

BY RONA
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Airborne AUSTIN

Soar to new heights in this Texas town, where kicking up your heels is a long-standing tradition.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY RONA DISTENFELD

A flight aboard FlyTexas' trike offers an uncommon experience as well as a bird's-eye view of Texas Hill Country. The trike (inset) is perfect for those who prefer motorized flights over hang gliding.

Austin is more than the Texas state capital. Known as the Live Music Capital of the World and home to the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library, the University of Texas and the Congress Avenue bats, this culturally rich city of almost 700,000 has always

known how to have a good time. And now there are ways to get your feet off the ground to see the area from a whole new perspective.

FLY LIKE AN EAGLE

Drive by Murchison Middle School almost any Friday evening from May through November, and you're likely to see people winging it off the hillside. This is the practice area for beginning hang gliders at Fly-

Texas, a program certified by the U.S. Hang Gliding Association.

See how it feels to float on the wind by taking a tandem flight with an instructor. Or get serious about it and learn to fly solo. Feeling your body rise above the ground by even a few feet, catching the breeze as you stride down Murchison's steep hill, can be as exhilarating as a flight off a mountainside for a novice.

Not so sure about leaving the ground without a motor or have a physical limita-





It may be roomy hanging out on the pit-stop platforms (left), but it's far more fun to feel the wind in your hair on Cypress Valley Canopy Tours' zip line (above).

tion? FlyTexas' owner, Jeff 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. The trike is similar to an all-terrain vehicle with wings, and one minute you're rolling along the ground, the next you're airborne, watching the ground fall away beneath you.

Ascending above FlyTexas' home base in Granite Shoals, you'll see the Texas Hill Country west of Austin from 800 feet up. Ask Hunt to cut the motor before landing, and the only sound you'll hear is the wind as you gently return to terra firma.

WITH THE GREATEST OF EASE

Were you enthralled as a child by those daring guys and girls on the flying trapeze? Now you can be one of them.

From March through May, and again in the fall, the Trapeze-Experience troupe sets up at The Crossings learning center, located in the rolling hills just west of downtown Austin. The troupe takes you through the basics, and by the end of the two-hour class, you'll perform your first catch. Don't be surprised if you want to come back and learn more.

Adults and kids can take classes for fun or use them as a tool for personal growth. Owner Peter Gold goes beyond the mechanics of flying to help you connect with your own process of transition and stay "grounded" while you have a great time on the flying trapeze.

THROUGH THE TREETOPS

Just northwest of town in Spicewood, you can see what it's

like to soar from tree to tree, or just hang out 40 feet above the ground, with Cypress Valley Canopy Tours, which will have you flying over creeks and boulders on a zip line.

Safely held by a 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 are at least 10 years old and can walk up a flight of stairs, you can join in at this virtual airborne playground in the cypress trees.

If you want something more demanding than just zipping around, the Challenge Course offers lots of ways to test your skill and courage without putting yourself at risk. Swing from rope to rope across open space, walk a tightrope maze and glide across a bridge where the logs move underfoot.

There's also 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.

FREE FALLING

Have you always wanted to jump out of an airplane? Then the Austin Skydiving Center is the place to live your dream. Come do a tandem jump and enjoy the ride while your experienced instructor does all the work. Or take the Accelerated Free Fall or Static Line class and jump on your own.

Planning Your Trip

- **Austin Convention & Visitors Bureau** (866) GO-AUSTIN (462-8784); www.austintexas.org
- **Austin Skydiving Center** (800) UGO-JUMP (846-5867); www.austinskydiving.com
- **Cypress Valley Canopy Tours** (512) 264-8880; www.CypressValleyCanopyTours.com
- **FlyTexas** (512) 467-2529; www.flytexas.com
- **Trapeze Experience** (877) 759-0044; www.trapeze-experience.com

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While virtually all drop zones are certified by the U.S. Parachute Association, fewer are willing to adhere to the demands of the USPA's equipment standards, and fewer still will do what it takes to affiliate with Skydive University. Only 20 drop zones in the U.S. meet the requirements for ongoing staff training and on-site inspections.

The Austin Skydiving Center is one of the few with all three certifications, and they have the safety record to prove it. With almost 800 students a year, they've seen just five broken ankles in nine years and no more-serious injuries.

Given all these high-flying options, Austin is not only a place to kick up your heels on the dance floor or the running trail, but to get them in the wild blue yonder as well. **H&A**

■ *Freelance writer Rona Distenfeld sails through the air with the greatest of ease from her home in Austin.*