

MOUNTAIN CLIMBING

LOVE ON THE ROCKS

Cheang Qin Xing combines the love of his life with his love for climbing

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SINGAPORE – From downright cheesy wedding proposals to creatively romantic ones — this one just takes the cake.

On a narrow ledge 100m off the ground on the Washington Column with the gorgeous sunset as a backdrop, Cheang Qin Xing whipped out a diamond and popped the question to his partner, Kelly Khiew.

The proposal was just one of the highlights of the couple's trip to the United States last year, where they became the first Singaporeans to conquer the infamous El Capitan.

"We were getting very bored with the climbing scene in Singapore," Cheang said, explaining the motivation behind the achievement, which he doesn't seem to think much about.

"Here, it is all about competitions and most people climb indoors. No one really wants to try something different."

The 30-year-old civil servant started climbing eight years ago and met fiancée Khiew, an avid climber of over 12 years, during a trip to Krabi seven years ago. The sport has since served as a means of taking their relationship to different levels.

Khiew said she had suspected that Cheang would propose sometime during the trip but had not thought it would be during that particular climb.

Their climbs are nothing like scaling an artificial wall, where there are numerous protrusions to grab

and step onto. Instead, they prefer traditional climbing — ascending by installing anchor points and removing them as they go along.

They successfully scaled the Washington Column in two days. It was during their second trip to the Half Dome, however, that trouble struck.

Having underestimated the rations they needed, Cheang and Khiew descended on the third day dehydrated, starving and exhausted.

"We could have died," Cheang said. "When we got down, we drove straight to the nearest supermarket and stuffed ourselves silly."

The couple rested for a few days before attempting the main event: Four nights of eating and sleeping on the surface of the almost-1km-high El Capitan.

"Rice, spam, eggs, sausages ... all these for a good meal on the first day!" Cheang exclaimed when asked about the menu during the trip. "We have to keep ourselves motivated. If you're eating energy bars every day, you'll never make it up there."

Their relatively extravagant feasting meant regular bowel movement. To manage this, the couple came up with an "improvised poop system". Comprising wax-coated paper — the type used to wrap hawker food — air-sick bags, zip-lock bags and a travel bag, the four-layered system ensured that the trip would not be soiled with an untimely leak.

So, with 65kg worth of rations and equipment, the couple set off for their first "campsite" on the mountain, a tiny ledge where they would spend the night.

It was hardly a leisurely journey. They would climb almost non-stop from 7.30am to 9pm. They had a minimum distance to cover daily or they would run out of rations before reaching the top. This meant they could only afford to take short breaks of a few minutes at a time.

But even as Khiew was quenching her thirst or having a quick snack to replenish energy, Cheang would be carrying out one of the toughest tasks of the climb — pulling their bags up. The friction between the heavy bags and the rock surface made this immensely difficult. And it got even more exasperating when the bags got stuck in crevices.

"I had to be very, very careful. One bad pull and the poop could explode in the bag," Cheang said, laughing.

The first night on El Capitan was, as he recalled, the worst. The ledge the couple was resting on was so narrow that it could only fit one person comfortably. Having to sleep in an



Cheang and Khiew on El Capitan. PHOTOS CHEANG QIN XING

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awkward position, his legs dropped off the ledge several times during the night in what he described as more annoying than nerve-racking.

"The mental challenge was the hardest part of this journey," said Cheang. "We knew that no one in Singapore had done this before. And there was also the factor that I really didn't know what to expect."

The fact that many have died trying to scale El Capitan did not deter these two brave — some say crazy — adventurers.

When asked how the trip had impacted them as a couple, Khiew said: "We have seen each other at our most 'un-cool' times but I think we have learnt to brave through challenges with honesty, perseverance, communication and, above all, a big smile."

And, smiling, Cheang added: "All I can say is that not everyone is able to find a partner who's willing to suffer with you like that."