

Flight of the Phoenix

Ratón's balloon rally rises from the ashes of the Track Fire.

WHEN TWO-DOZEN BIG, bright balloons rise over Ratón on the 4th of July, it'll be a 20th anniversary that almost didn't fly. The 2011 Track Fire burned 27,000 acres along the town's northern edge, abruptly shutting down Ratón's annual balloon rally when the launch site was commandeered as a staging center for firefighting crews. Grounded, the rally didn't return in 2012. But last year, race director Christine Valentini and founding volunteer Kathy McQueary mobilized the city's resources and triumphantly relaunched the International Santa Fe Trail Balloon Rally.

Sponsored by Ratón MainStreet, this year's festive July 4-6 All American Weekend on the Santa Fe Trail features a boisterous downtown parade ending at Ripley Park, site of the Arts & Crafts & Fun Fair that includes live music from the gazebo Friday and Saturday. Other weekend events include a holiday production at Ratón's magnificent Shuler Theater, a balloon-themed art show at the city's Old Pass Gallery, and a fireworks extravaganza at dusk on the 4th. The downtown fireworks will light the sky beyond the centerfield fence from Gabriele Field after the Raton Osos play the Trinidad Triggers in a Pecos League professional baseball game starting at 6 p.m.

The star of the show all three days, though, is the balloon rally at La Mesa Airfield on the southwest edge of town. A pancake breakfast begins each morning at 5:30, accompanied by a DJ/announcer who will broadcast each morning's pilots' meeting at 6:15. As soon as the sunrise breezes settle after

6:30, balloonmeister Royce Miller will signal the mass ascension of this year's 24 invited pilots and their balloons.

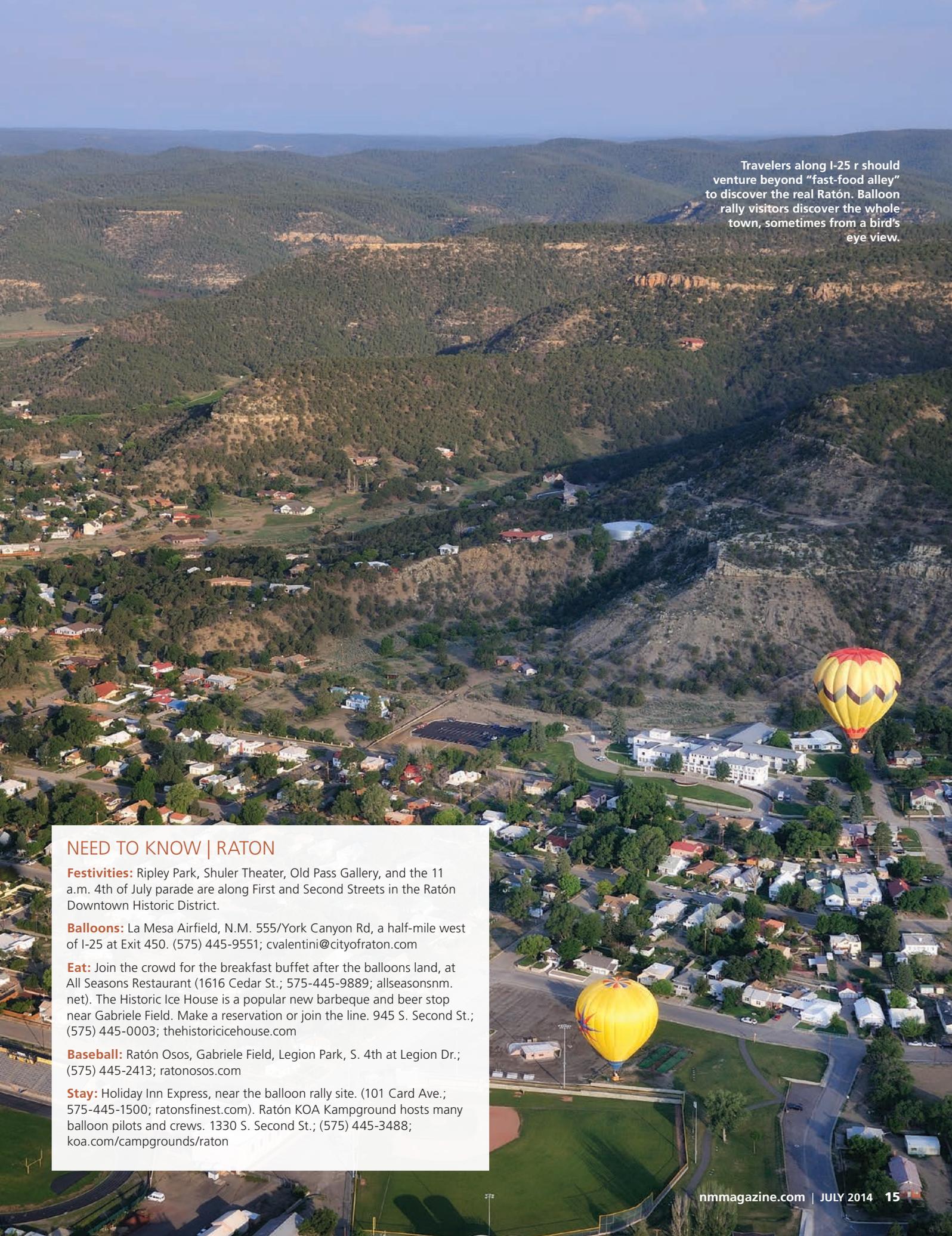
Pilots love Ratón for the same reasons they love Albuquerque: beautiful vistas, mesas, and mountains with the unique "box effect" that those produce. Royce Miller's hometown of Guymon, Oklahoma, is more typical: When he takes his Green Hornet balloon up at Guymon, it blows straight out of town. In Ratón pilots can often control their paths by changing altitude, taking advantage of crosswinds produced by the mountains that tightly hug the town.

