

Footwear brand Vivobarefoot is on a mission to prove less is more when it comes to making shoes that complement the natural function of the feet.

Vivobarefoot puts the feet first

Merriam-Webster defines a shoe as “an outer covering for the human foot typically having a thick or stiff sole with an attached heel and an upper part of lighter material”. UK-based Vivobarefoot says that, by this definition, the products it makes are not shoes at all as they have neither a heel nor a thick, stiff sole.

The Vivobarefoot concept was developed by Terra Plan, a brand owned since 1998 by Lancelot Clark, a sixth-generation member of the famous shoemaking family. Its desire to champion ‘minimalist’ footwear inspired the launch in 2012 of the standalone Vivobarefoot brand. Based in London, it is now led by Galahad Clark, son of Lancelot, and his cousin Asher.

The brand is guided by the belief that feet should be given the freedom to perform their natural function. It describes the human foot as a “biomechanical masterpiece” capable of coping with anything from walking and running to jumping and dancing. It insists cramming the feet into a modern shoe impedes their innate capabilities. Its mission is to convince the footwear industry and its consumers that when it comes to shoes, less is more.

Foot-shaped shoes

There are over 200,000 nerve endings in a human foot (the same number as in the hands), Galahad Clark explains to *World Footwear*, and it is important we use all of them. The key to ensuring this is to avoid shoes with a thick, stiff sole, he says. Vivobarefoot’s products feature a patented, ultra-thin sole which offers the wearer “maximum sensory feedback” from contact with the ground.

The brand believes many modern shoes have excessive padding or cushioning, thus depriving the feet of crucial information and inhibiting their sensory development. This is

especially important for children, Mr Clark says, as their feet are still maturing. If they grow up wearing shoes with thick soles, the lack of sensory feedback will affect the development of their movement skills. A puncture-resistant layer in the sole offers protection; the company calls this material PRO-5 as it is said to be five times more puncture resistant than a standard sole of the same thickness.

Vivobarefoot’s shoes are extremely flexible, allowing the feet to flex and bend as they are biologically designed to do. They are wide to accommodate the natural splay of the toes; this is in stark contrast to what it would term traditional shoes, the narrowness of which the company believes can lead to weakness in the tendons and the muscles. This is due to the toes not being able to spread out. It says its shoes are “foot-shaped” so the feet can function as evolution has dictated.

Beyond manufacturing

“Sustainability is as much about the use of products as it is about how products are made,” Galahad Clark says; a product should only be made if it in some way enhances someone’s life. By respecting natural movement, he believes his brand is helping to restore the connection between people and the natural world.

There needs to be more discussion about the culture of use in modern society, he insists, especially in the footwear industry as people are not only wearing shoes that are fundamentally bad for their feet, but are also readily discarding them after limited use. More often than not, these products end up in landfill, which is bad for the planet. It is for this reason that Vivobarefoot tries to make its shoes last for as long as possible through the use of high-quality materials and by employing state of the art manufacturing processes.



The Primus Lux is one of the shoes to feature Pittards' Wild Hide leather.

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Vivobarefoot's shoes are characterised by a thin sole, minimal padding or cushioning, and no heel or arch support.

This strategy involves the use of leather in a number of its products, some of which is sourced from UK-based tanning group Pittards. One of the materials Vivobarefoot uses is Pittards' Wild Hide leather, which is made using the hides of wild roaming cattle from Ethiopia. These cattle are reared by independent farmers, who benefit financially from its use.

Vivobarefoot's concern for these farmers is just one example of its attitude towards social responsibility. Another is its involvement with the Soul of Africa project, which was launched in 2003 by Galahad Clark's father, Lancelot. It seeks to use shoemaking to alleviate unemployment in different parts of Africa and to teach local people important job skills. The aim of this initiative is to help them build a career, so they can support themselves and their family. It currently makes products in Tunisia, South Africa and Ethiopia. It donates a share of its profits to education and arts projects across the continent.

In 2017, Vivobarefoot teamed up with Pittards to establish a new production line in Ethiopia as part of this project. It initially employed eight newly-trained cobblers with plans to grow this number to 30. The company also works with indigenous shoemakers in the Kalahari in Southern Africa and in India. "There are still a few pockets in the world where indigenous cobblers make really good barefoot shoes," Galahad Clark says.

Around 85% of its products are manufactured in Asia, but some models, such as the Lisbon and the Porto Rocker, are crafted by footwear artisans in Portugal. Mr Clark tells *World Footwear* the company is considering transferring some production to the UK and is running tests with two different factories to assess if this idea is viable.

Algal alternative

In May last year, Vivobarefoot announced a partnership with Bloom, a San Diego-based company that has come up with a way to turn potentially harmful algae into a foam material with a range of possible uses. One of these is to make shoes and shoe soles.

Bloom's parent company Algix collects the algae from freshwater sources at high risk of algal bloom (a rapid build-up of algae). It filters the water using a mobile harvester to extract the algae which is then turned into pellets before being expanded into a flexible foam with the addition of foaming compounds. A more detailed look at how algae is being used by shoe component manufacturers was covered in *World Footwear* September/October 2017.

Vivobarefoot incorporated Bloom's algae foam into the third generation of its Ultra running shoe. It was the first footwear to be completely made from the material, which had previously been used in midsoles. The fully waterproof Ultra III, described by the brand as "the ultimate amphibious adventure shoe", went on sale last summer.

The partners say each pair of Ultra III Bloom shoes contributes to the recirculation of 57 gallons of filtered water back into natural habits. Each pair also prevents the equivalent of 40 standard-sized balloons of carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere. These figures are for a pair of men's EU42 shoes.

The relationship came about through Asher Clark. A keen surfer, he learned that US professional surfer Kelly Slater, one of the sport's most successful ever athletes, had developed a range of surfboards featuring a traction pad made from the algae foam. He approached Bloom with the idea of making a complete shoe from the material. Galahad Clark says Vivobarefoot had previously worked with another US company on a closed-loop EVA solution, but it had been unsuccessful. He describes Bloom's foam as "a true revolution for the footwear industry".

Nature's wisdom

As a company, Clark's had been advocating 'barefoot shoes' as far back as the 1880s. Supported by the most advanced scientific evidence available at the time, the company ran a campaign encouraging parents to buy their children "foot-shaped" shoes to strengthen their feet. Mr Clark believes the abundant technological advances of the 20th century prompted a gradual move away from this school of thought.

He points to Nike as an example of a footwear company that has embraced the idea of barefoot shoes. The Nike Free range is designed to give the wearer the sensation of running without shoes and the company has made use of modern innovations such as pressure mapping and motion capture cameras to create shoes that replicate barefoot running. Nevertheless, these products still have considerably more cushioning than a typical Vivobarefoot shoe. Mr Clark believes Nike "understands a lot about natural movement" due to its close relationship with a number of elite athletes.

He is adamant nevertheless that the technological developments of the past century should not take precedence over the process of evolution which has created the natural shape of the foot over millions of years. "In the end, it is rare that nature is wrong," he says. 🌱

Vivobarefoot's Ultra III Bloom is made out of an innovative foam material derived from algae.

