

Floating Away: Bristol Balloon Fiesta [C1]

Per tre giorni in agosto, il cielo di questa città costiera nel sud-ovest dell'Inghilterra diventa un mosaico colorato grazie al volo sincronizzato di centinaia di mongolfiere.

Every second weekend of August, the skies of Bristol, the largest city in South West England, fill with [hot-air balloons](#) for the Bristol Balloon Fiesta. The event [draws crowds](#) from the local area and much [further afield](#), with some participants flying in from as far as Taiwan and the United States. It is the largest hot-air balloon festival in Europe and the second biggest in the world, just behind the Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta, in New Mexico, US.

GLOBAL VISITORS

The very first Bristol International Balloon Fiesta took place in 1979 at Ashton Court, on the [outskirts](#) of Bristol. The extensive site includes a historic mansion dating back over six hundred years, a [golf course](#), gardens, cafés and a [deer park](#). The first event had just twenty-eight participating [hot-air balloons](#), but since then, it has grown in popularity. The festival is still held on the grounds of Ashton Court today and over one hundred balloons now take part in the three-day festival, which attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors over the course of the weekend.

PUB ORIGINS

To find out more, Speak Up contacted Dani Andres, head of Bristol International Balloon Fiesta's department of public relations. Andres has been attending the event since she was a child and believes it is of particular relevance in European hot-air ballooning history. As she explains, the colourful event has its origins in a conversation held in a Bristol pub in the 1970s between a Glaswegian aeronautical engineer called Don Cameron and a group of his friends. **Dani Andres (English accent):** Don comes from an

aeronautical background. He was an engineer. Basically, they had a Rotary Club that they were part of and used to do some [paragliding](#), et cetera. And they found out about a hot-air balloon that had been built in America, [and] thought, “Oh, it would be quite fun. Why don’t we try and build one ourselves?” So, they did, and in the 1970s, they built the Bristol Belle, which is the first modern hot-air balloon in Europe. Not the [hot-air balloons](#) that you saw in Bridgerton recently — that’s the older style — but the more recent, kind of modern type that you see now, effectively... the Bristol Belle was the very first one. And it was shortly after building that, that they then [came up with the idea](#) of the Balloon Fiesta. And at that time, Don decided, as a hobby, to build more [hot-air balloons](#). He used to build them in the [basement](#) of his house. And the excitement for it just grew and grew, and now he [runs](#) Cameron Balloons, which is a factory here in Bristol, and they’re the world’s largest manufacturer of [hot-air balloons](#) and get orders and [shipments](#) in from everywhere, you name it.

BRISTOL MAGIC

For those considering whether it is [worth their while](#) making the trip to Bristol from more popular tourist destinations like London, Andres [summed up](#) the magic of the event. **Dani Andres:** There is nothing like a mass ascent of [hot-air balloons](#). What’s lovely about Bristol, as well, is the arena that they launch from is actually quite compact for a hot-air balloon festival, given the number of balloons we have attending, so when the weather allows, and the balloons can fly, you just get this complete kind of compact rainbow of colour, it’s like a kaleidoscope, and they’re going up here, there and everywhere all around you, and as they [drift off](#) across the city, it’s just the most beautiful sight. And it’s one of those things that stay with you for a really long time.

MASS ASCENTS

The mass ascents are the most spectacular part of this event. Attendees will get to see up to 130 to 140 [hot-air balloons](#) flying together. Andres told us about the complex [log](#)istics of these huge [displays](#). **Dani Andres:** If you’ve

got more than you can fit in within the space, you just fly [in waves](#), because you normally get a window of about an hour to an hour and a half for mass ascent from the first balloon [taking off](#) to the last balloon [taking off](#). So, balloons have to take off early in the morning or early evening because of the thermals. It's the safest time for them to fly. So, basically, six o'clock in the morning, they have pilots briefing, where they go through the weather reports and [make the call](#) whether it's safe to fly and then we [let off](#) some smoke, either green, amber or red, which allows the crowd to know if they're going to fly. And then the balloon teams get set and then [off they go](#). And then we repeat that twice daily for all three days of the event.

WEATHER WATCH

All events of the Bristol Balloon Fiesta are free, but the weather conditions can prevent balloons from [taking off](#), [spoiling](#) the fun. There are, however, other worthwhile activities for those who want to learn about the world of ballooning. **Dani Andres:** Obviously, the mass ascents are weather-dependent, they can't always fly, so we wanted to make sure that people could interact with this world of hot-air ballooning, even when the balloons aren't flying. So, a few years ago, we introduced Meet the Pilot. Essentially, we invite the visiting public into the arena, you can [climb](#) into the [basket](#), [have a go](#) at a [burner](#), see how a hot-air balloon comes from being in a quite a small bag, really, on the back of a trailer, to being in the air and kind of follow those stages together.

