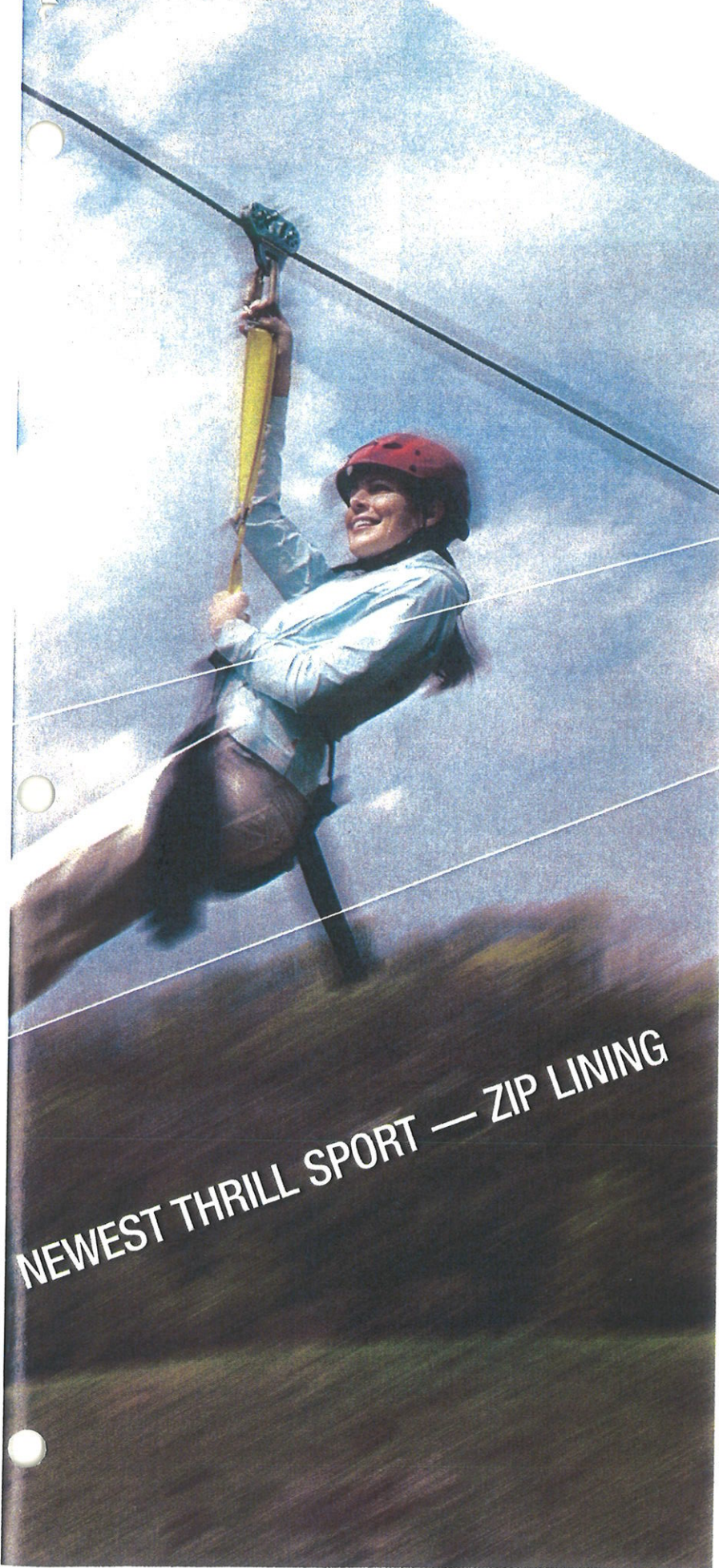


Photography by Darron S. Co

WIRED

OUR REPORTER GETS HUNG UP ON THE ADRENALINE RUSH OF THE

By Jenny Rough



My toes are near the edge of a grassy cliff. One ... two ... three running steps and I'm in the air. It's an 80-foot drop to the valley below, and for a split second I expect my stomach to claw its way into my rib cage. It doesn't. Gravity pushes me down no more than an inch, and my body sinks into a harness. In addition to being wrapped snugly around my thighs, the harness is clipped to a cable above my head, and I'm breezing across the valley at nearly 30 mph.

