

# Weekend Leisure

## DRAKENSBERG CANOPY TOUR: WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- The Drakensberg Canopy Tour costs R450, lasts about three hours and includes a light meal.
- It accommodates individuals, couples and groups up to a maximum of eight per group. Participants should be between the ages of seven and 70, and weigh less than 120 kg.
- It starts with a safety briefing, after which you are kitted out in a full body harness, pulley, gloves and safety helmet.
- The group is transported in an open vehicle to the start of the tour and back to the base camp at the

- end.
- There is a short, steep walk out of the valley at the end of the tour, but nothing that would require excessive fitness levels.
- The Drakensberg Lifestyle Resort, where I was hosted for the weekend, is only a short drive to the Canopy Tour reception. It offered quality accommodation, good food and a range of activities to keep two small boys busy enough for two days.
- For more information, e-mail [info@drakensbergcanopytour.co.za](mailto:info@drakensbergcanopytour.co.za) or telephone 083 661 5691.



PHOTO: ADVENTURE FOOTAGE

Through the forest.

# Freefall to serenity

The new Drakensberg Canopy Tour in the Central Berg will leave you feeling as spiritually enriched and physically rejuvenated as any expensive spa treatment, writes SHARON DELL.



GET ready for some unapologetic superlatives: having the chance to enjoy the Drakensberg Canopy Tour, formally launched last weekend, was quite simply the highlight of my year.

From the time you enter the Rabbit Hole — the aptly named entry point into the bird-rich Blue Grotto Forest on land owned by the Drakensberg Sun Lifestyle Resort where the network of slides await — the enchantment begins.

It's a sublime, elevated world in which you have the opportunity to commune with the upper reaches of stately, ancient Yellowwoods and gigantic Red Pear trees, meet colourful sun birds at eyelevel, listen to the fall of water and gaze down upon a rich kaleidoscope of indigenous tree tops, including the dazzling pink blooms of the Cape Chestnut.

And, of course, there's the sheer joy of the slides — 12 of them ranging between 40 and 170 metres long and up to 60 metres above the ground — which take you on an exhilarating three-hour zig-zagging journey through the valley. Each zip-cable (or foefie slide as South Africans may better know it) is linked by discretely positioned wooden platforms, which hug perpendicular rock faces by means of some clever engineering feat, which I didn't fully understand and preferred to think of as magic.

Keeping a firm eye on reality (just as well someone was) were lead guide Simon Mabuza and safety guide Richard Hlophe, who, not only paid meticulous attention to the safety of each member of our six-person tour party (at no point in the tour are you untethered), clipped us safely on and off the slides' steel cables, told us when to go and stop, but regaled us with information and anecdotes about the forest vegetation, and welcomed us to each of the 14 uniquely named platforms.

All I had to do was enjoy the ride.



PHOTO: ADVENTURE FOOTAGE  
A cliff-face platform.

Oh yes ... And remember to apply my "hand brake" (you literally pull down on the cable with your gloved hand to slow yourself down) towards the end of some of the faster slides.

The slides start off rather gently, reaching a climax in both length and speed towards the middle of the tour. Some of the later slides take you through narrow spaces between trees, which brings an interesting dimension to the final stages.

The tour is cleverly designed to build confidence levels, so don't let vertigo or any other fears come between you and this experience. You also have the option of sliding in tandem with a guide, if necessary.

Designed by civil engineer Mark Brown, the Drakensberg Canopy Tour is the fifth of its kind in South Africa and was four years in the planning, owing to stringent environmental impact assessment procedures.

I was fortunate to have on my tour a range of seasoned canopy tour "ex-



PHOTO: ADVENTURE FOOTAGE  
Civil engineer and canopy tour designer Mark Brown briefly joined our tour.



PHOTO: ADVENTURE FOOTAGE  
Lead guide Simon Mabuza.

perts": Tsitsikamma Canopy Tour founder Ashley Wentworth and his wife Fiona, Anton Barnes of Karkloof Canopy Tour and his wife Amoranda, and Graham Baum, himself a fully trained canopy tour guide and son of the owners of the Magaliesberg tour.

All of them seemed impressed with the most recent addition to the canopy tours family and were highly complimentary of Brown's discrete and elegant design, which has managed to keep the slide system well-hidden from the view of Berg hikers and its impact on the natural environment to a bare minimum.

Brown's first encounter with the canopy tour concept was in 1999, when he became involved in building a tour in the Central American country of Costa Rica where the slides — originally created to aid scientists studying the upper-level ecology of rain forests — were a popular ecotourist activity.

"Immediately, I knew what I wan-



PHOTO: ADVENTURE FOOTAGE  
Wooden walkways up to the cliff.

ted to do," Brown told me. "I came back to Cape Town via Argentina and started to look for big trees in which to build a similar tour."

He found them in Tsitsikamma and, together with Ashley Wentworth, founder of Stormsriver Adventures, opened the first canopy tour in the forest in 2001.

Karkloof came next, followed by Magaliesberg Canopy Tour outside Johannesburg, in 2004, Magoebaskloof Canopy Tour near Tzaneen, in 2008 and, now, the Drakensberg.

Owned by Wentworth and Brown, Canopy Tours SA holds all licensing rights to all canopy tours in South Africa.

A new tour is opening in Swaziland, in January, and the company is currently eyeing a potential site in Uganda.

Brown said the slides meet general engineering standards, and cables are technically strong enough to have a car hang from them. The statistics he gave me were all academic:

I never felt unsafe at any point.

Open to anyone between the ages of seven and 70, the tour also offers the potential for a strong bonding experience. As Brown said at the ribbon-cutting ceremony at the Drakensberg Canopy Tour base-camp building, which has been built around an enormous plane tree, it's an activity that will have both fathers and their 10-year-old offspring grinning with delight, and grandparents able to prove to the youngsters that they still know how to have fun.

Judging from the camaraderie I experienced in my group, I would imagine it's also pretty effective as a team-building exercise.

Adding value to the tour, and working in partnership with Canopy Tours SA, is a company called Adventure Footage, which takes photographs and a video footage of each tour, so you don't need to carry your own camera, unless you really want to.

So, for an additional R145 you can take home a double-disc package containing photographs and 25 minutes of video footage through which you can relive the fun and show off to your friends.

Like Canopy Tours SA, which draws its guides from local communities, Adventure Footage managing owner Matthew Smith said his company also has a strict policy of hiring and training local residents. It currently employs 15 people at three canopy tour sites, including Tsitsikamma, Magaliesberg and the Berg.

Any kind of development, particularly those in pristine natural areas, raises alarm bells. However, the Drakensberg Canopy Tour is as much a nature trail as an adventure activity, and it left me feeling surprisingly relaxed, "at one" with the world, and ready to do it all over again.

• Watch the video footage at [www.witness.co.za](http://www.witness.co.za)