

# Northern Lights

An intrepid native of Saigon takes on the Arctic



**T**he sub-zero temperatures of the Scandinavian Arctic are beyond the imagination of most sandal-wearing inhabitants of Saigon, but for 29-year-old Hoang Le Giang, a seven-day expedition crossing this remote wilderness presented an unmissable challenge.

In December 2016, he won a competition which offered amateur adventurers the chance to travel to Sweden, where they would be taught how to build a shelter, start a fire, cook food and navigate their way using dog sleds, before setting out on their adventure across 300km. When he applied, Vietnam wasn't even on the list of countries where applicants could say they were from.

"I had to email the organisers to put it on," he says.

His dream was to be the first Vietnamese to go to this remote corner of the globe, and the public responded as he received over 113,000 votes to send him on the trip in April of this year.

## On Becoming Top Dog

Giang wasn't a complete novice, however. He'd had some experience of trekking in the Himalayas, and he knew he'd have to put in the hours to ensure he was in peak physical condition for the adventure, which he would complete with 27 other people.

He spent five days a week doing triathlon training to prepare.

"Physically, I'm much smaller than Europeans. They are huge. You feel a bit of pressure," he says.

Once there, the most important relationship he made was with the huskies that would pull their sleds. They were to carry Giang between 50km and 70km each day, so it was imperative that they were well looked after and well managed.

"At first they don't really like you," he says. "Six dogs have six different personalities. Sometimes one dog is bad, some are grumpy, and there are fat dogs, thin dogs. You have to learn the differences. One dog might not go well with the other so you have to switch positions. You have to make them trust you. At the beginning, they have suspicious eyes.

"Especially when they are going uphill they always look to see if you are helping them. They appreciate it if you jump out of your sled and help them push. When you are going downhill they want to go very fast, and you have to slow them down and they look back thinking, 'Hey, what are you doing man?!'"

Witnessing the Aurora Borealis (northern lights) is an experience many people dream of, and Giang was lucky enough to experience it first-hand as he lay at night in his sleeping bag.



“It’s always very magical. It happened on the night we didn’t have the tent. Normally it happens when we are all asleep. We were looking at it as we fell asleep,” he remembers.

### Pressure Cooker Environment

A trip in such extreme conditions presented certain unavoidable ailments, but these served to spur Giang and his fellow adventurers on. Through the adversity, there were vital lessons to be learnt.

“Sometimes you are so cold and your back is painful, your fingers are cracked but you still have to do everything,” he says. “You know that you have to keep going on.”

“The instructor is a very famous outdoors man in Sweden. He gave a lot of lessons about the philosophy. I remember the lesson about our cooker. It’s very problematic because sometimes it’s too cold, you have to reheat it, and the snowflakes get into the nozzle and there are many things to fix.

“It’s 10pm and it’s so cold, and we haven’t eaten yet. We’re still trying to fix it. So we borrowed the cooker from our neighbour. The instructor said the relationship between us and the cooker is like our relationship with life. If you have a problem you have to try and fix it. Nowadays people don’t try to fix things when they have a problem, because there

are so many other options.”

Giang says this was the biggest life lesson that he took away from the trip — that a job should be done properly and seen through until the end. Shortcuts will usually end up costing you more in the long run.

“It’s amplified in nature,” he says. “If you don’t use a stove properly you get burnt. If you don’t cook the water hot enough, the food won’t taste good, or if you don’t make the tent properly, it will collapse and you have to do it all again.”

### A Double Life

Giang works for a web browser company as well as owning a small coffee store, and he made many personal and financial sacrifices in order to go on the trip. He’s reflective as he looks back on his Arctic adventure.

“It felt like you live a different life,” he says. “You feel like another person. Just like there’s an office worker me, then there’s the one who went on the adventure. It’s like I live many lives.”

Later this summer, Giang will head off to Russia to climb Mount Elbrus, the highest mountain in Europe and one of the seven summits, which are the highest peaks in each of the seven continents. Giang’s ultimate goal is to be the first Vietnamese to complete all seven. — **Thomas Barrett**

Follow Giang’s adventures at [facebook.com/travel.is.the.priority](https://www.facebook.com/travel.is.the.priority) 



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY HOANG LE GIANG