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ROCK

IN A

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Once home to the notorious *Bounty* mutineers and now to a shocking scandal, lonely Pitcairn Island is hoping to shake its dark legacy. Can a rock-climbing expedition help forge a better future?

BY MARK SYNNOTT  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIMMY CHIN



SHORE PARTY: The author scouting sea stacks at St. Paul's Pool. Opposite: Pitcairn Island as the *Bounty* mutineers first glimpsed it in 1790.

# A

At first light on the morning of July 1, I stumbled into the *Picasso's* cockpit. A fierce wind was ripping at the South Pacific and shrieking through the boat's rigging. "It's blowing a gale," yelled the Australian captain, Mike Griffiths, as the 66-foot cutter angled up a 12-foot swell and smashed down so hard I thought it would snap in half. ¶ Griffiths was outfitted in full foul-weather gear

and tethered to the boat by a body harness. While I'd been whimpering in my bunk, he'd been at the helm keeping the ship on course. Looking at my green visage now, he grinned, probably for the first time all night. "Toughen up, dawg," he said.

This two-day, stomach-churning trip really began three years ago when I came across Caroline Alexander's 2003 book *The Bounty* and was struck by an illustration of a wooden longboat attempting to land on Pitcairn Island. It dated to 1825, 35 years after the infamous *Bounty* mutineers first landed on that rocky outpost. In the background, majestic stone spires rose like ramparts from the South Pacific. As a member of The North Face climbing team, it's my job to seek out exotic places with untapped potential. That island—and those spires—piqued my interest.

Some 3,000 miles from New Zealand, the nearest major landmass, tiny Pitcairn has been called the most remote inhabited place on Earth. Getting there requires flights from Los Angeles to Tahiti, then from Tahiti to the Gambiers, a group of 11 motus in the southeast corner of French Polynesia. Last comes a 330-mile sea voyage to lonely Pitcairn—a one-and-a-half-square-mile blip with no airstrips and no harbors where a boat can safely anchor. Supply ships pass by just three or four times a year, so chartered vessels are the only option.



**FACING THE FUTURE:** A portrait of John Adams, the longest surviving mutineer (above). Near right, from top: Captain Mike Griffiths and first mate Kathy Urpani at the helm of the *Picasso*; a village on Pitcairn, circa 1825. Opposite: Shirley Young, a Pitcairn "outsider," whose first home mysteriously burned down.



Griffiths was the fifth captain I'd contacted and the first willing to make the trip with my team: climbers Greg Child, Kevin Thaw, and Jimmy Chin. Still, there was no guarantee we would even get ashore, because the sea is often too rough for any of the island's 47 inhabitants—many of them seventh- and eighth-generation descendants of the mutineers—to launch their longboats and fetch visitors.

Later that morning the skies had cleared, and when I staggered back up to join Captain Griffiths on deck he pointed to the west. "Well, mate," he said, "there's your effing island." About five miles off the starboard side, a giant rock rose 1,100 feet out of the ocean, flanked by orange-and-gray sea cliffs and capped with tufts of vibrant green jungle. It was the same sight that greeted Fletcher Christian and his *Bounty* crew 215 years earlier. But today I could make out the whitewashed houses of Adamstown perched on a small plateau about 500 feet above Bounty Bay.

Thirty minutes later, a battered aluminum longboat pulled alongside the *Picasso*. We tossed our duffels and backpacks down to its two scruffy-looking crewmen as their vessel ground against the side of the ship. Then my team and I climbed aboard, and Robbin "Hermie" Hermans, the longboat's skipper, motored us into the massive swells and through a maze of rocks that loomed out of the water like giant incisors. Only the locals know the exact route through it, and newcomers have died trying. As we neared the docks, Hermie eased off the throttle, let a few small waves pass under us, then gunned the twin 225-horsepower engines, crested a huge roller over a volcanic outcrop, and cut a quick turn into the jetty. Waiting to haul us out of the ocean like the day's catch were half a dozen Pitcairners.

The assembled men and women looked unmistakably Polynesian, with broad noses and molasses-toned skin, but many had blond hair and light eyes that betrayed their Anglo-Saxon lineage. One woman—barefoot, in cutoff jeans and an old ratty T-shirt—I recognized as 50-year-old Brenda Christian. I'd seen her picture on her Web site and, later, in *Time* magazine next to a write-up about her election, in 2004, as the island's first female mayor. "Welcome to Pitcairn," she said in a Cockney accent with a lilting Polynesian drawl.

## TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

The story of how this inhospitable place became an unlikely redoubt has been glorified by five films and hundreds of books—not to mention a handful of musicals. On October 26, 1788, Her Majesty's armed vessel *Bounty* arrived in Tahiti after a 27,086-mile round-the-world journey. The ship's captain, a harsh and demanding young navigator named William Bligh, had been dispatched by the Queen to gather breadfruit, a Polynesian staple, and transplant saplings in the West Indies. For five months he and his crew lived in paradise with the amiable Polynesians, spending their days collecting plants and their nights among the Tahitian women, who, in the words of naturalist Philibert Commerson, a traveler through the area in the 18th century, "know no other god but love." By the time the captain announced their return to England, some of his crew were expectant fathers, and in no mood to abandon their new lives and return to the hardships of the sea.

The infamous mutiny occurred on April 28, 1789, some three weeks after the *Bounty* set sail. It was a bloodless coup, realized in the night when first mate Fletcher Christian and three other sailors cast Bligh and 18 loyal crewmen adrift in a 23-foot longboat. Bligh, in a masterly exhibition of seamanship, piloted his tiny vessel 3,618 miles to Dutch East Timor. Christian, meanwhile, set a course back to Tahiti, where he brought aboard six Polynesian men, 18 women, and one baby. Whether the Tahitians were willing shipmates remains unclear. According to some accounts, the *Bounty* set sail from Tahiti while the Polynesians slept off an evening of partying on deck.

For nine months they scoured the South Pacific for a safe haven, and when Christian first set eyes on rockbound Pitcairn in January 1790, he knew they'd found it. The British Royal Navy would never think to look for them on a minuscule volcanic speck with no harbor. After running the *Bounty* aground, one of the mutineers set the ship ablaze and sealed their fate on the island.

Visiting Pitcairn today is an only slightly simpler process, which begins with an application to the Pitcairn Island Council. As it happened, at the time I made contact with them their community



was embroiled in scandal. Seven adult men had been charged with a decades-long pattern of sexually abusing several of Pitcairn's girls. The victims ranged in age from seven to 19, and all had since moved off the island. Was it a question of outright criminality, or was it, as the accused insisted, a clash of cultures, pitting traditional Polynesian customs against Western sexual mores? The verdict came in October 2004, when six of the defendants were convicted by a British court (Pitcairn remains a British protectorate); two were sentenced to 300-400 hours of community service, others to as much as six years in prison. Jay Warren, the island's current mayor, was the only one acquitted.

Since the trials began, the council had been routinely denying

journalists' requests to visit the island. This would have been my fate as well, but the council was intrigued by the idea of assessing Pitcairn's potential as a rock-climbing destination. From a high of 200 in 1936, the population had already suffered from decades of exodus. Soon the island would be losing almost a quarter of its already limited workforce to incarceration, and the economy was sure to suffer as a result. To boost income, the residents planned to construct a breakwater that would encourage passing cruise ships to shuttle passengers ashore, and permit a semiregular ferry service from the nearby island of Mangareva. Tourism seemed imminent, and our team would be among the first in.

Brenda Christian was a strong proponent of evolving Pitcairn's future. As the local contact for our expedition, she had arranged for each of us to stay with a different family. I'd be lodging with hers. One by one, we loaded our belongings onto ATVs and set off up the Hill of Difficulty, a sharp dirt rise that leads to Adamstown. Pitcairn has a relentlessly crumpled volcanic landscape, with towering ridges and low valleys that knit up to the highest point—1,138-foot Goathouse Peak. One of the few level sections is the site of its sole village, comprising a Seventh-day Adventist church, a library, a post office, a museum, a general store, a few benches, and a bell that was once used to call the community together. There are no hotels on the island (though Brenda and her husband, Mike Lupton, a 47-year-old Brit, are planning to open one this year). Brenda and I motored through town, then picked our way along dirt tracts where the vegetation pressed in on all sides.

