

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT INDEED!

An interview with Stephanie Besse, Managing Director, Forest Adventure

Tell us about Forest Adventure, and how it all started in Singapore:

We discovered our first Tree Top Course in France during a summer holiday in 2003. Nick (my husband) and I had so much fun that we immediately thought that this type of activity would be perfect in Singapore, especially as the climate allows it to be open throughout the year. I was working in advertising at the time and it was only in 2005 that we

finally decided to have it a go. Finding a company in France to work on the design and construction was relatively easy. We knew exactly what we were looking for. We needed a company that had extensive experience in working outside France and Europe so that they could easily adapt to new market conditions and require-

ments. We also required extremely high safety standards and features as we really felt this was what was needed in Singapore. Finally we wanted to build a children course with an ongoing safety line.

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Our next task was to find a piece of land. We needed 1.5 ha of mature forest in a city-state – not easy! National Parks Board

(NParks) was the obvious organisation to talk to as they manage all public parks in Singapore. As it turned out, we were lucky to be at the right place, at the right time: we made an initial proposal to NParks and PUB (Singapore National Water Agency) just as they were looking at the redevelopment masterplan of Bedok Reservoir Park. We had never been there when NParks mentioned the site, but we fell in love with the place instantly when we saw the stunning sunset on the water!

It then took many proposals, discussions and an open tender to finally be awarded this piece of land to develop the 2 courses. As expected, the safety aspect and the protection of the trees were the main concerns. NParks was always really excited and supportive of the project as it well reflected NParks' vision of "Green Activity as a Lifestyle"

My last task was to find staff! Pleasingly, we have found wonderful young people to be our instructors. They are all very passionate about the product. Until recently, outdoor adventure activities in Singapore had been aimed solely at schools and corporate groups, never to the general public. So as they all started in this business with us, they have a great sense of ownership. They are a great contributor to the success!

Since you began operations, what major changes did you see in





terms of the demand for outdoor recreation from Singaporeans?

There is no doubt that in the 2 years of working on this project, we have met many sceptics! We were told on many occasions that Singaporeans would simply not be interested in such a challenging activity and that no money could be made targeting the general public.

Working in advertising, I was very aware of social trends and could see a definitive, emerging interest from young adults to experiment more, get out there and try out new things. For a long time, Singaporeans have been driven by academic excellence. It is only recently that young people are being encouraged to look for personal reward outside the academia and take up sport, art, travel and other hobbies.

Outdoor recreation is indeed one such area where changes can be observed; 10 years ago, parks such as Bukit Timah Nature Reserve, McRitchie Reservoir and even the Botanic Garden would be almost deserted. Today, the situation has changed totally – Sunday morning in Bukit Timah looks more like Lacanau Plage (famous surfer's resort on the French Atlantic coast) in the middle of August!

There is also a clear move from the

government to take kids out of the class rooms and provide a rewarding environment for sports excellence. Clear targets have been set including two in three Singaporeans taking part in sporting activities at least once a week by 2015! This follows the opening in 2004 of the Singapore Sport School; an amazing facility that

many countries would dream of. Also, the new Sports Hub is intended to help develop greater interest in sport and the win of the inaugural Youth Olympics in 2010 will no doubt provide a

great platform to inspire young people to pick up sports and get away from shopping malls and their PC's.

As far as Forest Adventure is concerned, I was simply amazed to see so many people so quickly; after one month of operations, we already had close to 2,000 participants! And six months later, we had had 8,000.

Today more than 80% of our customers are Singaporeans. We didn't create a need. We simply built a recreation destination people were craving for!

How do you see the future of outdoor in Singapore?

The future is bright for outdoor's junkies in Singapore! Though it may not be public knowledge, there is

quite a large outdoor industry in Singapore catering to schools and corporates. I was also amazed by the number of "adventure races" already in existence. Almost every university in Singapore has one or wants one!

The outdoor culture is slowly moving to the broader public, driven by the major infrastructure development. For example, The HSBC canopy walk in McRitchie is a great initiation to trekking. It reaches up to 2,000 visitors per day on weekends!

For a very long time, water bodies in Singapore were strictly protected and water reservoirs tightly guarded. Now, almost every reservoir offers Dragon Boating and Kayaking activities. These water sports are mainly managed by People Association. It is only a matter of time before commercial organisations become involved too, offering more choice to the public.

The Park Connectors developed by National Parks Board connect parks and natural reserves using spare land such as drainage reserves, foreshore and road reserves and turning them into beautiful green corridors for recreation. When completed this will become a 300 km cycling path across the island!

The future is bright indeed. **FOCUS**

