RIDE of your LIFE

The Jungle offers unlimited adventure experiences

BY NORMAN CANNADA
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SALUDA, N.C. — Can't decide between a mini-vacation to see picturesque mountain views or a day of thrill-seeking rides? Why not do both at the same time?

Nestled off of Interstate 26 in Saluda, N.C., The Gorge zipline canopy tour offers the steepest descent of any canopy tour in the U.S., dropping 1,100 feet through 11 zipline platforms, three rappel drops and a skybridge. The Gorge has been open for a little more than a year and saw about 9,000 people come through the trees from the rim of the Green River Gorge to the bottom in 2013.

"It's an entire wilderness experience," said Sara Bell, owner of The Gorge Zipline.

"The zipline tour goes from tree-based platform to tree-based platform, so you're zipping through the canopy in the trees — sometimes above it, sometimes below it and sometimes right through it like a tunnel through the trees. We are the steepest and fastest zipline canopy tour in the country. You drop 1,100 vertical feet in elevation from the rim of the Green River Gorge all the way to the bottom. It's pretty amazing."

Bell started out at Auburn University as a landscape architect major. By the end of her sophomore year, she had transferred to Brevard College in the North Carolina mountains. There she earned a degree in a field she loved — wilderness leadership and experimental education.

"I started kayaking just before my freshman year, and after that, all I wanted to do was to work in the outdoors," she said. "I wanted to live in a place where I could kayak all year round, and western North Carolina is sort of a no-brainer once you're in that community. So I found Brevard after my sophomore year and finished school there."

She and her husband opened Green River Adventures, which offers kayaking trips and other activities several years ago. They began looking for a property and putting together the idea of the zipline canopy tour about four years ago. The canopy tour is now a sister company to Green River Adventures.

Today, the average canopy tour takes a group of eight with two guides through the wilderness adventure through the trees.

Not sure what to expect while hanging in the trees?

"We ask people to allow four hours door-to-door for the whole experience," she said. "You can imagine a tree with a circular platform around it that is large enough to hold 12 people with 11 zips, three repels and a skybridge."

The canopy tour runs year round, but the peak months are the summer and the month of October, when the leaves change colors offering an unique experience to see the fall foliage.

"It's amazing and because you're dropping so much in elevation, it's sort of a litmus test during the peak leaf change," she said. "At the top, it's peak leaf season and when you get to the bottom, its' still green still feels like summer. People panic about what weekend they're coming whether it's going to be peak. What we learned this past season is the later you come — even if you feel like it's past peak — you're going to see just some amazing colors all the way to the bottom even if the trees at the top have lost their leaves."

Bell said the canopy tour provides fun and excitement for a range of experience levels, from the novice to those who make it a practice to travel to canopy tours around the world.

"Certainly it is totally beginner friendly," she said. "One thing that is really unique about our course is that we have an automatic braking system on each line. On most ziplines, the participants are required to handbrake to put your hand on the cable — the glove hand — and apply pressure to slow yourself down. Ours is totally hands free.

"You're able to enjoy those views from mid-line, not focus on the platform and when to brake and that stuff," she added. "So you get those huge views when you're on the line and because of how sheer the drop off is on the platform, you've got some pretty incredible views there as well."

The more experienced ziplin-ers also enjoy the thrill of the course, according to Bell.

"We see people who say, 'We've been to Hawaii and California and other places, but this thing blows all the others out of the water,'" she said.

In addition to the automatic braking system, Bell said the location of the gorge is one of the features that make it unique.

"Number one is the nature of the terrain; it is steepest course and therefore the fastest," she said. "And the largest part of the gorge has never been logged before, so we have 250-year-old trees — old growth forest — throughout the course. It's just gorgeous. It's not something you see on the canopy tours around here, maybe in California."

For more information, call 1-855-749-2500 or visit the-gorgezipline.com.

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IF YOU GO:

The Gorge Zipline is located in Saluda, N.C. From Oconee County, take 123 or I-85 to Greenville, then go north on U.S. Highway 25 to I-26 east. Take I-26 to Exit 59, Saluda. Take a left at the bottom of the exit ramp onto Holbert Cove Road. After about a quarter of a mile, turn left onto Honey Bee Drive. The office is located at the top of the gravel road.

Two guides typically accompany groups of eight around the course that includes a skybridge, rappelling and 11 ziplines — one of which drops 1,100 feet.

PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

