

WORDS: Tessa Buhrmann
 PICS: Drakensberg Canopy Tour /
 Karkloof Canopy Tour

...we are proud to work closely with the communities within which we operate. Each Canopy Tour site is located in rural areas where we have helped to uplift local communities by training locals to become guides; thereby providing a vital source of income and employment.

'Watch out for that tree...'



Call me a wimp, if you will, but the thought of careering through the tree tops at breakneck speed was not really my cup of tea! But I was committed... daybreak brought dull rainy weather, 'a reprieve' I thought gleefully - alas no, the Drakensberg Canopy Tour operates in all weather (except thunder storms). Even my mind was toying with me, with the lyrics from the movie 'George of the Jungle' repeating themselves in my head... 'George, George, George of the Jungle... watch out for that tree...'

Needless to say, my fears slowly abated as we began the safety briefing and demonstration - our group of six adults and two children (yep, age six and ten) were assured by our guides that strict safety procedures are in place and that we would be connected to either the cable or platform at all times. We were then ready to be kitted up with a full body harness, pulley, gloves and safety helmet - all equipment including pulleys and carabineers carry standard safety certification ratings. With the full body harness fitting snugly around my waist, the last of my nervousness wore off - the weather too seemed to be in tune, as the clouds were lifting and the drizzle subsiding.

Our single-file descent into the Blue Grotto Forest along a damp footpath seemed to heighten the tension and excitement, the forest had taken a magical appearance, the leaves shimmering jewel-like after the rain. As we entered the 'Rabbit Hole' (all the platforms are named), I certainly felt like Alice, and wondered after all, if this was perhaps the cup of tea I was indeed looking for...

The scenery high up in the forest is spectacular, we were surrounded by ancient Yellowwoods and gigantic Red Pear trees, cliff faces that seem to defy gravity, forest ferns and tree orchids - nature in all her incredible splendour. Pause a while and listen to the sound of water and melodious bird calls... the sound of pulley against zip-cable pulls me back to reality, reminding me why I am here - the adventure had begun.

The exhilarating three-hour ride starts gently, reaching a climax in both speed and length towards the middle, and just as your confidence level is at its greatest, you seem to reach the end. There are 12 slides in total ranging between 40 and 170 metres long and up to 60 metres above the ground, each criss-crossing the forest, from cliff to cliff and tree to tree - an engineering feat of note, made all the more amazing by the incredibly small footprint that was left in the construction process. Great consideration was taken to disturb as little vegetation as possible, and the wooden platforms encircling the trees are attached with great care so as not to harm them - we had to dodge the occasional branch on the platform as even these were accommodated and not just removed for convenience sake. All platforms and walkways are discreetly tucked into the forest canopy, and are virtually invisible from hikers on the forest floor below.

What makes this a very special eco-adventure are the interesting features or facts about the surrounding ecology imparted by the knowledgeable local guides, all of which are employed from local communities. Our guide pointed out the nest of the Greater Double-collared

Sunbird in the trees above 'Mushroom', told us about the fiery gin that could be made by partly crushing the leaves of the Knobwood and soaking them in cane spirit, and the fact that a remedy to treat headaches, heartburn and coughs is made from the roots of the Cape Ash.

As I whizzed my way across the forest canopy I was now able to look down and appreciate the incredible view, see the water tumbling over the cliff into the Blue Grotto, and watch out for the beautiful Cape Chestnut in all its splendour - being adorned with pink flowers certainly made it easier to spot. What began as an obligation, ended with me standing on the circular platform of the magnificent Outeniqua Yellowwood (aptly named 'Madiba'), high above ground level and who knows how tall, wishing I was about to set off on my first slide and not my last.

All the Canopy Tours, of which there are five in South Africa, have been designed and built by Mark Brown, a qualified civil engineer. Mark's first encounter with the concept of canopy tours was in the lush rainforests of Costa Rica, where in 1999 he became involved in the building of a tour, this sparked the idea of what he wanted to do in South Africa. The original concept of slides in trees was used to aid adventurous scientists desperate to study the diversity of animal life habituating the upper-levels of rain forests. It wasn't long before this developed into a breathtaking eco-tourism activity that not only allowed people to enter and experience the upper realm of a rainforest, but raised awareness

of the plight and beauty of the world's endangered indigenous forests.

On his return Mark set out to find big trees; these he found in Tsitsikamma and together with Ashley Wentworth of Stormsriver Adventures opened the first canopy tour in the Tsitsikamma forest in 2001, followed by Karkloof, Magaliesberg, Magoebaskloof and now the Drakensberg. The next exciting new Canopy Tour to be completed will be in the Malolotja Nature Reserve, Swaziland (opening April/May 2010). Environmental impact studies are undertaken prior to construction to ensure that the canopy tours do not harm the surrounding forest ecology in any way. Strict environmental management plans are adhered to and the construction of South Africa's Canopy Tours are carried out with the approval of the relevant government departments.

When Anton Barnes invited me to experience his Karkloof Canopy Tour near Howick, there was no hesitation! I was looking forward to another unforgettable adventure, sliding from one platform to another along steel cables set in spectacular natural surroundings.

