Wow Place #109: Ziplining in Costa Rica

“Life is too important to be taken seriously!” -- Oscar Wilde

If I was a *serious* person, I wouldn’t be on this platform, 100 feet above the ground, preparing to zip across a Central American cloud forest. *Serious* people understand the importance of life (and limb). *Serious* people don’t do dangerous activities where there’s no liability waiver or safety requirements. And yet here I am in Monteverde, Costa Rica, ready to place my trust in a ziplining outfit that *seems* legit, but are they really? Who knows? It’s not like I’ve done this before. Is it normal to *not* have brakes when you’re out on the wire? At the beginning of the activity, our instructor hands each of us a pair of gloves and explains, “Pull down on the wire when you want to slow down. But be careful not to get your fingers caught in the pulley. That would be bad.” Seriously?

It’s a misty, overcast day in central Costa Rica when my friend Donna and I report to our zipline course. I’ve been looking forward to this day since I first came to this country, having heard that Costa Rica is *the* place to try this crazy adventure activity. At the same time, coming off a back injury incurred earlier in the trip which almost sent me home, I’m feeling a little trepidatious. Is this harness going to be painful? Will it hurt when I’m swinging around? Not to mention the fact that I’m just wee bit afraid of heights! Still, we came here. We spent the money. I’m doing this!

The scenery from the top of the first tower is pretty darn stunning. As a “cloud forest,” Monteverde is known for the way its fog and low-hanging clouds hover above the upper canopy of the forest. As I look out at the mist clinging to the dense foliage, it’s like the sky has come down to the forest and I’m walking on clouds.

The first zipline is pretty scary – that initial sensation of speed combined with height combined with the knowledge that your life depends on your harness being firmly connected to that narrow little wire. The next zipline segment is a little better, and the five or six after that are better still. I’m getting the hang of this! I’m not going to die! At least, that’s the sense of (over) confidence I’m running as we come to the final leg of the journey: the descent. Imagine standing on a high platform WAY up in the trees, above the canopy, looking down at platform on the ground about half a mile away (or so it seems), and your instructor saying, “Go full speed until you see the yellow flag, then brake as hard as you can or the ground will break you.” Ha ha. Again remember, braking means putting your leather gloves atop the wire and pulling down. If you pull too late, you smash into the final barrier. If you pull too soon, you stop yourself on the wire and get hung out to dry, half way from home. With heart in hand, I take the plunge and careen towards the ground, hitting the brakes on the wire at just the right time and gliding to the ground, light as a feather. It’s a completely insane, totally exhilarating, entirely non-serious moment in my life. And I love it. “Can we do it again?!!” Seriously!

(What’s your relationship with risk? What’s the right balance between playing it safe and missing out on experience, vs. jumping into things without measuring out the cost? In the end, you just have to tap into your instinct. It’ll let you know if this the serious thing, or the seriously fun thing to do.)