#### SCOUTING MISSION

The next morning I hopped on the back of Mike's ATV and we sped off into the island's interior. Pitcairn is riddled with little roads and trails—most of which dead-end in jungle. Mike pointed out thickly vegetated valleys ringed with cliffs that he said haven't

**STACKED UP:** The expedition team finds its footing on this hundred-foot pinnacle (right). Far right, from top: Climber Kevin Thaw with locals on the island of Mangareva; Pitcairn local "Paul the Pirate."



been explored in decades. Every panorama offered views of vibrant foliage, sea cliffs, and the cobalt blue Pacific.

Our first stop was Ship's Landing Point, the summit of a 500-foot wall of gray rock that rises directly above Bounty Bay. From the *Picasso* it looked like the island's most promising cliff—soaring and exposed. But when I made my way to its edge and grabbed ahold, the rock crumbled in my hand like overbaked clay. Mike shrugged sheepishly. "No good, eh?" he said. Each place we tried, the result was the same: a handful of rubble, a shrug from Mike, then back along a crisscrossing network of trails, the sea air mingling with the four-stroke fumes.

After a day of unsuccessful recon, we returned to find the dinner table piled high with grilled *nanue* that Brenda had caught that afternoon, along with a pot roast and breadfruit fries. Mike and Brenda's house is one of the nicest on the island, a sprawling single-story cement block that abuts the biggest ocean in the world. The most notable thing about it, though, is its boggling array of electrical appliances: refrigerators, freezers, televisions, DVD players, computers, blenders, toasters, coffeemakers. It was the collection of a lifetime, and Brenda introduced it ("that's the microwave," "there's the toaster," "there's another toaster") with obvious pride.

To my further surprise, the entire island is set up for wireless Internet, something I don't even have at my house back in New Hampshire. Several families have Web sites selling Pitcairn carvings, T-shirts, and the island's famous pure honey. Though nascent, this Internet economy is one of the island's most lucrative,

**A maze of rocks**  
loomed out of the water  
like giant incisors. Only the locals  
know the exact route through it.

despite the fact that electricity is expensive and hard to come by. The principal generator feeds power to the community from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. and from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m.

As we ate, Brenda's 19-year-old son Andrew Christian—whose long hair, goatee, and ears lined with piercings gave him the air of an urban hipster—explained his plan to start an Internet café in Adamstown. He was clearly a new breed of islander, a marked contrast to the other dinner guest, 80-year-old Len Brown, one of the island's elders—and a convicted sex offender—who years ago had established his reputation as Pitcairn's most adventurous soul by swimming the circumference of the island, about seven shark-infested miles. He was still the only person who had ever explored every inch of the place.

"Len," I yelled across the table (his hearing was going). "Any idea where we can find some good rock climbing?"

Len nodded and turned to Brenda, speaking in Pitkern, an amalgam of 18th-century English and Polynesian that the old-timers still use among themselves. This pidgin language was

developed as a way for the English sailors and the Tahitians to communicate, and it features some words I could discern, such as *musket* (gun), and others I couldn't, such as *tin-tola* (girlfriend) and *wettles* (food). Brenda helped translate.

Len: "*Nava bin down Gudgeon fer long time.*" Brenda: "No one has been down to Gudgeons in a long time."

Len: "*Mebe gut sum good side fer clime Down Rope.*" Brenda: "Maybe there's some good climbing at Down Rope."

Down Rope. If the name was any indication, I thought we might have caught a break.

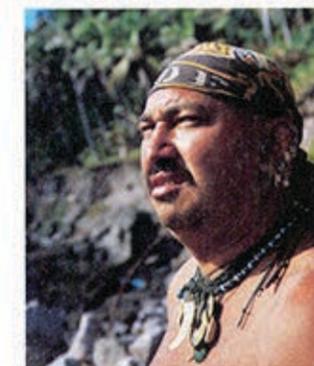
#### INSIDE AND OUT

The next morning Andrew parked his ATV along a rugged trail that skirts the edge of a steep precipice. "Over here," he said, dropping down a near-vertical slot that had been hacked into the vegetation. Greg, Jimmy, and I stopped our borrowed vehicles and followed close behind, making our way down a staircase that had been chopped into the compressed mud and black-ash face of a 500-foot cliff. A stumble or slip here would almost certainly have been fatal.

