

SCALING WALLS
WITHOUT LEAVING
FOOTPRINTS
WHILE GIVING
BACK TO THE
PEOPLE. ONE
COMPANY SHOWS
HOW ROCK
CLIMBING CAN
OFFER MORE THAN
JUST A PHYSICAL
CHALLENGE

WORDS STACEY MCKENNA

CRAZY CLIMBS

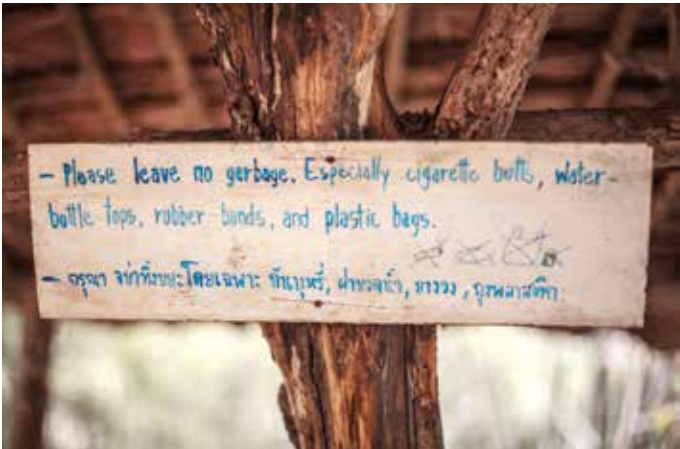
Professional climber
Jonathan Siegrist
climbs the third pitch
of Headhunters,
grade 7a, high above
Mae On valley

I'm balanced and trembling 20m above the earth, four limbs stretched between opposing walls, toes pinched tight in sticky-soled slippers. Sewing machine leg — that cursed shaking born of equal parts fear and fatigue — has set in, amplifying my uncertainty. Out of nervous habit, I check my rope, tracing it from waist to anchor to my husband, perched on the dusty ledge below. One at a time, I dip my sweaty hands into the chalk bag dangling from my harness and blow stray hairs from my eyes. A monkey rustles among the trees, sending bamboo stalks clacking and dry leaves the size of my head clattering noisily to the forest floor.



This page, clockwise from top left: Climbers are encouraged to eat local to support the Mae On community; a reminder to visitors to pick up after themselves; mock rescue training for staff. All CMRCA main guides undergo Wilderness First Responder Training; crag clean-up day

Facing page: Climbing out the horse's mouth on P3 of the airy Headhunters, Crazy Horse South Face



CLIMBS IN COMMUNITY
In 1998, Kraisak Boonthip discovered an outcrop of black-and-white streaked limestone karsts jutting from an emerald canopy 36km east of Chiang Mai, Thailand. The cliffs' prominent feature, a multi-storey ridge resembling an equine head, earned them the name Crazy Horse Buttress. Their melted-wax aesthetic – full of pockets and stalactite-like pockets – just begged to be climbed.
Armed with a rope, harness, and bolting equipment, Boonthip began putting up routes. Soon after, climbers Josh Morris and Francis Haden joined him in transforming the area into an adventurer's playground. Through the years, both local and international climbers have helped establish over 200 ascents

on 17 walls at Crazy Horse. Many routes afford views of rural Mae On district, which spills over with caves, waterfalls, hot springs, quiet villages and verdant rice paddies.
From the beginning, the climbers tried to balance their ambition with protecting the local environment and culture. Says Morris: "Our thought was, there are so many people going to climb in the south [of Thailand] but it's all foreigners. If we build a community, then that community might be able to survive independent of the high and low seasons. When people come, they'll be joining a community and not participating in an industry... so, we asked ourselves, what can we do to make the climbing really special and preserve the environment at the same time?"

Drawing on psychologist Robert Yerkes' ideas about comfort zones, Morris began connecting climbing and travel. "Cultural anxiety can be the same as when you're climbing and you're nervous," he says. "Our goal was that we could support the Mae On community without demanding they change things." In 2002, Morris co-founded Chiang Mai Rock Climbing Adventures (CMRCA) with his now-wife, Kat. The bouldering wall and gear shop provide information and guide services to Crazy Horse for local and visiting climbers. And Morris urges his customers to get uncomfortable, to be as brave in their travel as they are ascending rocks.
MAKING A CONSCIOUS IMPACT
The night before our Crazy Horse



excursion, my husband and I stopped by CMRCA to sign up for its transport service. A staff member reminded us to bring our own reusable bottles. Several years ago, Morris realised that one way to minimise Crazy Horse's impact on the environment was to avoid contributing to Thailand's plastic waste problem. CMRCA staff provide water at the crag each day that climbers can use to refill their personal bottles. And they bought stackable metal takeaway bowls for the nearby restaurant where climbers can add on a takeaway lunch for THB75. The guidebook and signs at the crag lay out additional rules and etiquette for preserving the local environment. For example, several hand-painted plaques remind climbers to clean up after themselves and cartoons provide instructions on how to properly use a squat toilet.
As we pull into Crazy Horse's dirt carpark the next morning, I crane my neck, looking for the towering horse face overhead. Peering out from CMRCA's converted cherry-red pick-up truck, I'm struck by the shelters and communal dining table lining



PREVIOUS SPREAD: JOSH MORRIS; THIS SPREAD: DAN MORRIS PHOTOGRAPHY/TANDEM STOCK; CHIANG MAI ROCK CLIMBING ADVENTURES



Clockwise from top: Mae Kampong village; chicken and quail eggs in a basket for visitors to boil in a hot spring; climbers participating in tree planting day

CLIMBS FOR EVERYONE

Want to push yourself safely? Heart Wall's roughly 40 routes were developed with an "ethic of bolting for the person who's at their limit," says Morris.

