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Sky high in a giant's arms Teresa Dameron and family lead majestic ascent up 'Horace,' a 250-foot Douglas fir.

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As if on cue, we soften our voices and walk down a trail in the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest along Lookout Creek east of Blue River. We duck under leafy vine maples and push through dense branches of conifer needles. We're in search of a massive 400-something-year-old tree named Horace.

This old-growth forest is nature's own cathedral: anchored by the architecture of grizzled Douglas firs, flanked with sweeping ferns and budding adolescent trees. Teresa Dameron, co-founder of the guided tree-climbing outfitter, Pacific Tree Climbing Institute (PTC), leads the way. She asks us to try not to disturb the fungal-rich life on the forest floor: decomposing leaves, lichens, delicate trumpet-like white flowers, cobwebs cradling fresh raindrops and tiny mushrooms popping from rotting wood.

But we don't plan to stay earth-bound. We're headed straight up: 200 feet into Horace's canopy.

Several ropes string down Horace, whose girth is about 2 meters in diameter. We plan to climb all together up separate ropes alongside, not on, Horace, though he's only an arm's reach away. We harness up, then pull down on the rope, and up on an ascender device, pulling ourselves up the tree. Imagine a giant inchworm moving up a web, or Spiderman — only slower and without superpowers. That's how we look.

"A circus family"

On this trip, some of Teresa's family joins us. The Swiss Family Robinson has nothing on these guys. Teresa's husband, Nathaniel Sperry, is an arborist with Sperry Tree Care. Son Rob Miron, who co-owns PTC with Jason Seppa, is also an arborist and competes with his older brother Andrew in professional tree-climbing events. "I feel like I'm living in a circus family," says Dameron.

Dameron's kids have always been up trees. When oldest son Andrew was only 2, she found him perched 30 feet up in a backyard cottonwood. Her first instinct was to panic and yell, but decided it was best not to startle him. "I swallowed and said 'time for cookies!'" she recalls.

As adults, Andrew and Rob are still up trees — they both compete in tree climbing and work as arborists as well. But for Teresa, climbing trees was an acquired taste. When other family members would watch fireworks on their home's roof, Teresa's fear of heights kept her from following. "I was sure the fire department would have to tranquilize me to get me down," she says.

In fact, she didn't climb her first old-growth fir tree until age 50 — it was a 280-foot tree by Bryce Creek near Cottage Grove and she was terrified. (It was Rob's first climb up an old growth tree, too — he was 20.) It didn't take long for Dameron to realize that dangling 100 feet off the earth heightened her experience of the natural world; she became fascinated by a new universe of insects, critters and birds and came back to earth with tears.

So Dameron partnered with Scott Altenhoff to create PTC to bring people up into the trees and teach them that remaining old-growth groves have greater value as intact forests than do swaths of controlled timber plantations. It

took PTC about a year to get a permit from the Willamette National forest to take people into trees; now visitors come from all over the world to climb. Dameron turned over the business to her son Rob a few years ago. PTC is close to Rob's heart. He has, in fact, a tattoo of a drawing his mom made of the first old-growth tree she and he climbed together; it's inked right above his heart.

Life at 200 feet up

Horace's trunk is mostly limbless on the way up until we hit a patch of new growth — clusters of branches that the photosynthesis-hungry conifer has sent out to capture more sunlight. We've left the world behind up here, in more ways than one. My rope spins me slowly around; the world's a 360-degree blur of green. We are lost in layers of the color: up, down, all around. Each leaf is like a splash of oil paint in nature's own impressionistic painting. Dameron hangs from her rope above me, between two mossy burls as large as couch pillows.

Below me is Teresa's husband, Nathaniel, who stops to identify trees in the canopy layers: hemlock, bigleaf maple, Pacific yew, red cedar and Horace's massive Douglas-fir brothers.

"There are people who can identify trees by their smell alone," says Dameron from her perch.

"There are people who can identify people by their smell alone," chimes in her son Rob from below; laughter ripples up and down the rope. Rob and his girlfriend, Katie, are perched in harnesses about 20 feet down, hanging close, like a couple of lovebirds. The two slept on a "portaledge," or tent-like system used by rock climbers, in Horace's canopy the night before. It's the best of what PTC offers, a night sleeping in a tree, typically in tree boats. "There's nothing like waking up to birds, cradled in the arms of a Douglas fir," says Dameron.

The upper canopy is full of life: sap oozes honey-like from bark as thick and crumbly as the crust of artisan bread; it's flecked with a few black ants and shelf mushrooms.

Dameron reminds us how carelessly this beauty has been lost over the years and wishes we'd all reflect: "Do we really need to use wood products the way we do?" She is heartened by PTC's partnership with the University of Oregon Environmental Leadership program to create Canopy Connections, which brings hundreds of middle-schoolers into H.J. Andrews' old-growth trees. "Taking kids tree climbing is like planting seeds. Some kids come down out of that tree on fire; they know they want to become arborists or forest biologists."

Middle-aged women are PTC's primary clients. "By the time you get to be middle aged you've come to accept that you are probably not going to make an attempt on Mt. Everest, but that doesn't mean you don't have some adventure left in you — and this is accessible," says Dameron.

Back to earth

We finally make it to the top, where we plan to hang out. But we hear a rumble in the distance and an electric crack. Thunder. The air is positively thick with ions and the sky lights up in my periphery. It was mostly sunny when we arrived, but a storm's coming and we need to get out of the tree, quick. Dangling tree-high from ropes fed through lightning-rod metal devices is not advised; Horace could turn ugly.

Rob shows me how to maneuver, and I'm zipping down the tree so fast I smell the gear oil in the ascender heat up. We're all on the ground except Rob, who's derigging the trees. His mom looks up with worry and yells from ground level, "Get out of that tree, Rob!"

Minutes later, down the rope comes Rob, Batman-like, holding a stash of ropes and flap of nylon portaledge. Mom sighs with relief.

We hear rain fall on the canopy, but we hardly feel it on our skin. Rob tells us that 40 percent of the rain gets absorbed up high in old-growth groves. It's intercepted by the epiphytes: small plants like mosses and lichens. How

an old-growth forest filters rain is one of the dynamics that make this ecosystem special. It's easy to see how this place has captured the hearts of Dameron and her family.

For info about Pacific Tree Climbing Institute, contact Rob Miron or Jason Seppa at PTC, (541) 461-9410 or www.pacifictreeclimbing.com.

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