



Photo by **Gordon Wiltsie**

From Antarctica to Luzon, the challenge of a vertical ascent is too alluring to ignore

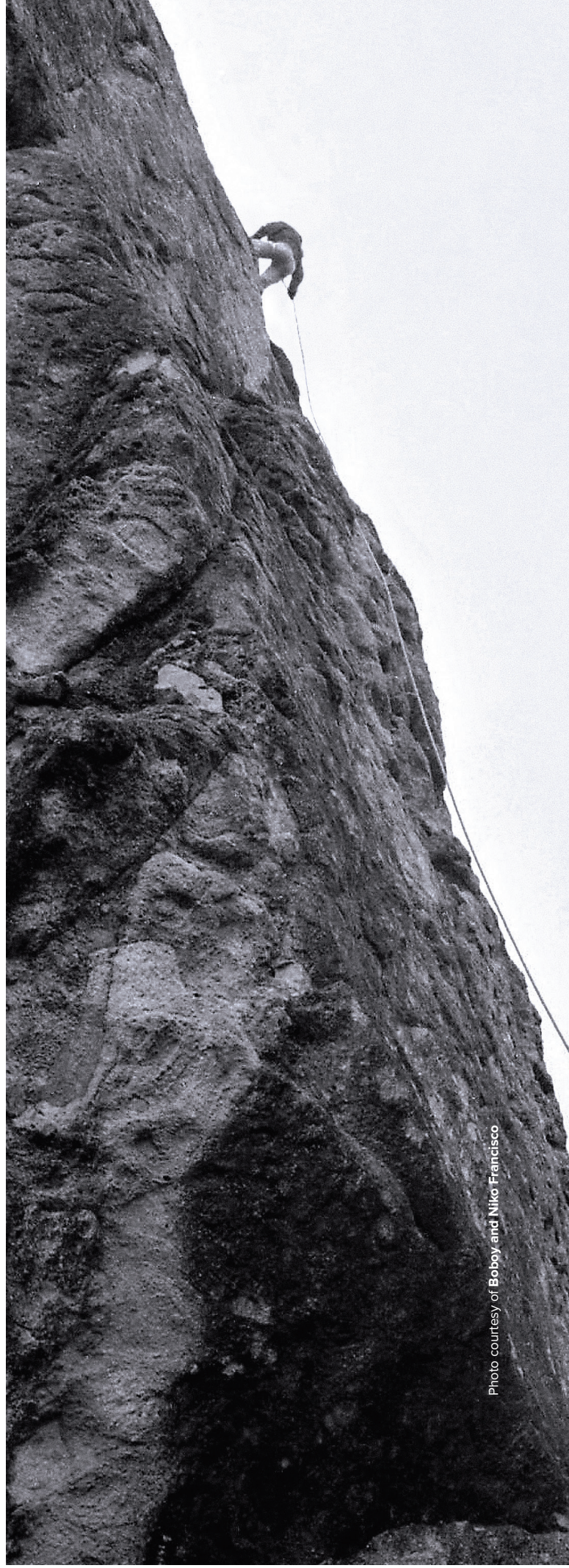


Photo courtesy of **Boboy and Niko Francisco**

The adventures of legendary mountaineers are well-chronicled—from the late Jim Whittaker, the first American to reach the summit of Mount Everest, to Reinhold Messner, the first to climb all fourteen 8,000-meter peaks. Rick Ridgeway is one of them: he was one of the first Americans atop K2—a 67-day expedition, finished without oxygen—and the writer who helped give the world the Seven Summits. Rolling Stone famously called him "the real Indiana Jones."

In the Philippines, we have a legend of our own: Boboy Francisco, co-founder of the UP Mountaineers and one of the country's first mountain guides. Ask him how many mountains he's climbed, and he'll tell you he's lost count.

He started in the late '60s, an era where Filipino climbers had no access to equipment, making do with spartan military gear and Boy Scout guides. Boboy helped pioneer many of the trails still enjoyed today, taking part in the 1982 expedition that opened Mt. Guiting-Guiting, one of the country's most challenging climbs.

Today, he celebrates over 50 years in the Philippine wilderness.

Boboy learned Rick's story from magazines. Now, Rick learns Boboy's. A conversation that begins with lessons from parallel lives; and ends with an invitation to the Philippines, to come see what our local heroes are trying to protect.

I WANT TO BE THAT GUY

Two celebrated mountaineers find a lifetime of
parallel adventures on a shared planet

Words by **Nina Unlay**

Boboy Francisco: Rick, I'm so honored to meet you. You know, you're one of my idols. I've always read about mountaineers from the US and Europe, and you're one of those that I look up to.

Rick Ridgeway: Oh, Boboy—one thing you learn in the mountains, that I learned anyway, is a kind of humility. So, I appreciate the accolades about what I've accomplished, but I'm just thankful that I had a chance, in my lifetime, to see so many wild places in the world. That's what we have in common.

BF: You know, the Philippines is such a small country, but we have our own places for adventure. I'm proud to say that in the early years of the development of Philippine mountaineering, I was there.