After the *Bounty* was run aground in 1790, the Pitcairners would descend this cliff by rope to collect bird eggs or to fish and picnic on the isle's only sand beach. According to island lore, this is where one of the Tahitian women fell to her death. Her husband, William McCoy, suddenly wifeless, promptly stole one from another man. Apparently this competition for the island's limited supply of women soon led to violence: Four years after landing

on the island, Fletcher Christian and all the other men, save one, were dead. When the American sealing ship *Topaz* landed on Pitcairn in 1808, they found John Adams, the last surviving mutineer and sole adult male, presiding over a community of 34 women and children. Adams claimed to have been innocent of any crimes—first telling a tale of a depressed Christian killing himself and later recounting a mutiny by the Polynesian men that led to fatalities on both sides. The truth will never be known, but one has to wonder how Adams became the last man standing.

At the bottom of the cliff we strolled along a sandy beach while sets of perfect waves rolled in from a bay hemmed in by sharp-toothed rocks. Andrew showed us some hieroglyphs that had been carved into the base of a nearby palisade. Many archaeologists believe that Pitcairn was home to a thriving community from A.D. 1200 to 1500. Because the island is volcanic, not a coral atoll like most in this region, its rocks were prized for their density and widely traded by early Polynesians. That ancients



MAP BY DAVE STEVENSON

## PITCAIRN ISLAND

had come to this beach to find solid rock seemed promising for climbers hunting the same.

Indeed, the cliff at Down Rope would have made for spectacular climbing. But due to the archaeological significance of the site, we decided to leave it untouched—even if that meant bankrupting our expedition. Greg Child was the one who voiced the irony of our predicament: “We’ve traveled thousands of miles to climb rock that, for the most part, isn’t fit to be called rock,” he said, “and when we do find something climbable, we still aren’t able to climb it.”



**SEA BOUNTY:** Brenda Christian (above) still catches much of her own food—such as this octopus—instead of depending on the island’s supply ships. Bottom right: John Adams’ grave.

That night, as I scoured maps looking for a way to salvage the trip, Brenda invited me along to a town meeting. Since the sex-abuse scandal, few visitors had been allowed to view the island’s politics from behind closed doors. She was offering me that chance.

By 8 p.m. the hall was packed with a majority of the Pitcairn community—about three dozen—who were gathered to discuss the supply ship schedule. Almost as soon as the mayor, Jay Warren, called the meeting to order, the arguing began. I couldn’t make out all that was said, as Pitkern sounds a lot like mumbling, but I didn’t need a translator to notice that a man named Steve Christian was by far the most vocal.

Steve is Brenda’s brother, one of the sex offenders, and also a former mayor. He lost his position in 2004 after he and five others were convicted on a total of 12 counts of rape, 29 counts of indecent assault, and two counts of gross indecency with a child under 14. The men insisted that the age of consent had long been 12, then later, 14 years, and that, regardless, such behavior was a long-standing tradition stemming from their Polynesian roots. In court they claimed that British sovereignty over the island was unconstitutional, on the basis that the original mutineers renounced citizenship when they torched the *Bounty*. But the judges rejected that argument.

As the trial grew more lurid, residents who were not called to testify in court chose to mostly ignore the proceedings. They had to continue living and working with the accused and didn’t want to hear the ugly details. In many ways, that logic continues today: People tolerate the convicted because they have to—even simple tasks like launching a longboat require a minimum of manpower.

It’s hardly a surprise, then, that the community has experienced a subsequent rift. As Greg said to me early in the trip, “I’ve never been anywhere where they use the terms insiders and outsiders as much as they do on Pitcairn.” The insiders are generally Pitcairn-born residents, and Steve Christian is their leader. The outsiders are everyone else on the island, including anyone who left to earn a living overseas, even if they’ve since moved back.

Since the trials, the insiders, long the dominant group on the island, have lost sway. As it was explained to me, the insiders are wary of newcomers. More people means more competition for the

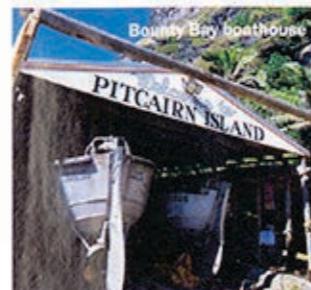
## ADVENTURE GUIDE: Pitcairn Island

### ACTIVITIES

The Cook Islands-based Pacific Expeditions Ltd runs a two-week diving trip (\$3,200; [www.pacific-expeditions.com](http://www.pacific-expeditions.com)) aboard their 14-berth, 55-foot research vessel that includes three days anchored off Pitcairn—plenty of time to see what little remains of the *Bounty*. If you get your paperwork in order, you can even stay on the island (\$35 for landing, plus \$40 a night).

