

the Friendly Skies

FF

By Abby Laub | Photos by J.A. Laub Photography

Experience treetop (and subterranean) thrills along Kentucky's Zipline Trail



I'm standing on "zip 1" at Red River Gorge Zipline in Campton, looking at the trees and pond below, and then at the thin cable above them. I'm placing my life in the hands of the two guides leading our tour, the cable and an elaborate harness system—and I could not be more excited.

Red River Gorge Zipline guides Sam Speed, left, and Aaron Charles, below.

"Keep your hands on the handle," guide Aaron Charles says. "You don't want to grab that cable during your zip!" Noted. I like my hands and want to keep them intact. My husband and I, along with the rest of our zip tour group, listen to Charles' and fellow guide Sam Speed's (an apropos last name) thorough, yet entertaining, safety instructions before the high-flying, zipping fun begins.

My stomach is in my mouth during the first zipline trip. Within about five seconds, I am flying toward the landing platform and don't think I'll be able to stop in time. But sure enough, I do, and Speed, on "retrieval" duty, is there to smooth the transition to the platform.

The job is a workout for Speed, Charles (both 23 years old) and the other guides. It often entails pulling themselves, hand by hand, across the wire to bring in zippers who are not heavy enough to make it across some of the longer lines propelled by their own body weight. Although the job is physically taxing, they enjoy it and keep our group laughing during the entire tour. "I think it's just really fun interacting with the guests," Speed says. "For most people, it's pretty intense and extreme—so it's fun taking them out and letting them enjoy that and experience that."

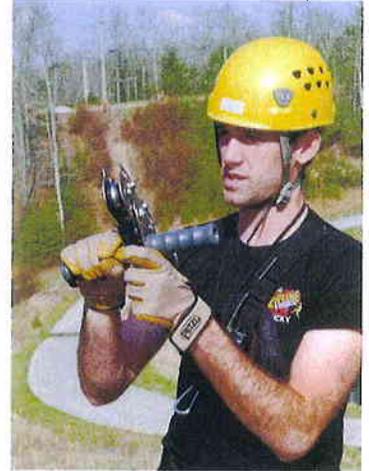
The job also has its, shall we say, memorable moments. "On zip 4, there is a rental cabin on the right, so you have guests that will stay there and hear the ziplines starting and will come out and watch," Charles says. "Another guide, Kevin, was the first one across, and he radioed back and said, 'Do not look at the house.' And now everyone has to look, and there was a dude in his birthday suit, about 70 years old. He wasn't getting any tan lines; that's for sure."

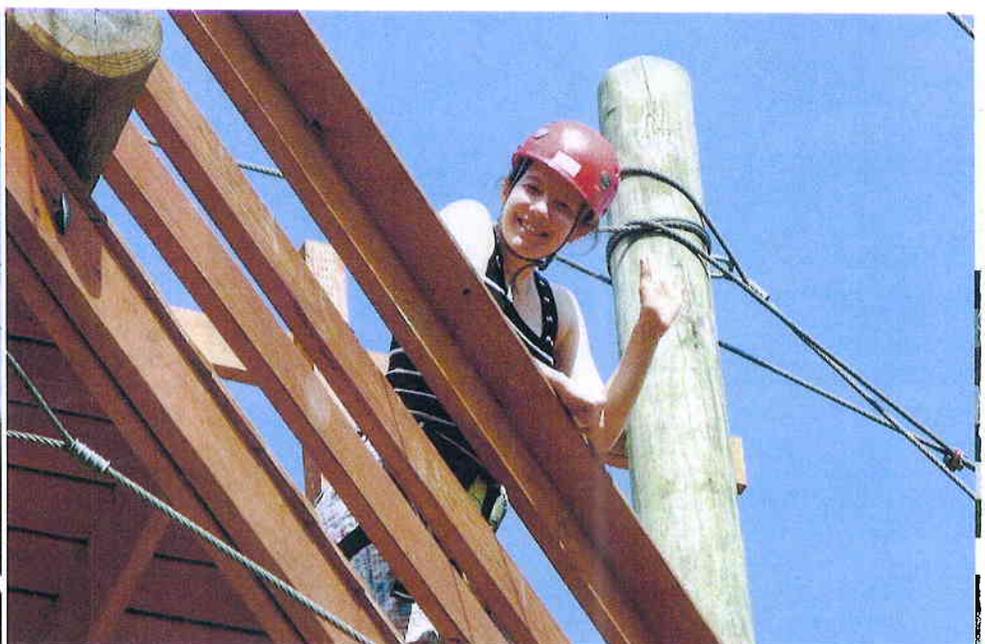
Sunscreen is a must on this trip as the zipline tour takes guests through and above the treetops and across ravines. This, naturally, leads to some scared participants.

