

# OUT ON A LIMB

Up in the trees, our writer tests her balance and grit in the new Aerial Treetop Adventure, a labyrinth of ladders, unsteady bridges, and zip lines that's just the beginning of the new summer adventures awaiting you at the mountain.

BY JACKIE LEAVITT



"You know, Nick can run that in 22 seconds," brags Bill Quigley, Gunstock's 47-year-old sales and marketing director, his usually teasing face surprisingly serious as I step off the Indy Bridge and onto a platform 85 feet off the ground attached to a pine tree. I look back at a 100-foot-long suspension bridge with one- to four-foot gaps between each plank and raise my eyebrows in skepticism – my crossing took at least two minutes and I'm sweating from it. "He can," chimes in Jonah Fernald, 36, Gunstock's marketing coordinator, who stands calmly on the platform with his arms crossed, his marathon-running physique barely showing signs of strain from his own trip across.

I'll believe it when I see it, so I turn to Nick Fournier, my 23-year-old guide for Gunstock's Aerial Treetop Adventure (ATA) course, and issue the challenge. Fournier – who sports two giant faux-diamond earrings, which seem completely out of place next to his red, long-sleeved ATA uniform shirt and sensible khaki shorts – gazes at me momentarily to gauge whether I'm serious. In a second, he slings his red backpack onto the cedar platform where we stand, clips his two carabineers onto the red safety wire, and takes off in a full sprint. The bridge bounces and warbles like an angry snake with each step, but Fournier fumbles only once midway through. And the return trip is flawless – putting to shame my own journey across, when I had made careful and steady (read: painfully slow) lunges from one plank to the next.

It's just proof of how many hours Fournier spends in the trees, mastering the five courses of the ATA, and how inexperienced I seem to be, which (not going to lie) comes as bit of a surprise. As a regular indoor climber and recreational runner, I had arrived at Gunstock this 90-degree July morning puffed up with confidence that completing all the courses (designed by TreeGO to increase in difficulty from green to blue, silver, red, and finally, black) would be a breeze. Yet when facing challenges like the Indy Bridge, soon I'm feeling my self-assurance slip away like a leaky balloon. But that's just how the ATA works – challenging your supposed Tarzan-like abilities by putting your strength, balance, and, most importantly, your limits to the test.

It's also not the only activity at Gunstock to do so either. Premiering a month or two before my visit, the ATA is one of the three highly anticipated new summer activities in Gunstock's Mountain Adventure Park. Memorial Day saw the launch of the ATA park and guided off-road Segway tours, with the 8,591-foot-long ZipTour opening in September – the trifecta turning the mountain into a four-season resort for adrenaline seekers of all types.

The three activities are subtly woven around one another: The Segway tours' X-2 off-road models are super quiet when wheeling on the three miles of cross-country trails and backwoods roads underneath the ATA park, and the ZipTour zip line's ending platform lies in between the ATA's demonstration and black course. Even though my visit comes four months before the ZipTour's grand opening, people are already in line to be the first rider, with contenders including Governor John Lynch and Tiffany Eddy, New Hampshire's WMUR-TV celebrity.

My first taste of the ATA comes with the demonstration course, which is designed to do just that: give you a sampling of the larger challenges to come, just on a smaller scale. "[Here] you learn how to use certain elements that are applied later on in the more difficult courses," says ATA manager Pat McGonagle, his own 6-foot, 6-inch pine tree of a frame towering over the practice course, where I first meet him. The course includes ladders, a wire tightrope, a zip line, and a rope swing. Running through the whole course is a red-wire safety line that your harness is clipped in to for the



It's a balancing act for ATA adventurers when crossing the log bridges; (opposite) the red course's suspension bridge foreshadows the black course's longer, higher Indy Bridge.

(BOTH PHOTOS ON THIS SPREAD) JONAH FERNALD



duration – so if you lose your balance and fall, the wire and harness support you.

Despite that, it's still tough to put your trust into something as skinny as that wire. While preparing to cross the course's tightrope wire, Quigley tells me just to test my weight first. For the first time, uncertainty automatically grips my stomach like a cramp as I look down. OK, so the drop's only a few feet, but, hey, it's hard to let go, even if I know my fear is completely irrational. I'm not afraid of heights, per se (unlike my other companion, Fernald), but I'm terrified of falling – a souvenir from breaking my wrist in first grade and then my arm a year later, both from short drops. I gingerly lean back, letting the wire hold more and more of my weight, until I finally lift up my feet – and laugh nervously with relief as I swing under the wire, the knot in my stomach unraveling.

Needless to say, I graduate to the first-level green course. Since I'm second in line, I get the benefit of watching

Quigley complete the challenges first, but that still doesn't stop me from feeling like a sailor without my sea legs as I wobble and sway my way through, using trial and error to figure out the challenges. For example, I quickly discover that on the swinging wood planks, it's best to hold on to the side ropes suspending the planks rather than the red safety line running above my head (otherwise, the element sways out to either side of you while you cling to the wire). A little while later, I climb into a large wooden barrel headfirst before I realize I need to have my feet coming out the other end in order to step down, so I have to somersault around inside the two-foot-wide tunnel.

About midway through the blue course, I find myself relaxing a bit as we progress, laughing at myself and my companions as we compare notes on the best ways to cross the obstacles. We can't help but poke fun at each other and the more unusual challenges. "Stilettoes would do wonders on this," Fernald jokes as we make our way

– stepping, then swinging forward – across the series of U-shaped ropes. I look back at him, picturing the salt-and-pepper haired Fernald in a pair of pumps.

