Rides of your life

From the global phenomenon of Burning Man to some of the quirkiest festivals in the US, Nevada knows how to put on a show. ***Brian Thacker*** goes 'ride or die' at two of them.

A camel walked into a bar. No, really. I was propped up at the bar in the Bucket of Blood Saloon when a grunting camel moseyed past behind me. I had ducked in for a large margarita to settle my nerves after I'd just been thrown off an ostrich and landed in zebra poo.

Hang on, I probably should back up a bit to explain. I'm at the 66th International Camel & Ostrich Races, a three-day event at which adults race camels, ostriches, and zebras – and children chase emus and chickens. It all takes place in Nevada's Virginia City, a Disneyesque slice of the Old West complete with wooden boardwalks, historic saloons, abandoned silver mines and folks wandering around dressed in uncomfortably scratchy clothes of yore.

THE SILLY

If the premise of a camel and ostrich race sounds like a joke, that's because it started as one. In 1959, the *Territorial Enterprise* editor published a fake story about upcoming camel races, echoing former editor Mark Twain's (yes, that Mark Twain) tradition of hoax articles. The *San Francisco Chronicle* ran the story without realising it was a hoax, then to save face, borrowed some camels the next year from the San Francisco Zoo and took them to Virginia City to race them.

As the morning sun turned the surrounding burnt orange hills into an outrageous orange, I made my way to the Virginia City Fairgrounds to meet my camel. I'd signed up to race a camel, but when one of the animal handlers asked if anyone wanted to ride an ostrich, I threw up my hand. Anyone can race a camel, I thought, because here you can. For 500 bucks you get a 'bucket list' ride and two VIP bleachers seats. One of those riders was Alexis from California, who was decked out in a tight-fitting silver-sequined suit, white cowboy hat and a 'BRIDE TO BE' sash.

We all gathered around for a safety brief from Joe Hedrick, former rodeo clown and now owner of Hedrick's Exotic Animal Farm in Kansas. "You could be hurt, you could get broken bones, you could be crapped on and you could be killed." So, nothing to worry about then. Those who were racing camels got detailed instructions, while riding an ostrich pretty much just boiled down to… hold on for dear life.

Before each race the riders were introduced to the crowd by Joe, who was also the MC. "Have you ridden an ostrich before?" he asked me. "I'm from Australia," I smiled. "We ride emus to school."

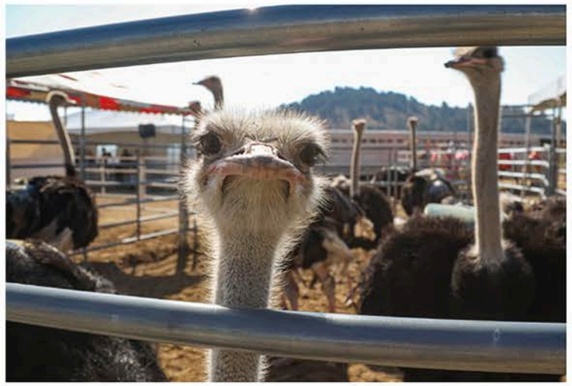
My ostrich (I didn't catch his name) was champing at the bit to get out of the barriers and, when the First Call finished and the gates opened, he was off like a Kentucky Derby thoroughbred. I blurted out a confident yee-haw, but I lasted all of 10 seconds before I was unceremoniously thrown off into the dust and on top of some zebra poo. I also came close to losing the shirt off my back. And no, I didn't bet on the race; I tore a huge hole in the back of my shirt when I landed. But hey, at least I was the last one to fall off their ostrich.

So, back to that camel in the bar. It's a long-standing tradition for one of the racing camels to be led into an old-time saloon at noon. I just hoped he could handle his drink – he went into four of them.

THE SUBLIME

I'm more than aware that the only thing keeping us aloft above the Earth is the luridly coloured balloon billowing above the rattan easter basket that three of us are squished into. But, more worryingly, having two large cups of tea at the early morning VIP breakfast was not a good idea; there isn't much room onboard for a toilet.

From an ostrich race one day to a balloon race the next – where falling off would give me more than a bruised bottom. I'm at the 44th Great Reno Balloon Race, the world's largest free hot-air ballooning event where over 100 balloons take to the skies from a park only a few kilometres north of the city of Reno.



The morning had begun ridiculously early where, half-asleep, I had to hop-scotch through a sea of pyjama-clad families spread out on picnic rugs in the dark to get to the Super Glow Show. This unique spectacular is a line of hot air balloons that light up in sync to music; in this case the stirring soundtrack from *Chariots of Fire* and a classic bluegrass song that is forever connected to scary rednecks, 'Dueling Banjos'.

But I wasn't there to just watch balloons. When the sun crept up over the horizon, I made my way through a colour riot patchwork of deflated balloons to meet my pilot, Jim Abell from California, for my first-ever balloon ride. Abell had been a pilot for United Airlines for 30 years, so I was confident he knew up from down. "What we say in ballooning is the only thing you know for sure is nothing stays the same," he told me. "But that's what I love about it. You never know where you're gonna end up."

I soon forgot my almost bursting bladder as we rose quickly and swept up above a lunaesque landscape splashed pink by the rising sun, while the city of Reno gleamed gold in the distance. Nevada's endless desert landscape looked like molten caramel under impossibly azure skies. Multi-coloured balloons (and a large Darth Vader head) drifted above and below us.

One of the first things that hits you is the silence. I'm used to the constant noise of airborne engines or blades, but here it's just the raw and exhilarating feeling of floating in the fresh open air, with only the intermittent whooshes of liquid propane that momentarily break the silence and warm your face.

High tech obviously hadn't reached the ballooning world yet, though; to test the wind speed and direction Jim squirted some shaving cream out from the basket. "I think we'll land over there somewhere," Abell said, pointing in a vague direction. That somewhere was a rough scrubby hill next to a cul-de-sac in the suburbs of Reno.

As residents videoed us lofty intruders, we crashed sideways into thick shrubs before being dragged by Abell's support crew safely to the middle of the cul-de-sac.

So, that's two crashes in two days. I think I'll skip a biplane ride at the Reno Air Races.

TRAVEL FACTS

GETTING THERE
Most major US airlines fly from Los Angeles to Reno. From there it's a 40-minute drive to Virginia City.

STAYING THERE
Virginia City: The Silverland Inn is a short walk from the centre of town.
silverlandinn.com
Reno: The swanky Best Bet Motor Lodge is a refurbished '50s motel.
bestbetmotorlodge.com

FURTHER INFORMATION
Both events usually take place the first weekend after Labor Day (early September).
visitvirginiacitynv.com
renoballoon.com
travelnevada.com

OPENING PAGE: The Great Reno Balloon Race © Brandon Bourdages/Shutterstock LEFT: Lofty views CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ostrich riding is part of the fun; Camel racing is a Nevada tradition; Camels visit saloons at noon. Images on this page © raisethestakeseditions.com