

Atlanta Sport Magazine - Fitness Section



Fitness in Flight

Get high on fitness at The Lodges at Historic Banning Mills

Staring down at swirling waters 100 feet below my sneakers, I knew I couldn't turn back. My legs wobbled as I lifted one foot in front of the next, gently placing them on the cable wires shaking beneath me. Since I made my way to the wooden platform, I secured myself onto the zip chord. With my feet dangling, heart racing and palms sweating, somehow I moved my legs-which felt like rubber bands-and jumped. Suddenly, the cables held onto my waist and I propelled into the wind at highway speed.

Panting, I could barely make sense of the trees zooming by my head, swirling into an array of vibrant colors as they passed me. Before I made it to the other side, taking in the fresh air, the cool breeze and the electrifying view, I thought to myself, "What a workout!"

True, there are all types of fitness activities you can do in a gym, but getting fit inside doesn't offer the same appeal as heading outdoors for a run, climb or hike, it's time to look at a new craze available to Georgians: the Tree Flight Canopy Tour at The Lodges at Historic Banning Mills-one of the longest and highest canopy tours in the world.



Like many adventure junkies, I had heard of canopy tours before—ziplines in Mexico, platform ropes courses in the trees at Costa Rica—but never anything in GA (and certainly nothing this sophisticated). Travelers spend thousands of dollars to leave the United States and find a fitness adventure in the skies, but with this excursion only 45 minutes from Atlanta, finding a lesser adventure elsewhere seems like a hasty notion.

"We knew that the Snake Creek Gorge is so beautiful and the topography and ecosystem was perfect for a canopy tour here in the Southeast," says Donna Holder, co-founder and operator of The Lodges at Historic Banning Mills with her husband, Mike. "It's a little different take on the jungle scene," she says, making reference to the other canopy experiences available Worldwide. "You actually can see better on this type of canopy tour than when you are over jungle canopy due to the cross-crossing of the cables over the creek and gorge, and the trees are different than what one finds in the jungle."



Inspiring Wilderness

The Lodges at Historic Banning Mills, a country inn, retreat and resort in Carroll County, is home to rich history and a scenic locale situated on 700 acres of wooded forest. Inspired to do more with the property than offer just another retreat center, the Holders decided to build something that would take advantage of the land and enhance the purpose of Banning Mills. "We wanted to be able to share this so we thought, let's do adventure treks," Donna says. "Adventure not only provides fun things to do but can be used to build up leadership skills, help build self-confidence, and help people overcome fears and know they really can do more than they thought."

Mike, brainchild behind the Tree Flight Canopy Tour, began his career in the Army after which he began flying for American Airlines (often to South America, where he

discovered many tree-flight courses.) With the motivation to amplify the historic property's appeal and a passion for tree flight, the Holder family went to work on what would become the only canopy tour of its kind.

A company called Signature Research helped the Holders design and build their tree flight construction, which took two years to complete. "It was hard to be patient," Donna says. "We were so excited to get it up and running."

Course Challenge

More than just a ropes course, the full flight experience boasts observation towers reaching 60 feet, more than a mile of active zip line cables- many flying 200 feet above the ground, tightrope walking, balance board trials and a final zip line that can reach speeds of 60 miles per hour.

And this is no easy feat. While climbing through the trees, expect to burn more than 300 calories climbing the towers, zipping down lines and maneuvering through high obstacle courses. You also will endure a lesson in active strength training, certain to make you feel the burn deep in your legs and add definition to your arms while holding onto the cable. Yet, you're certain to relish every moment, distracted by the thrill of the task and the views which to go on for miles. Soaring over paper mill ruins from the 1800s mill-town of Banning and landscape features such as Snake Creek Gorge, a love for the Southern heritage forms alongside a new found pride for your very own skill to sustain such a challenge.

High-flying escapades are ideal for thrill seekers, but anyone willing to try it on for size won't regret it. Team-building courses, father/son adventure retreats and group workshops are among programs you can choose from to enhance communication skills, bonding and respect among families, co-workers and friends.

"When someone comes to do our Tree Flight Canopy Tour or maybe our team-building course, they also get to learn about Banning Mills, see its beauty and take something personal back home with them," Donna says. "It can be a new knowledge of Georgia history, better self-esteem, a new communication skill, or just being out in nature and having a great and fun stress-free day."

When your routine needs some spice, or you, too, want to proclaim "what a workout," escape from the ordinary day at the gym, and find your fitness in flight. - Tova Gelford

*The park is not open to the public. Tours are by reservation only.

Safety First

This may be wild, but it's completely safe. While you won't hear any "ladies and gentleman, please keep your arms inside the aircraft," this journey in flight certainly puts well-being above all. As a member of the Association of Challenge Course Technology and PRCA, Screaming Eagle tours at Banning Mills meets or exceeds all required standards. Fully trained, experienced Guides accompany groups through the course

with equipment that is checked and double-checked.