



Make It Real

IN 1988, A YOUNG KIM BOON swatted the mosquitoes off his face at a defunct granite quarry near Bukit Timah (meaning “Hill of the Temak Trees” in Malay). At a mere 534 feet above sea level, this hill was the highest point in Singapore. During the 1850s, British naturalist Alfred Russel Wallace, who developed the theory of evolution through natural selection contemporaneously with Charles Darwin, discovered some 700 species of beetles here. The area has long been known for other curiosities: in 1931 Fred Heron imported livestock from abroad to start the first farm to rear Friesian cows (habituated to a much more temperate climate) in an equatorial region; and after the closing of local mining operations, old quarries remained as surreal craters in the earth. Three of them eventually brimmed with rainwater and became lakes. But the government filled this one, known as the Dairy Farm Quarry, partly with earth, leaving cliffs that protruded up to 150 feet off the ground. The fissures in its granite were formed by years of blasting and preserved as an afterthought. The remnants of its walls consisted of choss and moss, yet local climbers loved them because the quarry was the only outdoor crag that Singapore had to offer. The centerpiece was a blunt arête that protruded out of the trees, a vision of golden granite above a thick canopy of green, an invitation to ascent.

Kim Boon inspected the seams of his harness for wear. There were still few outdoor retailers in Singapore in the 1980s, so this was a replica, skillfully executed by a local seamstress. Across his chest, he slung a few precious cams as well as some dubiously improvised metal chocks. In the small local climbing community, only a privileged few had the opportunity to purchase gear overseas during business trips. Some brought home foreign climbing magazines, and their friends would gather to gawk at photos of beautiful cliffs and mountains. The accompanying articles offered one of the only available forms of instruction. The stories were their main source of inspiration, their gateway to the world.

One year prior, Lawrence Lee and Anthony Seah, had established the first route in Dairy Farm, called “No Name,” because they could not decide on one. “No Name” was on the opposite cliff where Kim Boon was. It ran through abrupt cracks of odd sizes left by industrial scarring. It was not pleasing to look at, but it was a start. Kim Boon now edged precariously on the polished granite of the cliff opposite No Name, keeping his composure despite the sultry heat. His shirt was saturated, and his hair was clumped from sweat. Immersed in nature, far from the arid atmosphere of air-conditioned offices, he climbed ever higher up “The Nose” (The Singapore Version).

Well, if you stood far and squinted hard enough, you could trace how the two rock faces met at an acute angle. A slightly jutting prow and a somewhat curved sun-shadow line—that’s where the similarities with the Nose of Yosemite ended. At a staggering height of forty-two meters, the Singapore Nose offered a grand total of two pitches of climbing. Still, this would become the only comprehensive training ground for multipitch and trad climbing here.

Kim Boon crept closer to the trees that fringed the top of the cliff. He exhaled deeply. Kim Boon, Kenneth Koh and Farid Hamid had been working on this project for a few weeks. They'd been thwarted again and again because they lacked the experience to climb the twenty-five-meter crack that ran almost seamlessly from the midsection to the top. This time, however, he'd gotten through the crux. Having established it was climbable, he and his friends placed fixed steel anchors at the top, and they gave the route its name. "I don't remember who made the *first* ascent," Kim Boon recalled, "we climbed for the sense of adventure and exploration of the area."

During the next couple of years, Kim Boon found himself venturing farther and higher, traveling to climb the frozen slopes of 6831-meter Kedar Dome in India and 6119-meter Lobuche East in Nepal. These expeditions provided his first exposure to the Himalaya, to altitude, to mountaineering. "It opened my eyes to the world," he said. "There was so much to see, to climb, to explore." Kim Boon and his friends continued to learn their basics mainly through trial and error, and they grew to become independent and resourceful climbers. In 1993 Bill Atkinson, an alpine guide from New Zealand, certified Kim Boon and several others as the first climbing instructors of the newly minted Singapore Mountaineering Federation.

CALLED A "CITY IN A GARDEN," Singapore is famous for sprawling skylines and for futuristic nature parks with neon-lit "Supertrees," where tropical plants grow from steel structures designed to resemble enormous forest canopies—glimpses of artificially bolstered wildness in a land-scarce island metropolis. Like many Singaporeans, I was first exposed to hiking as a character-building activity in school, when my classmates and I went on trips to hilly forests in the nearby country of Malaysia. I never envisioned myself pursuing adventures on faraway peaks. To me, the closest semblance of a mountain range was a silhouette of high-rise buildings traced across the horizon in the evening sky. Alpinism was a vague subject here, romanticized by the tranquility of distant photos, dismissed as an activity too foreign to comprehend. Climbing, in my mind, was confined to the realms of technicolored indoor walls.

