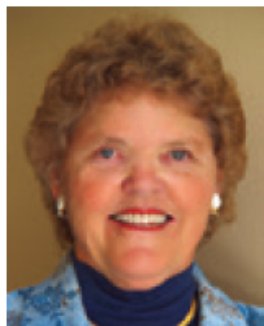




Golden Gate Bridge



By Donna Judd
California

“Don’t just shoot from eye level,” we photographers are often reminded. For the ultimate change in perspective, join photographers who have been shooting from the air since 1858, when the oldest known aerial photograph was taken from a hot air balloon over Paris.

To date, over 700 risk-takers have made a \$250,000 deposit to Virgin Galactic, hoping to be one of its first space tourists. Fortunately, you have numerous other options, from drones to helicopters. This photographer has shot from commercial airplanes, small planes, helicopters, hot air balloons, gliders, Ferris wheels, mountain tops, and the world’s tallest building. Each location has its own pleasures, whether it’s the ever-changing scenery, sunsets above the clouds, or enthralling patterns created with shadows, lines, color and light.

Patterns work especially well when you have no horizon line in your photo. Look for repetitive shape, or patterns where one element breaks out of the mold. It might be agricultural fields, stands of trees, river tributaries, sand patterns caused by tides or winds, or any number of other surprises, such as when this photographer, bored with drab, wintery views over northern Europe, suddenly

realized she could shoot the beautiful ice-crystal patterns that had formed between her window’s double panes.

Aerial photography can be expensive, but we can all photograph from commercial flights at no extra cost. Book a window seat in front of the wing. Getting stuck behind the wing can leave you photographing through engine exhaust toward a would-be-fabulous view partially blocked by that shiny wing. Try for the non-sunny side. (Check seatguru.com)

Polarizing lens might seem advisable due to reflections, but may be a problem since many airplane windows have a protective coating that will produce unwanted wavy, colored lines. You just have to try different positions and angles to find a clear view. Wearing a dark shirt or blouse also helps reduce reflections, so channel Johnny Cash.

Helicopter rides are a great way to get aerial views over scenic natural wonders. Either side of the aircraft will normally be suitable, because pilots are trained to circle so that everyone gets to photograph the famous falls, canyon, or coastline. Pilots usually assign seating based on weight, so special requests carry no weight.



Dubai and beyond

This photographer knows the pain of ending up in the middle seat while photographing Hawaii's Waimea Canyon. The child on my left leaned his head against the window and slept blissfully through the entire flight. Reason enough for the wealthy, dedicated photographer to choose a solo ride or a helicopter with the door removed.

Small, fixed-wing planes are less expensive than helicopters and often available through flight schools or aircraft clubs at smaller airports. Choose a high-winged model such as a Cessna 185 for unobstructed views, and try partially opening the window rather than shooting through the Plexiglas™.

For both small craft planes and helicopters, early morning is usually your best chance for a calm, clear day; the earlier the better for strong shadows and dramatic lighting. Shoot RAW preferably, with a low ISO, and white balance set on automatic or cloudy. Although usually less of an issue in a plane, don't brace yourself against a helicopter to stabilize your camera, due to engine vibration. Having two cameras, a wide angle and a mid-range telephoto, works nicely. Finally, if needed, bring earplugs and Dramamine.

Hot air ballooning is a considerably different experience, one actually easier on the photographer, with no window seat to grab and



Helicopter glacier run



From the Ferris Wheel

no reflection to worry about. It is easy to join a “golden hour” sunrise flight, since balloons need calm winds to operate effectively, and the early morning hours are preferable, before the earth’s surface heats up. The ride is smooth, propelled by the occasional blast of propane. You fly low enough to shoot not just landscapes, but everything from galloping giraffes to startled Chinese farmers working in their fields.

California close-up



Mud abstract

Balloons are somewhat at the mercy of the wind. This photographer once convinced a balloonist near Guilin, China, to fly over our riverside resort, wanting shots of rafters going down the river. The resort was in the opposite direction from the prevailing wind, his planned route. The search for opposing winds took us up so high that we spent most of the hour wrapped in dreary, grey clouds. And freezing!

