



Henry van Asch, Andy Brinsley and Dave Mitchell of AJ Hackett Bungy New Zealand take to the Kawarau Zipride.

More than just Hanging

Toni Krasicki charts the growth of zip line and aerial adventure attractions

While many nations in the northern hemisphere have operated aerial adventure parks and zip line tours for about a decade, Australasia has been slower on the uptake, but is now quickly catching on.

Primarily driven by the attractions and tourism operators there are currently a growing number of projects operating, nearing completion or in the final design/build stages across Australia and New Zealand.

World-renowned adventure design builder Matt Scott from Touch Cloud Global believes that the growth in this sector is just beginning.

Scott explains “10 years ago there were a few things happening in New Zealand but nothing much in Australia (but) in 2014 it’s hard to keep track of how many new developments there have been. I would guess it’s upwards of 30 new offerings.”

With 20 years of expertise in ropes course and outdoor adventure facilities, Scott says there have been many changes, especially in design, adding “technology specific to our industry has really started coming on line in the last couple of years and there are still plenty of developments in the pipeline.”

A relative newcomer, Touch Cloud Global has been operating for around 18 months. Scott says that the company was formed specifically to target the growth of ‘pay for play’ aerial adventure parks and zip lines, stating “it was born from frustrations that traditional ropes course companies did not have the depth of commercial/financing operations experience to cater to this emerging market.”

With New Zealand acknowledged as a global leader in

Ecoline’s new EcoZip rollercoaster zip line.





The Cairns ZOOM is located on top of the Reef Hotel Casino.

adventure tourism, its adoption of zip lines encompasses a wide range of activities from exhilarating zip line adventure rides and guided zip line tours, to self-guided multi-level adventure high ropes and adventures courses incorporating obstacles and often short zip lines.

Trent Yeo, Chief Executive of Queenstown-based Ziptrek Ecotours (which became New Zealand's first zip line operator in 2009) explains "zip line and adventure parks cater to a specific market – more for children and families (and) our business, guided zip line tours, caters for all.

"We've had people from six to 92 years old, and we have multi-generational people on tours regularly."

Small-scale zip lines have been used as a functional mode of transport in high altitude and mountainous areas such as Nepal in the past, and also to some extent among mountaineers in Europe. Those growing up several decades ago in Australia and New Zealand may be more familiar with the flying fox: a basic small zip line commonly found in children's playgrounds and in parks.

Contemporary commercial zip lines used in adventure tourism and recreation today developed in the rainforests of Costa Rica during the early 1990s. The pioneers in eco-tourism and zip line canopy tours, the Costa Ricans began operations and further developed zip lines to the sophisticated operations they are today.

Yeo's Canadian business partners, who own and run the two Ziptrek Ecotours in Canada, were inspired by what was developing in Costa Rica.

With over 200 operators in North America alone, many operators in Australia and New Zealand are opting to use the term 'zip line' over 'flying fox' in their business literature. Yeo says "technically it's a zip line.

"People say that it's on a bigger scale, but it's the same – it just happens to have become bigger due to commercial and recreational needs."

Ecoline has taken the opposite approach, favouring 'flying fox' for their four NSW-based operations with zips travelling in a straight line, but adopting the term for their recently launched TreeTop Crazy Rider, a roller coaster meets zip line experience.

As Ecoline General Manager Sandrine Gaymard states "it's an Australian first and the longest in the world.

"It shows how zip lining and adventure parks are changing."

Building courses for outdoor adventure camps mainly used by schools, Ecoline was the first company in Australia building treetop rope courses. Seeing a gap in the adventure tourism market, Ecoline opened their first adventure park on the NSW Central Coast in 2008, launching an attraction that was followed by other operators during that same year.

Tourism operators have certainly identified the appeal and are installing adventure parks and zip lines to heighten visitor experience. Gold Coast theme park Sea World has added Sky

Fortress, a five-storey adventure playground featuring rope bridges and tunnels and Sky Climb, which has the addition of slides and is constructed 12 metres above the ground.

