

# Balloonist conjures up coffee, culture, and... kilts?

Story and top photo by Kelsey Seeger, Public Affairs

“Hmmm... It’s definitely not the waking up at 4:30 in the morning on weekends. It’s probably not the heavy lifting or the expense (of the hobby)... I’d have to say it’s the people,” said Joan Coffing, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ Albuquerque District Project Engineer, assigned to the Northern Area Office at Kirkland Air Force Base, N.M.

What is this hobby that would require someone to rise early, lift heavy objects and spend a decent amount of money just to participate?

Here’s a big hint. It involves two gigantic balloons, each with a big basket hanging from them, open skies, and thousands of tourists that flock to Albuquerque every October.

It is hot air ballooning, with the culture of it and its people keeping her waking up before the dawn. And although a hot air balloonist herself, she prefers to chase the balloon rather than fly in it.

“The balloons are beautiful and people love to watch them, but there is an entire culture that exists beneath the surface at a ballooning event. Most people don’t experience it unless they come out and crew or fly. We have competitions, tailgate parties, customs, ceremonies, clubs, and costumes,” Coffing said.

Coffing has been ballooning for the past ten years, and these balloons are not the kinds that are filled with helium. She, along with her husband Steve who is a commercial rated pilot, both own

a hot air balloon called Twist of Fate and are the co-owners of another hot air balloon named Sunset Rise. This makes



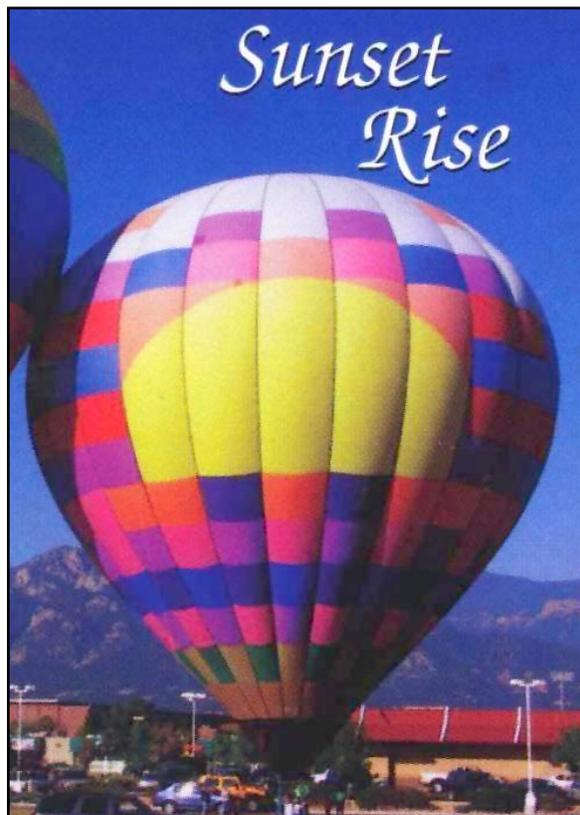
Sands, Socorro in New Mexico as well as El Paso and Plano in Texas/Juarez, Mexico. She has also flown in rallies in Chihuahua, Leon, and Guanajuato, Mexico. She has also repeatedly participated in the Albuquerque Balloon Fiesta, which always seems to turn out to be a memorable event for her every fall.

“Every Balloon Fiesta is incredible. The magnitude of the event is hard to fathom unless you crew for a balloon for the entire week. Trying to find places to launch and land, trying to compete in the flying events while juggling passenger, sponsors, crew, tailgating, and visitors, for nine days, all while waking up at four every morning and staying up till eleven or so on the nights when there are glows is pretty wild,” said Coffing.

“Balloonists and their crews are an incredibly diverse group of people. They come from all walks of life, have different educational backgrounds, different careers, different philosophies in life, but share this one love of ballooning,” said Coffing.

“We often hang out with a group who call themselves the Wicker Clan,” she said. “They do ballooning with a Celtic twist. They wear kilts for big events and do their post flight ceremonies in a nice brogue. They also have great tail gate parties.”

So while others sleep in on the weekends, Coffing is sipping coffee with people in kilts while chasing after hot air balloons, and apparently enjoying every single sleep deprived minute of it.



owning a balloon take on a whole new meaning.

She and her husband’s hobby have taken her to Los Lunas, Angel Fire, Raton, Deming, Elephant Butte, White

