



UP AND AWAY: Floating Images operates hot air balloon flights from Limestone Park in Ipswich.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED



Alaskan cruise deal

ENJOY a free upgrade to a balcony cabin and choose from a range of bonuses when booking a fly, stay and cruise holiday through Alaska with Cruise1st.

The deal features an eight-night voyage aboard the Celebrity Solstice from Vancouver where you'll sail past translucent blue icebergs at Tracy Arm Fjord, go in search of humpback whales, sea lions and seals in Juneau, experience Tlingit culture in Ketchikan and more.

The holiday departs May 7 from Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne from \$2999; Canberra from \$3149; and Perth from \$3099 per person, twin share based on a balcony cabin.

For more information call 1300 596 345.



Best of Japan tour

VISIT Japan in May to walk through azalea gardens in bloom and alpine snow canyons.

When lowland gardens are blooming with azalea, iris and wisteria, the Japan Alps are still covered with snow.

Springtime snow is one of the unusual highlights to be experienced on Toursgallery's Best of Japan Tour in May 2014.

Toursgallery will take 15 guests to 2450 metres above sea level on Mt Tatayama, in the Central Alps of Honshu.

After a major snow clearing effort, the Tatayama-Murodo road across the Roof of Japan turns into a snow canyon.

Closed to regular traffic, this area is part of the Kurobe Alpine Route and is rarely visited by foreign tourists.

Starting on May 12 in Tokyo, this 17 day escorted small group tour is priced at \$8518 twin share.

For details, phone 1300 307 317 or email travel@toursgallery.com.

On top of a bucket list

Flying high over the Scenic Rim and Ipswich, the views are simply stunning

BIANCA CLARE

THE clock on the bedside table reads 3.30am.

The alarm is about to pierce through the darkness and silence, but that is okay.

I have been wide awake for the past 30 minutes.

I am filled with nervous excitement at the prospect of being suspended in a wicker basket 1km above the ground.

Hot air ballooning has been in the top three of my bucket list for as long as I can remember.

Floating Images balloon operator Graeme Day picks up my husband and myself from the lobby of the Metro Hotel Ipswich International about 20 minutes before sunrise.

It is only a short trip in the four-wheel-drive to our departure point at Limestone Park. The anticipation is fast building to fever pitch with four of the six passengers

celebrating the milestone of their 30th birthdays.

After a safety briefing, Graeme gives passengers the option to get involved in the balloon preparation.

The massive rip-stop nylon balloon is carefully emptied out of its case and into a long straight line.

Two powered fans are used to inflate the balloon with cold air before hot air is blown in from a large propane burner.

Once the balloon is standing, it is all aboard.

It takes a minute or two before you realise the 738kg flying machine has effortlessly left the ground.

It is a surreal feeling having an open-air view of the world below.

As we gain height, the stunning views over the valleys of the Scenic Rim, Somerset and the heritage city of Ipswich are breathtaking.

With not a cloud in the sky, you can see Flinders Peak, Mount Walker, the Great Dividing and

McPherson ranges, Mount Tamborine, Moreton Bay, the skyline of Brisbane and the Brisbane and Bremer rivers.

I am struck by how peacefully quiet it is and how I am not suffering from white-knuckled terror.

Other than the occasional reassuring release of the propane tank to heat the balloon, it is a serene glide through the sky. When it's time to descend, it is a gentle drift back to earth. We assume the brace position, back against the wicker wall and knees bent, as the basket sets down in a grassy paddock.

Just like set-up, we all get involved in the pack-up – rolling up our sleeves to lift the balloon back into the case.

A champagne breakfast at Metro Hotel Ipswich International is the perfect post-ballooning celebration.

● *The writer was a guest of Floating Images.*

IF YOU GO

● Floating Images hot air balloon flights can be booked on 3294 8770, bookings@floatingimages.com.au or online www.floatingimages.com.au.

● It is recommended to stay overnight at the Metro Hotel Ipswich International and dine at Platform 9. Bookings can be made on 3812 8077 or www.metrohotels.com.au.

● You need to allow three to four hours for the ballooning program which involves a one-hour scenic flight.

● No open footwear or high heels are permitted. Don't forget to bring a camera to capture the experience.

\$200

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