

How to Make Great Images at a Hot Air Balloon Festival



Close up

The first week of October explodes with color and excitement when hundreds of hot air balloonists descend on Albuquerque, New Mexico for the *Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta*. The “Mass Ascension” held on the opening day is a photographers dream. The *Dawn Patrol* ascends.

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Photos © Maria Drumm

Up, up, up



Watching these trial runs lets the photographer know in which direction the colorful pageantry will travel.

To photograph a balloon festival successfully, get to the event before sunrise. Look around and feel the energy! It is truly overwhelming.

Close up shots that fill the frame are breathtaking and set the stage for the ascent shots. As the balloons fill with air there are rows and rows of these colorful giant envelopes (the technical name for the cloth part) that are born in just a few minutes. In the beginning shoot in aperture priority (f 11-16) because things are still, but as soon as the balloons start to fill, switch to shutter priority and stay there for the rest of the action.

This photographer kept the shutter speed between 1/200 and 1/250 while adjusting the ISO so that the f-stop stayed between 11 and 16. If the depth of field (the f stop) is too wide, the images will be flat. With digital photography, do not be afraid to move the ISO to 800. Unless creating huge posters, noise is not a problem. The camera used here was an 8-mega pixel Canon Rebel and there was no problem making 11x14 prints.

Once the balloons are in the air it is another story. If you turn one way the sun is right there and you have backlit conditions. Turn around again and there is front light. It is important to check your ISO to keep the depth of field tight. Try shooting as close to 100 ISO as possible but if the clouds roll in, make an adjustment.



Up we go

Two lenses were used: the 17-85mm was perfect for almost everything except the close up shots and for those a 70-300mm was used. The telephoto lens would not auto-focus (AF) all the time so it was necessary to switch to *MF*. Do not bother to check the histogram more than once or twice or you will miss something. Try to get combinations of balloons of different sizes and shapes and do both vertical and horizontal shots.

A tripod was used because it offered space and allowed the camera to be held higher than usual and still be steady. It may seem unnecessary with the short shutter speed, but with the presence of thousands of spectators, the tripod does offer the photographer a protected area. A remote was also used.

In the early dawn before the balloons started arriving there were lots of opportunities for wonderful people shots, which will enhance the creation of a Travelette or digital slide show.



Full of hot air

Hot air balloon festivals are held all over the country. Just remember it is usually very cold when things get started so check your batteries and have several backups.

Have fun! ■

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Special shapes—witch in sky



Mass ascension