

## Hot-air Ballooning over Cappadocia



by Ir. Chin Mee Poon

**CAPPADOCIA** is a region measuring about 400km east-west and 250km north-south in central Anatolia, Turkey. And Turkey, as everyone knows, is the only country other than Russia that spans over two continents, namely, Asia and Europe.

The intercontinental boundary runs from the Black Sea in the north through the Bosphorus Strait to the Sea of Marmara and thence through the Dardanelles to the Aegean Sea in the west. Only about 3% of Turkey's total land area of 814,578sqkm is in Europe. The rest, *i.e.* the 97% that is in Asia, is known as Anatolia. Yet Turkey is often considered a European country. It even made an attempt to become a member of the European Union.

The name Cappadocia is an English adulteration of the Turkish name "Kapadokya", which means "land of well-bred horses".

Several volcanoes erupted about 30 million years ago, covering the Cappadocia region with ash and mud. These solidified over time to form a soft rock known as tuff. Agents of erosion, *i.e.* water, wind and temperature variations, then worked through the extremely slow process of carving out the bizarre geological features evident in Cappadocia today – table mountains, straight-sided red canyons, slender columns capped with a boulder of basalt, and forests of large conical rocks known as "fairy chimneys". Centuries of human habitation and activities have resulted in villages of rock-hewn houses and churches in the fairy chimneys as well as underground cities with a vast network of tunnels and chambers.

My wife and I arrived by bus at the village of Goreme located right in the heart of Cappadocia one evening in November last year. We got a double room with en-suite facilities in a fairy chimney of a hotel near the bus station. For the next three days, we used the hotel as our base to explore Cappadocia from the air, by bus, on foot and on motorcycle.

One of the best ways to appreciate the unique geological features of Cappadocia is by floating in the air suspended from a hot-air balloon. Cappadocia is reputedly one of the best places in the world to enjoy the experience of hot-air ballooning. It is not cheap though. A one-hour-plus ride in a basket suspended below a hot-air balloon will set you back by 125 euros.

Our airborne adventure started at 5:30 a.m. when a van from the balloon operator picked us up from our hotel and

took us to an office in an adjacent village. After signing an indemnity form and having a cup of hot coffee with biscuits, we were transferred together with other tourists to the launching pad in a secluded place. Ours was a large balloon and the basket, divided into five compartments with the central one reserved for the captain, took in 24 passengers. We shared a compartment with a couple from Hong Kong and two Japanese girls.

By turning on the gas burner to heat up the air in the balloon as and when required, the captain could control our height above ground, and by pulling one or another of several ropes hanging down from the balloon, he was able to rotate the balloon so that all of us in the basket could take turns to have an unobstructed view of certain features on the ground. However, the captain had no control over the direction and speed at which we were drifting through the air.

For one hour and 10 minutes, we had a most exhilarating and rewarding experience of surveying quite an extensive area of Cappadocia from a bird's eye-view at different heights. We saw the magic of light play among the fairy chimneys as the morning sun climbed over the distant mountain and cast its golden blanket of light and shadow over the earth. Some 50 balloons of varying colours and sizes were floating at different heights over Cappadocia. What a mesmerising sight!

I do not need a flight certificate to remind me of this experience. The aerial view of so many fairy chimneys and houses, a real-life fairyland, has already been indelibly engraved in my memory. ■

