



BARE FEET FIRST

THE REMARKABLE STORY OF YUNGUYEN I BY MICHAEL LEVY

Staring up into the metallic yellow of the Vietnamese sun, I hear Vu channelling gods and demons 20 metres above. He is nearly through the crux on *Dreamweaver*, a Chris Lindner 7c+, when suddenly he peels off, the shrieks of moments ago now echoing into the sound of chirping cicadas all around us. As he comes down he flashes me a 'What-can-you-do?' grin. 'No power' he says, unconcerned, taking his shoes off and wiggling his toes. An hour later Vu gets back on the route and sends it without as much as a stutter.

Fairly commonplace occurrence, right? A strong climber redpoints a difficult climb after a brief session working the moves. Well, except for one detail: when he got back on the route for the second time, Vu never put his climbing shoes back on. He did the climb barefoot – the way he climbs nearly

everything. You see, while Vu may not be the strongest climber in the world, he may very well be the strongest barefoot climber in the world – which makes him quite a remarkable climber.

Born in Hue, Vietnam, Vu Nguyen is just twenty four years old. To those unaware of his climbing prowess, he is an unimposing figure, measuring a skinny five-foot-three. Seeing him play with his infant niece or the local bartender's son, you can tell kids adore him. Taciturn, selfless, and with his hair always coiffed, Vu stumbled into climbing more as a way of making money than as a pastime. Before moving to Cat Ba Island, the hub of Vietnam's embryonic climbing scene, in 2009, Vu was a motorbike mechanic. He can take apart all the bits and bobs rattling around in an old Honda Winn and put them back together again without getting the slightest

grease smudge on his shirt.

But motorcycles weren't providing what Vu was in search of. His older brother had been working for a ramshackle climbing operation called Slo Pony (now called Asia Outdoors). Started by two Americans – Onslo Carrington and Erik Ferjentsik – Slo Pony aimed to turn Vietnam's Ha Long Bay into a spot on the Asian climbing circuit of the same calibre as destinations like Yangshuo, China and Tonsai, Thailand.

Cat Ba, the biggest island in Ha Long Bay around which smaller islets speckle the ocean, seemed like a good place to start. Building upon limited development already conducted on expeditions by such global climbing heavyweights as Lynn Hill and Neil Gresham, Carrington and Ferjentsik went on a bolting blitzkrieg, establishing a major crag on the island and exploring

the endless deep water soloing potential.

And one day in walked Vu. New to climbing and without a pair of climbing shoes, he simply did without. Onsighting 5.11s virtually from day one, Vu honed his skills in the labyrinthine Ha Long and Lan Ha Bays, deep water soloing the limestone karst cliffs above the jade green seas for hours on end. He began bolting routes and collecting first ascents as well. Out on Moody Beach in the middle of Lan Ha Bay is a 20 metre Vu Nguyen-line with a three metre horizontal roof at the top. A highly aesthetic line, he named it *Barefoot Vietnamese* after his trademark style.

Vu experimented with shoes here and there, but, having learned to climb without footwear, he was better that way. So, bare feet first, Vu continued climbing and getting stronger. By 2012, Vu had sent Vietnam's hardest bolted route, *Enter the Dragon*, clocking in at a solid 5.13d [this may be the hardest route ever climbed without rock shoes – ed].

Also in 2012, Vu competed in the second annual National Bouldering Championships hosted by Hanoi's VietClimb gym and its founder, Jean Verly. Not used to bouldering, competition, or plastic, Vu still did well, coming in second and earning a trip to a higher profile bouldering competition in Singapore. Singapore was only Vu's second trip outside the country (he had been to China once before). Walking through Singapore's Changi airport with his friend and sometimes-coach Nico Faraguna, Vu was wide-eyed. 'Pointing towards the wall, he asked me what a particular metal box was' Nico recalls. 'It was a water fountain.'

Even more than the glamour of the big city, Vu had his eyes opened to the calibre of climbers outside his secluded bubble on Cat Ba Island. In short, he got blown out at the competition.

Coming back to Cat Ba, Vu had new motivation and a new drive. He started training. Having relied on mostly pure talent thus far in his climbing career, he started to push his limits, to see just how hard he could crimp with his toes. Training on a three panel bouldering wall built from discarded plywood, using hand-carved and donated holds, Vu set problems to challenge himself more than ever before.



train with shoes, he decided to compete with them on. The finals consisted of one long roof problem. Though he was unable to send it during his five minute window, Vu made it further than any of the other competitors, placing first overall. His training had paid off, and he was crowned Vietnam's strongest climber.

Hanging around after the competition in VietClimb's garage-like space, the competitors and spectators drank, laughed, and some tried the final problem just for kicks. Vu tried it one last time – this time with rock shoes off – and dispatched it with ease.

One of the only active developers in Vietnam at present, Vu is looking to push his limits further. 8c is on the horizon – it simply doesn't exist in the country yet – and after that there's no telling where his two bare feet will take him. He is unlikely to get sponsored by a shoe company anytime soon, but he doesn't seem concerned about that. His concern is out in the bay, tussling with rock above the dragon mists. Channelling gods and demons as he flashes up the wall, it's easy to see that Vu is in his element.

FACING PAGE & THIS PAGE TOP: Vu Nguyen deep water soloing barefoot on his home ground of Halong Bay, Vietnam. He has climbed up to French 8b without rock shoes. **THIS PAGE LOWER:** Vu Nguyen glimpsed on one of the rare occasions he's ever worn rock shoes – and look, he's not even using them! DAVE LUCAS

One-handed one-finger pull ups and circuits on the bouldering wall were all part of his regime. And, of course, Vu spent hours out in the bay deep water soloing.

Striped orange and grey, yellow and blue, the sculpted karst walls are Vu's domain. There is a tenacity and grace in his barefoot style high above the seas. People

People talk about free soloing as the purest form of climbing. How much purer, then, is Vu Nguyen's style, with all extraneous elements stripped away?

No rope, no chalkbag, no shoes – just rock, air, and calm water far below

Watching Vu sport climb, there is a Zen quality about his movement and his calmness. Having learned to climb through deep water soloing, the fear of a ten or fifteen metre whipper barely registers as a blip on Vu's radar when compared to the countless 20-plus metre plunges he has taken. Vu is the most knowledgeable person in the world about the deep water soloing on the overhanging walls in the bays surrounding Cat Ba Island.

often talk about free soloing as the purest form of climbing – just the climber and the rock. How much purer, then, is Vu's style: no rope, no chalkbag, no shoes. Just rock, air, and calm water far below.

Stronger than he had ever been before, Vu returned to VietClimb's National Bouldering Championships in 2014. Qualifying third out of five in the men's finals, Vu did something he rarely does: he put shoes on. Having started to