Your first time? With an easy approach and an assortment of beginner and moderate-friendly climbs that offer spectacular views from the anchors, the main area – Crazy Horse Buttress – is a must-do.

Prefer something unique? Get your heart pumping in Anxiety State Crisis Cave. The routes are long (as tall as 70m) and exposed, and unlike anything you've done before. There are even a couple of shorter moderates for folks who want to experience climbing in the cave without going so extreme.



the lot. The structures create instant community. Built from thatch, wood and bamboo, it's here that climbers gather midday to refuel and swap stories in the cool shadows. My husband and I check our water, hoist our packs onto our shoulders, and begin the short hike – most approaches at Crazy Horse take less than 20 minutes – to the area's namesake wall. We meander along carefully excavated switchbacks and climb reinforced stairs complete with bamboo handrails, passing shade huts as we near the base of the routes. Our driver Loong Naan is responsible for imagining and constructing nearly all of these comforts. CMRCA staff

and members of the Chiang Mai climbing community have also chipped in, picking up trash, maintaining trails and building belay ledges. Despite near-daily visitors, the forest is pristine. While these efforts have earned Crazy Horse acclaim, it tries to keep growth slow and deliberate to continue benefitting the community without compromising its citizens' way of life. There are few signs to alert passersby of the site and the guidebook foregoes specific recommendations for lodging or eats in Mae On. Instead, it lists every option in the district and encourages visitors to sample the local fare and accommodations for themselves. Morris flat-out discourages seeking out Western food in the countryside. After all, Chiang Mai is less than an hour away and bustles with plenty of familiar options for homesick travellers.

SCALING UP Recently, CMRCA turned its attention to bigger, broader changes in environmental stewardship and in Thailand's climbing scene. As far as Morris is concerned, the two are connected. "Using intercultural exchange and leadership, we want to facilitate experiences that help people care more for the environment." CMRCA now offers outward-



bound style programming for local students, teaching "leave no trace" ethics through climbing, caving and multi-day treks. Since 2013, the company has sent 10 Thai staff members to the US in a collaborative exchange programme with Colorado Mountain School (CMS). "The guide lives in Boulder, trains with CMS guides for two months, goes to Salt Lake City, climbs the Grand Teton, elevates skill sets, and comes back and trains the younger guides," Morris explains. As a result, all of CMRCA's main guides hold American Mountain Guides Association certification, including Wilderness First Responder Training. All of them have tools and experiences they can apply to new adventures. Two years after first learning

about Crazy Horse, I find myself sitting across from Suradet Kongsingh in an apartment in Boulder, Colorado. Kongsingh, 29, has been climbing for nine years and guiding for CMRCA since 2009. He was the company's first employee to attend CMS and is back for advanced training. Sinewy strong and soft spoken, he lights up when asked about the sport and its future in his country. "Climbing gets me outside. It has taken me to new places, lets me see different cultures," he says. "I want to introduce more Thai people to it, teach them to climb well and safely. I'd like to bring an international standard to climbing in Thailand."

 SilkAir flies daily between Singapore and Chiang Mai



MAKING IT HAPPEN

- Beginners can arrange guided excursions to Crazy Horse as well as nearby caves with Chiang Mai Rock Climbing Adventures. thailandclimbing.com
- Well-trained guides will provide gear and teach you the safety basics. Expect five- to 20-minute hikes on well-maintained trails to the various cliffs. Wear comfortable pants or long shorts and make sure to bring sun screen, bug repellent and a refillable water bottle.
- Those with experience and their own gear can sign up for transport to the crag with CMRCA, which includes water, insurance, optional lunch, and a ride in a *songtaew* (red truck). The trucks leave the shop in Chiang Mai (in the southeast corner of the moat between Thapae and Chiang Mai gates) daily at 8.30am and head back to town at 4.30pm – make sure to sign up by 7.30pm the night before.
- If you prefer some flexibility and the option to enjoy Mae On's spoils independently, consider renting a car or motorbike from one of the shops on Chaiyapoom Road in Chiang Mai. From town, head east on route 1141 to 1317. The dirt road to Crazy Horse, marked by flags and a wooden sign, sits about 200m past the sign for Muang On Cave.

CHIANG MAI ROCK CLIMBING ADVENTURES, SHUTTERSTOCK