My journey began in 2016 at the start of the first semester of my second year at the National University of Singapore. I was at the Student

Life Fair, where I found myself captivated by a poster of a climber staring into the distance. The sky held a faint pinkish hue, an afterglow from the morning sun. Immense towers of steep blue ice loomed over him. Sawtooth peaks sliced the lapis sky. I looked up and saw a white banner with the prominent words, "Make it Real," the name of the mountaineering club program, "MIR" for short. The mannequin on display at the booth wore a colorful jacket, a rope coiled around its torso and an ice axe in hand. I thought it was a curious sight, out of place in a hall filled with mainstream sports and clubs. I was drawn to the striking photographs of young men and women shouldering backpacks that appeared too big for themselves. Their faces glistened with sweat as they made their way up red-bricked staircases. I'd finished my national service in the army not too long ago, and trudging up stairs with heavy loads to simulate climbing wasn't a foreign concept to me. Yet, this was different: these people weren't forced to perform this activity as conscripted soldiers; they were training by choice to explore a new environment, one like none I'd ever seen before. In other pictures, yellow with age, triumphant climbers forced a weary smile on what looked like a summit. They held Singapore's flag unfurled.

A week later, I was in a lecture hall, among strangers. A wave of chatter broke the silence when a spirited group of students dressed in red shirts entered, and they sat together like a close family—the sixteenth class since the founding of MIR. I was introduced by the president of the club to the technical mountaineering course. We had to commit up to five days a week for physical training sessions, technical lessons and stairs training. After five months, we would travel to Nepal for a guided climb to an introductory peak. I pictured the icy blue chasms that were already etched in my mind, the white masses sculpted by the violent forces of nature. I could vaguely hear the winds rasping across me. I was enraptured by the beauty of high altitudes, devoid of the superfluous nature of man. Perhaps it was this mystery within that was the most alluring.

To go rock climbing outdoors in Singapore, we had to meet early when temperatures were cooler and to have the afternoon free to work on our studies. At the train station, the floor sparkled, a cleaner finished her routine, the turnstile opened with each precise tap of the card, commuters shuffled along with efficiency—a typical urban morning. A short walk later, I

transited from the modernity of Singapore onto a short gravel trail that broke into the serenity of an open grass field. Since 2005, the Dairy Farm Quarry had become part of a nature park within the Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. As I entered the area for the first time, I caught a glimpse of the slight sheen on the granite walls, reflecting the dawn light.

The seniors had the ropes running through metal chains and bolted anchors. The morning sun emanated through the canopy, casting the dull granite in a warm glow. Dark streaks of water ran across some of the rock faces, damp from recent rain. Chalk marks traced obvious lines, away from the lichen blooming within the cracks. I felt a tinge of apprehension as my rock shoes touched the polished granite. I grasped at the insides of mossy fissures until my elbows were smeared with tangerine-colored mud. While mosquitoes pestered my belayer, I paid little notice to the giant insects that hovered overhead or the spider webs that I disturbed as I made my way up the route called Direct. For many Singaporeans, this is their first entry to outdoor climbing. At a soaring fifteen meters, it never fails to impress novices. It is an unusual (and questionable) route, with slippery faces and gigantic indents from mining blasts. Near the top, deep fissures appear within unstable rock.

As I explored more of Dairy Farm, the place became close to my heart. I enjoyed the simple breakfasts with my friends, consuming plain biscuits with coffee as we sat on the ground sheets stacked with gear. I loved the sense of mounting excitement that rose before exploring each new route. I also came to associate Saturday mornings with the red banded woodpecker's shrill voice at the base of Bukit Timah Hill. Like the figures in the photos I'd seen, we began to shoulder heavy packs and march up stairs carved from mud and fortified by large stone blocks. We knew the mountains would not give us easy passage, so when we were told by our seniors to repeat this exercise eighteen times, we were willing. In a world that celebrated instant gratification, it was hard to appreciate such an arduous activity with no end in sight, but it provided a rehearsal for more formidable endeavors ahead.

