ZIPPING THROUGH THE TREES WITH THE GREATEST OF EASE



Because of the mountainous terrain, The Gorge in Saluda, N.C., offers a steeper zipline tour than most. PROVIDED

Former adventure travel guides build zipline in nearby Saluda

By Amy Clarke Burns
Staff writer
aburns@greenvilleonline.com

Your harness is tightened, your clips fastened. You grab onto the handlebars over your head, take a deep breath and then step off a perfectly sturdy platform into nothingness. And you're loving every second of it.

The Gorge, a zipline canopy tour in Saluda, N.C., takes riders on a breathtaking tour of the Green River Gorge while they're hanging from a steel cable and whizzing through, over and between trees at 35 miles per hour.

The name itself gives visitors a clue about the terrain of the park. Sara Bell, co-owner with husband Tim, said The Gorge is among the steepest zipline canopy tours in the country.

The mountainous terrain around Saluda is no stranger to gravity-defying features. It's renowned for having what was considered the steepest mainline standard gauge railway grade in the U.S.

"It's only fitting that the zipline that gets built here is the steepest," Bell said.

The Gorge incorporates 11 zips, three rappels and one skybridge, accumulating a 1,100-foot loss in elevation from top to bottom.

"You're essentially making your way down the wall of a gorge," Bell said. "You start your last zip from the bottom of one tree — this is how steep the terrain is — and then you're in another treetop."

Because of its sharp grade, The Gorge is faster than your average zipline, but it's also more scenic.

"We're literally perched on the rim of the Green River Gorge," Bell said, and vistas on a clear day reach as far as 90 miles.

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GO ZIPPING

Where: The Gorge, 166 Honey Bee Drive, Saluda (¼ mile off I-26)
Cost: $95
Requirements: Zipline riders must be at least 10 years old and between 70 and 250 pounds.
For more: www.thegorge-zipline.com

ZIPLINE

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Former adventure travel trip guides in Costa Rica, the Bells, who also own Green River Adventures, a whitewater kayak school and river guide business, saw how popular ziplining was among the Americans who visited.

"We had always joked wouldn't it be amazing if this ever caught on in the States," Bell said.

Gradually, over the past several years, Americans have grown more comfortable with what Bell called "recreation at height," and ziplining has seen an uptick in popularity.

About 300 ziplines operated in North America in 2011, said James Borishade, executive director of the Association for Challenge Course Technology. Today, that number has climbed to 450.

"It's a tourist attraction now," he said, thanks in part to advancing safety standards that offer comfort and confidence to adventure-seekers.

From The Gorge's mountaintop outpost, participants hop on their first zip right off the deck of the newly constructed building, which is of modern design. Groups of no more than eight are accompanied by two guides.

Bell said the entire experience was designed to be easy for riders. An automatic braking system eliminates the need to control speed by hand (a common requirement on many ziplines), and an automatic belay system at the rappels requires no technical skills or experience.

"You just literally step out of the tree, and it lowers you down," Bell said. "It's just like being in an elevator without the box around you."

Thanks to the steep terrain, zippers often find themselves looking down at treetops below and seemingly face to face with rock formations on the next ridge over.

Bell said she and Tim made it a priority to impact the land as little as possible in building The Gorge, trimming corridors through the canopy to make room for the course rather than clear-cutting the land beneath it.

In one spot, visitors walk about 100 yards between zips in order to spare a tree that arborists estimated to be 200 years old. It's the only time visitors are on terra firma from the start of the course to the end.

The entire trip takes about three hours, Bell said.



Sara and Tim Bell, owners of The Gorge, kept environmental impact minimal in building the zipline attraction. The line goes above and, in some cases, through the tree canopy. PROVIDED



Zipliners are harnessed to a safety line as they make their way to a platform in the Green River Gorge. PROVIDED