

## Into the Wild Blue Yonder

In the skies over Anderson, SkyScapes of America gives passengers high-altitude thrills. BY NANCY DORMAN-HICKSON



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Detail, Mrs. Robert Brown, in *David Reed Lambert*, 2011 by Thomas Sully  
(American, 1763–1872). Oil on canvas. Bequest of Mrs. Lilla Lambert Jones.

In dim light just before dawn, Steve and Connie Lambert drive into a hilly green pasture near Anderson. Their large van and trailer mark the spot for hot-air balloon riders to embark on an aerial adventure with SkyScapes of America.

The Lamberts begin their pre-flight routine with the ease of veterans. As the sun inches over the horizon to light the grassy field, they unpack a huge multicolored balloon and its large basket. Turning in the direction of a gentle breeze, Steve observes it's a picture-perfect day for flying over the Upstate.

**Flying High** "From the first day I was here, I was in love with Ander-

son," says Florida native Steve, one of about 5,000 balloon pilots in the country. "It's one of the best areas I've flown." Seasonal changes and scenic rolling hills make the area ideal for ballooning.

"People here are balloon friendly," adds Connie. "They don't mind us flying over, launching from, or landing on their property."

Steve likes to take off in the wee hours for a reason: "It's the calmest time of day," he explains. Eyeing a rising sun, he's glad to see his passengers drive up. Bob Fries and Deborah Ponder, celebrating their third anniversary, arrive with friends Doug and Jacque Davison, who introduced the happy couple.

"We had a balloon theme at our

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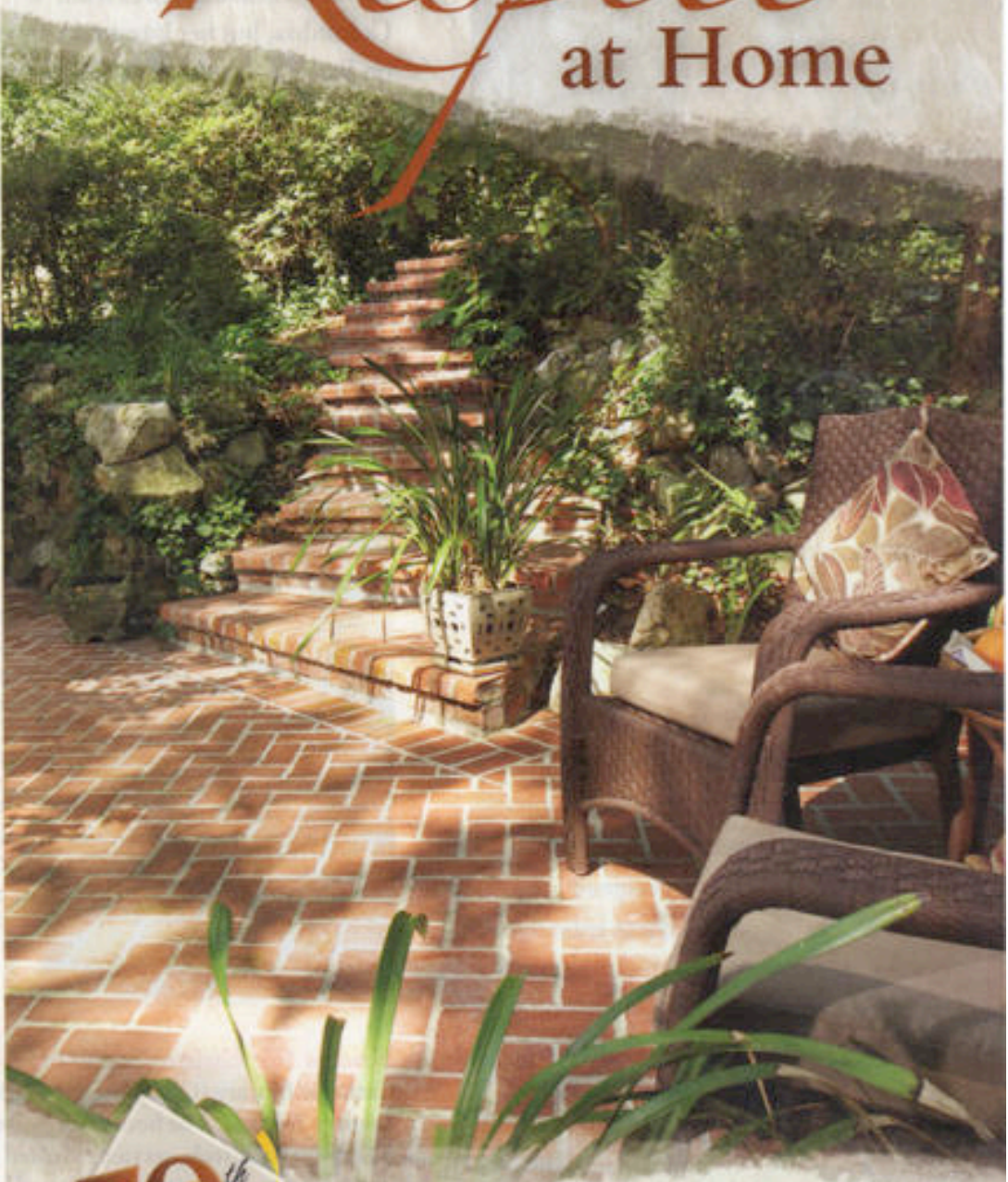
Balloons sail over Simpsonville during Freedom Weekend Aloft, May 22-25. SkyScapes joins this hot-air balloon extravaganza with sunrise and sunset flights, available for \$175 per person. For reservations contact Connie Lambert at (864) 221-0552. Tethered balloon ride tickets (\$15 adults, \$10 ages 12 and under) are sold on the launch field during the festival. For information about the festival, visit [www.freedomweekend.org](http://www.freedomweekend.org), or call (864) 399-9481.



I was fine," says formerly nervous Jacque. "It's like floating rather than flying."

Today's adventure vindicates the missed wedding day flight. "Steve didn't think that was the direction that we would go, so it was just opportune that we went over the church where we were married," Deborah says. Steve grins and shrugs as he pops the cork on a celebratory bottle of Champagne. Sometimes Mother Nature sprinkles a bit of magic in her winds of whimsy. ●

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wedding reception and had the Lamberts there with their big balloon, intending that we'd fly off into the sunset," Bob explains. But, Deborah adds, "It was one of those it-might-come-up-a-thunderstorm days." Foiled by weather, SkyScapes offered tethered rides for the guests instead.

**Off We Go** Now both couples eagerly anticipate their first free flight. Only Jacque shows any nervousness. "I expect to enjoy it," she says gamely as the four climb into the basket. Steve gives them a few pointers, including advice about not videotaping the entire flight, lest they miss the actual experience. Then he hits the burner, and the billowing balloon begins to rise.

As crew chief, Connie follows the flight visually from the ground, with occasional radio guidance from Steve. At landing, she picks up the passengers and helps pack away the balloon.

As the voyagers enjoy an aerial view of Anderson County, Steve uses propane burners to guide the vessel up and down, but wind current dictates the flight path. A pilot must know the terrain and potential landing places, no matter which way the wind blows.

Connie keeps the balloon in sight until a bend in the road prevents her from spying its landing. One quick radio call later and she pulls the van into a pasture where Steve grounded the balloon with its look-at-me colors upright to help her find it.

**Getting to the Church** The passengers pop out of the basket, eager to share the experience. "After we took off,

After the flight, Steve offers a toast to his passengers.



"From the first day I was here, I was in **love** with Anderson. It's one of the **best** flying areas I've **ever** flown."

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