As 'Murphy' would have it, the day I chose was misty and dull, Anton assured us that this would not detract from the experience. He told us that when he took his first slide at Tsitsikamma, he never dreamed that it would lead to the introduction of canopy tours to his piece of Karkloof forest and become what it is today, a part of KwaZulu-Natal's growing tourism industry. He invited Mark from Canopy Tours SA to the Karkloof forest, to 'monkey

around the treetops' in an attempt to establish a route for the new tour - the result today is seven viewing decks, joined by nearly a kilometre of heavy-duty steel cable zigzagging down a pristine valley of indigenous forest.

Once again I was safely strapped into my full-body, state of the art climbing harness and being led by Thula, a locally trained canopy guide, to start the adventure. The forest had an ethereal appearance with the mist swirling through the trees, the platforms and treetops playing hide-and-seek, almost taunting us to come and find them. Anton was right... stepping off the platform when you cannot see where you are going seemed to amplify the adrenalin - on the long slides, several of which are over 150m long I was unable to see the platform on the other end - move over Alice here comes Jane (in this particular instance I was thinking 'gorillas in the mist' Jane, not Tarzan's Jane).

This time I really did need to 'watch out for that tree', as two of the slides have you sliding slowly up to a tree that just happens to be in the way - I was once again impressed by Canopy Tours SA's commitment to touching the forest as lightly as possible. Sliding slowly just didn't work for me... hasn't anyone heard of gravity? On both occasions I almost straddled the tree, much to the delight of my teenage sons, before continuing the rest of the way.

The platforms are built high in or above the forest canopy and all offer different views of the proud giant Yellowwoods, Stinkwoods and



Great consideration was taken to disturb as little vegetation as possible, and the wooden platforms encircling the trees are attached with great care so as not to harm them...



Conferences & Team Building:

Besides being an ideal place to stay for your Drakensberg Canopy Tours experience, the Drakensberg Sun and Lifestyle Resort offers visitors breathtaking views and fresh mountain air. The hotel has a proven track record for hosting seminars, conferences, banquets and intimate special occasion functions, and a variety of packages are available ranging from one-day packages to 24-hour fully inclusive packages.

Various on-site team-building activities are available on request. The Canopy Tours experience adds another dimension to the teambuilding on offer and is an excellent activity that brings people together and allows everyone to relax and have a blast in an awesome setting. It is a fun social activity that suits almost everyone.

Management and staff at the Drakensberg Sun and Lifestyle Resort are passionate about the environment and participate in a number of environmental and community projects. They are extremely proud to have achieved Platinum Status in the Heritage Environmental Rating Programme.

drakconf@southern.sun.com
www.southern.sun.com



Community Upliftment

'At Canopy Tours South Africa we are proud to work closely with the communities within which we operate. Each Canopy Tour site is located in rural areas where we have helped to uplift local communities by training locals to become guides; thereby providing a vital source of income and employment.' states Mark Brown.

The owners of the Drakensberg Canopy Tour desire to see the local area socially uplifted. As such, a decision was made to only employ people from the surrounding communities as the guides for the tour. Drakensberg Canopy tour currently has 18 full time guides, two drivers and two domestic workers all from local communities. That means that 22 households are being supported on a full time basis by the Drakensberg Canopy Tour - this is impressive when you consider that the average household in these communities comprises of ± 7 people. 'Africa needs TRADE not AID; and businesses like the Canopy Tours are providing opportunities for trade by bringing tourists into the area as well as providing long term sustainable employment. This combination should ultimately see the local community uplifted.' says Kai Schultz of African Fig.



Ironwoods, a magnificent 20m waterfall, clear sparkling forest streams and an expansive view across the Karkloof valley far below, so I was told. Thula assured us that on a clear day you can see Durban, something of an exaggeration, but we forgave him his creative licence.

Besides the breathtaking view and pristine environment, bird lovers will delight in the abundant bird life with the opportunity of spotting Knysna Loeries, Emerald Cuckoos, a wide variety of Raptors, perhaps even the illusive Narina Trogon or endangered Cape Parrot. The forest is also home to several mammals, most common of which is the Samango monkey, whose loud calls and fearless tree swinging soon alert visitors to its presence.

Karkloof Canopy Tours has created work opportunities for the locals as the tour is essentially operated and managed by members of the local

community, and this has brought much needed revenue to the area of Karkloof. This same team were involved in the construction of the canopy tour from inception, under the watchful eye of Canopy Tours SA staff. Not only have they received vital skills training, they have also learnt the essential climbing and safety techniques required to graduate them to becoming the guides of the canopy tour.

A Canopy Tour experience is something for everyone between the ages of 7 and 70, and are great for nature lovers, families, corporate groups and thrill seekers alike - one thing is for sure, do it once and you'll have to come back a second time!

Contact details:

- www.canopytour.co.za
- www.drakensbergcanopytour.co.za
- www.karkloofcanopytour.co.za

EXPERIENCE SOUTH AFRICA'S FASTEST GROWING OUTDOOR ADVENTURE!

Canopy Tours[®] South Africa

www.canopytour.co.za

Magaliesberg 014 535 0150	Karkloof 033 330 3415	Tsitsikamma 042 281 1836	Magoebaskloof 083 866 1546	Drakensberg 083 661 5691	Swaziland +268 644 2948
-------------------------------------	---------------------------------	------------------------------------	--------------------------------------	------------------------------------	-----------------------------------