IN 2001, A YOUNG, slender Robert Goh had stood hunched over, panting at the top of Bukit Timah Hill. People out for a stroll paused to stare and make remarks under their breaths: Didn't he get enough of this sort of thing as an Army conscript, carrying field packs on long

marches? He caught his breath; his eyes gazed into the distance. Climbing had captivated him since his years of studying abroad. As a member of the Imperial College Mountaineering Club in London, he had ventured into the Alps with his mentors during summer breaks and absorbed everything he could about mountains.

Since then, with Edwin Siew, Mok Ying Jang and base camp manager Lulin Reutens, Robert Goh hoped to form the first Singaporean team to achieve an unsupported ascent of Shishapangma. He also wanted to see the next generation continue their progress. So he and his expedition members founded the MIR program and recruited Kim Boon to help train the students. Robert Goh aspired to emulate the model of the club at his alma mater. His goal was to expand the horizons of Singaporean students' dreams and to give them the necessary skills to realize them.

It was a radical notion for Singapore's conservative, pragmatic society in the early 2000s, a time when staunch parenting and a heavy academic emphasis meant that most students never strayed far from their books. To many, climbing was impractical, and futile at best—a pursuit that did nothing to facilitate (and could even impede) the usual goals of having a stable career, family and material accomplishments. But aspiring climbers are the same around the world: we're drawn to the intrigue of what lies within the dense contour lines of maps, and we can't be kept indoors always. The few who succeeded in reaching the mountains, back then, relied on ingenuity and improvisation, creating their own training ground in the midst of this concrete jungle.

OF COURSE, WE HID in that concrete jungle whenever torrents of rain fell on us. "Don't use the railings, because the mountains have no railings to hold on to," a senior remarked as we climbed the stairwells of a forty-story building close to campus. I climbed higher up the stairwell and felt enclosed by the immaculate white walls on all sides. About twenty stories up, I looked beyond the windowless parapet and caught a glimpse of the West Coast. Trapped in the stifling humidity of the stairwell, I yearned for a breeze, a touch of rain, some visceral contact with nature. The turquoise waters of the Singapore Straits shimmered in the distance, alluding to the adventures far beyond what city dwellers could imagine.

Several evenings after school, I found myself suspended in empty space, held by the teeth of

my jumar, halfway up an overhanging artificial rock wall, while I practiced aid climbing. I tried my best to step hard into the loop of my homemade etrier, but despite my attempts at keeping my body straight, I spun in the same dreaded spiral as my teammate up ahead of me did. I looked down, several meters below, on another rope, the next contestant had left the ground too hastily and now swung in an uncontrolled pendulum. The seniors, who had all anticipated these novice mistakes, stood by laughing. Other students stared at us in wonder, unable to comprehend this bizarre activity. Classmates asked me what this oddity of a group was. At my reply, they gawked even more. "Mountaineering? What do you climb, Bukit Timah Hill?" I couldn't help scoffing at them. *We're not the delusionary*, I thought. *We're the curious*.

We trained late into the night after class, running out of campus into the darkness that was Vigilante Drive. It was the steepest road outside of campus, a winding piece of asphalt that spiraled upward—formidable enough that we couldn't eat too much dinner beforehand, lest it come spewing out at the end of the run. Afterward, the team convened outside the multipurpose sports hall. Before the climbing wall was built, the first batch of MIR trainees used to ascend ropes anchored onto hand railings on the second level of this building. Now, we positioned ourselves in a circle, sprawled across the porch, for calisthenics. When we were done, I lay with a full view of the evening sky. I'd perspired enough to leave a "sweat angel," an imprint of my back on the ground.

We practiced crevasse rescue on the grass fields outside the multipurpose hall where the earth was soft and muddy enough to simulate snow. Some of us roped ourselves up and ran as a team about the running track, to instill the discipline of keeping good distance from our partners. On top of training and studies, we also had to commit time to raise funds. As we looked up into the night, we knew what we aspired to was only as tangible as our imagination, and it might not come to fruition at all.

During the final weeks before our flight to Nepal, I went to pick my equipment from the club's collection. It wasn't feasible for students to own such specialized and expensive apparel and gear, which we'd hardly ever use in our climate at home. But through combined fundraising efforts over the years, the club had amassed a well-developed centralized inventory—a repository of past expeditions and milestone achievements. I searched through the

colorful shell jackets and stopped at a salmon pink one with the Shishapangma expedition logo patched on its sleeve. I brushed my fingers across the embroidery, tracing the rib of threads. I wondered how many people had come before me, donning the same jacket, dreaming of the same things. I stepped into yellow plastic boots. They had deep scratches along their sides, and the laces were shredded at its ends, marks that they'd been put to good use. I had the sense that I was part of something bigger than myself.