Ratón's rally began in 1994 with an 18-year-old's wish. Californian Jarrod Giacomo had multiple sclerosis but dreamed of floating above the earth in a hot air balloon. The best his family could find for him in California was a tethered ride for \$400.

Giacomo spent the summers with his grandmother in Ratón where his uncle, Chuck Henry, arranged a balloon ride for him with his Albuquerque pilot friend, Bruce Hale. Giacomo was unable to travel to Albuquerque so Hale brought his balloon to Ratón.

"Jarrod got his ride that lasted almost two hours," *Balloon Life* reported three years later. "Bruce and his crew had such a great time in Ratón with flying and fishing and hospitality that they decided to do an annual event. Thus the Santa Fe Trail Balloon Rally was born."

Triumphantly arisen from the ashes of the Track Fire, this year's balloon rally is a great reason to beat the sunrise to Ratón for the 4th of July weekend.



Travelers along I-25 should venture beyond “fast-food alley” to discover the real Raton. Balloon rally visitors discover the whole town, sometimes from a bird’s eye view.

NEED TO KNOW | RATON

Festivities: Ripley Park, Shuler Theater, Old Pass Gallery, and the 11 a.m. 4th of July parade are along First and Second Streets in the Raton Downtown Historic District.

Balloons: La Mesa Airfield, N.M. 555/York Canyon Rd, a half-mile west of I-25 at Exit 450. (575) 445-9551; cvalentini@cityofraton.com

Eat: Join the crowd for the breakfast buffet after the balloons land, at All Seasons Restaurant (1616 Cedar St.; 575-445-9889; allseasonsnm.net). The Historic Ice House is a popular new barbeque and beer stop near Gabriele Field. Make a reservation or join the line. 945 S. Second St.; (575) 445-0003; thehistoricicehouse.com

Baseball: Raton Osos, Gabriele Field, Legion Park, S. 4th at Legion Dr.; (575) 445-2413; ratonosos.com

Stay: Holiday Inn Express, near the balloon rally site. (101 Card Ave.; 575-445-1500; ratonsfinest.com). Raton KOA Kampground hosts many balloon pilots and crews. 1330 S. Second St.; (575) 445-3488; koa.com/campgrounds/raton