"People don't want to go. You have to coach them," Speed says. "I've seen people cry and not go. There was one guy, scared at the first three smaller zips, and he got up to the big bridge that you have to walk up to get to four, and he just stopped and said, 'Nope, nope, nope.' He didn't even turn around, he just backed down."

The suspension bridges that lead from zip to zip are a wobbly, challenging experience in their own right. They are really up there. My stomach feels slightly woozy while crossing them, but it doesn't lessen the fun.

The highest point of the zipline tour is about 350 feet. There are breathtaking views of the eastern Kentucky landscape that are impossible to see anywhere other than while whizzing along on a zipline. The longest zip—the fourth one—is 2,000 feet. Zip 1, the warm-up, is 250 feet; zip 2 is 280; zip 3 is 300; and zip 5 wraps up the tour with 1,200 feet of spectacular views. It also is the fastest zipline, with guests sometimes reaching speeds of 50 miles per hour. (Our guides guess that we got up to about 40 miles per hour on our tour. We had a little head wind.)





The author at Red River Gorge Zipline

Although the tour is enjoyable, it is also a workout. We have hills to ascend weighed down with at least 20 pounds of gear. The sun is hot above the trees, and adrenaline has a funny way of eventually tiring the body out.

Though sunscreen is not necessary for the Mega Cavern's Mega Zips tours, the thrill is no less—especially if ziplining through dark, cool caverns is your cup of tea. "It is simply unlike any other zipline course on the planet," says **Jim Lowry**, co-owner of the Louisville Mega Cavern. Purported to be the only underground zipline course in the world, the tour takes place in a portion of a 100-acre former limestone mine pit founded in the 1930s and located only minutes away from downtown Louisville.

"People say that the atmosphere underground with an element of darkness, coupled with the thrill of ziplining, is just something that is totally unique," Lowry says. "We've heard people say that they have ziplined all over the world, but ours is better because of the way you go down the lines in some degree of darkness and when you're traveling through a large cavern, it's just a completely different experience."

The zip course is approximately one-quarter mile into the cavern. A shuttle tram takes guests to the tour starting point, each zipper wearing almost \$1,000 worth of gear—including a helmet with a miner's light, making the tour also seem like a spelunking expedition. (Those with a more sedate adventure in mind can enjoy a tram tour to explore

some of the more than 17 miles of the Mega Cavern's underground passageways.)

The Mega Zips tour consists of six ziplines, including a dual racing zipline at the end, and three "challenge bridges." Lowry likens these to "Indiana Jones bridges. It's probably the scariest thing that people do—or at least that's what they say."

Lowry says his attraction is bringing people to Louisville, as about 75 percent of his customers are out-of-towners, and that ziplining, in general, is catching on in a big way. "It's the thrill. It's a very safe sport, and it's an extreme sport. You can step off a 70-foot platform and go. Here, you're 160 feet underground while you're 70 feet in the air."

An added bonus of the Mega Zips tour: The temperature in the cavern is 58 degrees year-round, so it is a good option for escaping the summer heat. 🌿



Louisville Mega Cavern

Online Extra
Get a fast-flying, bird's-eye view of the author's Red River Gorge Zipline adventure. Watch the video at kentuckymonthly.com

If you go ...

Zip the Bluegrass Zipline Trail zipthebluegrass.com

- The Big Zipper
Maysville
(606) 564-8283,
bigzippermaysville.com
- Black Mountain Thunder Zipline
Evarts
(606) 837-3205,
blackmountainthunder.com
- Mammoth Cave Adventures
Cave City
(270) 773-6087,
mammothcave-adventures.com/zipline
- Mega Zips
Louisville
1-877-614-6342,
louisvillemegacavern.com
- Red River Gorge Zipline Tours
Campton
(606) 668-6222,
redrivergorgezipline.com

Trail Blaze

"I love that I can be outdoors and see the state from a birds-eye view," says Angela Lipscomb of Lexington. "It's very different from the view you get while hiking, which I also love. Traveling in and above the trees is a huge adrenaline rush." She says the "Zip the Bluegrass" zipline trail has encouraged her not only to visit ziplines in other areas of the state but also to try new hiking trails and restaurants in the areas she visits to zip.

