

Getting to know the ropes

Nautical-themed course with zip lines opens in National Harbor

by Rachel Fus
Staff Writer

For some adventurers, even the new ropes course in National Harbor can be too much.

“Just step off,” said Tom Doy, an instructor for the new course, as a nervous rope-climber looked out Sept. 16 at the three-story drop off the front mast of a life-sized pirate ship replica.

People lined up to take the leap and cascade through the open air as they dangled on the zip line, part of a ropes course opened in mid-August by Poolesville-based Calleva, an outdoor and environmental education center.

“We do want people to feel out of their comfort zone when they’re doing this,” said Alex Markoff, Calleva’s executive director. “The whole thrill and learning experience, how we grow is by trying new things.”

At the course — at the intersection of National Harbor’s American Way and St. George Boulevard — groups of 15 people or more can participate on weekdays with advanced reservations, whereas weekends are open to individuals from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. The course is customizable, with packages ranging from \$10 to \$75 per person.

Participants must weigh between 40 and 280 pounds and be at least 13 to climb the course’s main ship.

Calleva Program Director Tony Witter divides the course’s challenges into two types: high and low. On low ropes courses, a participant’s feet barely leave the ground, whereas a high ropes obstacle requires a safety harness and starts at 30 feet above the ground. The highest element, on the pirate ship replica, is 65 feet off the ground.

“Low ropes are team-building,” Witter said. “They teach communication and cooperation. People learn to help and how to ask for help.”

High ropes elements, like the zip line, play more to the individual.

“High ropes are confidence-building. It’s about what fear feels like and how to keep going,” Witter said. “Then they can reference that feeling later when making a phone call, giving a presentation or voicing an opinion in a meeting.”

Each of the course’s elements reflects its “on-the-water” location, from a lighthouse to a clipper ship.

“When we started coming up with ideas to design this ropes course, we just kept focusing on the nautical theme,” said Markoff.

The National Harbor course, which cost \$300,000 to build, is Calleva’s first in an urban location and their first in Prince George’s County. Calleva has two other ropes courses: one in Dickerson on the Markoff farm and another on Adventure Island near Riley’s Lock in the Potomac.

“We just thought it would be a neat fit ... to do a lot of the things that we do out in the woods and on our other ropes courses and do them next to buildings and in such a beautiful environment,” Markoff said.

The course, designed by a LEED-certified architect who is a former Calleva camper, is also eco-friendly, using wood from only trees that have fallen naturally, and recycled windows and doors, said Matt Markoff, Alex Markoff’s brother and one of Calleva’s directors.

On Sept. 16, The Peterson Cos., National Harbor’s developer, brought employees to the ropes course for team-building.

“It was fun; exhilarating, actually,” said Linda Kemp, a Peterson Cos. accountant, after trying the giant, aptly named “Bermuda’s Triangle” swing apparatus. “You really have to trust the people you work with.”

Alex Markoff said all of Calleva’s adventures meet industry standards for safety and that the staff goes through special training.

“You’re wearing a harness tethered to a climbing rope that can hold 2,000 pounds,” he said. “We invite you to be scared ... but in a controlled environment.”

Sidebar

To learn more about Calleva’s ropes course at National Harbor, visit www.calleva.org/nationalharbor.html.

The course is open to individuals every weekend day from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. No appointment is necessary. E-mail office@calleva.org to schedule a group program.

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