

Going Places

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Hot-air balloons climb the walls this month outside Gallup, at the Red Rock Balloon Rally. Turn the page to learn more about this colorful event.

CHARLES MANN





PHOTOS BY CHARLES MANN

The visuals at the Red Rock Balloon Rally are unique among the state's many festivals.

GALLUP

Chasing Rainbows

The Red Rock Balloon Rally is the best of the Southwest, in 3-D, Technicolor, all-the-way-live super high-def. Scores of colorful balloons float inside the box-canyon launch site at Red Rock Park, outside of Gallup, nearly 140 miles west of Albuquerque. They drift alongside a towering, 120-foot-high wall of sandstone and cast spectacular shadows against the rock face.

As the balloons glide by the cliff, visitors can scramble up a sandy slope to the ridge, where they are privy to a sight usually reserved only for balloonists and

their passengers: looking down on a huge balloon as it rises from below, gliding up in profile until, finally, the basket appears with its passengers only a few feet away. Greetings are exchanged, and often the pilot is skillful enough to plop his aircraft down close enough to shake hands.

Most of the balloons proceed to fly out and around the borders of Red Rock State Park, which, with its contrasting layers of red, white, and pink sandstone, is as colorful as any canyon in Utah. With balloons above and below, up, down, and sideways, there is nothing else

quite like it anywhere in the world.

This year, the 31st annual festival will take flight December 2-4. To make the most of your adventure, get up early and be on the field before daybreak, when a trial balloon is sent aloft to test the winds in the rosy-fingered dawn. Shortly thereafter, the fleet of some 120 balloons takes to the skies—you don't want to miss a minute of it.

—Charles Mann

Free admission; fee for parking. Red Rock State Park, off N.M. 566; (505) 722-2228; www.redrockballoonrally.com



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