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Hang out, fly through the treetops

LINCOLN - While in the Army, Jerry Ortkiese jumped out of planes. The Lincoln motel owner wasn't skydiving in Woodstock, instead launching himself from towering treetop platforms 75 feet off the ground and riding a steel cable like a modern-day Tarzan zipping from tree to tree.

"This is right up there," said Ortkiese, a smile beaming. "This is basically how you learn to jump out of a plane."

Ortkiese was one of a group of five who morphed from businessman to treetop flier during a two-hour tour of the new zip-line course offered through Alpine Adventures in Lincoln. Opened Labor Day, the Zip-line Treetop Eco-Tour features seven zip-lines and three bridges where thrill-seekers move through the air while harnessed to the cables, flying through the trees and stepping gingerly along rope bridges high off the ground.

The zip lines, located on Barron Mountain in Woodstock, a short drive from Lincoln, progress in height, length and difficulty, and range from 100 to 700 feet long.

Plans call for the course to be open year-round, with only weekend operations during certain times of the year. It is billed as the only one of its kind in New England and one of three in the contiguous United States.

Engineered by a Baltimore firm, a series of guides along the flight path are there to not only become your new best friend while you are in their care, but also are there for safety and confidence-building, as not everyone flies through the air with the greatest of ease. Nerves can definitely make an appearance.

Fliers are outfitted with a harness, lanyards, carabiners, a helmet and pulley. Weight is a factor in flight – it influences speed – and everyone weighs in with gear. There are a few no's: no sharp objects in pockets, no open-toe shoes, no loose jewelry, no one with heart, neck or back problems. Following the drive to the dirt-road tree village, fliers are ferried in a six-wheel-drive, open-top, vintage military vehicle to the base. A blend of Ewok village and Indiana Jones, the treetop challenge begins with a walk across netted bridges and then a belayed zip down to the ground.

Slowly, fliers are introduced to treetop life. Before becoming airborne, co-owner Randy Farwell offers sage advice: "Pay attention and don't mess with your gear."

After that, everything is up in the air.

Moving under the canopy of trees high above precious terra firma immediately kicks you out of your comfort zone and into an untested stratosphere. Taking those first nervous steps into the unknown can take forever – in reality, it's seconds – as trepidation and adrenaline compete for attention. Inner demons and angels banter about in the mind's arena, but it is the angels ultimately winning with rewards of flights without wings.

In the trees, hang out and hang on. Go ape, but don't monkey around.

Do you have vertigo? This isn't for you.

It's a rush.

At each station, guides become gods. They check you before you launch to make sure everything is safe and are there to grab you onto the platform, making like a linebacker grabbing a 200 pound running back hurtling through the air at 40 miles per hour. They are there to give you secure footing on small stepladders before reaching the platform.

Zip away from one platform, another is at the next ready to catch and hook, securing every flier to a cable fitted around the tree. Never been a tree hugger? Baby, those branches are adorable and comfortable after the maiden flight.

While zipping, fliers can make like a ball, knees raised, and increase speed. Bigger fliers – once they realize they can actually let go of the lanyards – can make like a starfish to slow down. Turning? Easily adjust the carabiner in the direction of the turn to straighten out.

Lon and Nancy Henderson, innkeepers from Sugar Hill, were hanging out in the trees, comfortably moving along.

"Each platform was different," said Nancy. "There was a progression in skill and psychology. This was very well-designed. You couldn't start with number seven (the last one)."

Ah, number seven. By the time the last zipline is reached, and a rope bridge without nets over 60 feet off the ground is crossed, the longest and most exhilarating ride presents itself.

"In a word, unbelievable," said Woodstock's Paul Turcotte. "This isn't something you do every day."