### OUTFITTER

Mary T. Crowley’s Ocean Voyages can arrange charter sails from Mangareva (a two-to-four-day trip, depending on weather). “It’s definitely ocean sailing,” she says, “and there can be big waves and wind.” A two-week trip (\$4,950; [www.oceanvoyages.com](http://www.oceanvoyages.com)) includes a cultural immersion on Pitcairn Island: You’ll stay in a Pitcairner’s home for about a week.



### GETTING THERE

A mile-and-a-half-square speck in a very big sea, Pitcairn is 330 miles from the nearest airport (on Mangareva, in the Gambiers) and 1,312 miles from the nearest city (Papeete, French Polynesia, pop. 127,635). Because an airstrip was nixed by Pitcairners, an ocean crossing will be your only passage. But the difficulty is the attraction: Unspoiled by tourism, Pitcairn has untapped adventure potential. —Ryan Bradley

few available government jobs. Since they’ve lived on Pitcairn the longest and haven’t amassed wealth elsewhere, the insiders believe they should have first dibs on these positions. Outsiders, meanwhile, are all those who are eager to grow the population and to seek new sources of income. Like Brenda—who moved back to the island in 1999 after 26 years living in England, New Zealand, and Cyprus—the outsiders were ardent supporters of both our expedition and the prospective breakwater.

The night after the meeting, which ended without any resolution to speak of, the community met again under more festive circumstances. Hermie, our longboat captain—a New Zealand contractor hired to rebuild Pitcairn’s crumbling jetty—was having a birthday party. According to Mike, it was a rare opportunity for the islanders to gather outside the meeting hall. “The last time we had a party,” he added, “a fight broke out, and Brenda got punched in the face.”

The islanders reconvened at the Remand Center, a row of motel-like rooms opening onto a grassy courtyard lined with massive banyan and palm trees. Hermie and his crew had been living here for the past several months. Upon inspection of their quarters, I marveled that they’d gotten any work done at all. One room was packed floor to ceiling and wall to wall with cases of beer, which they boasted were brought (Continued on page 92)



PHOTOGRAPH, BOTTOM: WOLFGANG KAEHLER/CORBIS

## THE MISSISSIPPI

enough to see us the full 25 miles or more to this evening’s camp on a broad sandbar. Paul and Christine toss nets into the river, hauling in a catch of small silver chubs.

“Man, I wish we could haul in a big-ass catfish!” Paul says.

After a grilled steak dinner, once again cooked over a roaring inferno (there are no formal regulations on this section of the river. Want to build a 12-foot bonfire? Go right ahead!), we all sit around drinking whiskey, telling stories, and helping ourselves to bottles of red wine our new friends have brought.

“You know what Mark Twain used to say about the river?” Libby asks with a wink. “You can drink Mississippi River water if you have something else to wash it down with.”

We pick out Scorpio, Sagittarius, Cassiopeia, and the Pleiades rising low to the East, then turn in for the count.

Sometime before dawn I hear a snapping sound, sit up, and peer out of my tent into the dark. It’s John and Paul. I check my watch. It’s 4:30 a.m. Paul is crouched over last night’s embers. John is breaking twigs for kindling. He walks down to the river and turns on his headlamp. It illuminates a white canvas against a sea of black. He’s painting. I watch him stand on the shore and move his brush quickly, like a conductor, capturing the moment. Presently, the stars fade and the sky brightens with soft orange light. A flock of white-fronted geese fly south, following a bend in the river, and a mist that smells like willow rises off the surface of the water.

