

Into the
WILD



Ziplining Through Kentucky

by Burgess Carey Photos by Dani Jelley

In the 1970s, scientists studying the rich biodiversity of the Central American rainforests found much of their work required them to be up high in the trees in the forest canopy above. The unique perspectives and up-close observations gained by climbing above the forest floor allowed those scientists to more intimately study and experience the life cycle of this ecologically rich but still economically developing part of the world. Soon tiring of constantly climbing up and rappelling down the trees, they began to build networks of cables, ropes, platforms and even suspension bridges that would allow them to travel from tree to tree without climbing down.

In particular, Costa Rica, a tiny country whose early focus on developing ecotourism as an integral part of its national economic development strategy, was a pioneer in promoting the study of the health of its rainforests and natural resources. Soon scientists there, in an effort to share their experiences in the canopy and increase awareness and support for their conservation efforts, began inviting tourists to join them, and the first true “canopy tours” were born. Those tours used “zip lines,” simple devices using a trolley fixed to a cable, whenever it was necessary to move over greater distances.

Soon these tours were more than achieving their purpose as tourists, eager for a new experience, were lining up and paying a lot of money to go up in the trees and move from place to place like scientists had done for years. Money was generated. Jobs were created. Forests were saved, awareness of the environment increased, and people were having fun!

In 2005, a leading cruise line, having noticed how many of their guests enjoyed the tours on its Central American destinations, decided to develop the first true canopy tour in North America in the temperate rainforests of Southeast Alaska. Since then the popularity of canopy tours has exploded with more than 50 tours having been developed in North America since then.

WHHEEEEEEE, WA WA WA WHHEEEEEEEEEEE!
As the pig in the popular TV commercial can attest, ziplines are fun, but a zipline by itself is fairly one-dimensional. Although zipline rides have been around for years, when combined with the unique perspectives in the canopy, a well-programmed tour is a multi-dimensional experience: thrilling, yet educational, active recreation immersing the participant in a sensory environment impossible to achieve any other way. And while the developing

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economies of Central America proved canopy tours can be significant economic drivers, canopy tours have had similar success in the United States and Canada.

Which brings us to Kentucky. Our Commonwealth also boasts one of the most biodiverse hardwood forests in the world, and some of the most interesting ancient geology. Over half our state is covered with woods, with much of those in the rugged mountainous eastern part of the state.

Recently, the Kentucky Tourism Department announced the creation of "Kentucky's Zipline Trail." Styled like the more famous Kentucky Bourbon Trail, this promotion is designed to highlight the five most established zipline tours to be found around our state.

Each of these tours can be found in a unique setting in a different part of Kentucky. Recently a friend and I decided to check them out. As we checked each one off of our list, we realized how each location was not only different but different than we expected and reflective of the region we were in.

Red River Gorge

First on our list was a quick afternoon trip down the Mountain Parkway to Red River Gorge where Ian, the general manager of RRG Zipline, put us on the 4 p.m. tour. Each tour runs about 1 ½ - 2 ½ hours long, depending on the location and group. RRGZ features long dual ziplines across the gorge, suspended bridges, platforms and a fairly state-of-the-art design. Only 55 minutes from Lexington, this tour featured the single most dramatic view we found on the entire trail. Close to sunset, flying across the gorge with my friend flying between me and the expansive Red River Valley was breathtaking.

Black Mountain Thunder

Next on our list was Black Mountain Thunder, located in Harlan County. The Black Mountain Thunder tour is located on its namesake mountain in the middle of a huge ATV park operated by The Harlan County Outdoor Recreation Board Authority. I have to admit to being guilty of prejudging the experience here.

Maybe because ATV parks aren't really my thing, or maybe because of the marketing I had seen, I expected a couple of long poorly designed ziplines in a loud and heavily impacted environment.

Was I ever wrong! Black Mountain Thunder was the biggest surprise of the trail. What we found was an excellent example of new opportunities created through ecotourism, and a coal reclamation site being put to excellent use.

Not only was the tour spectacular, featuring ziplines traversing the vast open spaces and forest canopy above the trails and the hollers of the highest mountain in Kentucky, but Black Mountain Thunder guides were fun and easy-going locals who clearly enjoyed showing off the

wonders of the Black Mountain ecosystem. Pointing out ginseng, old "auger" mines, old growth trees and making jokes all while guiding us on the state's longest lines.

Our guide, Kimber, a 20-year-old local woman hoping to study at EKU in the fall, represented bad ass Kentucky women everywhere by wearing full makeup, a bedazzled helmet, and guiding our unruly group of eight safely, without even the first sign of sweat. After our tour, Ken, the head guide, showed us a project he had been working on by diverting water flowing out of an abandoned mine into a wetland pond they had created and now was teeming with fish, turtles and salamanders. Black Mountain Thunder was well worth the drive.

The Big Zipper & Mega Zip

Next on our trip was The Big Zipper, also located on an ATV park. This zipline was the most affordable, a discount experience located only an hour from Lexington in the picturesque river town of Maysville.

Next up, Louisville's Mega Cavern.

The Louisville Mega Cavern/Mega Zip is located under the city of Louisville in a former limestone mine and quarry with caverns as high as 90-plus feet. As expected, this is a MEGA operation complete with gift shop, running tours of 12 about every 20 minutes. While not a canopy tour, this zipline tour is well programmed, offering multiple different elements like bridges and dual zips but also highlighting geologic points of interest and the history of the mine and Louisville in general. Because it is underground, this tour took advantage of creative lighting elements to produce unique sensory experiences. Still, no one knew of anyone finishing the trail.

Mammoth Cave


Our final leg of the trail was Mammoth Cave Adventures, whose website (see sidebar) boasted beautiful scenery in and around the knobs and Kentucky's only national park. On the site, this tour



looked like it was very professionally and thoughtfully designed ... and it was.

Mammoth Cave Adventures had the most diverse elements on its tour, featuring self-belayed ladders and multi-level platforms as well as bridges and quality ziplines. What's more, MCA has installed a zipline course for those who weigh under 100 pounds (all of the tours had a required weight range of approximately 60-260 pounds), opening up the activity to the whole family.

MCA has also leveraged its tour success into offering additional elements now being found in other eco-adventure parks around the country. Horseback riding, canoeing, kayaking and camping can all be found there. With our limited time, I tried the "Powerfan," a free-fall from an 80-foot tower on a modified belay, and the "Tarzan Swing" a 60-foot arboreal swing up into the canopy – awesome! Combined with the National Park, cave and the Green River, MCA would be a perfect multiday destination for the entire outdoor adventure-loving family – I'm going back with mine!

By this time we had figured out that, yes, we were in fact the first and only to complete the entire Kentucky Zipline Trail ... which is a shame really. Why two middle-aged fathers would be the first to experience Kentucky in this unique perspective – showing the best of five distinct regions of the commonwealth, soaring over and through tree tops, joking and flirting with the locals, learning about regional issues and distinctions and being challenged to embrace our fears – is beyond me. Although the "first" has been done, we sure should not be the "only" much longer. Hopefully others will soon follow us to "Unbridled Adventure" outdoors in Kentucky. 

-  Kentucky Tourism Department: KentuckyTourism.com
- Kentucky's Zipline Trail: [Facebook.com/ZipTheBluegrass](https://www.facebook.com/ZipTheBluegrass)
- RRG Zipline: RedRiverGorgeZipline.com
- Black Mountain Thunder: BlackMountainThunder.com
- Big Zipper: BigRockOffroadPark.com
- Louisville Mega Cavern: LouisvilleMegaCavern.com
- Mammoth Cave Adventures: MammothCave-Adventures.com

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