



Sure, Vermont has a reputation for being full of tree huggers, but right now, my friend Liz is literally *hugging the tree*, hanging on for dear life to a towering red maple that marks the beginning of Arbor's Wild Ride, a three-hour canopy adventure at Smugglers' Notch.

The rest of our newly acquainted group — another friend of mine from the Burlington area, plus a family from Michigan on spring break at Smuggs and a twenty-something couple from New Jersey staying at a nearby timeshare — laugh at Liz's expense. But the truth is, the rest of us are also a little nervous. After all, we're on a wooden platform no bigger than a dining table, and nothing but beige-colored lanyards attaching our harnesses to a cable prevent us from plummeting to the ground below.

There's no time to contemplate our fate, however, as our guide, Nate, declares the three words to begin the procession of Tarzans and Janes swinging through the trees: **"Let it rip!"**

Our guide Josh reassures us that these lanyards are designed to hold up to 4,500 pounds, and that the course is inspected each day prior to use. (Hearing this, I'm tempted to knock on wood — luckily there are thousands of trees surrounding us.) Still, our journey ahead is daunting: 4,500 feet of whooshing through the air from tree to tree via gravity and a small aluminum trolley that will be fixed to eight cables, or "lines." We will go nearly 40 miles per hour at times.

There's no time to contemplate our fate, however, as our other guide, Nate, declares the three words to begin the procession of Tarzans and Janes swinging through the trees: "Let it rip!"

Long popular in Costa Rica, zip lining has recently arrived among more and more treetops of North America, where ropes course diversions have turned into full-fledged and highly professional excursions designed not only to thrill participants but also to educate them about their natural surroundings.

"The experience is designed to educate, entertain and inspire," ArborTrek managing partner Michael Smith says. With more

than 15 years of experience from working on and developing challenge courses and canopy tours in the U.S. and abroad, Smith decided to create his own company in 2009 to "create novel experiences that are highly memorable" for ages 8 and up (the minimum weight is 70 lbs). He drove around the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast to some 100 different potential locations for ArborTrek's first canopy tour and was eventually led to Smugglers' Notch.

"When I pulled into Smuggs, it was later in the evening, families were out walking around, and I said, 'This is a place where I would go on vacation with my family.' I felt really comfortable right away."

So right down the road from the Smuggs base area, Smith established ArborTrek headquarters, a bright yellow farmhouse adorned with oversized cut-outs of company mascot Arbor, a red-eyed tree frog direct from the Yucatan Peninsula. This is where groups meet their guides to suit up in harnesses, work gloves and helmets, and take a brief "ground school" class to learn and practice the fundamentals of zip lining.

At the beginning of our April tour, lead guide Nate gently ribs my friend Heidi for

her fear of becoming cold out on the course when it's a balmy 60 degrees out. While they are skilled, professional and obviously concerned about our safety, the ArborTrek guides are also highly personable, a characteristic that keeps the fun factor of our experience high from the get-go.

"I look for guides who are really passionate about life, love to share their story and hear other people's stories," Smith later explains. "There is something about each of them that is inspiring."

Once we've geared up, Nate and Josh distribute small black lanyards to attach our cameras to our harnesses so that our own photographic stories won't tumble down to the leaves during the tour. (Nate is also bringing along a camera to snap some shots, he tells us.) Then it's off to ground school, two platforms raised just a couple of feet off the grass where Nate and Josh demonstrate where to put our hands on the trolley that "zips" down the line and how to brake — by gently placing a hand on the top of the cable.

There are all sorts of braking systems for zip lines; many do the work for you. But the hand-brake method, Smith will tell me, fits with ArborTrek's immersive experience in the woods. "It's a much more engaging way to travel down the cable," he says, "than if you're just a sack of potatoes that's spinning around at the will of the wind."

But enough with the preparations. Now it's time for Eric, the bus driver, to shuttle the eight of us up to the top of Arbor's Wild Ride. I'm having such a blast watching everyone else take their first turn that I barely have time to think about the challenge ahead: simply letting go, trusting my equipment and my guides, and taking a moment to look around.

"As you go through the course, there's a story that unfolds, and that story changes by the group," Smith says later. "For some groups, there's the story of ecology and natural history; for others, it's about growing confident in their skills and abilities, so that at the end of it they feel



they've mastered something, whether that's a perceived fear of heights or just feeling the reward of something they thought they'd never be able to do."

For our group, it seems to be a combination of all of these. As the zip lines become progressively longer, ranging from 175 feet to 1,000 feet, the initial rush mingles with appreciation for the babbling brook below, the maples and hemlocks around us, and the killer views of Madonna Mountain. Sure, we're kept on our toes by challenges along the way — rappelling down a couple of platforms, walking across a suspension bridge. But apprehension is replaced by empowerment: we can fly! (And we can also stop ourselves quite gracefully without slamming into a tree, much to Nate's delight.)

Most of all, however, something sparkles in these treetops, beyond the sunlight-dappled water below or the distant ski slopes. Time slows down. We truly listen to each other. We are friends, families and guides merged into one cohesive unit, elegantly moving among the natural elements by way of trolleys, lanyards and cables without leaving a trace. And if one of us happens to hug a tree at each platform, well, so be it. We're all sharing something that we will never forget.

Some of us were nervous about getting out of our comfort zone. But when we reach the bittersweet moment of coming down from the trees and returning to ArborTrek headquarters to check out Nate's instant slideshow, the only discomfort I feel is above the neck. My cheeks hurt from laughing and smiling so much. "It's a very intense shared experience," says Smith. "Soaring through the trees, being able to be outside in a wild place, all of that is great; but what we're really in the business of doing is helping people to build great shared memories."

*Sarah Tuff is a writer and editor whose work has appeared in The New York Times, Runner's World and Skiing, among other publications. She is the co-author of 101 Best Outdoor Towns and lives in Shelburne, Vermont, with her husband and their two young children. Having taken the kids skiing at Smuggs, Tuff can't wait for them to try zip lining.*

ArborTrek Canopy Tours at Smugglers' Notch Resort offers multiple zip line canopy tours departing daily between 9:00 am and 4:00 pm. Reservations can be made online at [smuggs.com/canopy-tour](http://smuggs.com/canopy-tour) or by calling ArborTrek directly at (802) 644-9300 or by dialing x5300 from a Resort phone. Tours meet at the ArborTrek Welcome Center at 1239 Edwards Road, just a few minutes from the Resort entrance. All Smugglers' guests receive a 10 percent per person discount on the canopy tour, normally priced at \$99.95 per person, plus 6% sales tax and 1% booking fee. Complete information about the tour can be found at [smuggs.com/canopy-tour](http://smuggs.com/canopy-tour).



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