A tourist climbs into a hot air balloon as it readies to fly over temples in the ancient Myanmar city of Bagan. — AFP photos

Unpredictable winds are calmer though, the most iconic temples remain accessible to visitors. Local residents still flock here to pray before the colossal Buddha statues, many lit by bright beams of sunlight inside. And foreign tourists still arrive in droves. But once you take off in a balloon, you get a completely different experience, at once thrilling and existential.

The moment of takeoff was silent, and mesmerizing. Within seconds, our hot air balloon was floating above the tree-tops, gliding toward what Marco Polo called “one of the finest sights in the world” when he saw it 700 years ago: the ancient Myanmar city of Bagan. Below us, the baked brick spires of hundreds of 11th and 12th century Buddhist temples poked skyward through the purple red horizon of dawn, graceful and serene. When I spotted the giant golden dome of the Shwesandaw Pagoda, glistening like a jewel in the first rays of light, my heart skipped a beat.

I had just spent several days exploring three iconic monuments and pagodas, walking through their dark stone corridors, climbing their steep exterior steps. But peering at them like a jewel in the first rays of light, my heart skipped a beat.

But once you take off in a balloon, you get a completely different experience, at once thrilling and existential. Our pilot, a Belgian named Bart D’hooge who has flown here for nine years, described Bagan as “stunning ... it’s just stunning,” said the pilot, “but once you take off in a balloon, you get a completely different perspective, “he said. “It’s really gives you a bit of an idea of the size of a completely different perspective, “he said. “It’s really gives you a bit of an idea of the size of... mmm, the number of having grown steadily since the 1800s, when the military, which ruled for half a century, began opening the Southeast Asian nation up to the rest of the world in 1825. Despite the influx, authorities have capped the number of balloons permitted in the skies here at 21, for safety reasons. With an average a passenger capacity of eight to 10 on each balloon, space is limited and can sell out for that reason, it’s best to plan your trip well in advance. Bagan’s balloon flight season runs only from October to March, when winds are calmer and the weather is cooler and more predictable.

Cancalled flights are rare, but balloons do get grounded several times a year. On what was supposed to be a clear day in March when I was scheduled to fly, a thick blanket of white fog unexpectedly enveloped the entire city, even shutting down the airport. Fortunately, I was able to get a spot the next day. Flights are not cheap, averaging $320 to $380 US for a roughly 45-minute ride. But for those willing to pay, it’s a once-in-a-lifetime experience. A tourist takes a photo from a temple in the ancient Myanmar city of Bagan.

Srishti Kaur from India reacts as she hears being winner of Miss Teen Universe 2017 among other contestants from around the world in the annual beauty pageant in Managua. — AFP photos

The temples were built by a series of Burmese kings who ruled the region for roughly 250 years, until city was abruptly abandoned in the late 13th century for reasons that are not entirely clear. Although time and the elements have eroded many of the structures’ iconic exteriors, the buildings themselves are still largely intact. On Aug 24, 2016, a magnitude 6.8 earthquake shook central Myanmar, damaging at least 369 of them, according to the country’s Department of Archaeology. Some have been closed to the public fully or partially. Others are in various states of repair, covered in elaborate arrays of bamboo and wood scaffolding.

Winds are calmer overall though, the most iconic temples remain accessible to tourists. Local residents still flock here to pray before the colossal Buddha statues, many lit by bright beams of sunlight inside. And foreign tourists still arrive in droves. But once you take off in a balloon, you get a completely different experience, at once thrilling and existential. Our pilot, a Belgian named Bart D’hooge who has flown here for nine years, described Bagan as “stunning ... even if you see it just from the ground.”

“But once you take off in a balloon, you get a completely different perspective” he said. “It really gives you a bit of an idea of the size of the ancient kingdom” that flourished here a millennium and a half years ago. “I don’t think there are many places in the world that get to this point” he said.

A tourist takes a photo from a temple in the ancient Myanmar city of Bagan.