Sweet.

In no time my flight is finished. I've landed on a different hilltop, and as I look back to the starting post, 460 feet away, I wave to my husband. He's next. This ride — the "bunny" zip — is just the beginning. There are eight other cables zig-zagging across ravines and rolling hills, with longer, faster runs. The 2,000-foot "super zip" at the end is how this place near Boone, N.C., earned its name: Scream Time Ziplines.

This isn't the first time I've tried zip lining. Fifteen years ago, I climbed high up a stairwell embedded into a bluff, then stepped off a platform to zip to the ground below. I was a summer camp counselor and was talked into the wild adventure ride by a fearless 13-year-old.

I hear the hum of the line as my husband rushes in. "Wish I had tried zip lines when I was in Costa Rica," he says.

Zip lines were popularized in that Central American country; the first U.S. zip line tour opened to the public in Maui in 2002. "There were probably lots of zip lines in North America before then," says Monty Holmes, owner of Captain Zipline in Salida, Colo., "but almost all were part of ropes courses" — a series of obstacles constructed between utility poles in the air. The others were at private locales, like my old summer camp. Or jury-rigged, homemade zip lines that sloped across a backyard and descended into a lake (or ended at a tree with a mattress wrapped around the trunk).

The course at Scream Time is called an "open-air" zip line



▲ Riders line up to zip out of a beech tree at the start of their adventure with Hocking Hills Canopy Tours in Ohio.

tour, a bit different from Costa Rica's "canopy tours," where the lines snake from treetop to treetop. Central America's zip lines can be more scenic, with monkeys and poison dart frogs lurking in the jungle trees. Not that I'm complaining about the view. This area is a playground — skiing, canoeing, caving, biking — making it a popular destination for folks in search of outdoor action. At our altitude of 3,600 feet, I can see Beech and Hawksnest peaks poking out of the Blue Ridge range. I try to find my bearings by locating the small town of Banner Elk, where we're staying at the Valle Crucis Bed & Breakfast, but now it's time for the second ride.

I want to go fast, and this time I have further instruction: I'm supposed to extend my body parallel to the ground. It's easy to straighten my legs. Leveling my torso is an abdominal workout. It's against the rules to flip upside down — a shoelace might get caught in the line — and to prevent us from attempting it, the guides refuse to demonstrate it. Spinning, however, happens naturally — perhaps because of the wind or the way my weight shifts. Either way, the circular motion is fun. The only disadvantage is that it slows you down. To steer, I hook my fingers through the bottom of the carabiners (metal loops with an auto lock) that are attached to a pulley suspended on the cable. If I spin left, I turn the carabiners left to straighten out. Like driving on ice. It's counterintuitive, but it works.

I look around below and see open hillsides, grazing horses and a fresh-cut pasture. There's also a graveyard. "Our first testers," jokes Robbie, one of the guides.

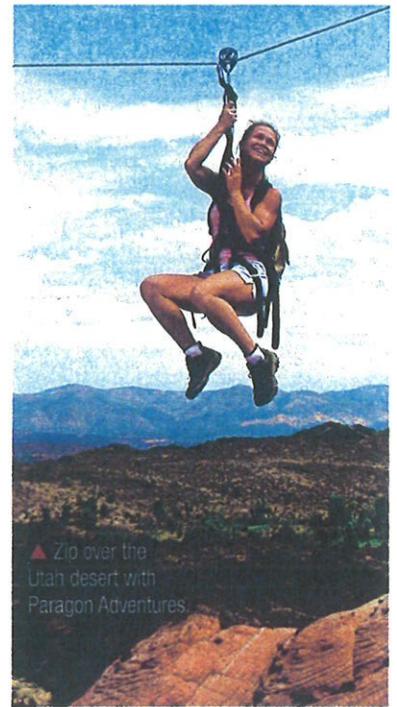


▲ Scream Time Ziplines guide Clay Messer, left, clips a rider's harness onto a pulley while Ron Rough inspects the wire.

We laughed, but his dark humor wasn't too comforting. In March, a 44-year-old American tourist died while zip lining in Honduras. The potential for danger is extremely low, but if something does go wrong (in that case, the cable snapped), it can be disastrous.