Ecoline has recently built, designed and is operating a high ropes adventure course, Wild Rope, at Sydney's Taronga Park Zoo. Adding another element to the zoo experience, visitors can tackle the urban designed (poles are used rather than trees) course above the Australian Walkabout exhibit.

Cairns Dome General Manager Michael Woodward, says the addition of the ZOOM in 2012, a high ropes course including a series of short zip lines, to their operation has added a fun and fitness element to viewing the wildlife.

Woodward explains "it's very popular particularly with kids, but we're not just for kids – it's also challenging for adults."

Located in a prime tourism location on top of the Reef Hotel Casino in Cairns, the Cairns ZOOM is the brainchild of Capta Group's Chairman, Charles Woodward. Incorporating a zip line over an enclosure that houses a four-metre crocodile, Woodward says that it's a huge drawcard because people love the perception of danger.

As the sector continues to grow, commercial adventure activities incorporating a degree of risk can pose problems for operators.

Gaymard emphasises that Ecoline focuses heavily on safety and that the business has been working with the Outdoor Recreation Industry Council (ORIC) to develop safety standards in Australia where no standards devoted to rope courses and zip lines currently exist.

Gaymard explains "it's very important that we get involved because we know exactly how it works as we are building and operating, so therefore can see the actual results of what we do.

"If an operator has an accident, it will impact on our business and that's why we have developed the safety aspect, because one incident could ruin the whole experience for everyone."

After having to withdraw from the Australia/New Zealand Standards Committee due to complications, New Zealand has recently completed a list of Activity Specific Guidelines (ASG)

TouchCloud's zip line installation at the Otway Fly, Victoria.





Ecoline's new EcoZip rollercoaster zip line.

for adventure tour operators under the new Adventure Tourism review.

Trent Yeo, who was a member of the committee and responsible for producing the guidelines for adventure courses and zip lining recalls "our area had no regulations compared to other adventure activities because fundamentally, it's new.

"(Now) the ASG covers everything generically, because there is a huge range in scale, size and application in different operations - it's hard to set a rule that covers everyone."

Gaymard admits that setting up an operation can be challenging, explaining that it took Ecoline almost 18 months to convince the New South Wales Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and the Forestry Corporation of NSW to give them the green light for the TreeTops Adventure Park in Ourimbah State Forest on the NSW Central Coast.

While Gaymard states "we wanted to do it on government land as it has the best catchment - it's also expensive to purchase land", Yeo recalls that he came up against too many hurdles trying to set up an operation in Australia, so instead launched Ziptrek Ecotours in New Zealand.

Public reaction against development can have an impact on start-ups. Scott admits that he knows of at least five major projects that have been stalled due to public reaction.

He states "in our experience it has been difficult getting buy-ins from the locals and environmental groups during the community consultation process.

"Many people don't know what an aerial adventure park or a zip line is and we may not have communicated this well in the past."

Perhaps due to increased popularity and awareness over recent years, these agencies have become more accommodating.

Gaymard states "nowadays NPWS and Forestry often call us up to have us look at the site before they open it to expressions of interest."

Adventure parks are not consigned to just green corridors. Man-made structures, and bringing the product closer to population hubs has been the impetus of Touch Cloud Global's urban aerial adventure park design, Skymate. The product is designed, financed and operated by Touch Cloud Global but can also be purchased as a third party build.

Scott explains that "the difference we hope the Skymate product brings to the market is that having it in a more contained area means that it's something that the whole family can experience regardless of whether they are doing the challenges or not. They are three or four levels high but every level has full pedestrian access to that height so everyone can be part of the action."

Set to launch in Easter 2015, Skymate will be part of a major development in the Adelaide Shores Recreation Precinct in South Australia. With 120 obstacles and at 26 metres high, Scott says it's probably the biggest adventure park built in the world.

Looking forward, he concludes "the main focus is where we are heading with Skymate (as) I see there being scope for one in every capital city in Australia."

Toni Krasicki is a freelance fitness and tourism writer with 24 years' experience in the fitness and recreation industry.

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