

STARTING LINES

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COME FLY WITH ME

Experience a heightened perspective on Georgia's new zip lining adventure

By Ashley Hesseltime

Need to know:

Children must be 70 pounds and 10 years old to zip. Additional guidelines and answers to questions, as well as pricing (introductory rates range from \$69-\$89), can be found at northgeorgiacanopytours.com.

Think you have to go to Costa Rica to zip high above the wilderness at breakneck speeds? Think again. North Georgia Canopy Tours opened its doors (or, rather, trees) just a few months ago, offering the zip-line experience to Atlantans who may only have the time and dough for an adventurous daytrip. Since I'm part thrill-seeker, part nature lover, and *always* looking for an exciting new activity, I was immediately on board to trek up to Tula, Ga., (just one hour north of Atlanta) and knock zip-lining off my bucket list.

When I arrived, I was introduced to Kirk and Leah Watkins, the Atlanta couple who founded North Georgia Canopy Tours after conquering their fears of heights on a zip line through the Costa Rican rainforest in 2007. Call it aerial inspiration: Kirk (an attorney) and Leah (a healthcare regula-

tory specialist) headed home from the tropics with plans to create their own canopy tour at their Lula property, Old Mill Farm. Their goal? To create an exhilarating experience that allows people to embrace nature without impacting it.

After a brief video introduction, we put on our gear (harnesses and stylish helmets included) and completed Ground School—an instructional session that teaches the basics (braking, hand placement, what to do if you get stuck on a line) on a short, low-to-the-ground practice zip. Then the fun started with the first zip (appropriately named “Fly the Coop”) that sent us flying through the trees.

Our group of seven did the two-hour SkyBridge Tour, which consists of nine zip lines, two sky bridges, two nature hikes, one zip that crosses the North Oconee River three times, and a final dual zip of

700 feet. The small, treehouse-like platforms you stop on between zips (and share with six other zippers) paired with wobbly sky bridges 70 feet in the air created just enough of a fear factor for this zip-liner. Yes, you're attached to something at all times so you won't plummet to the ground, but it's still fairly intense.

Each zip seemed to be more thrilling than the last, with the longest and fastest one sending me flying over the North Oconee River. This 850-foot zip takes the average person about 35 seconds, and even less time if you follow your guides' speed tips, which include curling into a cannonball position and putting less pressure on your line. It was a breathtaking experience, but it was the dual zip at the very end of the course that was my favorite, as I got the opportunity to race with a partner, and actually propel off the high platform

with my feet (which isn't feasible in the other zips). I pushed off, utilized the aforementioned speed tips and beat my partner to the end of the course. For those with a competitive spirit, this will be your favorite part of the tour—unless, of course, you lose.

North Georgia Canopy Tours aren't designed to give you the same feeling as skydiving or bungee jumping, but then again, that's not really the point. The focus is letting patrons experience their natural surroundings in a new and exciting way.

And if a two-hour tour through the treetops isn't enough nature for you, North Georgia Canopy Tours will soon offer camping in rustic campsites and teepees (a generous 24 feet in diameter!) on the property. Come this summer, you'll be able to suit up, soar through the sky, and even stay a while. **CM**