



This summer, a special group of 70 walkers made its way across the Via Alpina, a 500-kilometre network of paths through the eight countries that share the Alps, linking Trieste and Monaco. All 70 were wearing boots with soles by Vibram.

Sole music

The number is significant because this year the specialist sole manufacturer is celebrating its seventieth anniversary. The walk along the Alpine paths was a tribute to the contribution the company has made over the decades to helping outdoor activity enthusiasts keep their feet on the ground.

It is exploring plenty of new avenues these days. Recent high-profile examples include the intriguing Five Fingers series, the pull-on shoes that look like gloves for the feet. There are models for streetwear, for watersports and even for the mountains (see image). Its characteristic octagonal yellow logo appears on 50 new models each season and it sells 32 million soles every year. But Vibram believes it can strive for diversification without leaving its history behind.

This history is what the week-long Via Alpina walk celebrated: helping people move more

safely in the mountains is what the company set out to do 70 years ago, and is an important part of what it still wants to do today.

Marketing manager, Jérôme Bernard, explains that it's not as easy as it may look to make a sole that doesn't slip, even in extreme environments in the mountains or on the high seas. "We need time for this," he says, "sometimes two, three or even four years to develop a new solution. And we only bring it to market when we are sure about it."

The Five Fingers range is a case in point. Mr Bernard confesses that these unusual-looking additions to Vibram's product offering are, technically, very complex to manufacture. "We had to make the upper part too because it's so difficult technically," he explains, "but it has been worthwhile. Products that bring a psychological benefit are of increasing importance in the market, and our Five Fingers footwear comes

Vibram's Five Finger footwear offers protection, even in the harshest environment.

 Vibram

into this category. The wearer is protected because we use such high-quality rubber, but it feels like you're walking barefoot."

Family gathering

While the Five Finger venture is an exclusively Vibram one, the company is also a partner to more than 1,000 footwear brands around the world. Mr Bernard explains that one part of his company's ongoing strategy for managing relationships with these brands will be to open a new technical centre next year in Guangzhou in China.

Partner companies will be able to use the facility to test new ideas and new materials, but Mr Bernard makes it clear that this is not an 'open house' offer. Vibram is passionate about protecting its own prestige, and selects the companies it works with carefully.

"We apply a lot of different criteria to this," he explains. "We want to be friendly about it, but we have to protect our brand, and our customers' brands too, because they're the carriers of our brand. Protecting intellectual property (IP) is obviously an important consideration, so we are investing heavily in IP and brand protection there."

He says his company does turn business away based on these criteria, perhaps €1.5 million worth in the last 18 months. This results in what the marketing manager describes as "a daily struggle" with the sales team, who are naturally inclined to want to include everyone.

"But you can't say 'yes' to everyone," he continues. "That could be very dangerous. We know which companies we will select to work with us in the new centre. We will be like a family."

Some footwear manufacturers, finding themselves outside this family group, have already resorted to desperate measures to add the Vibram badge to their products. It's a risky thing to do because the yellow logo doesn't just appear on the sole; it's often on visible parts of the shoe as well, such as the side of the heel, and genuine partners display hang-tags to make the most of their Vibram connection.

In the last year alone, Mr Bernard has received at least 20 calls from customs officials suspicious that shoes that appear to have Vibram soles were counterfeit. And at the time of our conversation he reveals that seven whole containers are being held up in European ports awaiting further investigation.

"In some instances the customs officials call and say they are suspicious because they have seen a hang-tag that claims the soles are Vibram, even though our logo is visible nowhere on the shoes," he explains. "They can capture an image of it immediately, send it to us by email and ask us to make a decision. If we tell them there may



70 years of Vibram

Vibram's founder, Vitale Bramani, was an excellent mountaineer and member of the SEM (Milan Society of Excursionists, a rival organisation to the Italian Alpine Club). He was the owner of a mountain-sports store at number 8 Via della Spiga, one of Milan's main shopping streets, where many mountain-guides and enthusiasts from the region bought their equipment.

In 1935, Vitale Bramani lost six friends during a climbing expedition. Surprised by a sudden drop in temperature and then a heavy snowfall, the team became trapped. The hemp shoes they were wearing were partly responsible. Though effective for climbing on dry rock, they were of no use on terrain that had become slippery, and they provided little protection against extreme cold.

This incident encouraged Vitale Bramani to look for a solution to improve the grip of mountain boots and the safety of mountaineers. The result was the first patented Vibram sole, which he called the Carrarmato, or 'tank'.

He completed the project with the help of a friend, Leopoldo Pirelli, from the famous Milan-based tyre manufacturer. He launched the Carrarmato in 1937, designing the lugs in the form of wedges, with a thick base and thinner bearing surface. This meant snow did not stick and the sole remained free, ensuring good grip in all weather conditions. 🌐

be a problem, they hold the goods."

He admits that it came as a surprise to him at first that European Union customs officials could be so assiduous, but he finds their attitude greatly encouraging and insists it should also encourage confidence among his company's genuine partners. 🌐

Vibram's characteristic octagonal yellow logo appears on 50 new models every season and is increasingly appearing not just on the sole but on visible parts of the shoe too.

 Vibram

