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New W Hotel in Atlanta opens Tuesday

By [LEON STAFFORD](#)

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Loren Henderson had his lines about the new W Hotel downtown well-rehearsed.

As he led two “guests” to their rooms recently, he asked about their flight, ran through Atlanta’s weather forecast for the next couple of days and pointed out where the visitors could find the hotel’s spa, pool and various bars. He was conversational, sunny and remembered to use their names.

But when he got into the room, he learned why practice makes perfect.

After ushering the pair in to show them the comfortable beds, flat panel TV and the mini bar (known as the munchy box in W parlance), Henderson had to backtrack to open the wardrobe. That forced the women to have to maneuver around him to see what he was talking about.

“I’m going to start with the closet next time,” Henderson laughed, realizing he had interrupted the flow.

He’ll get a chance to get it perfect Tuesday. When he made his small error, Henderson was taking part in a simulation late last week of his real role as a welcome ambassador to the hotel, which opens its doors for the first time this morning.

After more than a year of construction, the W Hotel downtown will become Atlanta’s fourth W, a funky, upscale boutique brand from New York-based Starwood Hotels & Resorts. It’s part of the nine-block Allen Plaza project by Barry Real Estate Companies. The development, which includes the headquarters of Southern Company and the Atlanta office of Ernst and Young, is expected to cost more than \$2 billion.

Unlike its three sister properties, the downtown W also comes with condos, starting in the \$400,000s. The six penthouse condos are well over \$3 million.

The W downtown joins an explosion of hotels built in metro Atlanta over the past few years. From small extended stay lodgers to big, tony skyscrapers with butlers, the area pushed higher its already striking 93,000-plus hotel rooms.

It opens, however, during a recession and at a time that hotel occupancy and room rates are dropping. One of its biggest demographics — conventioners — is also expected to be lighter this year because of continuing economic woes. (Each W has a different constituency, albeit with overlap, such as shoppers at Perimeter, businesspeople in Buckhead and entertainers in Midtown.)

Atlanta-based PKF Hospitality Research, the research affiliate of PKF Consulting, reported Monday that the recession and rising hotel supply levels nationally have caused “one of the deepest and longest recessions in the history of the domestic lodging industry.

“As a result, the newest forecast produced by PKF-HR, based on preliminary year-end data from Smith Travel Research, projects that the average U.S. hotel will experience a 9.8 percent decline in the revenue received from the rental of guest rooms in 2009, after having already declined an estimated 1.8 percent in 2008,” the group wrote in its notes.

That daunting challenge was not the focus of the staff of the downtown W last week. They were taking stock of their ability to ensure each guest will enjoy his or her stay .

They practiced setting up banquet dinners in the hotel’s meeting space, delivering food from BLT, the high-end steakhouse that is part of the building and giving manicures in the Bliss spa.

Allison Floyd smiled warmly and made plenty of eye contact when checking Henderson’s two “guests” in. She made sure they knew the upgraded room they were getting was large, that their stay would go toward their reward program and ran down a list of amenities they could expect.

The guests themselves were actually hotel workers — Susan Barry, the hotel’s marketing chief, and Sherry Telford, who is helping to handle public relations. Barry and Telford kept the questions coming — asking about bar hours, whether they could stash luggage after check-out so they could hit the spa before leaving, and if they could get a helicopter ride from the helipad on the building’s roof.

“It will be a trial by fire when we open, which is why we try to test them before then,” Barry said.

During the practice runs, construction workers were put on the finishing touches for the opening. Also, sofas were moved into place, glass was polished and beds were made.

Barry said the staff proved to be up to the job. She was especially complimentary of Henderson.

“In live [simulations], a lot of times people will get the information right, but they won’t sound natural,” she said. “He sounded really natural, which is good for his first time out.”

ATLANTA W HOTELS

W Hotel Perimeter: 111 Perimeter Center West, Dunwoody, 275 rooms, opened 1998.

W Hotel Buckhead: 3377 Peachtree Road NE, 291 rooms, opened late 2008.

W Hotel Midtown: 188 14th Street, NE, 466 rooms, opened Spring 2008.

W Hotel Downtown: 45 Ivan Allen Jr. Boulevard, 237 rooms, 74 condos, opening Tuesday.

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The zany joy of ziplining catches hold in the USA

By Laura Bly, USA TODAY

ROCKWOOD, Colo. — Debbie Burns' 55-year-old knees are quivering as much as the aspen trees that blanket the surrounding San Juan Mountains.

But to Burns, perched at the edge of a two-story-high platform wrapped around an old-growth ponderosa pine, her grandson's happiness trumps an aversion to heights so acute she once had to be shoved off a chair lift.

So after watching 11-year-old Colby Moe swoop down the first of nearly two dozen steel ziplines strung across the Tall Timber Resort in southwestern Colorado, the vacationer from Bakersfield, Calif., takes a deep breath — and her own 72-foot-long leap of faith.