SOON AFTER WE ARRIVED in Nepal, we journeyed on a 4x4 towards Langtang Valley. The dusty streets of Kathmandu gave way to the viridescent flora in Syabrubesi where we started our trek. As we gained altitude, the plants vanished before a copper landscape of dust and sand. Familiar jagged peaks I saw in the photographs at the Student Life Fair loomed in the distance. When we started up Tserko Peak in Langtang Valley, the glacier ice cracked under my aged crampons, while the intense sunlight bore down on us. There were six of us students, and three IFMGA certified Nepali guides. Naren Shahi and Aashish Gurung went ahead of the group, scouting for dangerous crevasses and fixing lines on the final 300 feet of ascent. Tulsi Singh Gurung led the rest of the team, strung together on a single rope. Near a band of steep rock, Tulsi abruptly scrambled head-first into the ground, shouting unintelligible commands. My body moved in a labored state as I tried to comprehend the commotion. I finally heard the word *Rocks!* My friend in front of me pointed at several grey objects hurtling in our direction. What I thought, at first, were tiny stones turned out to be boulders. Fortunately, I'd shifted in the same direction as the others on our rope team, and I watched the rocks hurtle away at immense speed.

At the end of a twenty-hour summit push, dehydrated and fatigued, I thought of the months leading up to the climb. As we'd hiked up the undulating moraine, my muscles had ached in ways I'd never felt before, and I realized how inadequate our training was on well-paved roads at home. When I looked at my bruised toes from poor front-pointing technique in steep ice, I knew that our simulated cramponing on grass had proven to be of no comparison to reality. During our training in Singapore, we'd run far and hard, and our team had appeared athletic and confident. Up here in the thin air, we were shadows of ourselves at sea level. Our impressive skyscrapers were no match to nature's towers, who were we to think otherwise? Sheer

grit, and talented guides, had pulled us through. We'd also been lucky that the mountain had so graciously allowed us passage. After the ordeal, as I stared up at Tserko Peak, my romanticized dreams of tracing poetic lines through glistening shades of grey and white shattered. Instead, I saw only flashes of our struggles. Each image seemed encased together with the crystalline facets of rock and ice before me, etched in my memory. The façade seemed to cast back reflections of my hubris.

Back in Singapore, I attended one of the club's yearly reunions. There, our seniors told vivid stories of tapping their ice axes into the delicate crystals of frozen waterfalls in Sichuan, China, and of concentrating their entire minds on each precise move and tiny hold of a steep multipitch route in Malaysia. They spoke of their ambition to become more self-reliant. These tales were part of an ecosystem of tales that allowed new ventures to grow. In the photos the seniors shared, I appreciated the preparation required to appear so graceful along passages of stone and ice, and I realized the proficiency I still needed to attain to reach that kind of flow state. There was much more to mountaineering than big guided expeditions in the Himalaya. There was also beauty in short technical ascents, in less faraway areas, where I could find the opportunity to gain more independence and develop my own experience in risk management. Whenever sufficient difficulty is met with the right level of competence, I knew that a timeless and serene experience could unfold, even on the small routes at Dairy Farm, amid a concrete jungle.

When we were on the summit of Tserko Peak, I remembered one of the Nepali guides pointing out a glimpse of Shishapangma in the distance. From this distance, it sat unassuming within the range, just edging over the clouds, but who was I to underestimate its presence? In May 2002, Robert Goh and Edwin Siew had become the first Singaporeans to reach its central summit. Theirs was also the first Southeast Asian team to summit an 8000-meter peak without fixed ropes. Merely getting there had been an achievement in itself: after years of training, of juggling jobs, studies and family, and cold-calling sponsors. In comparison, my group had benefited from a well-developed syllabus, affordable flights and an accessible equipment stash in school. I looked at the photos of their sunburned faces, the pale reflections of snow and ice across their goggles and their cracked-lip smiles. I paused and pictured the invisible connection between our founding members, twenty years ago on the central summit, and ourselves. Even my own introductory climb would never have happened had they not decided to undertake their own journey, to *make it real*.

—Joel Lim, with Gawain Pek, Nathaniel Soon,
Nicholas Goh and Wang Chiew Hui, Singapore