Shooting from skyscrapers often provides photographers a higher perspective than balloons, helicopters, gliders or drones. At 2,723 feet, Dubai’s Burj Khalifa holds the current title of “world’s tallest building.” Three different elevators zip you to the 124th floor observation deck at two floors per second! You photograph through open gaps created so you are not forced to shoot through the thick glass. It’s exciting to look down on the ocean, the world’s largest swimming pool, a maze of freeways, skyscrapers, and new construction spreading into the desert.

Be creative; consider any structure that gives you height, such as a Ferris wheel. Following the commercial success of the 443-foot London Eye, the world’s tallest when it opened in 2000, Ferris wheels have exploded in popularity. Currently, the champion is Las Vegas’s 550-foot High Roller, followed by giants in Singapore and Nanchang, China.

In just a few short years, drones have revolutionized aerial photography. We’ve all seen stunning landscape, animal, and architectural shots that were essentially impossible to achieve only a few years ago.

Getting a camera into the air via a drone is adventurous and fun. Before jumping in, educate yourself on local and federal drone regulations, for example, the need to fly below 400 feet and register your drone with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), as over 406,000 owners have done. And, of course, stay away from airplanes, crowds, military facilities and emergency situations. (Thoughtless drones operators interfered with firefighting aircrafts about 25 times last year, usually preventing helicopters from dropping water on wildfires, a felony offense.)



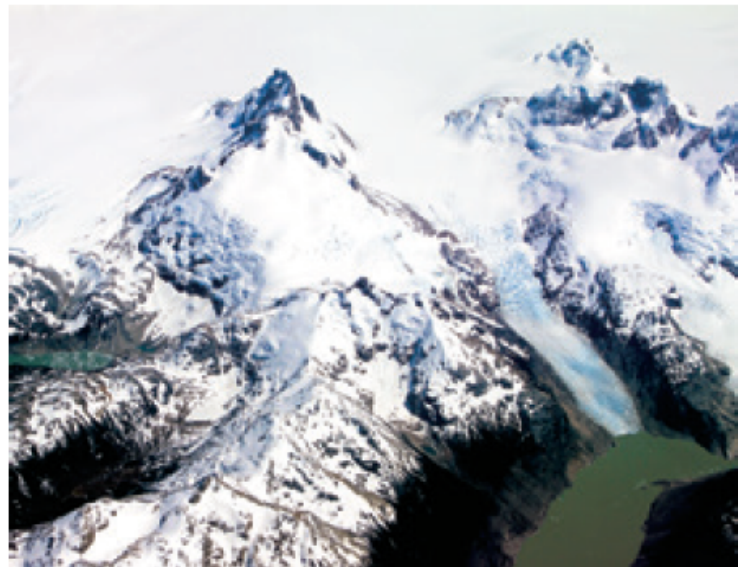
Rural China

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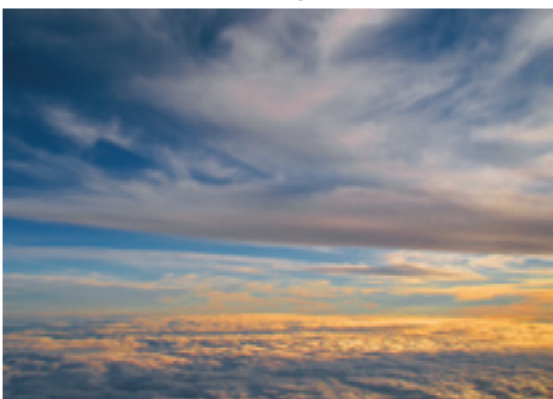
The field is still young and changing rapidly, so research online forums and sources like myfirstdrone.com before making your choice. Since crashes do happen, some experts suggest starting with an inexpensive drone. They're available for under \$50, with a two megapixel camera. Others note that more expensive units, in the \$700 and up range, are stabilized and easier to control.

A first-class option would be DJI's Phantom 4, with features such as obstacle avoidance, auto tracking, tap-to-fly (tapping on an iPad running the DJI Go piloting app, rather than using joysticks) which allow even total beginners to quickly and safely operate their drone, while capturing PSA-quality shots via 4K video or 12-megapixel photo. The first-class price tag is \$1,399.

It is time to join the constantly evolving world of ariel photography! In the end, it doesn't matter how you give your favorite camera an aerial perspective, just as long as you do, for, as Amelia Earhart said, "You haven't seen a tree until you've seen its shadow from the sky." ■



Chilian Andes



Clouds



Watery wonderland