole family can enjoy the ride up the mountainside in an enclosed cable car, safe from the elements.

Starting in Lionshead Village, the gondola effortlessly climbs to the top of Vail Mountain where breathtaking views of the Sawatch, New York and Gore Mountain Ranges and the Mount of the Holy Cross await you.

Sure, you could come right back down, but there's plenty to do at Vail Mountain Adventure Ridge. Play a round of disc golf or let the kids hunt for buried bones at the Dino Dig. Get the blood pumping by mountain biking or hiking down the mountain after you've taken in the scenery. Hour-long guided nature hikes will teach you about the area's flora and fauna.

For an even more economical trip, take a sunset ride up the mountain when there's no charge to ride the gondola.

Though even these flying dreams must end, at least you can record the experience in your mind's eye. And if you bring your camera, you can even share them. ☺

AIR ADVENTURES

HOT AIR BALLOONING

What: Camelot Balloons

When: Year-round

Where: Eagle

How much: 60 to 75 minutes, adults | \$275

Children (6-12 yrs) & seniors | \$225

30 to 40 minutes, all ages | \$190

More information: www.Camelotballoons.com or 970.328.2290

What: Balloon America

When: June 15 – Sept. 15

Where: Edwards

How much: Mountain Sunrise Tour: 2 hours, all ages | \$195

Alpine Adventure Tour: 75 to 90 minutes, adults | \$475

Children under 12 | \$425

More information: www.balloonrideUSA.com or 970.468.2473

PARAGLIDING

What: Vail Valley Paragliding

When: Year-round

Where: Edwards or Wolcott

How much: Edwards Morning Flights (15 minutes in air) | \$175

Wolcott Evening Flights (45 to 60 minutes in air) | \$225

More information: www.vailvalleyparagliding.com or 970.845.7321

GONDOLA

What: Eagle Bahn Gondola

When: 10 a.m.-4 p.m. June 22 – Sept. 3 weekends Sept. 7-9, 14-16, 21-23

Where: Lionshead Village, Vail

How much: Adult lift ticket | \$18, \$23 with bike haul

Children (5-12 yrs) and seniors lift ticket | \$11, \$16 with bike haul

Children 4 and under are free

Free for everyone after 4 p.m.

More information: vail.snow.com 970.476.9090