Come to think of it, these lifelines do look awfully skinny. The cables, I'm told, are half-inch galvanized aircraft wire rope rated to 26,600 pounds (enough to hold six Jeep Grand Cherokees). They're connected to posts secured 5 feet into the ground. Additional wires, also anchoring the posts, run almost 8 feet underground and are attached to steel plates. My harness? It's seat belt webbing, able to withstand weight up to 7,000 pounds.

"The safest place to be is on the lines," says Clay, the second guide. He's right: To reach the starting point, we take a bumpy ride along a dirt road in a Swiss Army Pinzgauer (a military machine, originally designed in Austria, that Scream Time uses as its tour vehicle). As we navigate



▲ Zip over the Utah desert with Paragon Adventures

between zip lines, we walk over unsteady ground. You're more likely to be in a rollover or to sprain an ankle than to be injured traveling the cables.

Still, according to Steve Gustafson of EBL Canopy Tours, a company that develops zip lines, "not all tours are installed and operated equally." Gustafson isn't sure what standards, if any, the operator in Honduras followed. There aren't any universal, mandatory regulations for zip line installation in the United States, either. Insurance companies essentially dictate safety in the industry by refusing coverage unless the operation meets the stringent guidelines of the Professional Ropes Course Association or meets safety codes governed by a body such as a state regulatory agency. You can ask the zip line operator to show you certification of the regulations it follows.

The nice thing about riding a zip line is that you don't have to be a bungee-jumping, skydiving adventure hound to enjoy it, although someone with acrophobia might be paralyzed with fear. It's exhilarating but not exhausting. Sensational but not scary. "And you don't need superhuman strength," Holmes says. Although it's an individual undertaking — one person zips at a time — it's a group outing. Many zip line

excursions are open year-round and include added activities, such as hikes. Scream Time has hosted bachelorette parties, Valentine's Day dates and family gatherings with participants ranging from kids (usually required to be at least 70 pounds) to grandmas. And it's affordable, ranging in cost from about \$15 to \$150, depending on the length and number of rides. It's a kick-off-your-shoes good time. Well, maybe not: If you lose a shoe while zipping, you may not recover it.

Back to the zips. We're on our fifth ride now. This one includes a brief passage through the trees. The guide zips first.

"I'll clear away the spider webs and bugs," he says. With that, he darts off, like a bullet.

I'm not sure why the heights don't scare me. They did when I tried the summer camp's zip line 15 years ago. Maybe I've matured and can rationalize it better ("perceived risk vs. actual risk," Gustafson says). Or maybe it's because the hills look like giant green marshmallows. I can almost convince myself that if I do fall, it won't hurt.

This one is my fastest trip so far. To slow me down a bit, Scream Time has rigged a passive braking system. My pulley smacks against an extra carabiner sitting at the end of the line. The extra carabiner is attached to a long rope, held by the guide. If necessary, I can grab the rope to pull myself toward the landing platform. No need this time. I swoop in and plant my feet on a mound of dirt.

In Colorado, Holmes' operation is different. The person who is zipping controls his own speed. "You form an inverted U with your hand," Holmes explains, "and then lightly track the cable behind you, adding friction to slow down." Thick gloves protect against rope burns. There is a risk of accidentally reaching for the cable in front of the pulley instead of behind it, resulting in pinched fingers. Still, "we haven't even had a hangnail," Holmes says.

Our group has made it to the super zip. It's a half-mile long, with speed potential of 60 to 80 mph. It's a triple-wide setup — three parallel

lines built for racing — and although Scream Time doesn't yet have an official clock, 28 seconds is the estimated record. I'm discouraged; as the lightweight of the group, my time will be slowest. But Clay the guide has a plan. He'll place me in the third position, where the line is strung tighter, automatically offering more speed. He also reminds me that weight isn't the only thing that will hasten my journey. Wind helps, too. The course was designed so air currents would be at your back as much as possible. Stormy weather is brewing, and, although the rains have held off, the clouds look fierce. When a gust blows, my husband shouts, "Go!"