Later that morning, we pack up our tents and sleeping gear and drybags for the last time, load up the canoes, and head on around the bend. It’s 20 miles to Greenville, and we’re battling 25-mile-an-hour headwinds, sidewinds, and haystacking waves. During the long paddle I watch bald eagles soaring above us, and above them, dark cumulus clouds, backlit by the sun. As much as I’m looking forward to a hot shower and a real bed, I know that I’ll miss the endless sky and the simple pace of our days. Just outside Greenville, when I’m sure I can paddle no farther, John passes around a sheet of paper and a pencil and asks each of us to spare a thought for the Mississippi.

I set aside Twain for the moment and try to recall a line from St. Louis’s own T.S. Eliot.

“A strong brown god,” I finally scrawl. “Sullen, untamed, and intractable . . . almost forgotten.”

I’ll grant Eliot the first three. But forgotten? Not a chance. ▲

## PITCAIRN ISLAND

(Continued from page 82)

in by a special crane-equipped barge. Before joining them we had to buy \$25 liquor licenses from Brenda, now the island’s police chief. The tenor was far more amicable than the previous night, and not a single punch was thrown. It was about an hour into the party before I realized that we were celebrating in Pitcairn’s freshly built jail.

For showing their remorse, two of the

As he climbed this vertical sea stack, Kevin stopped every ten feet or so to secure a piece of protection. But near the top he came to a small overhang and had no choice but to put all of his weight on some questionable, unprotected holds. Luckily they withstood the stress, and he was soon standing on the tiny summit.

Brenda sat beside me as I belayed Kevin.

## Each day on Pitcairn holds a sense of surviving in the moment, far from the rest of the world. ✕

convicted men were sentenced to community service. The other four were sentenced to incarceration in this clean and cozy lodge. They were given the choice of serving their time in a New Zealand jail or in Pitcairn’s version; naturally they all chose Pitcairn’s. With good behavior they will be let out during the day to work. And in a classic example of civil ingenuity, the Remand Center was built to one day become a hotel. Some leading Pitcairners had even lobbied for its official name to be Bob’s Holiday House. The governor’s rep vetoed that one.

### TOPPING OUT

Not since Len Brown’s heyday has anyone made as extensive a survey of Pitcairn as we did over the course of our week on the island. But only after six days and countless hours of searching did we finally find what we came for: St. Paul’s Pool, a magnificent, aquamarine, 20-foot-deep lagoon enclosed by three rock pinnacles that rise from the sea.

To get to the towers, which mark the eastern extremity of the island, we scrambled across a slender ridge to the tallest and skinniest of the columns. It rose almost a hundred feet and was nearly vertical on all four sides. Every few minutes the ocean swell crashed against the base, sending up huge clouds of spray.

Kevin, the strongest and most daring freeclimber of our group, took the lead. He started with a downclimb, timing his step across to the tower to avoid the huge waves. Thirty seconds later, he was off the slime and on dry stone. Before each move, he tested the integrity of the handholds by knocking on the rock with his palm. Amazingly the tower was solid, no doubt picked clean by eons of pounding by the South Pacific.

She had never climbed on anything like this pinnacle, but I could tell she wanted to try.

“Have a go?” I asked.

“You betcha,” she said without hesitation.

I gave her my harness, but she declined to wear rock shoes, opting instead to climb the razor-sharp escarpment barefoot. “We’re used to going shoeless on Pitcairn,” she grinned. With Kevin belaying her from above and me shouting encouragement from below, she carefully climbed into the notch and made the stem across to the tower.

As I watched her move smoothly along the ocean-drenched rock, I thought of the other climbers—novices like herself—who might one day come to this island in the middle of nowhere. I thought of the men who would soon be imprisoned and the community torn apart by dark crimes. For 217 years the Pitcairners have maintained a precarious balance between a storied past and an uncertain future, and they continue to do so today. But in the past week, I’d gotten a modest glimpse of how they manage to persevere—and why they stay. Each day on Pitcairn holds a sense of surviving in the moment, far from the rest of the world.

Watching Brenda’s technique you would have guessed she’d been climbing her whole life. Hanging by her fingertips, with her toes slotted into pockets in the rock, she was briefly stymied by the overhang. Then suddenly, using a move she shouldn’t have known, she threw a foot over her head, hooked her heel behind a small protrusion, and levered herself, ninjalike, onto the summit. As she scampered to the top, a huge wave exploded against the tower, spewing up a plume of seawater that licked her ankles. She let loose a wild, triumphant cry. We couldn’t help but cheer too. ▲