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THE NEWS YOU NEED NOW

In gravity's hands

Zipline tours offer exhilaration, tree-top views

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Nikki Burrell ran down a platform on the side of the mountain and jumped into the void, 225 feet above the forest floor.

She screamed, but she didn't fall. Instead, Burrell lifted her knees into a cannonball position, twisted around and disappeared into a grove of pine trees. A harness strapped to her waist held her firmly as she rode the zipline through the forest.

"The faster the better!" said Burrell, who's in her early 30s.

The Sky Rider Zipline Tour is one of two zipline tours offered by Alpine Adventures, a 12-year-old adventure company based in Lincoln.

In 2006, owner Kerry Farwell and her husband opened the first zipline in New England. It was a way to keep their snowmobile tour employees busy during the summer, Farwell said, but the idea took off.

That first course, the Treetop Canopy Tour, lets riders swing like monkeys from tree to tree on six ziplines.

The platforms are in the branches, with the squirrels and birds, and the ziplines range from 80 to 900 feet long.

Last July 4, Alpine Adventures opened the aptly named sky rider tour. Those with a fear of heights should beware. If the treetops aren't high enough, the sky rider lines let riders fly above the trees.

With five ziplines and a handful of shaky suspension bridges, the ride is not for the faint of heart.

If you're brave enough to fly, don't even think about closing your eyes. The ziplines are located on Barron Mountain in Woodstock, 300 acres owned by Alpine Adventures.



ALAN MacRAE / For the Monitor
Nikki Burrell heads down the 1,200-foot Montego Bay Express on Alpine Adventures's Sky Rider Zipline Tour. The tour group's a network of zipline courses is located on 300 acres on Barron Mountain in Woodstock.

Below the ziplines are stunning views of mountains and valleys. On the longest zipline, which is 1,500 feet long and 200 feet above ground, take a moment to look out at the White Mountains and a nearby lake.

Guides set the mood for adventure with a short, bumpy ride into the woods in a Pinzgauer, an off-road vehicle made for the Swiss Army.

The thick lanyards and metal karabiners that hold your weight on the ziplines will make you feel safe, if not quite comfortable.

Short trails through the woods lead from one zipline to the other. Looking down from the first platform, perched in a treetop, it takes a leap of faith to make that first jump.

But once you do, you'll find yourself gliding above the trees, wind blowing in your face. By placing a hand on the lanyard, you can turn your body from side to side. But there is no brake, so gravity determines how fast you go.

Heavier people will zoom from one end of the line to the other and may need help slowing down. Lighter riders may suffer the minor indignity of being thrown a rope and reeled in like a fish.

The longest zipline takes about 30 seconds from start to finish. "It's so fast, it's over in, like, a flash," said Nathan Lantieri, 12.

Two of the ziplines are meant for racing: Go at the same time as a friend and see who finishes faster. Aside from the natural advantage of weight, the guides had few suggestions on how to speed up: tuck into a cannonball and think "fast thoughts."

"It's a fun thrill," said Chris Farmer, 19. "It's a rush. I like the speed; it just wakes me up."

One 1,200-foot zipline, called the Montego Bay Express, is named after Alpine Adventures's sister zipline in Jamaica. While you're waiting, bang on the drums and bongos.

Between the ziplines, take a moment to enjoy the woods. Suspension bridges will carry you about 40 feet above the forest floor. Hold on to the sides, to your harness, or not at all. Guides make sure you're hooked in at all times.

By the time you get to the end, there's one last chance to show your fearlessness, on the "white knuckle pine." Fall backwards if you dare. Think freefall.