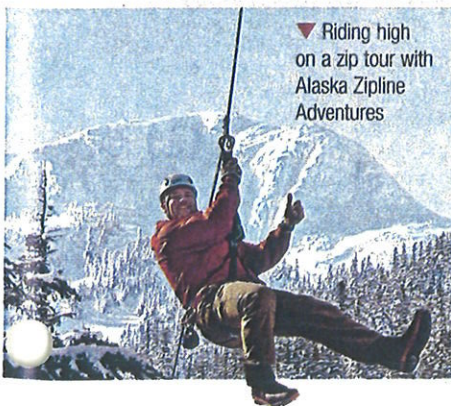
As I sail away, the wind whips against my face. The ride is smooth, and the bird's-eye view is beautiful. I'm reminded of how good it feels to let loose, release my worries and replace the serious expression on my face with a smile. To laugh. To play. To delight. To have fun. That's the beauty of a zip line. **oa**

Where to zip

Tour operators say schedules change because of weather and demand. Be sure to check websites or call to verify dates and times.

ALASKA

Juneau's **Alaska Zipline Adventures** offers amazing views of snowcapped mountains. Afterward, celebrate your ride with an Alaska-brewed beer in the lodge (alaskazip.com). Birders can scout for bald eagles while on **ZipRider's** tour (ziprider.com) at Icy Strait Point (icystraitpoint.com).



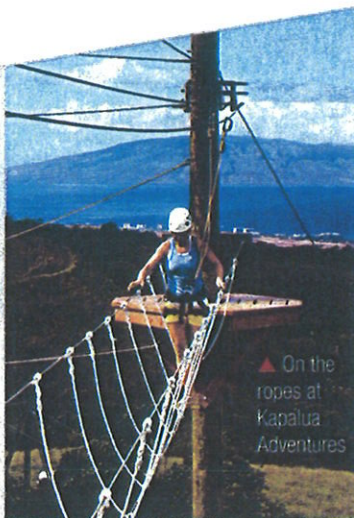
▼ Riding high on a zip tour with Alaska Zipline Adventures

CALIFORNIA

Possibly the most scenic zip line in the United States, the **Heavenly Flyer** zooms over mountain slopes with views of Lake Tahoe. It boasts a 525-foot vertical drop — about the height of the observation deck at Seattle's Space Needle (skiheavenly.com). Farther north, take in Gold Country while zipping at **Moaning Cavern Adventure Park** (caverntours.com).

COLORADO

A package deal for couples includes a River Runners rafting tour, a night in a log cabin near Mount Princeton Hot Springs and a next-day excursion at **Captain Zipline**. Call 877-947-5463 to register (captainzipline.com). Or ride a steam train up the Durango & Silverton Narrow Gauge Railroad to **Soaring Tree Top Adventures** (soaringcolorado.com). Vail's **Zip Adventures** will have you taking flight over canyons and cliffs (zipadventures.com).



▲ On the ropes at Kapalua Adventures

HAWAII

On the island of Kauai, **Just Live** has a moonlight tour (justlive.org). **Kauai Backcountry Adventures** includes four-wheel-drive transport to the zip site and a picnic lunch (kauaibackcountry.com). On Maui, **Kapalua Adventures' "zipper lifter"** ascends 3,000 linear feet to the start of eight ziplines, or you can test your skill on the ropes course (kapaluaadventures.com).

NEW HAMPSHIRE

Ski bunnies can give their legs a break (make that a rest!) after hitting the slopes by zipping at **Wildcat Mountain** (skiwildcat.com).

OHIO

Try **Hocking Hills Canopy Tours** near Columbus for a three-hour excursion that includes four sky bridges and a rappel (hockinghillscanopytours.com).

SOUTH CAROLINA

At **Carolina Adventure World**, north of Columbia, ride the Blue Sky Zip Line — three zips totaling half a mile. For folks who would rather keep their feet on the ground, there are more than 100 miles of ATV trails (carolinaadventureworld.net).

TEXAS

At **Cypress Valley Canopy Tours**, outside of Austin, you can zip to the Lofthaven, a small, furnished treehouse, and spend the night. In the morning, wake up early for a sunrise birding tour up in the trees (cypressvalleycanopytours.com).