

# High Over the Hill Country



photos by Rona Distenfeld

At Cypress Valley Canopy Tours you can get a birds-eye view from the tree tops without risking life and limb.

By RONA DISTENFELD

The Texas Hill Country is known for winding roads through rolling hills, dance halls where you can kick up your heels, and lakes and rivers where you can float to your heart's content. For those in search of a more elevated experience, the area also offers unexpected opportunities to get your feet up off the ground.

## Fly Through the Tree Tops

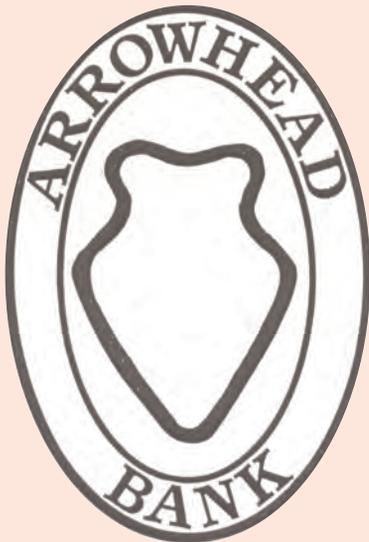
Just north of where Highway 71 crosses the Pedernales River, you can see what it's like to fly through a canopy of old growth cypress trees, some as high as 100 feet tall. Or just hang out at bird's eye level on platforms circling the tree trunks forty feet above the ground.



Cypress Valley Canopy Tours offers the chance to ride a zipline through the air, letting you fly over creeks and boulders. Safely held by your harness, one hand resting lightly on a steel cable strong enough to pull an airplane, you just pick up your feet...and fly! A guide waits for you on the next platform, ready to catch and steady you as you come in for a landing.

This is the only true tree canopy zip line in the continental U.S. You don't need any special physical ability – if you can walk up a flight of stairs, weigh less than 250 pounds, and you're at least 10 years old, you can do this. Kids, adults, even the faint of heart will find that the thrill of soaring through the air while safely anchored in your harness is like nothing else you've tried. Civic groups and companies will find that soaring together is a great way to bond over a special experience.

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Owners David and Elizabeth Beilharz have created a virtual airborne playground in the cypress trees on their property. If you want something more demanding than just zipping around, the Challenge Course offers lots of ways to test your skill and courage without actually putting you at risk. Swing from rope to rope across open space, walk a tightrope maze, and glide across a bridge where the logs underfoot move underneath you.

You can also do early morning birding with a local naturalist. And if spending a day in the trees isn't enough, there's a tree house where you can spend the night in comfort after zipping in for a landing.

Once you're back on the ground, take a swim in the private lake or enjoy a picnic under the trees along its shore. It's the perfect place to share your best moments with your fellow flyers.



Each Spring and Fall, the *Trapeze-Experience* troupe conducts classes to give amateurs an authentic trapeze experience.

#### Flip Through the Air

Were you enthralled as a child by those daring guys and girls on the flying trapeze? Did you wonder how it would feel to climb up to that platform and launch yourself into the air? Did you dream you could spin and connect with the catcher? Now you can become a high flyer and discover first-hand how it feels.

From March through May, and again in the fall, the *Trapeze-Experience™* troupe of instructors sets up at The Crossings in the rolling hills northwest of Austin, near Volente. They erect a full trapeze rig, complete with nets, just like the circus. But here, you're the star.

After a round of stretching exercises to limber you up, you learn to hang from the bar by your hands and legs on a swing jumping height from the ground. A thick pad and the close attention of the instructors give you a sense of security.

They take you through the basics on the ground, and then it's time to ascend to the platform, hook your harness to the safety

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Jeff Hunt, the owner of *Fly Texas* in Granite Shoals, offers all different ways to soar above the Hill Country. If you really get serious about flying, he is certified by the United States Hang-Gliding Association to teach you solo hang-gliding.

### Float Like a Butterfly

At *FlyTexas* in Granite Shoals, owner Jeff Hunt brings hang-gliding to the Hill Country. See how it feels to float on the wind and air currents by taking a tandem flight with an instructor. Or, get serious about it and learn to fly solo at this USGHA (United States Hang Gliding Association)-certified program..

Hunt practices with new flyers at Murchison Middle School in Austin Friday evenings from May through November. Drive by, and you're likely to see people flying off the hillside.

Feeling yourself rise above the ground by even a few feet as you stride down Murchison's steep hill and catch the breeze can be as exhilarating as a flight off a mountainside for a new flyer. When you're ready to solo, Hunt has plenty of ways to get you in the air.

Not so sure about leaving the ground without a motor, or have a physical limitation? Hunt will take you up in the "trike" he sometimes uses to tow hang gliders aloft when he's not towing them by boat on Lake LBJ or leading them off a mountaintop in the Hill Country. Like an ATV with wings, one minute you're rolling along the ground, the next you're airborne, watching the ground fall away beneath you.

From *FlyTexas*' home base you'll see the Texas Hill Country west of Austin from 800 feet in the air. Ask him to cut the motor before you land. The only sound will be the wind as you gently descend.

#### If You Go: *FlyTexas*

(512) 467-2529 • [www.flytexas.com](http://www.flytexas.com)

#### *Cypress Valley Canopy Tours*

(512) 264-8880

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ropes, and jump off into space with the bar. By the end of your 2-hour class you'll do your first catch! Don't be surprised if you want to come back to learn more advanced moves.

Adults and kids can take the classes for the pure fun of it, or use this as a tool for personal growth. Owner Peter Gold goes beyond the pure mechanics of flying and helps you connect with your own process of transition and staying grounded while you have a great time on the flying trapeze.

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