RR: I've never been to the Philippines but I took a little time to go online and see what some of the mountains look like and I was so impressed. It's just fabulously beautiful, some of the high peaks there—some with those pine forests, and others with the open grasslands, and you're above 2,000 meters. It looks fabulous.

BF: Maybe visit us one of these days. I heard that you're a bird watcher also.

RR: Yes, I heard you're prominent in the Wild Bird Club. How did you get into it?

BF: I just got addicted to bird watching. We have beautiful birds here—about 760 species recorded all in all and almost 250 of those are endemic to the Philippines.

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RR: Wow, amazing!

BF: And that's for such a small country.

RR: That's a very high percentage, isn't it? Fantastic!

When I was a young boy growing up in California, my family lived in a rural part of the Los Angeles basin, before it was a big city. We lived in a kind of a ranching area, and we had chickens. One day I saw a male Chinese ring-necked pheasant outside the chicken cage, walking along the cage, looking in at the chickens. It must have been an escapee from somebody—they're from China. I caught the pheasant, talked my grandpa into getting a female pheasant, and we started raising pheasants. Pretty soon we had hundreds of them. I was obsessed with pheasants.

That was where my interest in birds started, and out of that came a passion for bird watching that I've had since I was in my 20s. I've always wanted to come to the Philippines to see that Palawan peacock-pheasant.

BF: I also grew up in a very rural community in the city, in Quezon City, and birds were an everyday happening in my life. As a teenager, I didn't mind them, because they were always all around me. But when one of our members in the UP Mountaineers took me out for a bird watching walk inside the university, and I saw these birds up close through binoculars—right there and then, I got hooked.

Rick, how did you start your mountaineering career?

RR: It was about the same time when I had the pheasants. I got an issue of *National Geographic* in the mail—my mother always gave that magazine to me, it was one of my favorite things. In 1963, there was a story about the first American ascent of Mount Everest. There was a photograph inside of the first American to climb Mount Everest, Jim Whittaker. I was just captivated and I said, "I want to be that guy. That's what I want to do."

So in high school, I did everything I could to try to learn about climbing, but I couldn't find anybody who shared my passion or interest. I started taking my friends up to the mountains around Los Angeles with me, to try to climb the mountains that were closest to where I lived. We succeeded in getting up all the main peaks around the Los Angeles

basin—the highest one is maybe over 3,000 meters. I started trying to climb them in the winter, and that was really a challenge. I found a book called *Freedom of the Hills*—the only book I could find about it—

BF: *Freedom of the Hills*, yes!

RR: Yeah—it came out in the '60s. I found a store that had some mountaineering gear, so I went there and I bought crampons, an ice axe and boots, and the book. I would go up to the mountains by myself. My mother started getting really frightened that I was going to hurt myself. So as my high school graduation present, she sent me to a wilderness course where I learned basic mountaineering skills.

Twelve years later I had made enough achievements, including climbing in the Himalayas, that I was invited to join an American team to attempt K2—and I made the summit. And the leader of that trip was Jim Whittaker, the same guy who was in the *National Geographic* that inspired me.

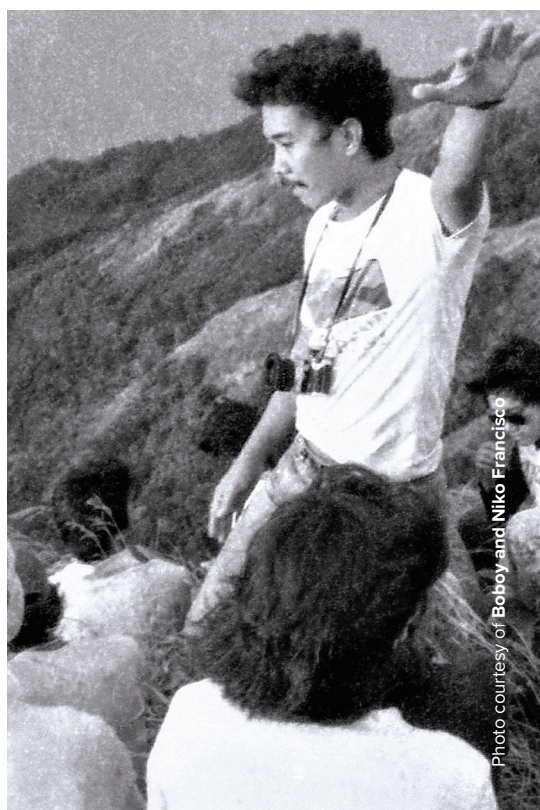
National Geographic did a story on the K2 climb, and I was on the cover. That was in 1979. Around 20 years later, I was on an expedition, doing the first big wall climb ever done in Antarctica. The two lead climbers were Conrad Anker and Alex Lowe, two of the greatest climbers ever. We were in base camp, waiting for a storm to clear, and Conrad Anker said, "Rick, I've been meaning to tell you this. When I was 14 years old, I got *National Geographic* in the mail because my parents subscribed for me, and you were on the cover, and I said, 'That's what I want to do. I want to be that guy.'"

