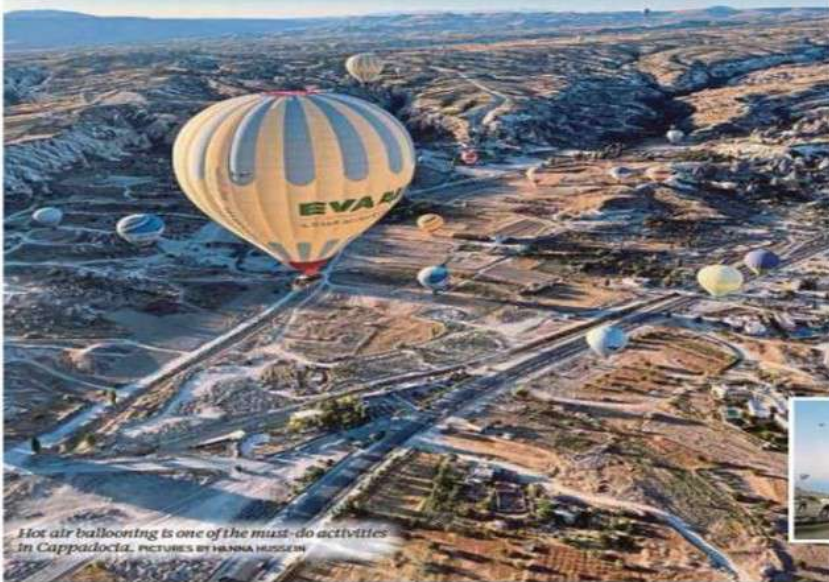


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JOM!

Ancient allure of Cappadocia

A breathtaking balloon ride, an underground adventure of ancient caves and churches, and good old Greek hospitality give **Hanna Hussein** a thrilling time in **Turkiye**



Hot air ballooning is one of the must-do activities in Cappadocia. PICTURES BY HANNA HUSSEIN



The Blue Eye or Nazar Boncuk (Evil Eye) is a good luck charm, and Turkish people believe that this amulet protects them from misfortune.

FRESH crisp air welcomes our arrival at dawn in a location somewhere between Avanos and Urgup, the two most-visited districts of Nevsehir province.

It is quite a bumpy drive along a dirt path, but the sunrise view at our destination makes the ride worth it, especially when the dark sky slowly lights up with an awesome mix of pink and blue.

Overlooking the barren, rugged landscape, the morning sky is dotted with floating hot air balloons. And this is actually a typical morning scene in Cappadocia, Turkiye's tourist destination famed for its hot air balloon rides.

The Cappadocia hot air balloon ride is definitely on every tourist's must-try list, including mine as well as my colleagues from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, South Korea and the United Arab Emirates.

We are on a media familiarisation trip organised by the Turkiye Tourism Promotion and Development Agency.

VIEW FROM THE SKY

While waiting to board our hot air balloon, which is already half inflated, we take the opportunity to soak in the view at the launch site.

Around us, there are more than 10 hot air balloons getting ready for take off. It's quite interesting to see the ground crew working to set up the balloons, especially when they are being lit up by the roaring flames of burning propane.

About 15 minutes past 6am, the passengers are called over to board the basket. One by one, we climb into the basket that has four compartments. Each compartment can fit five people comfortably.

The pilot, Mehmet Cevizli, who has five years of flying experience with Atmosfer Balloons, begins the tour with a short safety briefing.

Soon after, our balloon starts to lift off the ground, slowly rising further and further up. It doesn't feel scary at all, as it floats smoothly and begins flying where the wind blows.

Looking down to the ground, the people below look like tiny ants, but the view up here is, oh, so breathtaking!

It's a jaw-dropping moment to see the sunrise behind the mountainous terrain at this height, especially with all the hot air balloons flying across the sky, surrounded

by valleys and rugged landscape.

Once we are 500m off the ground, Mehmet gives some informative facts about the geological formations in the area.

This unique canyon landscape and unusual rock formations, he says, are the result of nature's forces from three volcanoes — the Erciyes, Hasan and Melendiz Daglar — that erupted some 30 million years ago.

People often ask, how does the pilot steer the hot air balloon? Well, although these balloons go where the wind takes them, the pilot can control the altitude by burning gas to go up, and allowing the air to cool to go down. In fact, Mehmet has actually taken us as high as 1,000 metres above the ground!

He also uses the turning vents to rotate the balloon 360° so passengers can enjoy a full panoramic view.

After almost an hour flying southwest across beautiful valleys, including Gerome and Rose Valleys, we reach the Love Valley, a popular spot known for its fairy chimneys.

There, our hot air balloon slowly makes a descent. Not only does this allow us to see the beautiful valleys up-close, but it is also an indication that we are about to land anytime soon.

In about five minutes, we reach a very low altitude, where the base of the basket can almost touch the vineyard below.

"Go into your seated landing position and get ready everyone," Mehmet suddenly instructs.

All of us begin crouching and holding the ropes in front of us. I am prepared for a rough touchdown, but instead, the landing is really smooth with just a little skid.

The landing is done in a very professional manner — it's so smooth that it feels really safe and nobody was scared. Apparently, it is assisted by the ground crew, who pull down the balloon once it reaches near ground level and safely place the basket onto a trailer with the balloon still attached. The trailer is then moved to another location for the passengers to get off and join a celebration party organised by Atmosfer Balloons.



Watching how the hot air balloons are being set up.



Looking down at the rock formations of Love Valley.