

canopy

zip line tours

BY AMY FERRARA SMITH



photos by www.ebicanopytours.com

When Taylor Hensen set out on a journalistic venture to explore the canopy zip line tour at Scream Time Zipline in Boone, NC, he didn't expect to return three days later to fill out an application for employment. But like so many other zip line adventure seekers, he got hooked.

"My passion for extreme excitement surpasses my fear, and, of course, knowing that the line will hold up to six Jeep Grand Cherokees doesn't hurt," wrote Hensen of his first experience on the zip line. His account was published in the winter/spring 2008 issue of *Carolina Mountain Life*. "A running start – my feet are off the ground. My heart is pounding and I am soaring across the valley seventy feet above the ground with miles and miles of mountains to my left. I can't help but let it out. WOOHOO!"

In this sport of suspension, participants glide along a zip line cable that is hung like a clothesline under a canopy of trees. While

their bottoms are anchored into a harness clipped to the cable, their limbs dangle as high as 200 feet above the ground.

"It's for the outdoor enthusiasts who want to have the thrill of adventure, but who don't want to exert a lot of energy to achieve it," said Steve Gustafson, owner of Experience Based Learning, Inc. While many South American countries have utilized zip lines for years, the Illinois-based company is the original installer of zip line canopy tours in the United States.

"It's fun to do this job," he continued. "Every morning I can't wait to go to work."

"It's incredible," said Monie McCoury, tour operator and one of the owners of Scream Time Zipline. "It's freedom. Camaraderie. Great team-building." The regular tour's two-and-half-hour course brings participants along six zip lines, the shortest being longer than a football field. The Super Zip trip lets clients glide for almost one-half of a mile.

"On the Super Zip with the right weather conditions and a slight tail wind, participants can clock in 65 or 70 miles per hour," said McCoury.

While clients normally weigh between 38 and 290 pounds, there has been one exception. A 15-month old baby harnessed to an adult like an Indian papoose zipped over the trees. Although babies aren't typical clients for the courses, Gustafson has seen zip line participants on various zip line canopy tours as young as and as old as 92. Some courses also incorporate physical challenges between lines, yet most of the canopy tours have their clients simply zip from one station to the next, letting the cable do the work.

"I'm a Toys R' Us kid. I don't want to grow up," McCoury said of his passion for the zip line. "This is the closest thing to flying."

Closer to home, Historic Banning Mills Country Inn, Retreat and Conservation

Center in Whitesburg, GA and 45 minutes from the Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, offers one of the longest and highest zip line courses in the world.

“It’s a great vacation,” said Donna Holder, co-owner of Banning Mills with her husband, Michael Holder. “With the gas prices so high, you don’t have to go to South America anymore for a zip line tour. You can go right here in the U.S.” In addition to the two miles of zip lines and cable bridges, the Holders have added a new course to the program this fall. Eagles Flight is a 2,000-foot zip line attached to one of the world’s highest timber towers, comparable to stepping off a 29-story building.

“We don’t push anybody (to do the courses),” continued Donna. “It’s a challenge by choice.” There are some restrictions, however. Participants must be at least 10 years old and weigh between 100 and 285 pounds. “If you can climb two 60-foot towers and are able to walk one-half mile, you can do it,” said Donna.

Those visitors who do not meet these requirements can still savor the green landscape with other outdoor recreation activities on the premises, such as a swimming pool, tennis courts, sand volleyball, hiking trails and an 18-hole putting green. If mom wants to zip and dad wants to relax (or the other way around), there is also a spa on site.



photos by www.eblcanopytours.com

Two local New Orleans families headed out west this past July to Spicewood, TX, just outside of Austin, to experience a zip line at Cypress Valley Canopy Tours.

Hanging from the cable, Sal Calcagno flew over the trees along with his wife, Denise, sister-in-law Deborah Bradbury, and two nieces, thirteen-year-old Jordan and sixteen-year-old Kelsey. “I’ve never done anything like that before,” said Calcagno of the experience. “It’s really pretty. You go in the forest through Cypress trees.”



photos by www.eblcanopytours.com

Calcagno credits his niece Kelsey for organizing the zip line experience during their family vacation to the Austin and San Antonio areas. “The view was from way up high, and you could see everything down below,” said Kelsey, a junior at Cabrini High School. “You were literally on top of the trees.”

Before they began on the zip line, Kelsey said that the guides had them practice on a four-foot high zip line. “They told us the three rules before we did the practice line: One, only the tour guides will fool with the equipment; two, always put your hand behind to break, not in front; three, never take both hands off. It was funny because my mom broke rules two and three on the first try. The tour guides said no one ever did that before and they were going to hang her picture on the wall as the ‘rule breaker,’” she said. “The whole thing was amazing and we plan to go back.”

On the canopy tour, participants such as the Calcagnos and Bradburys zoom over bald cypress trees and cross sky bridges in one and a half hours. If they complete this course and are eager for another test, they can sign up for the canopy challenge, a two hour course with longer zip lines and a narrower sky bridge with wider gaps between the wooden planks. The canopy

challenge course also leads participants to a grove of trees, where they choose between three levels of trails to conquer.

For the early risers, Cypress Valley also offers a 2-3 hour sunrise birding tour. On this quest, a wildlife biologist leads a group on a canopy tour at the start of the day, taking time to stop and listen to the songs of birds.

While other countries, such as Costa Rica and Mexico, have been offering zip line canopy tours for years, it is a new chapter in the story of American adventures. And for some participants, it is also the beginning of a renewed life.

“One couple,” said Gustafson, “even renewed their vows during the zip tour.”

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Experienced Based Learning Zip Lines Canopy Tours Division

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