A year later, *National Geographic* came out with a story about our climb in Antarctica, and Conrad was on the cover. I called him, and I said, "Conrad, guess what? There's a 12- or 14-year-old girl or boy out there getting their *National Geographic*. They're going to see you on the cover, and they're going to say, 'I want to be that guy.'"

BF: I read stories about your early climbs in *Outside*. Back then, it was the only source of adventure stories. We didn't have much by way of subscriptions here in the Philippines. I would go to the secondhand magazine shops, or look for old issues of *Outside* magazine, and that's where I encountered those articles by you about Patagonia, about Yvon Chouinard.



As pioneering mountaineers, both Boboy and Rick have inspired generations of people to seek the outdoors





No cellular signal, no problem—their mountaineering journeys are shared with communities wherever they go

I think many mountaineers started the same way—with a fascination for the mountains. Then as we grew with our passion for climbing mountains, we developed something that pushes us to make sure that these mountains will still be there for the future generations of mountaineers.
— Boboy Francisco



TURTLES ALL THE WAY UP

by Mariah Reodica

The turtle in Rick Ridgeway's hand was thought to be extinct for over half a century. Small enough to fit in a palm, it is very much alive. And this little one's birth is a landmark step for the species' survival.

A Philippine forest turtle (*Siebenrockiella leytenensis*) hatched at the Turtle Conservancy's facility in Ojai, California in 2025, as the first of its kind to be born outside of the Philippines. It descended from a small group of turtles the Conservancy received from the country following an illegal wildlife trade confiscation. The animals arrived sick and depleted, narrowly pulled from the smuggling that has pushed their species to the brink. The team nursed them back to health.

The Conservancy now works with communities in Palawan to protect native forests and swamps as vital habitats for this turtle, along with endangered Palawan pangolins. Watch a short documentary about the return of this species at turtleconservancy.org



BF: Wow. My first climb was when I was 16 years old. Since I was a kid, I've had this unexplainable attraction toward mountains, and every time my father brought us out to the rural areas, I would be fascinated by the mountains around me. I had a chance in 1969 to climb my first mountain near Manila, and from the top of that mountain, Mount Mataba, I saw the expanse of the Sierra Madre range, our longest mountain range. It covers almost the whole Pacific coast, the eastern side of Luzon. I saw these vast mountains on my left and my right, and I told myself: this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. And I did.

RR: I climbed my first mountain at about the same age. Same thing: I said, "This is what I want to do," and I did it, for my life. At almost the same age, and not too far apart in time—my first climb would have been in about 1965 or '66, only because I'm 77 now.

BF: I'll be 73 this month.

RR: Oh, how great is that? It's exciting that we've had such similar lives.

BF: I think many mountaineers started the same way—with a fascination for the mountains. Then as we grew with our passion for climbing mountains, we developed something that pushes us to make sure that these mountains will still be there for the future generations of mountaineers.

RR: Boboy, it sounds like we have the same personal history. Over the years, the passion for mountaineering, for me, shifted: it was not just about trying to get to a summit, going with my close friends and having these adventures, but about saving the places that I was going to. I've tried to do what I can in my life to protect the places that I love so much—the nature that has meant so much to me, and inspired me, and that I've learned so much from.

At this stage of my life, I spend more than half of every day working hard doing volunteer work for conservation organizations, creating new protected areas, especially for wildlife, and I work very actively all over the world.

Here in California I live on the compound of a group that is dedicated to saving turtles and tortoises and we're

very actively involved in trying to conserve and protect the Palawan forest turtle, from your country. Right next to my house, I have three or four Palawan forest turtles—out the window right behind me, just a few meters away, there are three turtles from your homeland. We've been very active in creating a protected area for them in Palawan. That's the kind of work that I do now.

BF: We have so many critically endangered species here. For the Philippine Eagle, the latest count was about 300 to 400 pairs in our wilderness. In Palawan, there's also the pangolin, which is a sought-after animal for the wildlife trade because of its scales. It's very alarming, because every now and then you will read news about poachers trying to move pangolins out of the country, and these animals don't have much time left if this kind of wildlife violation continues, and their environment keeps being destroyed on a regular basis.

RR: Boboy, it starts with what you're doing when you inspire the young kids to get out into the mountains, to become mountaineers, to get into nature—because nobody's going to be really inspired to save nature until they understand nature and can experience it.

BF: It's true. Until they go into the mountains and the rivers and the forests, they will not understand. They get a deeper understanding of the need to protect our wildlife when they're out there.

RR: Yeah. Wow.

BF: You know, Rick, I'm no longer active with mountain climbing—my ailments relative to aging came too early for me. But I still do my environmental work. I would like to share with you, if you visit the Philippines—and if you can still climb—Mount Guiting-Guiting. The guides there would be very excited to have you climb this mountain. I could show you around, maybe the Cordilleras, and then go bird watching in Palawan.

RR: I would accept that invitation, Boboy. I'm already excited about it.