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 Currently: 85
 RealFeel® High: 96
 Humidity: 62
 Winds: WNW at 6 mph

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Canopy tour zips through Lula treetops

By Jane Harrison

Life on the edge of Lula just got more exciting. High in the treetops southeast of the quaint East Hall County railroad town of two lane roads, a corner café and the pharmacy and gift shop, tourists strapped into harnesses zip from tree to tree at speeds clocked at 35 miles per hour. Screams of "Wheee!" and "Awesome!" resound amidst giant red oaks and mock butternuts.

Ziplining, a popular tourist activity in South American rain forests, is now drawing thrill seekers and eco-tourists to a 136-acre plot on the southeastern fringe of Lula. The land that once nurtured chickens and cattle on the North Oconee River has become the environmentally-conscientious site of North Georgia Canopy Tours. Since its opening April 1, nearly 1,000 people have swung through the trees on cables strung high above the ground.

The business venture begun by Alpharetta residents Kirk and Leah Watkins on family land in Hall County in the midst of an economic recession is a joint effort meshing a sister zipline company in Ohio with environmentalists, engineers, Kennesaw State University MBA students, local contractors, Hall County and Lula officials, and a canopy tour designer. By late May, it had already attracted nearly a quarter of its first year goal of visitors, many of whom are North Georgia tourists and adventure seeking groups.

The financial risk of starting such an unusual venture in rural Hall County was unsure, but the investment has lofted returns above early expectations. The physical risk of zipping people through the treetops is kept in check by double lock harnesses, a well-trained staff, and safely maintained cables, platforms and courses.

On a late May evening, a group of doctors from Columbus strode in from the converted chicken coop parking lot into the geothermal heated and cooled tour headquarters and signed waivers to take on the two-plus hour Sky Bridge Tour.

"It sounded like something different we could do outside with the group," said Carrie Cowley, whose husband, Phil, a real-estate developer, would be the only non-doctor in the trees, besides the guides and a reporter.



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An Internet search landed the middle Georgia professionals in Lula for an adventure side trip from their three-day weekend in Big Canoe. After buckling into their harnesses, grabbing pairs of heavy work gloves, and donning helmets, tour participants got hands-on instruction from guides Kevin McCall and Jess Rogers. McCall, an outdoor adventurer from West Virginia, and Rogers, a pre-med University of Georgia student, both undertook 60 hours of training, a written test, and passed an observation evaluation prior to getting hired to swing people through the trees, take pictures of glee-struck tourists, and trim branches that grow close to the cables.



During the introductory lesson, the guides demonstrated how zipliners should place their hands on the trolley that is attached to their harness and carries it over steel cables strewn between wooden platforms surrounding each reception tree. On a cable about seven feet above the ground, they showed how to brake by laying a hand flat against the zipline behind their trolley. They also modeled a "self-rescue" technique consisting of behind the back hand-over-hand tugs on the cable to return to a platform.

When it came their turn to show they could accomplish all the right moves, participants' gloves got a little moist. For Serena Tidwell, the anxiety mounted as she stepped on a stump and looked down the cable. With harness and hard hat in place and her doctor peers awaiting her try-out, Tidwell hesitated. "I don't want to do this. I really don't want to. I'm not athletic at all. I'll just watch you all," she insisted. Despite her friends' urging to take the challenge, she backed down and Rogers helped her out of the trolley.

Minutes later, after nearly each participant had swung out gracefully, braked, and self-rescued, Tidwell was back on the stump. She zipped perfectly. She was still hesitant, but committed to do the tour.

The high flying course took them soaring across nine ziplines spanning a lush hardwood forest and crossing the North Oconee River. After getting over the initial nervousness about heights and harnesses, the tourists relaxed enough to enjoy the fresh breeze created by effortlessly cutting through the air in the verdant woodland. The longest ride, nearly the length of three football fields, crossed a leafy expanse that led to a platform totally unseen from the take-off tree.

McCall led each crossing and radioed Rogers from the receiving platform, advising him when to send each zipliner. Participants, double clipped onto cables surrounding each platform, waited their turn and chatted with Rogers. He told them he had guided 100 Boy Scouts the previous day. He recollected only one visitor among hundreds who had to be lowered mid-tour from a 65-foot high platform after getting too jittery to go on. He revealed the youngest zipliner thus far was 10 years old, the oldest was 78.

When Rogers got the "all clear" message from McCall, he unclipped the next participant from the platform, clipped them into the zipline and sent them flying. Rogers set up a steadying routine with Tidwell, which did much to enhance her confidence.



After the first couple of zips, most group members were able brake adeptly at McCall's signal and plant their feet on the landing log on the receiving platform. McCall was always ready to pull them up, if necessary, and stabilize their arrival.

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The Sky Bridge Tour, true to its name, included two narrow suspension bridges that shook with each step. One crossed above a cable, where tour goers viewed other guests zipping below them. Two zips landed on the ground, where participants hiked to their next airborne excursion.

The other canopy tour, the three-plus hour Adventure Tour, features 12 ziplines, two sky bridges, three nature walks, and, what Rogers described as the most thrilling challenge on the property: a rappel down from a high tower. He admitted it was downright daunting for most people, who surprised themselves when they did it.

Both tours end with an exciting finale: a 680-foot dual zip over a pond in front of the tour observation deck. Participants paired up and raced each other toward earth. Tidwell, completely shed of her early anxiety, soared ahead of her competitor and nailed the landing.

She said she was glad she did it. And yes, she'd do it again.

North Georgia Canopy Tours

What: Two- and three-hour zipline tours through the treetops, including two sky bridge crossings and short nature hikes.

Where: On the outskirts of Lula off Whitehall Road at 5290 Harris Road, northeast of Gainesville

Cost: Two hour Sky Bridge Tour, \$69; three-hour Adventure Tour, \$89. Special pricing available for Sky Bridge Tour for kids, groups, and military.

Participant requirements: Minimum age, 10; children 10 to 15 must be accompanied by adult and must be able to participate independently of the adult; weight, 70 to 250 pounds recommended; average mobility and strength, reasonable good health, ability to hike an equivalent of 1/2 mile; ability to control speed of travel and perform self-rescue during introductory lesson; closed-toe shoes.

Restrictions: Pregnant women, people with heart, leg, or back problems, or other serious illnesses will not be allowed to participate, nor will anyone under the influence of alcohol, illegal drugs, or impairing legal drugs.

Information and reservations: www.northgeorgiacanopytours.com, 770 869-7272