

Treetop Fliers

Riders beat the fear factor for the thrill of the zipline

By Tom Long, Boston Globe Correspondent | September 24, 2006

LINCOLN, N.H. -- Am I really going to do this? That's what I wondered as I stood on a wooden platform while harnessed to a cable 50 feet up in a pine tree.

Before me stretched a gorgeous view of the Pemigewasset Valley and the White Mountains beyond, but fear had narrowed my focus to the cable at my feet dropping at an impossibly steep angle down Barron Mountain.

"Did I tell you I'm afraid of heights?" I asked Al Guilbeault, director of operations at Alpine Adventures and my guide through a new hands-on attraction called a Zipline Treetop Adventure.

"There's no shame in that, it's a defense mechanism," he said.

Maybe it was machismo, or the gleeful exuberance of the four young local women also on the tour, but defense mechanism be damned! I took a step off the platform and slid down the mountain at treetop level, my heart thumping so loudly it nearly drowned out the whir of the pulley above my head.

One hundred feet below I came gently to rest in the welcoming arms of a helmeted guide.

So far so good.

Alpine Adventures opened the zipline treetop cable system in late August. As Guilbeault explained, ziplines were developed by biologists, who set up a cable and pulley system in a Costa Rican rain forest so they could study wildlife in the jungle canopy. The technology has been adapted for thrill-seekers and there are now three or four zipline courses in the United States. Guilbeault says the zipline in Lincoln is the first in the Northeast.

The course descends a half mile with seven lines connected by a series of platforms, walkways, and a rope bridge.

"It's 'Fear Factor' stuff. You could call it an extreme eco tour, or thrill-seeker ride," said Corey Beaudry, a guide at the Alpine Adventures headquarters in a storefront on Main Street, where the tour begins.

The headquarters has the ambience of a rustic backwoods cabin with a stuffed bear looming in one corner and helmets and rock-climbing gear hanging from racks on the walls.

As we tugged on our helmets and harnesses I met Justin and Liane Joly, a young couple from West Warwick, R.I., who were celebrating their first wedding anniversary.

“You look nervous,” I said to Justin.

“I’m terrified,” he said. “She’s the adventurous one.”

The laughter of the other four women expressed their unadulterated excitement at the prospect of riding the zipline.

Elvis Presley singing “All Shook Up” blared from the stereo as we hopped into an open-sided six-wheel-drive Swiss Army transport truck for the 10-minute ride up the mountain.

As my helmeted head bounced off the roof of the truck, I was having my doubts. If the look in his eyes was any indication, Justin Joly was too.

After we descended from the truck and climbed up a ramp and a series of bridges to the first drop, Guilbeault explained that the cables can hold up to 17,000 pounds and the carabiners and harnesses can hold up to 5,000 pounds.

And thus began a three-hour trip from fear to exaltation, at least for some of us. The young women were fearless and hooted, hollered, and twisted on their harnesses each time they dropped.

It’s worth noting that the high-altitude outing calls for no special skill or strength. That makes it the perfect adventure for couch potatoes like me.

So there I was at the first zipline, where your speed is controlled by a drag line held by a guide. During the next six drops, gravity controls your speed. Safety comes first. Even when you’re standing on a platform, you’re fastened to a cable by a safety line.

“Wait until you see the last one,” said Guilbeault. “It’s great. You drop almost like a free fall before the cable takes hold.”

He explained we might reach speeds of 35 miles per hour on the descent and that there was an escape trail back to the truck if we chicken ed out.

Uh-oh.

The second drop was 250 feet long and 65 feet high at its peak. The landing is on a platform 50 feet up a pine tree where a guide hauls you in.

The trip down was magical. All fear escaped as I whizzed through the canopy of 70-foot oak trees, some just beginning to show a trace of fall orange. The bird 's-eye view was breathtaking. Maybe it was a little too breathtaking since I failed to grab the outstretched arms of the guide trying to catch me on the platform at the end.

This was the worst-case scenario for anyone with a fear of heights. Suspended above the forest floor, without the momentum to go up or down, I dangled motionless from the cable 65 feet in the air.

And you know what? I could have stayed there for hours. The scenery was gorgeous and now I know what it's like to be a bird on the top of a tree.

I was "rescued" by Guilbeault, who placed another pulley with a rope tether on the cable. He then descended to the forest floor and pulled the tether until his pulley backed up to mine. He then pulled me up to the platform where the guide retrieved me.

The next drop I found particularly frightening, a slow -motion sit-down takeoff from the platform for a 75-foot slide down the mountain to a rocking rope walkway 25 feet long and familiar to anyone who has watched old jungle movies. But the bridge was a cakewalk. I was harnessed to a cable above, so there was nothing to fear.

I aced the next few jumps -- 330 , 500 , and 200 feet -- and was really beginning to enjoy myself. And then we arrived at the big kahuna -- the last drop, about 400 feet with the heart -stopping fall at the beginning.

There would be no shame in dropping out. What was there left to prove?

As the young women in our group whooped onto the platform behind me, I looked to the Jolys for guidance.

"Why not?" said Liane. She leaped off the platform and screamed as she dropped.

So 400 feet down the mountain I went . As I lost momentum, I rolled backward and then back and forth up and down the cable until I came to rest above a wooden bridge. A guide rolled a 12-foot ladder over, climbed up and unhooked me.

As I wobbled down the ladder, the old fear of heights clicked back in, but I'd met that fear and mastered it. It was, as the Jolys agreed, "awesome."

Contact Tom Long, a freelance writer in Hudson, N.H., at tomlong918@msn.com.