Zip the Bluegrass consists of five participating ziplining outfitters located across the state and offers adventurers a passport program incentive similar to the Kentucky Bourbon Trail. Zip the Bluegrass is free to join, and participants are eligible for 15 percent off general admission for subsequent zip tours after receiving a stamp on their passport upon completing their first ziplining adventure. Zippers who finish their passport by taking all five zipline tours receive a certificate of completion and a Zip the Bluegrass t-shirt.

Jim Lowry of the Louisville Mega Cavern Mega Zips tours says the Zip the Bluegrass initiative brings accountability and safety standards to the participating ziplining outfitters. He says he also hopes it will bring increased business to all of the separate tours.

Sherri Powers of Nicholasville has completed six zipline tours both in and out of Kentucky and says the passport system has encouraged her and her friends to travel across Kentucky to try all the ziplines. "I love the adventure of flying 100 feet above the treetops, on a cable at fast speeds with a group of friends," she says.

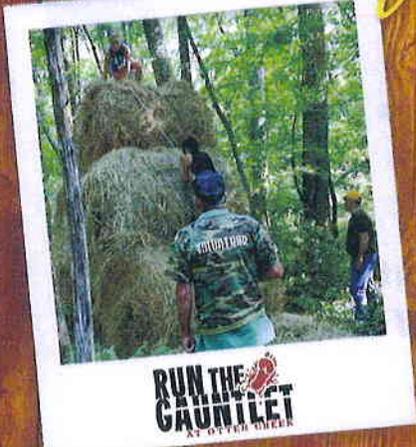
Powers recommends Red River Gorge Zipline in Campton for first-time zippers because of its easy-to-use system. She says her favorite tour was Black Mountain Thunder in Evarts because of the ability to control speed on the zips, making it more adventurous for experienced zippers.

Participant Evelyn Tandy of Crittenden says she also has zipped in Alaska, Ohio and Costa Rica and that she loves ziplining because it's the closest she can get to flying. "The Zip the Bluegrass passport system has made me do more zipline tours around the state," she says. "If the passport system did not exist, then I would not be as inclined to travel across the state to zipline."

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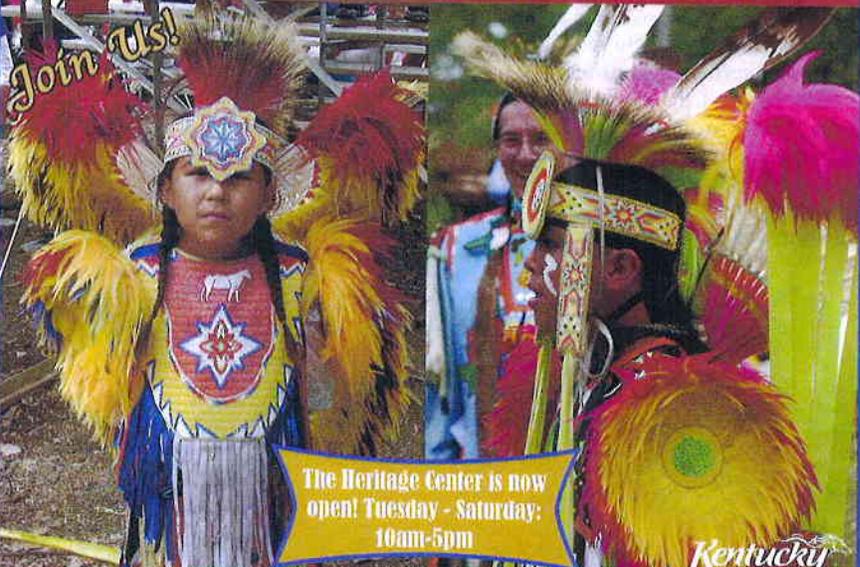
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