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Sliding Down Mountains, All Year

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In the past, after the Whistler Blackcomb lifts closed for the day, adrenaline lovers were left with disappointingly passive options - usually some combination of bar stools and hot tubs. Now, visitors to the popular ski area, in British Columbia, can climb above Whistler Village, don a headlamp and rock-climber's harness, clip onto a cable and step off a platform into a black void.

From there, they can whiz through the upper reaches of ancient old-growth Douglas firs and Western red cedars, riding a succession of five increasingly faster and longer steel cables, blitzing along at a teary-eyed 55 miles per hour 150 feet above the white-water gush of Fitzsimmons Creek.

This is the zip line, a thrill ride that has become somewhat of a sensation at several major resorts since first appearing at Whistler in summer 2002. The sport began to mushroom in earnest last August, when three new lines opened: two at the Utah Olympic Park in Park City, site of the alpine ski events for the 2002 Winter Games, and another at Snowbird, also in Utah. (Breckenridge, in Colorado, also operates a zip line, but only in the summer.)

Michael Berry, president of the National Ski Areas Association, said the zip lines renewed a multiuse trend started a generation ago with alpine slides. But the zip lines are cheaper to install and require less maintenance. "I expect to see many more of these pop up as ski areas try to round out their experience," Mr. Berry said.

At Whistler, David Udow, a Ziptrek Ecotours owner, will wax about interpretive displays that teach guests about British Columbia's once-ubiquitous old-growth forests. (Zip line rides can take as little as a few minutes, but the Ecotours experience is stretched out to two and a half hours to encompass natural history exhibits.) But there is no denying that much of the zip line's allure lies with its cocktail-party cachet, its Tarzan je ne sais quoi. Despite the altitudes and speeds, operators insist it is far less risky than skiing. Ziptrek Ecotours, for example, says that it invested thousands of hours on safety engineering and that the cables are rigged to support loads measured in tons, though riders go one at a time. "The analogy we use," Mr. Udow said, "is that each guest could take a car with them if they wanted to."

Perhaps as a result, the rides attract all ages; at Whistler, where the ride costs about \$82, at \$1.24 Canadian to the U.S. dollar, Ziptrek Ecotours participants have ranged from 6 to 88.

"It's been a great addition," said Christina Moore, Whistler's public relations manager. "I don't know that anybody expected how popular it would become so quickly."

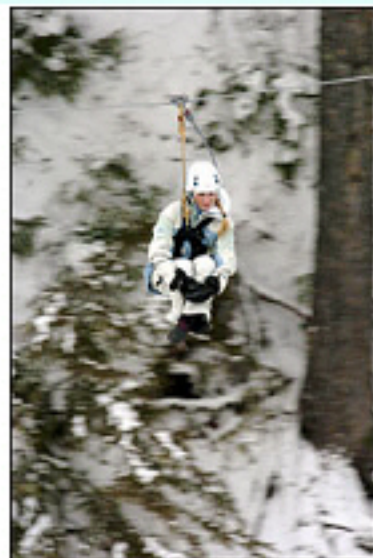
It is actually surprising that zip lines took this long to nudge their way into the adventure-sports consciousness. Central and South Americans have used similar mechanisms to cross river gorges for more than a century, and tour operators in Costa Rica have operated variations in rain forests for more than a decade. Mr. Udow heard about the device several years ago from a scientist who used them to navigate forest canopies. (The researcher, Reese Halter, later became a consultant to Ziptrek Ecotours.)

At the Utah Olympic Park, new zip lines make no pretensions about rolling ecology into the ride. The Ultra Zipline drops riders from the top of the winter freestyle hill, reaching speeds of 42 m.p.h. It costs \$7 a ride, plus \$8 admission to the park; additional rides are \$4.

But the park's Xtreme Zipline has generated the most buzz. This ride costs \$12 and drops 435 feet at a 33 percent grade, reaching a top speed of 55 m.p.h. It descends between two ski jumps, meaning that riders can sometimes fly toward terra firma alongside practicing jumpers.

Interestingly, sales of zip-line kits for home use - in backyards or nearby woods - have spiked in the last two years, said Daniel Wright, president of the Outdoor Fun Store in Wayne, Mich., which has shipped and installed zip lines all over the country. A starter package with 70 feet of cable costs less than \$100, but prices can exceed \$2,000.

"You look at the popularity of amusement parks," Mr. Wright said, "and this is just a way to bring a little of that home."



Don MacKinnon for The New York Times
Danielle Kinsey zipping at Whistler.



Don MacKinnon for The New York Times
This Ziptrek Ecotours customer decided to cross Fitzsimmons Creek in Whistler upside down.