

A happy and confident family spans one of ArborTrek's suspension bridges.





Learning to Fly

Adventures happen near the Notch at ArborTrek

It's not every day you find yourself in this situation. I'm standing in an Eastern hemlock, wearing a helmet and shoulder and waist harnesses, and clipped to a half-inch steel cable. The cable is all that connects me to my ultimate destination—a tiny unseen platform halfway up another tree. My guide, Jamie, explains that all I need to do is step off the platform where I stand, and I'll hurtle 800 feet through the air at nearly 35 miles per hour. "When you're almost there, look for Josh, the other guide," says Jamie. "He'll give you the brake signal."

I'm at platform number three on the ArborTrek Canopy Tour at Smugglers' Notch in Jeffersonville, Vermont, near the town of Stowe. What is a canopy tour, you wonder? It's feeling the cool, dark quiet of a hemlock forest, seeing views of Mount Mansfield and the Notch, and getting the adrenaline rush of an amusement ride. It's learning to trust your guides, your equipment, their setup . . . and yourself.



An ArborTrek guide delivers a natural history lesson to a group. Right: Another guide descends the zip line toward a platform with a waiting group.

Meeting the Locals

For a more technical definition of “canopy tour,” here’s ArborTrek founder and president Michael Smith’s definition: “It’s a series of zip lines and bridges under the canopy of the forest,” he says. In the case of the Smuggs tour, it is eight zip lines, two suspension bridges, and two rappels out of trees.

After studying wilderness leadership as an undergrad at Arizona’s Prescott College and earning a master’s degree in management and training from Oakland University in his home state of Michigan, Michael spent most of the first decade of the millennium leading adventure programming for schoolkids, writing rock-climbing guidebooks, and building canopy tours—often worldwide.

Michael founded ArborTrek Canopy Adventures in 2010, and now the company operates two sites year-round. His other company, AdventureSmith, provides services to other companies. The operation at Smugglers’ Notch employs 40 to 50 people in the peak seasons—summer and autumn—and fewer than 10 during the more scaled-back, slower times. For Michael, the interactions he has with his staff and customers are reason to continue to grow the company. “We hire people who are passionate about what they do. It’s infectious, and our customers see that,” he says.

Another operator might not have gotten to know the locals as well, but Michael sourced nearly all of his construction labor and supplies locally. “We spent a lot of time getting to know the location of this tour. And we hired all local people when we built,” says Michael.

He was surprised and impressed with the level of talent and knowledge among the locals. “They were climbers and arborists . . .



but none of them had ever been on a zip tour before!" he says. The same was true when he went through the permitting process; nobody had ever worked on a project of this kind. It was steep learning curve for everyone involved. "I can't say enough about the local nature and flora," he says.

A Perfect Match

When Michael first started looking for a place to build a canopy tour, he knew he was looking for a ski resort. But which one? He met with resort managers nationwide, but there was always a sticking point. "I would ask them 'What is your core business?'" Michael says. "Over and over, they would say skiing." Not a satisfactory answer, says Michael.

Then he met with Bill Stritzler, managing director of Smugglers' Notch. Bill made no mistake about his company's mission: "Our purpose is to exhaust people's children." For years, Smuggs has focused on families—and children in particular. "It was clear from the beginning to me that Smuggs' focus and purpose was very consistent with the kind of business that I wanted to build," Michael says. A partnership was born.

The ArborTrek operation at Smugglers' Notch is located in a quiet forest of hemlocks and sugar maples—not on the extreme top of Madonna Mountain (where weather and difficulty might limit the operation). There are three tour options that depend on guests' ages and interests: 1) the Canopy Tour filled with zip lines and adrenaline rushes; 2) the Treetop Obstacle Course (with more than 70 obstacle elements with increasing height off the ground and difficulty levels, and culminating with the Eliminator, a moving series of hanging steps that require roped-in participants to jump from step to step); the Apple Creek section of the obstacle course offers challenges to families with children as young as four years; and 3) The Climbing Adventure, a series of vertical tree climbs and climbing obstacles that range from easy to extreme.

"They are novelty experiences," says Scott Walters, manager of ArborTrek at the Smuggs operation. "But I measure success by our repeat business and the numbers of people who come back." What makes

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people return? It's not, says Michael, the biggest zip line or the biggest thrill. "With us, it's about programming," he says, "having great guides and forging great connections."

Stepping Off

"What differentiates an average tour from an extraordinary tour?" Michael asks. "An extraordinary tour has a story to tell; it's not just a thrill ride." ArborTrek goes to great lengths, then, to train staff—not just in the safety features and necessities inherent to activities like zip lines and adventure courses. Guides expound on local and natural history. One guide told his group about the invasive woolly adelgid, a tiny, punctuation-mark-sized insect that threatens all Eastern hemlock forests. Guides can be gentle and understanding in ways that can make the difference between participating and giving up for a nervous guest.

"That we have the best technology and we meet safety standards . . . all of this is important and expected," Michael says. "Where we excel is that we do it in a more local, more family-friendly way."

Make no mistake. ArborTrek runs a lot of people through their program. "Sure, it can get tedious," Scott admits. But he points to the training that the staff goes through and what motivates the staff to work here in the first place. "They're outdoorsy, and they're 'people' people," he says.

And ArborTrek puts staffers through 60 to 80 hours of training. "We have Scenario Days, Practical Days, and a written test,"





Arbor the Frog visits the Treetop Obstacle Course. "You never know when Arbor will show up," says Michael Smith.

Opposite: A family poses with their guide for a group photo after completing Ground School and before entering the canopy tour.

he says. Scott pauses as he thinks back to when he first joined the ArborTrek team after stints as a physical education teacher and years in sales and marketing. "I've never felt better prepared for a job than when I started here," he says.

Back out in the woods, I stand next to my guide Jamie at the edge of my platform. Just step off, he reminds me, keep my body straight by gently turning my arms, and look for Josh on the far platform for the brake signal. I check my helmet and inhale deeply, smelling the fresh scent of hemlocks and a Vermont forest in springtime. I leap off and feel the wind in my face. I hear the whine of the cable increasing as I fly across the zip line toward the other side. ❁

ArborTrek Canopy Adventures

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