

Tuesday Nov 3

Hot air balloon ride:

We woke up in our cave room early this morning for our 5:40 AM pick up to go ballooning. Not easy to wake up early in complete darkness, but since we were still jetlagged, it wasn't a problem. The car from the Royal



Ballooning Company picked us up right on time. We made a few stops on the way to pick up other travelers and where all deposited at the Royal Balloon headquarters. This is the only balloon company that serves breakfast before taking off in the balloons. We assumed it would be coffee and sweet rolls, but in fact it was a full buffet including eggs, cucumber and tomato and cheese and all the things you might find in any breakfast. We were assigned a table and balloon number 3. While we were eating, the crew was figuring out the best launching site based on that morning's weather conditions. We were very lucky as the weather was gorgeous. They drove us to the balloons, many of which were already in the air, and the sky began to fill with color. There are multiple balloon companies and probably

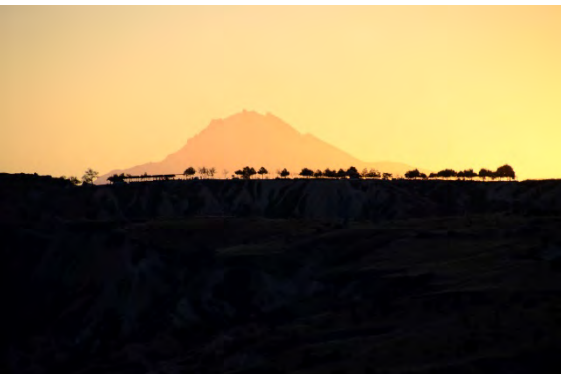
100 balloons. In recent times they local government began limiting the companies so no new ones can open and none can purchase more balloons.



We arrived in our balloon number three. The basket was lying on its side and the balloon was on the ground with the fire jets filling it up with hot air. It slowly rose off the ground, and when it was fully alert, a ladder was brought over for us to climb into the basket. The basket was divided into 5 compartments, two on each side and a center one for the pilot. There were 11 of us and our pilot, Suat (pronounced swat as in swat team, as he told us). Suat immediately learned all our names and we rose into the sky. I had never



been in a hot air balloon before and it was wonderful floating through the sky – peaceful and quiet, except when the fire jets were turned on and made a lot of noise like a hissing sound.

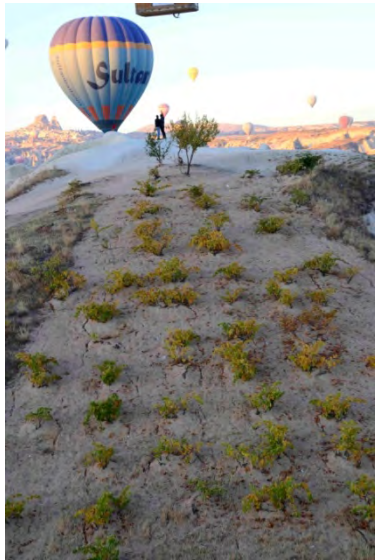


We drifted over the tops of the fairy chimneys, and watched the sun rise over the volcano. It was magical. We drifted over Lovers Lane, named that due to the shapes of the chimney. When you see the pictures, no more explanation will be needed.

The formations and fairy chimneys really need to be seen from all directions. It was wonderful that we got to hike around in between them. It was also wonderful to fly above them and get a whole different perspective. It is like any sculpture or piece of art, you have to walk all the way around it to get the full affect.



We were one of the last balloons to ascend, so we got the full view of the sky filled with balloons of all different colors. We floated here and there, as the sun cast our shadow on the chimneys. A photographer's dream. The sky was a deep blue, the sun shone brightly, the rocks changed colors, the shadows danced and the balloons continually made different patterns in the sky.



Since we were the last up, we were also the last down, so we also got to watch as the other balloons landed, deflated, and then be rolled up into colorful snakes that were packaged away until the next flight.

After one hour and nine minutes, as Suat was sure to tell us, we landed right on the trailer so the basket would not need to be moved. The ground crew literally picked me up and carried me out of the basket. No picture of that!



As they deflated our balloon, they set up a table with a white tablecloth which was quickly filled with chocolate covered strawberries, cookies that Suat had baked, and custom champagne specially bottled for Royal balloons. I don't usually drink at eight in the morning, but after floating through the sky, it seemed appropriate and quite delicious. This is a ballooning tradition, or so we were told, to be thankful and grateful that we landed safely. We each had a medal placed around our neck, certifying that we were official ballooners (with a warning that they didn't want to see it being auctioned off on E-bay).



When it was all over, we went back to hotel for yet another breakfast, another beautifully laid out buffet of all the wonderful things we expect in a Turkish breakfast. Yogurts, homemade jams, olives, olives, olives, cucumbers, tomato, good fresh bread etc. etc. and remember, this was our second breakfast.