



Floating With The Breeze over Tuscany. . .

By Gina Ruggiero (with permission and excerpts from Buddy Bombard Europe's website).

Dawn breaks over the quiet hills of Tuscany, still too early for even the church bells to ring. The air is calm. A small exclusive group is gathered in a Tuscan field peppered with mid summer wildflowers. Buddy Bombard's trademark balloons are spread across the dew-swept ground awaiting their breath of life for flight. The sturdy wicker gondolas lay on their sides soon to be upright with the glowing inflation of the balloons. Looking on with amazement are excited guests about to experience a bird's eye view of one the most famously scenic landscapes on earth--under the expert guidance of Buddy Bombard's Europe; the singular, 30 year old tour company and originator of this unique blend of --luxury—cultural—experiential--travel.

Meanwhile, I am walking through the narrow stone lined streets of nearby Siena. The sun is now rising. Everyone is scurrying to catch his or her first cappuccino of the day. They stare intensely at the ground as they walk glancing up only occasionally to exchange a friendly “giorno” with those passing by. But me, I feel as though I am a part of a secret club. I look up to the sky with great anticipation. I know that a large beautiful blue flowered mass of balloons will soon be floating gently over the ancient towers of the city at the skillful hands of the Bombard Pilots. This I know because I have had the wonderful fortune to join a Buddy Bombard trip and experience “floating with the breeze” over Tuscany.

On the day I joined the journey, we launched at dawn and drifted aloft ever so slowly rising like the sun itself. Buddy's efficient ground crew, four 'red-shirts', assigned to each balloon, waved as our pilots skillfully picked up the light breeze that would carry us over to Siena just a short distance away. As we came upon the town, the residents, recognizing the approach of Buddy's gorgeous balloons, came out to their terraces to take photos or to greet us with delighted shouts and well wishes. We all hollered back our best "buongiorno and arrivaderci!"



Guiding the balloon like a marksman, our pilot hovered directly in the center of the Piazza del Campo just long enough for us to snap our own fantastic photos of the famous square and of our fellow Bombard balloons floating past the Mangia Tower. We then glided quietly through this medieval painting of a town for an hour's exploration through the magnificent neighboring estates, vineyards and olive groves to our ideal landing field, about 10 miles from where we began.

The same crews who waved us off to our adventure followed our aerial path as they navigated the ancient twisting backcountry bi-ways of Tuscany. As good planning, radio communication with the pilots, and experience would have it, they had arrived at the field simultaneously as the baskets slowly descended, assisting in gentle, tethered landings.

While they packed up the balloons for the next day's outing, we all partook in the traditional post flight champagne toast and breakfast served on the portable picnic table adorned with a red-checked table cloth and fresh flowers. There we stood in the beautiful Tuscan field marveling in and exchanging impressions of the morning's adventure, and sharing our digital photographs that will be treasured for many years to come. It was only 9:30 a.m..



I went back to my language studies in Siena, and Buddy, with the rest of his guests, returned to Siena's 5-star Grand Hotel Continental, their luxurious base from where they further explored this magical city. And like members of a secret club, we all went about the rest of the day *floating on air*.