On the easier courses, the guides tend to hover on the ground "like fairies," as Quigley says, but eventually migrate upward with their group as the courses get higher off the forest floor. Throughout the day, guides get up on the course a minimum of four or five times, and there's always someone in the black course, just in case guests need help or don't want to finish the level. As our group scampers along, Fournier follows our route like a mother duck from the ground, casually tossing up advice, like rather than walk, run across the long suspension bridge because it won't bounce and sway as much (which I refuse to believe until I actually try it).

Fournier has been working at Gunstock for the past 10 years, turning into a jack-of-all-trades by hopping from one wintertime department to the next, including lift

operations, ticket booth sales, and the Learning Center. But being an ATA guide has a particular appeal to him. "You're not sitting in an office all day like everyone else," he says. "I just want to be outside. I work five days a week so I'm in the trees all day, every day pretty much."

I have a quick flash to my own desk, tucked into an air-conditioned brick building and littered with papers, sticky notes, and deadline dates among my computer and phone. I can't help but wish I could move everything into the trees, too. But as I try to copy Fournier by zipping upside down on the red course's 275-foot zip line, I'm definitely not dwelling on my desk anymore. In fact, I barely notice that with each new course, we are gradually getting farther away from the ground.

That's something that creeps up on other ATA climbers, too, including 23-year-old Amanda Carvill, who completed the first three levels with her partner 28-year-old Cameron White the same day as me, before deciding to leave the last two levels for another visit. "I don't think you even focus on [the height]; you're just trying to get to the next landing," she says. "Then looking at it from down here, you're like, 'Holy cow!' But once you get up there and you do it, it's an adrenaline rush and you just go."

Put simply, you lose track of where you are. That is, until you start looking around. A couple times I stop (once, accidentally resting my hand in a river of sap on a platform's pine tree) to take in the view. The forest floor stretches below me; a six-foot-wide creek winds between the 150-foot-tall pine trees that filter the sunlight but still allow for a gentle breeze. With each course that I advance through, that stream gets smaller



(Clockwise from this photo) The barrel challenge has some visitors crawling on hands and knees before somersaulting around inside to exit feet-first; the most difficult course (black) hovers 100 feet up in the air; a guest does his best Temple of Doom imitation on the 100-foot-long Indy Bridge.

and smaller, giving me perspective about how high up I really am – eventually 100 feet off the forest floor. I also notice that the challenges are also turning into scarier, bigger brothers to the ones I’ve already completed: Swinging log bridges begin to have larger gaps between steps; wire and wood walkways turn into circus-like tightrope walks; a simple Tarzan swing evolves into me rolling across a 12-foot chasm on something resembling a skateboard.

On those harder challenges in the black course, I try to use my earlier lessons in balancing, which begin well, but don’t always end quite as elegantly. “Did you used to be part of a circus?” Quigley asks as I tiptoe delicately onto a swinging log. But it doesn’t take me long to realize I had gone the wrong way, tangling my harness in the ropes suspending the element, which causes me to swing back and forth on the log, clutching the ropes and safety wire in a death grip. Once I have a semblance of balance, I backtrack and start the obstacle over, just glad I didn’t fall. “Well, it began gracefully,” I defend myself as I try it again, the boys chuckling at my expense.

Besides the apparent comic relief you encounter while watching friends get themselves into awkward positions, one of the best parts is hearing people’s reactions when coming upon a new course challenge. Take, for example, what Quigley and Fernald call the “Oh No Rings” on the black course, where you use the metal rings like stepping stones to swing your way across the five-foot gap (which seems much larger when trying it). “[This one guest] looked up and said, ‘Ohhh no...’” says Quigley of the guy’s reaction. Thus, the name stuck.

I can definitely commiserate as I near the end. “A lot of people say to me before they go up, ‘I just get to go through once?’” says McGonagle. “And 99.9 percent of the people who come down from that black ladder say, ‘I’m done!’”

While I may not be reacting the same way, I certainly feel a wave of accomplishment – and relief – as I step off that last ladder rung. No, I may not be Tarzan or Indiana Jones, but I certainly feel like I’ve earned my bragging rights. Maybe that’s enough to call me Indiana Jackie – at least for the day. ❖



Segway tours go off-road at Gunstock; (left) zipping through the trees in the ATA.

## COMPLETING THE TRIFECTA

You’ll be zipping and wheeling your way into more adventures with these other two new attractions, which premiered alongside the Aerial Treetop Adventure.

### ZIPTOUR ZIP LINES

The 8,591-foot ZipTour – with the longest zip line segments in the Continental U.S. – sends you from Gunstock’s summit to Pistol Peak (3,981 feet) and back to the base (3,809 feet), crossing runs like the Recoil Glades and Blundersmoke Park. With two lines set side by side, you can ride in-tandem with a friend, either speeding up to 56 miles per hour or slowing it down with a self-braking device (even stopping midway) for a scenic cruise.

### OFF-ROAD SEGWAY TOURS

During this six-person, two- to three-hour guided tour, you take special off-road Segways through Cobble Mountain’s cross-country trails, the Wetlands Boardwalk, and past the ski jump complex on Mount Rowe. Along the way, guides also expound upon Gunstock’s history, the area’s flora and fauna, and the year-round events and activities that make the Lakes Region famous.