BY NIGHT

For Andres, the after-dark events are particularly stunning. **Dani Andres:** The 'nightglows' are always super iconic. So, the 'nightglows' take place on Friday and Saturday evenings, just after nightfall. It's essentially when we [tether](#) twenty-five [hot-air balloons](#) in the arena, and then they [light up](#) in sequence, almost like giant [light bulbs](#), to music, to a soundtrack that's carefully choreographed. It literally [brings the crowd to their feet](#). All the crowd have their phones out with their lights on, [waving](#). It's just the most

amazing thing to witness and actually a really emotional thing for everyone involved.

FAR AND WIDE

Andres spoke about how far away from Bristol balloons tend to fly. She then went on to detail the parameters of the event. **Dani Andres:** It obviously depends on weather conditions on the day and how quickly you may or may not need to come down. We're in quite a weird space in Bristol, in that we've obviously got the channel on one side of us, and we've also got a major airport, as well, so that's its boundaries. But, quite frequently, if you get a good direction, you'll [end up](#) in Wiltshire, Gloucester... that kind of area, and this is still very much in the South West of England. A balloon flight lasts anything from forty-five minutes to an hour and a half, normally, so it just depends on wind speeds and wind directions [as] to where you [end up](#). So, it's not a [race](#), it just tends to be the fun and camaraderie of all flying out together. However, we do run competitive elements, I suppose. There's something called The [Hare](#) and [Hound](#), where we'll set off one balloon first, the 'hare'. They take a [marker](#) with them, and they [drop](#) it, and then, the rest have to try and land as close as they can to that [marker](#) to score points. And you know, there's a whole element of competitive hot-air ballooning, as well, in the UK, where you'll have to achieve different things, so it might be flying within a certain air space for a certain amount of time or at different altitudes. So, there's things like that you can play around with. But yeah, [it's up to](#) the wind, really — what it wants to do on the day.

PILOTS

Participating pilots must meet the event's [entry requirements](#) to have a [chance](#) of flying at the festival. Andres talked about this in more detail.

Dani Andres: There are certain criteria: every pilot has to [submit](#) a pilot's licence, for example. They normally have to [submit](#) a balloon [log](#), which shows how frequently and recently they've been flying as well. And [medical](#), their [insurance](#), [public liability](#), and then the balloon itself has to have a

certificate of [airworthiness](#), which effectively means that it is allowed to go up in the air.

HISTORIC BALLOONS

The [hot-air balloons](#) that participate in the event are not just [state-of-the-art](#) modern [hot-air balloons](#); there are also several historic balloons that are [showcased](#) at the event. **Dani Andres:** Historic balloons, most of them don't fly anymore. They are the iconic special shapes of [years gone by](#) that the crowd absolutely loves, definitely. Most of them aren't [flyable](#) anymore, but we can still get them out, and what we call '[tether](#)' — so, when the balloon [tethers](#) it's essentially [tied](#) to the ground by vehicles. So, after the balloons' mass ascent has taken place, we get the historic balloons out and put on a show. [It's] still only about eight o'clock in the morning at that point! You've all been up so early — might as well continue the entertainment for a bit longer! They're really beautiful old shapes, most of which have been built here in Bristol at Cameron Balloons, as well, so, it's really special to see those again. Obviously, the Bristol Belle was the first in Europe, which you can just about still get out of the bag. Now, I mean, she's [in bits](#), but, you know, we like to, on special occasions, still try and see her. www.bristolballoonfiesta.co.uk

Glossary

- **off they go** = e se ne vanno
- **race** = gara
- **hot-air balloons** = mongolfiere
- **deer park** = parco di cervi
- **paragliding** = parapendio
- **worth their while** = che vale la pena
- **summed up** = riassumere
- **it's up to** = dipendere da
- **public liability** = responsabilità civile
- **state-of-the-art** = moderne, all'avanguardia
- **drift off** = allontanarsi lentamente
- **in waves** = a scaglioni
- **light up** = illuminare
- **Hare** = lepre
- **Hound** = segugio
- **flyable** = adatte al volo
- **medical** = esame medico
- **insurance** = assicurazione
- **showcased** = mettere in mostra
- **draws** = richiamare
- **golf course** = campo da golf
- **make the call** = prendere la decisione
- **chance** = possibilità
- **log** = registro
- **drop** = far cadere
- **in bits** = a pezzi
- **displays** = manifestazioni
- **let off** = emettere
- **spoiling** = rovinare
- **climb** = montare
- **tether** = legare
- **basket** = cesta, gondola
- **light bulbs** = lampadine

- **waving** = sventolare
- **end up** = ritrovarsi
- **submit** = presentare
- **crowds** = folle
- **further afield** = oltre, più lontano
- **basement** = seminterrato
- **years gone by** = anni passati
- **tied** = legare, fissare
- **came up with the idea** = avere l'idea
- **runs** = gestire
- **brings the crowd to their feet** = far alzare in piedi
- **entry requirements** = requisiti di ammissione
- **airworthiness** = idoneità al volo
- **marker** = segnale
- **outskirts** = periferia
- **shipments** = spedizioni
- **taking off** = decollare
- **have a go** = provare
- **burner** = bruciatore