



THRILLS AND SPILLS

aplenty just over the border

By John Hewitt

Those looking for a weekend of wilderness adventure can find a near-perfect location only a couple of hours from metro Atlanta, straddling the Georgia/Tennessee border in the Ocoee River basin area of the Cherokee National Forest.

Traveling north toward Blue Ridge and ultimately to the twin border towns of McCaysville, Ga. and Copperhill, Tenn., you will likely notice the lack of congested roadways, the rolling hills against a backdrop of the Appalachian Mountains and the abundance of roadside apple orchards, shops and vegetable stands.

One block into McCaysville, as you cross the river and approach the junction of Blue Ridge Road and Highway 68, appears a solid blue line painted diagonally through the road that leads to a corner marker showing the state line separating Georgia and Tennessee. What appears to be one small town is actually two towns in different states. The twin towns are the first of many points of interest.

Less than four miles from the downtown area is where non-stop action can be found any day of the week from sunup to sundown. Antiquing and hiking can be found here, but my favorites are whitewater rafting and my newest affinity—zip lining.

Thrill seekers can easily combine both activities into one day of fun by beginning the day at Wildwater Ocoee River Basin Canopy Tours. Lucky for us, some adventurers who would have been part of our zip line tour got their reservations for rafting and zipping mixed up and we had two excellent and knowledgeable guides all to ourselves. **Morgan Pierce** and **Jacob Sparks**, along with Sparks' significant other, **Brittany Lee**, gave us one-on-one in-



Photo courtesy of www.wildwater rafting.com



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Thrills

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struction and guidance and made the experience one that combined the rush of soaring through the treetops with the calm associated with hanging out with good friends.

The adrenalin began to pump from the start as we readied to zip through the trees and over valleys, listened to precautionary measures and adjusted equipment that fit snugly in rather personal places on the body.

As I climb the circular stairs leading to the first departure platform trying to not think about how high in the air I am; I attach my straps onto the zip cable, recall the instructions on how to brake and what to do when I reach the next platform. The instructor shouts "ready," I step off the platform feeling nothing under my feet, hear the hissing sound of a metal pulley zipping along the cable that is my safety net and it's on.

There's no turning back now.

For the next 60-plus minutes we zipped from one treetop level platform to the next, over suspended bridges, valleys and hills; then came the grand finale. We were told that the last run was the highest and fastest of the course; this excited me. Our instructor, Pierce, said if we wanted to increase our speed to upwards of 45 miles per hour to grab our legs into a cannonball position with one hand and hold on with the other. I happily followed her suggestion and went flying toward the end.

Following our zip line experience, we grabbed a quick bite to eat in town and headed back toward the Ocoee River for part two of the day's adventure—whitewater rafting. Earlier in the day as we departed via the national forest road where we had camped the evening before, it was difficult to imagine that the nearby

dry riverbed would, in just a few hours, be a raging river where the 1996 Olympic rafting and kayaking competitions were held. This section of the Ocoee River is dam-controlled with waters released at specific times.

Unfortunately, we missed seeing the water being released but did hear the loud warning siren that is similar to a tornado warning. By the time we got to the river bank, the water was already rushing in an amazing display of waves and sprays.

It was then time to begin the second adventure of the day—rafting the Ocoee.

After a brief, mandatory (albeit painfully boring for those with experience) safety course, and being fitted for life vests and helmets and given paddles, the group was ready to board the bus to be taken to the put-in point—the base of a 60-foot

high wall of water crashing into the relatively calm pool underneath.

Under the expert direction of team leader **Philip Cahn**, the next two hours were nonstop action and thrills as we traversed crested waves, maneuvered around boulders and paddled in unison with others on the raft to keep our vessel from capsizing or one of our raft mates from going overboard. Cahn continuously instructed our crew on which way to paddle and who should paddle when. We succeeded in both while seeing incredible scenery and getting one heck of an upper body workout.

For zip line tours, expect to pay \$79 per person and \$40-79 per person for rafting. Combination packages as well as overnight packages are also available. For additional information visit www.wildwateradventurecenters.com.