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NORTH CAROLINA **neverland**

Sans tights or Tinkerbell, glide through life with a ziplining adventure.

Written by *Christopher Lacey*

I don't know if you've noticed, but fairy dust is scarce these days. Perhaps the little sprites are on strike, or maybe they've abandoned production altogether. Whatever the reason, it has wreaked havoc on my lifelong quest for Neverland. How can a Peter Pan wannabe turn right at the second star and fly straight through 'til morning without a sprinkle of that magical powder? Last time I checked, the cost of a civilian ticket to space was \$20 million. That doesn't even get you to the moon, let alone the second star.

But I'll let you in on a secret. Until I stumble upon a hidden stash of the elusive dust, I will get my Neverland fix at Carolina Ziplines. So can you. Spend an afternoon gliding through the treetops, and you'll remember what it means to be a kid again, happy thoughts and all.



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Imagine a roller coaster without the coaster,
no structure between you and the ground.
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Nestled in the rolling foothills of Stokes County, nine miles from Hanging Rock State Park, Carolina Ziplines is the creation of Robert and Joanna Nickell, zipline aficionados who've frequented courses around the world, including Costa Rica, where the sport originated. Initially devised by scientists to traverse the dense rainforest canopies while studying native wildlife, someone recognized its inherent Peter Pan appeal, and a new adventure sport emerged for the young-at-heart.

FIRST IN FLIGHT

I showed up at Carolina Ziplines on a sunny Saturday as a first-time zipliner — eager to begin but a little off in my

expectations. As a pilot of small planes, I am no stranger to flight and anticipated a similar experience, just much slower and lower. But pilots sometimes forget that while we indeed fly fast, it doesn't necessarily feel that way once we lift off the ground. Except for the precious few pilots who still barnstorm in open biplanes, we are sheltered from the wind while the landscape creeps by far below. Not so on a zipline.

Imagine a roller coaster without the coaster, no structure between you and the ground. A quick plunge off the platform accelerates you forward, wind in your face, while a thicket of leaves rushes past in a green

blur. Traveling upwards of 50 miles per hour, you face forward most of the course, one gloved hand trailing behind on the line. The exception is the last leg, a monster stretch of zipline where there's enough time to hang free and spin around, if you're brave enough. Most riders were that Saturday. I watched as the inner kids emerged from my group of fellow adventurers. Over our time on the 7,000-foot course (which has more than 20 lines ranging from 40 feet to 1,300 feet), timid, uncertain steps off the series of platforms became running leaps by the end.

For me, from the moment my hiking boots left the ground until long



Why not make a weekend of it? For our picks on where to grab a meal and where to bed down after a treetop flight in Stokes County, visit www.ncsignature.com.



after they hopped off the last platform, I carried a lightheartedness typically reserved for youth, that all-too-brief time when you're insulated from the adult worries of life insurance, liability waivers, and the pursuit of credit. Immersed in the treetops, I was reminded that nature is the ultimate stress reliever.

That was a goal Robert Nickell had in mind when he created the course. "I wanted to reconnect people with nature because society spends way too much time indoors," Nickell says. The course also gave Nickell a chance to reconnect with his son, Sean, whom Nickell felt was drifting in a different direction as the young boy entered his teen years. Together, the father and son worked to build an adventure in the hills of their vast, wooded backyard, an effort that gradually brought the two close again.

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And the zipline still brings people together. Nickell often watches participants

forge friendships in the treetop platforms. "Individuals and couples meet here while ziplining, and then we see them return together to do it again," Nickell says. It's simple to understand why. There's ample opportunity to bond as riders gather on the platforms between turns. Blend in the talkativeness that flows from soaring spirits, and it's easy to make friends.

I spent a large portion of my course time with members from the Triangle Hiking and Outdoors Group, an organization that spends most weekends in pursuit of adventure. The diverse group, which that day included individuals from Romania and Ecuador, planned to kayak the Dan River later that afternoon, then return to Carolina Ziplines to relive the experience after sunset, something the Nickells provide to large groups if arranged in advance.

The course also furnished the backdrop for a couple seeking a change of pace

from the usual anniversary fare of dinner and drinks. Chris and Emily Hendricks of Greensboro celebrated their sixth anniversary with thrills. "We thought we'd do something different this year and give ziplining a shot," Chris says. Next year they plan to continue the adventure theme and try skydiving. But you don't need a reason to celebrate to go ziplining; you simply have to appease that oft-suppressed voice within that craves fun and adventure.

As we finished that afternoon, loud chatter and belly laughter provided stark contrast to the quiet conversation and nervous titters that sifted through the air at the beginning. It probably would have been difficult to find someone unwilling to jump right back on to do it again. I suppose I could have asked to be certain, but I didn't want to interrupt the handshakes, high-fives, and hugs. More than once, I heard, "Just when it was

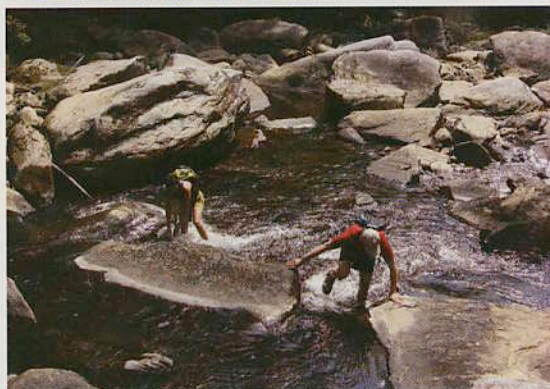
Above: A zipliner tackles one of the 350-foot-long, high-course cables, one of the 21 cables available at Carolina Ziplines Canopy Tour.

Opposite: Several Wake Forest cheerleaders and dance team members stop for a picture with owner Robert Nickell (on right) while on a team-building experience.

really getting good, it was over." I couldn't agree more. What's funny is, I often think the same thing about childhood. □

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TRIANGLE hiking and outdoors group



Members of the Triangle Hiking and Outdoors group cross Horse Pasture River Gorge as part of their twice-yearly trip to the Jocassee Gorges near Brevard.

Chris Chao, a family physician in Cary, rarely hiked as a kid growing up in North Carolina. It wasn't until his clinical rotation in Washington State that his love of hiking emerged after his supervising physician introduced him to the beauty of the outdoors.

Once Chao returned to North Carolina, he set off to discover his own backyard. As he shared memorable outing

When asked about his favorite hike, Chao points out the Jocassee Gorges near Brevard — a trip the group makes twice a year. "For me, the waterfalls in that area make it the most stunning place in North Carolina," he says.

Chao's affinity for the outdoors is obvious, as is his eagerness to share his discoveries with others. His

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.....

details with friends and coworkers, people began to join him. Eventually, the email list Chao used to coordinate trips grew to unwieldy proportions, so he moved the operation online to www.triangleoutdoors.com. The Triangle Hiking and Outdoors Group has more than 800 people attending events over the last two years.

In addition to the large number of native North Carolinians, the group attracts many professionals who move to the area from other states and from around the world. Although the organization is one of the most active hiking groups in the Triangle, the outings aren't limited to that area alone.

proudest moments come when participants learn about hidden local gems. Chao says, "Many times new members come up after hikes to say, 'Thank you. I grew up here and didn't even know this place existed.'" □

— Christopher Laney

Log on to the Triangle Hiking and Outdoors Club message board (at www.meetup.com) to learn how fast you hike, find out about free classes (like outdoor cooking!), and find a list of must-see North Carolina waterfalls.