



Treetop Adventure

Historic Banning Mills in Whitesburg, Georgia houses one of the world's longest and highest canopy tours

By **Hope S. Philbrick**

Photos courtesy of Historic Banning Mills

Trees sway gently, nudging resident geckos awake. A breeze tickles leaves that have transformed from green to shades of gold and orange. Whiffs of ripe apple, forest floor and fresh-tilled hay lurk under a strong pine scent. A red tail hawk floats in the blue sky. Ahh, autumn in Georgia. Appreciating the scenery is easy until your escalated heartbeat pummels your ears as you concentrate on not falling from a perch hundreds of feet above the ground. Or when you're whizzing along a zip-line at 60 miles per hour. A day spent traversing the tree flight canopy eco-tour course at Historic Banning Mills in Whitesburg is an extraordinary experience you'll likely never forget.

Flying High

A picture may say a thousand words, but in some cases that's hardly enough – especially when it comes to the breathtaking beauty of the canopy tour at Historic Banning Mills. The course is more than one mile long, includes three tightrope-style bridges, crisscrosses the Snake River Gorge and is the longest and highest canopy tour in the northern hemisphere. Navigating it is a personal challenge and, when done with a group, a gratifying way to build enduring bonds.

Arguably one of the best ways to test your mettle, build self-confidence and get face-to-face with nature, the canopy tour is comprised of a network of eight



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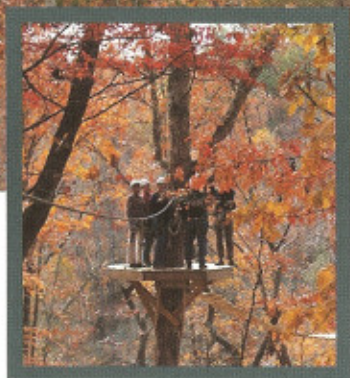




What To Do

If you prefer to keep your feet planted firmly on the ground, Historic Banning Mills has much to offer besides its tree flight canopy eco-tour course, including:

- GPS Adventure Challenge
- Low-high ropes course
- Birds of prey shows
- Day spa
- Hiking trails
- Picnic areas
- Horseback riding
- Catch and release fishing lake
- Golf at Oak Mountain
- 18-hole putting green
- Horseshoes
- Kayaking
- Miniature golf
- Baseball
- Basketball
- Sand volleyball
- Skeet
- Swimming (seasonal)
- Tennis
- Banning Mills Museum



especially groups in search of team- and leadership-building activities. Among fans of the challenging course are the U.S. Army, NASA, Big Nerd Ranch and Chick-fil-A.

The course, which is certified by the Association for Challenge Course Technology, has three segments: pattern, pattern plus and extreme. All routes begin with a 1,000-foot long zip-line that starts from a 60-foot tower. Though safety instructions and a demonstration are the first order of business, that first step is a doozy. "We make the first step hard on purpose," says Mike. "That's where a lot of people have a hard time and many folks have to get off and get back on. Some come all the way down. We'd rather do it there than out in the trees." Encouraging words and gentle nudging are all most people need to get going. "I can tell if they're really scared and I'll tell them, 'This is the hardest one and we do it on purpose. As soon as you step off you're going to be fine.' And they almost always are. In fact, I can count on one finger the number of people who went across and quit."

Rising to the Challenge

To help ensure successful completion of the course, participants must weigh at least 100 pounds and be at least 10 years old. Two rescue-qualified guides accompany each group of two to 14 participants and check to ensure all equipment is properly outfitted. "Our guides are first-responder qualified," says Donna. They wear first aid packs and are on the lookout for potential problems like heat stroke and bee stings. "If you get somebody with a problem and they're 20 stories up, you better know what to do, so we test our guides all the time," adds Mike.

The first portion of the course consists of one 700-foot and two 1,000-foot zip-lines plus eight cable and wood bridges of varying complexity and physical challenge. Some bridges feature wide wooden steps that are close together, others position the steps far apart or offer narrow steps and some offer only a cable. All range from 50 to 300 feet above the ground. The "pattern plus" route adds a 1,500-foot zip-line called "Big Daddy." The extreme route adds 10 more bridges, some at heights of 250 feet, plus a new 2,400-foot zip-line dubbed "Screaming

zip-lines, 20 platforms and 19 wood and cable suspension bridges. It's a place where overcoming fear is uniquely rewarded with fun and once-in-a-lifetime memories. Some points are as high as 300 feet above the ground and in such instances stepping off is "like jumping out of a skyscraper," says Mike Holder, who co-founded and operates Historic Banning Mills with his wife, Donna.

Positioning the course high within trees not only provides access to the canopy ecosystem, it helps give "a sense of how high you are and also how fast you're going," says Mike of his course that's located about three hours west of Augusta. First opened in 2007, the canopy tour was designed by Mike, a former American Airlines pilot who'd seen zip-line tours in South America and wondered why none were in the United States or Europe, along with engineers at Signature Research. Building and testing took another three years.

Located on property that housed paper mills in the 1800s, Historic Banning Mills is a 1,000-acre estate the Holders have developed into a resort destination for nature lovers, weddings, family outings, church retreats, adventure seekers, anyone looking for a physical and mental challenge, and



Eagle" which is accessed by climbing 300 feet up one of the world's tallest timber pole towers.

On the extreme leg, two bridges crossing Snake Creek Gorge are the longest, highest and most challenging of the course. "The first one is 240 feet long," says Mike. "It has guy-wires on the bottom to help stabilize it." Nevertheless, it's wobbly. Before reaching it, however, earlier course elements help build the skills and confidence needed to cross it. "I was so scared when I got on it," admitted 13-year-old Shannon Moscho of that particular bridge on the day of her visit. "Usually when you get onto a bridge you're like, 'Oh, it's scary, but it's okay.' But that one was like, 'Just get me off. I don't like this one!'" But she made it across without stumbling and, weeks later, her fear had transformed into a favored memory: "The thrill and excitement was what made that day so much fun!"

Completing the course does provide an invigorating sense of accomplishment. What's more, from a bird's-eye perspective the gorge's beauty is spectacular. Seeing people at such heights may startle an owl to give a look that seems to ask, "What are you doing up here?" Whether the answer is as complicated as building inner strength or as simple as enjoying the view, the canopy tour's exclusive fun is a treasure. ☐

If You Go

What: Historic Banning Mills

Where: 205 Horseshoe Dam Road, Whitesburg, Georgia 30185

How Much: Canopy tours are priced at \$85 per person for the pattern tour, \$85 per person for pattern plus and \$139 per person for the full extreme adventure. Reservations are required.

Accommodations: 65-room Country Inn as well as 68 RV camping sites

More Info: 866-447-8688 or HistoricBanningMills.com

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