ZIPLINE SAFETY: [Learn the risks](#)

PHOTO GALLERY: [The zany joy of ziplining](#)

"Oh, my *gravy!*" Burns yells, accepting a congratulatory hug from Colby after gliding to a graceful stop at the next tree. "Now, can I stay here and keep doing the bunny-hill version?"

Not a chance.

Transcending fear is part of the fun at Tall Timber's Soaring Tree Top Adventures. Opened four years ago and tagged by TripAdvisor.com as the USA's most popular attraction based on reader rankings, it's a leading example of a high-wire act that's taking off like Tarzan.

The adventure of strapping into a harness, clipping to a cable, then zipping across a canyon, down a mountain or through a canopy of trees — hence the terms ziplining and canopy tours — was popularized in Costa Rica a decade ago. Now, the elevated excursions are cropping up across the USA, with at least two dozen in operation and dozens more in the works.

Some, like an Alaska zipline that whisks cruise ship passengers more than 1 mile in 90 seconds, are aimed at adrenaline junkies. Others cater to families wanting to both scream and savor the scenery.

Many canopy tours let participants "connect with nature and each other in an otherwise inaccessible environment," says John Walker of Bonsai Design, a Grand Junction, Colo.-based company that has designed seven U.S. zipline courses over the past three years.

That mission certainly applies to Soaring Tree Top Adventures.

Tall Timber owners Denny Beggrow and his son Johnroy created the 5½-hour aerial tour as a way to broaden their remote, 180-acre retreat's appeal. Inspired by Johnroy's childhood treehouses and Sean Connery's rain-forest adventures in the 1992 film *Medicine Man*, their tour rapidly eclipsed such offerings as fly-fishing and horseback riding among wealthy patrons that have included CEOs, movie stars and vice presidents.

As of this summer, the Beggrows' 10-room resort — accessible only by helicopter or the Durango & Silverton Railroad — no longer accepts new overnight guests. But as many as 60 people a day pay \$329 a piece to clamber aboard the steam-powered train in Durango, spend two hours gazing at vistas captured in *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, and get off at Tall Timber to enter a world worthy of Peter Pan and Frodo Baggins.

The unregulated canopy tour industry suffered a high-profile black eye this spring when an American vacationer plummeted to her death from a zipline on the Caribbean island of Roatan, Honduras.

At Tall Timber, would-be soarers must sign an alarmingly detailed liability waiver that flags the activity's uninsured status and notes such possibilities as slamming into or missing a platform, falling from 100 feet and becoming "sick from the swinging motion."

But Soaring Tree Top Adventures' personable "sky rangers," all of whom have 40 hours of wilderness first-aid training as well as climbing and rappelling skills, emphasize the safety of both people and trees.

An initially apprehensive Burns hangs on every word as 24-year-old Simon Richardson describes the resort's equipment, from padded, full-body Petzl harnesses designed for search-and-rescue workers to helicopter-grade, stainless-steel cables and locally manufactured platforms that hug 300-year-old pine trees without invasive bolts.

A patented braking system, Richardson explains, uses a formula based on distance between platforms, wind speed and angle of descent that eliminates the need for riders to slow down by grasping the cable with a leather glove.

The 28-platform course is designed to ease fears by starting out with shorter spans at lower heights, and Burns and her fellow adventurers soon focus less on carabiner and pulley mechanics than on the magic of flying through a tunnel of aspens and crisscrossing above the churning Animas River, swollen with spring snowmelt.

Between *whoo-ees* and *waa-hoos*, there's plenty of time to take deep whiffs of the ponderosas' vanilla-scented bark, munch on homemade cranberry bars and keep an eye out for wheeling ospreys and the occasional black bear.

Flailing legs and twisting torsos are encouraged on most of Soaring Tree Top Adventures' 1.2 miles of cable, with many guests turning topsy-turvy on longer runs. By the end of the afternoon's airborne explorations at an elevation of 7,550 feet, some are winding down.

Burns, the newly intrepid grandmother, is not among them. She had resisted — and conquered — a morning maneuver that required her to step off a platform and drop straight down 30 feet, learning to trust the guides and her harness. As for the soaring itself, she realized her smooth swoops had less in common with skydiving or roller coasters than with Johnny Weissmuller's moves in the *Tarzan* movies she loved as a child.

In mid-July, the resort will answer repeaters' clamoring for "bigger, faster, longer" with a new 1,400-foot-long span that starts after a 15- to 20-minute uphill climb by foot and zooms riders across the Animas River in about 45 seconds. As a sky ranger rhapsodizes about the views, the same woman who had to be pried off a chair lift turns to her grandson with a grin.

"Now *that*," Burns says, "would be worth coming back for."