

Moran dreams of flying balloons over the Mara

AIMING FOR SKY

Nurse is up before dawn to practise his aerial skills, then heads for his clinic

BY BONIFACE MWANGI

The allure of flying has mesmerised man for centuries. Some spend their lives in pursuit of the freedom promised by the endless skies.

The flying bug bit Mr Jackson Njapit, a Maasai moran and clinical nurse, as he watched hot air balloons quietly soaring above the Maasai Mara plains.

For Mr Njapit, who was born and brought up in the Mara, the real spectacle is not the much hyped wildebeest migration but the sight of a soaring balloon.

He flies in the balloons regularly and even aspires to become the second Kenyan balloon pilot, then he will be "the flying moran".

Only one Kenyan has a balloon pilot's licence.

"Jackson is hopefully going to be the first Maasai balloon pilot," says Mr Andrew Peart, the chief pilot at Adventures Aloft, a hot air balloon company in the Mara.

With the help of Mr Peart, who is his close friend, Mr Njapit has been using his mornings to train as an apprentice in ballooning and the afternoons at his clinic.

"You have to wake up very early in the morning when it is still dark and sometimes raining," says the aspiring pilot.

"But the thrill of flying in the balloon makes it worth the effort."

Inside the balloon, the moran prefers his red shukas and a pair of tyre sandals (akala) to more conventional flying attire.

His first time inside a balloon was not easy for him. Although culturally he had been trained to confront lions in the jungle, Mr Njapit says he was scared.

"I recall it was a little windy, but I could feel sweat trickling down my brow. My legs were trembling," he recalls.

1.5m

Amount, in shillings, needed to train as a balloon pilot

Unfortunately, Mr Njapit cannot get the covered balloon pilot's licence locally because there is no balloon flying school in Kenya. The Kenya Civil Aviation Authority only gives licences for operating balloon services and carries out yearly inspection of balloons.

Therefore, until he saves enough money to train in the US, Australia, or Italy, this moran's desire to fly tourists' above the Mara plains must take a back seat.

Mr Peart says one needs around \$15,000 to \$20,000 (Sh1.2 to 1.5 million) to acquire the licence in the US.

Mr Njapit is not sure he will be able to



Flying a hot air balloon is the dream of Mr Jackson Njapit (inset). Photos/INTERNET and BONIFACE MWANGI

raise the money, and has turned to fellow morans for assistance.

"It would be a privilege and an honour for the entire community if he makes it. We have Maasai guides and drivers and now we are going to have a Maasai pilot," says Mr James Shimren.

With his people firmly behind him, Mr Njapit is determined to join California Balloon Excelsior in the US by June, and eventually set up a balloon flying school in Kenya. "It would be good to have a balloon training system in Kenya since it would help many people," he says.

Lack of training facilities and the huge capital needed to operate balloons has

kept the lucrative industry out of the reach of Kenyan investors. A trip in the balloons costs Sh35,000 an hour, and with one balloon carrying 12 people, it comes to Sh420,000 an hour.

Modern hot air balloons have two main parts, the envelope (or gas bag) and the basket, which carries passengers. A hydrocarbon gas burner attached to the basket provides the air that lifts the balloon.

Adjusting the burning rate of the gas controls the rise of the balloon, while a rope attached to a valve at the top of the balloon controls its descent.

The floating contraptions can rise up to 55 kilometres into the sky.