

LOSING THE Fear of Flying



Ziplining through the ancient foliage of the Blue Grotto forest in South Africa, **CHARUKESI RAMADURAI** experiences flight of another kind

I had never thought I would find myself 65 metres above the ground, hanging on for dear life. And doing this of my own volition. I'm not the particularly adventurous type, preferring to get all cultured out through museums and concerts while on holiday.

Though it is a bit of an overstatement to say that I was hanging on for dear life. After all, I was tethered in three places as I zipped across the steel cables in the heart of the dense Blue Grotto forest.

Here, in the midlands of South Africa, they call it the 'Canopy Tour,' a nod to the lush canopy formed by the venerable trees of this forest located in the Khahlamba-Drakensberg Park. This UNESCO World Heritage site encompasses the Drakens-

berg mountain range, roughly translated as Dragon's Back from Afrikaans, which stretches on for 200 kilometres.

The canopy tour site was a short walk away from the Drakensberg Sun Valley resort, where I was staying. At the site, we went through a detailed safety briefing, after which we were kitted out and harnessed. My guide's name was Promise; in my super

nervous state, I took it as a divine signal. Promise was a local who had been doing this for five years, a woman with a gentle smile and (as I discovered later) endless reserves of patience.

A vista of lofty trees all around. An occasional glint off the thin ribbon of river way below. The novel sensation of flying straight on to a waterfall.

Then there was the bumpy jeep ride into the forest, followed by a long walk to the starting point. Sharp sunlight was soon lost to us, as we found ourselves surrounded by ancient yellowwoods, cape chestnut trees, red pear trees and tall pines. The two accompanying guides kept up a constant comforting chatter but I was preoccupied with morbid thoughts of the adventure ahead.

Let's get this over with already.

The first slide, aptly called the Rabbit Hole, was very short and easy, meant to lure me into a sense of false security. At the next stop, reached through a walk

over a wobbly hanging bridge, I found that I could barely see the other end of the zipline on the other hill. There was no turning back. This was just the beginning. And there were 12 such platforms perched on treetops and cliff faces to cross before reaching the end.

We had been told all this before, but seeing it on a map and doing it were two different things.

My guide Elijah went first, performing all kinds of tricks to reassure us of how utterly effortless and safe the whole thing was. "Easy for him," I muttered under my breath, as he waved both his hands while mid-air and turned somersaults in harness. He whistled and sang, even as I found it difficult to take normal breaths.

When my turn came, I got harnessed again and brought long-forgotten prayers to my mind.

I found that the toughest thing here (as in life, chimed my inner philosopher) was to let go. I had to assume a sitting position, stretch my legs and just launch myself into thin air.

Trouble struck at the end of the third slide. That was when I braked too early by pressing on the cable. I misread my guide's signal and went sliding back on the line.

We had been given clear instructions on what to do in such situations. We were to turn back and crawl our short way back to the platform, monkey style. But panic took over and I just hung on screaming for help till my guide came and towed me to safety. I admit that this is not a moment I am particularly proud of, but what can I say, I am not a monkey.



After a few initial hiccups, embarrassingly captured on video for posterity, I actually began to enjoy myself. The Drakensberg mountains, and particularly the Blue Grotto Forest, offer several popular hiking trails for all levels of walkers. The canopy

were times when I went zipping through a large tree on one side and a rock jutting out on the other. But by then, I was in Tarzan (or Jane, if you will) mode, happy to fly from these ancient treetops.

I lingered at the end of the tour, however, offered something no hike could: a bird's eye view of the spectacular mountain. A vista of lofty trees above, below and all around. An occasional glint off the thin ribbon of river way below.

The novel sensation of flying straight on to a waterfall. And of course, the company of birds at eye level; there are over 150 avian species in this forest alone, including the Greater Double-collared Sunbird and the much rarer Bush Blackcap.

Each of the platforms has been built to harmonise with the existing natural feature: cliff face, waterfall, tree trunk. So, there

lin rush, I wondered why I had fussed so much. Bring it on once more!

The Canopy Tour

The entire activity takes approximately three hours and costs R495 per person, including all equipment, guides, transport to the starting point and refreshments afterwards. Visit www.drakensbergcanopytour.co.za for more information.

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