

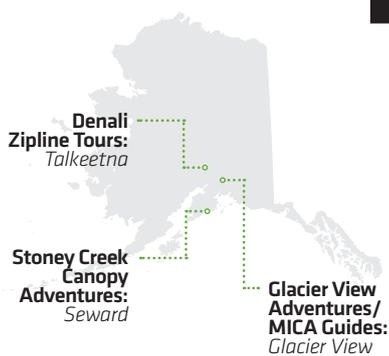


TRY THIS

## Airborne in Alaska

Ziplines are finally taking hold in Southcentral Alaska

BY LISA MALONEY



Ziplining through the forest canopy.

**“WOULD YOU LIKE TO GO FIRST this time?”**

Sierra, one of the guides for the Stoney Creek Canopy Adventures zipline tour, looks at me, waiting for my answer. SCCA, located in Seward, is the third and newest zipline to open in Southcentral. I stare down the longest of its eight zips—a graceful arc of cable that stretches some 1,200 feet. On the opposing platform the other guide, Mike, is reduced to a tiny figure in khaki shorts and a green shirt.

“Sure,” I say. I step across the small wooden platform, wrapped around the trunk of a hulking hemlock tree. There are plenty of things that terrify me, but high places aren’t one of them—so I’m surprised to feel a tingle of nerves.

Sierra attaches the Petzl trolley, dangling

from my full-body harness, to the cable first—this is the part that actually rolls along the cable, supporting my weight—followed by two backup leashes. I do just what they showed me in “ground school” at the start of this adventure: gloved left hand on the trolley, gloved right hand on top of that, with its heavy leather palm pad that I can press on the cable behind the trolley as a brake. I sit down in the harness, take a deep breath, and commit: The instant I lift my feet, I start sliding down the arc of the cable, picking up speed.

I can’t help but hoot, flinging my legs forward because it feels like sitting in a porch swing—if the swing were zipping along a cable at 35 miles per hour. I stare at the lily pads in the pond below

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF STONEY CREEK CANOPY ADVENTURES



[LEFT] Zipping over Reflection Pond. [RIGHT] The author pauses for a quick photo on the first of two rappels during the Stone Creek Canopy Adventures tour.

me, the reaching branches of nearby trees that can't quite catch me. As I pass the low point in the cable's arc and start zipping uphill, my momentum slowly bleeds off. The heavier you are and the wetter things are, the faster you go—but I'm not very big, and this is an unusually dry day in the temperate rainforest around Seward. I get within arm's reach of the far platform; Mike reaches out, grabs my harness and pulls me in, saving me from having to haul myself in hand-over-hand.

Once Mike has me clipped into the safety anchors on this new platform, he whacks the cable three times with his hand—a signal to Sierra that the line is clear for the next client. The whirring buzz of wheels on cable—*zzzziiiiip!*—tells me where ziplines get their name from, as the next passenger comes down the line, growing slowly from doll size to human size as he swoops in for a graceful landing.

The highest platform on this tour is about 75 feet tall; if anybody in our little group of three had changed their mind, the last chance for a graceful bailout was the steps leading up to the first platform. After that, the only way down is for the guides to build an anchor off the cables and use a rope to lower the person to the ground. Often, Mike and Sierra explain, people decide they'd rather go ahead with the zip than be lowered.

"It's one of those courses where you're

accomplishing something," says Riley Foster, marketing manager for SCCA and its sister company Denali Zipline Tours, based out of Talkeetna, in a later phone call. "It's cool to see the people who are really nervous go through the course, and then they get off and they're really proud of themselves."

Communal tour experiences like this are a bit like teppanyaki-style dining: You have no idea who's going to end up sharing your table or your zipline, but by the end of the experience you've all bonded. When we first started out, it was hard to tell exactly how nervy our little group—myself and two amiable guys from the East Coast—would be. There was the expected quota of neck-craning to see the ground, jokes about falling short of the platforms or smashing into a tree. But with one guide behind us clipping us in and another in front to run a backup brake, there was really no chance for us to screw things up.

All of that makes ziplining a natural team-building exercise, something that Riley tells me companies of all sizes use SCCA for with growing frequency. And it works for us, too. By the time we've done a handful of zips, tromped across aerial walkways and lowered ourselves on rappel, we're laughing, joking, pestering both guides with endless questions about how things work, and soaking up the lush, almost tropical beauty around us.

We get to the very last rappel, lowering



#### IF YOU GO

Already well-established in Southeast Alaska, zipline tours are finally catching on in Southcentral Alaska. Like most tour activities, the Southcentral zipline season typically runs from May through September.

→ **Stoney Creek Canopy Adventures in Seward:** 8 ziplines, 3 aerial walkways and 2 rappels  
[stoneycreekca.com](http://stoneycreekca.com)  
 907-224-3662

→ **Denali Zipline Tours in Talkeetna:** 9 ziplines, 1 spiral staircase, 1 rappel and 3 suspension bridges  
[denaliziplanetours.com](http://denaliziplanetours.com)  
 1-855-733-3988

→ **Glacier View Adventures/MICA Guides:** 2 long ziplines—1,500 and 2,200 feet respectively—with one dual line to let you race a friend.  
[glacierviewadventures.com](http://glacierviewadventures.com)  
 907-351-7587

ourselves to the ground just a few feet from where we started. There, I wonder if the guides ever spend their off days riding that longest zip back and forth over the pond. I would. But for now, I'll just have to settle for going back soon. 📷