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Zip line, ropes course now open for outdoor fun

By Marcy Velte

Howe Caverns expands up for its new High Adventure

Daily Gazette reporter Marcy Velte tries out the zip line at the new Howe High Adventure ropes course and zip line at Howe Caverns on July 20.

HOWES CAVE – For more than 100 years the allure of Howe Caverns was 156 feet below the ground.

Now, in an attempt to boost tourism and extend the stay of visitors, cavern officials are looking skyward.

Earlier this month they opened Howe High Adventures, a four-tower zip line and multi-level ropes course. It's the first time the Schoharie County landmark has expanded above ground in nearly 82 years.

"The caves will always be considered the main attraction at Howe's. The expansions are just fun add-ons to get kids outdoors," said Operations Manager Mark "Sparky" Spaulding.

General Manager Robert Holt said surveys of cave visitors showed people were looking for more to do while on vacation.

A board member of the National Caves Association, Holt said other cave attractions he's visited had already built zip lines and found them popular. Then, at a trade show last year, Howe officials saw a self-contained, free-standing ropes course and zip system created by Ropes Courses of Allegan, Mich.

"We thought it was a great product. A lot of courses are up in the trees, but you have to have the right trees to do that," said Holt. "We don't have that here, so this was the way to go for us. It's like a big erector set."

The two new attractions were purchased that day and soon after, Spaulding and three other employees went to Michigan for a week of training. They in turn trained 35 new employees to run Howe High Adventures.

Preparation and construction started in March. Spaulding said they had hoped to have the courses open by Memorial Day weekend, but bad spring weather spring postponed the opening.

"It was disappointing," he said.

The ropes course eventually opened July 9 and the zip line opened July 16. In just a few weeks, hundreds of people have been drawn to the adventure course, designed for families with children rather than serious rope and rock climbers. In fact, many find the zip ride to be relaxing once they get over their initial anxiety.

Susie Maure, 19, was visiting Howe Caverns with her family and several friends earlier this month while on vacation in Greenville. She said at first she was scared, but once she made up her mind to do it, the ride was smooth and peaceful.

Riders climb 40 feet up a winding staircase, where their harnesses are secured to a track. They then glide from tower to tower, across 90 feet of rope at about 12 mph. In between each tower, four safety checks are performed by staff members stationed on the towers. The lines grow a little longer and the ride gets slightly faster, but the harness keeps you securely in place.

Ropes course

Maure's friend Matthew Appell, 18, loved the zip line but wasn't as sure about the ropes course.

"I liked that it was a challenge, but I didn't like the skinny boards. They were narrow and swayed," he said.

Those on the ropes course are also harnessed to a track. The course includes 28 different elements, from walking across

swaying balance beams to swinging across looped ropes. There are two different levels, one at 15 feet in the air and a second at 30 feet.

Maure found the ropes course to be scary since she often forgot she was wearing a harness. "But I would encourage people to try it. It's still fun," she said.

Spaulding said maintenance checks are performed each morning and staff are trained to get participants down in about two minutes in case of emergencies.

The Appells and Maures visit the area each year from New Jersey. The Appells had visited the caverns before, but the Maures hadn't so they decided it would be a good day activity for their teens. They had no idea Howe High Adventures had opened.

"There aren't too many things to do with kids around here," said Matthew's father, Robert. "After you go to an attraction and see it once, you don't really want to go to it again, but this is different. The price is good, and it's something the kids will want to come back to."

That's what officials at Howe Caverns were hoping for. A combination ticket – zip and ropes – costs \$23.

More plans

Other expansion plans are in the works. Still to open in October is the outside food pavilion, now under construction. Next year, a new building will house the Howe Caverns Mining Co., featuring the Patty Tobin Fine Fashion Jewelry Boutique. The building will double the size of the current mining attraction and bring a portion of it indoors.

Farther in the future, Garner Holt Productions – the company that created the animatronic replica of discoverer Lester Howe, who now greets guests before they enter the caves – is in talks with Howe Caverns officials to develop the Howe Dinosaur Canyon, complete with animatronic dinosaurs and featuring a huge Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Robert Appell said he was excited about the expansion and visiting Howe Caverns during their summer vacation would now become a family tradition.

Carrie Drybrough of Toronto visited Howe with her family after going to Cooperstown for the induction ceremony at the National Baseball Hall of Fame. They came this year specifically because they knew Howe High Adventures would be open.

Her two children, 8-year-old Colin and 10-year-old Victoria, both had a great time, but Carrie said she was nervous. Spaulding said adults often fall behind their children on the course because "kids don't know fear yet."

The children who do grow scared are easily helped down by the multiple staff members on site, like Amanda Zuluaga.

Zuluaga, 22, was a recent hire, but already has years of experience working on several different types of zip lines, ropes courses, and climbing walls.

Recently graduated from SUNY Potsdam, she minored in wilderness education and double majored in secondary education and history. While there, she learned techniques on how to effectively interact with her future students, skills she's using on her new job.

"Sometimes kids don't know why they're scared to do it, so you have to get them to answer so you can help," she said. "It's just great to encourage them to take that one extra step to get them to try something new. It's rewarding and part of the reason I love what I do."

For more information visit www.howecaverns.com.