

## Tree Hugging

by Deborah Abrams Kaplan | September, 2013

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If you're afraid of heights, aerial trekking is one of the worst things you could do. Or one of the best, if forcing yourself to face the fear directly might cure you. Fortunately I can handle heights — as long as I know I'm safe. Still, climbing an unstable ladder to a tree platform several stories up induces heart palpitations. Even while harnessed in.

You may have already tried ziplining — its popularity has exploded world-wide over the past eight years, according to [ziplinenirvana.com](http://ziplinenirvana.com). Ziplining is one element of aerial trekking, moving from tree to tree while walking on planks, swinging logs, hanging barrels, netting and across rock climbing walls, all while clipped into a safety cable. Like ziplining, aerial

trekking is also rising in popularity. Only a few courses existed in the U.S. and Canada in 2005. Now there are more than 80. We tried our skills this summer at Flagstaff Extreme. My 12-year-old daughter Dori, brother-in-law Jim and I set out on the easiest of the four courses, not too far off the ground. After 30 minutes of training, we knew the rules: no more than three people on a tree platform at a time, no more than two on an action line (anything with a red cable extended between trees), and only one person on a ladder. You need to be hooked into a cable at all times with at least one carabiner — the other must be in the process of getting hooked in. You get one safety warning. If you need a second, you're kicked off the course without a refund.

Just because we weren't too high up when we started didn't mean it wasn't difficult and scary at times. Dori was my inspiration. I made her go before me, with the pretense that I'd be taking pictures of her. Many times my mantra was "if Dori can do that, so can I." I held on with two hands, but Jim challenged himself trying to cross each hands-free. At least for the first two courses, he was able to mostly do it, falling only once and hitting his shin on a board while the harness caught him.

I was amazed how many different types of obstacles they created. Of the 60 or so, very few repeated. I didn't realize how tired I was until we started climbing the first ladder in the third course. There were easily 20 to 30 rungs. The ladder was bolted at the top and bottom, but it was mobile, and so were the rungs.

While the ladder was physically challenging, for the first time it hit me that I might freak out and need help off, given that I was exhausted and we were high enough that I got scared looking down. To get off the course early, you have to yell "guide, guide, guide" and wait. A guide (they're stationed all around), will help you down.



Dori went before me on the ladder, and my heart started racing when she reached the top. The zipline ahead would be a piece of cake — it's the ladder that terrified me. It took all my focus to clip in, climb a step, sling my arm under the bar to hold on, unclip the bottom carabiner, move it higher, climb another step, unclip the bottom one, untangle the lines, clip in again, and repeat. *And not look down.*

I made it, and zipped across to the next tree, and completed several more crossings in that set. At the end of the third course, we talked about our next move: go even higher for the last (and hardest) course, or take the long ladder down and call it a day. Dori and I were too tired to continue up. We could see even more ladders in the trees ahead. Jim might have continued if there weren't big lines (the ladders are time consuming). So we made the journey down to drop off our harnesses and buy some well-deserved ice cream.

Dori was especially proud of herself for doing the courses, and admittedly, so was I. Aside from pictures, we had the sore upper arms and shoulders to help us remember the experience.

**Other Ziplining Adventure Courses:**

[Adirondack Extreme](#): If you're an East coaster, you can experience aerial challenges similar to Flagstaff Extreme's, but in New York. This course has you criss-crossing rivers – but from tree to tree.

[Go Ape Virginia Freedom Park](#): Take a break from Colonial Williamsburg and do something the early American settlers didn't do: zipline and walk the planks.

[Treetop Quest](#): Outside of Atlanta, this aerial obstacle course even comes with trivia questions before each new crossing, adding mental challenge to the physical.

To find a listing of ziplining and aerial trekking courses worldwide, check [ziplinenirvana.com](http://ziplinenirvana.com).

*Photos by Deborah Abrams Kaplan*

<http://agardenlife.com/article/2013/09/11/tree-hugging-ziplining>