MODERN LIFE & STYLE IN THAILAND

WANDERLUST

ISSUE 13
OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2016

WANDERLUSTMAG.COM
120THB

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Russian-born actress, model and makeup artist **Natalie Lorence** explains to Wanderlust how she fell in love with traveling, why she loves Bangkok and what home means to her.

by Shannon Frandsen

WHAT STRUCK YOU THE MOST ABOUT GROWING UP IN MOSCOW?

I am from the only generation that lived on the border of two regimes: I remember the Soviet times and modern Russia. My childhood was a special time that to me, to who I am now, seems like a fairytale. It was a different world back then. Life was much simpler. We were closer to nature. There was less materialism. People were more focused on family dinners and cooking together. At least that is how it seemed to me, from a child's perspective.

My grandparents kept a country house in a village near Moscow. When I visited them, we went swimming in the river every day. We ate everything that my grandparents grew, so we never went grocery shopping other than to buy bread and sausage. There were apple trees, and the neighbors had cows so we had fresh milk and cheese and butter. I remember hunting for mushrooms and picking raspberries and blueberries in the forest. We were never sick, and we were all very thin. We swam and ran so much. It was a healthy, natural life that I try to give to my kids whenever I go home for the summer.

WHERE IS HOME TO YOU NOW?

Everyone in my family is so nomadic by nature that we really could feel at home anywhere. I definitely feel like Bangkok is my city and that I am a long-term resident more than an expat. But if I had to move, within weeks I could feel settled in a different place, too. Home is where my kids are and where I feel fulfilled and happy. In the modern world, you can feel at home everywhere.

WHEN AND HOW DID YOU FALL IN LOVE WITH TRAVELING?

Reading is what first inspired my love of travel. As a child, I read Jules Verne: *Around The World in 80 Days* (and) *20,000 Leagues Under The Sea*. I would read under my blankets with a flashlight so my parents couldn't see the light. *The Count of Monte Cristo* I read over and over again and thought, "Ah! This is the life I'm going to have."

As soon as I could, I started working and spending all my money on air and train tickets, at a time when my friends were just buying clothes and going to concerts. They were into boys, but I just wanted to travel and see what was out there. I was obsessed with the idea of seeing the world.

For my first trip, when I was 16, I took a train with three of my friends, and we toured all of Eastern Europe by train—from Warsaw to Budapest and Prague to Bratislava. There were gorgeous castles on this trip, which inspired my passion for architecture.

WHAT DID YOUR FRIENDS THINK OF YOUR TRAVEL ADDICTION AS A TEEN?

I don't remember if my friends thought it was weird or not. They just thought I had my own thing going. I didn't like peer pressure, and I didn't let it get to me. I spent a lot of time with my family and going around Russia and into the forest. Even as a 16-year-old, I had no interest in alcohol or boyfriends, just travel.

I studied English on my own in the summers so that I could travel more. I studied many languages to pave the way for traveling. By the time I was 25, I'd taught myself English, Italian, and French. I haven't had a conventional youth, but I don't regret it for a moment.

WHAT IS YOUR CAREER BACKGROUND?

I started out in advertising with the McCann Erickson agency in Moscow. When I lived and worked there, Moscow was really developing and it was a fun city. There was a lot to do and a fantastic party scene.

I worked as marketing director for L'Oreal for the West African region for many years, starting in 2002. I was based in Ghana, but my job took me to Paris and New York on a quarterly basis. It was very challenging. I had the large responsibility of managing teams of people. Being able to travel professionally meant I could travel with everything paid for. I was in heaven.

WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE LIVING IN GHANA?

It actually felt like I lived in West Africa, not just Ghana, because I was constantly traveling the region. It was like living in a movie. Everything was unusual to me, from the landscape to the food and the languages. I felt lucky to be able to experience West Africa at a time when there were not many foreigners living there. I had the unique chance to properly experience the country—not just through tourism—and for that I'm very grateful.

Living in Ghana was very different from what I was used to and there were challenges, but it was really cool and exotic. We were exotic, too: My daughter Stella was born there, with a full head of pure white hair like a halo. She was the first blonde baby the nurses had delivered. They were shocked, and everyone took many photos of her.

HOW DID YOU END UP MOVING TO THAILAND?

In 2007, after several years in Ghana, my husband had three job offers made over the phone: Hanoi, Taipei or Bangkok. The company wanted an answer as quickly as possible. We had only 15 minutes to make a decision!

Dress by Tawn C

Dress by Ek Thongprasert

When my husband called to tell me the choices of cities, I got on the Internet and looked up facts of these places, but my immediate gut feeling was Bangkok. I really love big cities. Thai people seemed modern and graceful. So, in well under an hour, we decided our next move would be to Bangkok.

WHAT WAS YOUR INITIAL REACTION TO BANGKOK?

As soon as I stepped off the plane, I felt at home. Thailand was my love at first sight. I just loved everything. People told me it was a honeymoon phase, but for me it was really just that something clicked. I feel at home in Bangkok—maybe because it's so big, alive and diverse. I love the buzz, the craziness, the Skytrain, the mess, the lights. I love Bangkok for its sheer energy. There is just something about this city that is mine. I'm a big-city girl, and I feel like a fish in water here. Ten years later, I feel the same. I am truly lucky to live here.

HOW DID YOU BECOME A MODEL AND ACTRESS IN THAILAND?

When I got to Thailand, I had a guilty-mom complex. I didn't want to look for any work yet. I wanted to settle in, set up the house and find a nanny. Curtains, furniture, food, friends, all that stuff. My plan was to spend time with Stella for half a year. I was able to find friends pretty quickly, and it was at a party that I met a booker for a modeling agency who asked if I wanted to model. I was surprised and explained I was 30 years old, too old for that. But she said her agency needed women my age for commercials to play moms and girlfriends.

So, a few months later, I sent a few pictures and went to one casting, where I landed a Canadian TV commercial for a kitchen appliance. That's how I started modeling and acting, and it was around this time that I began to take acting lessons.

Cover Story

Photos:
Keith Theerakulchai

Makeup:
Audrey Munkestam

Dresses:
Tawn C and
Ek Thongprasert

Location:
Penthouse
at The River
by Raimon Land

Dress by Ek Thongprasert

I had always wanted to try acting, just for myself because it sounded interesting. I want to live to the max, and one life wasn't enough. Acting was a way to live other lives as different people.

I definitely prefer acting to modeling. It's an amazing way to live many little lifetimes.

My best on-set experience so far was when I was cast to be a body double for Naomi Watts. It was for a movie called "The Impossible." Ewan McGregor was in it as well.

I spent four months in Phang-na—which is a really beautiful part of Thailand and where the 2004 tsunami hit the hardest—for filming. I spent most of the time covered in mud and blood. The Thai extras on the set had really lived through the tsunami and many of them had lost their relatives. It was a rough and emotional project.

HOW DOES IT WORK BEING A BODY DOUBLE?

To be a body double, many physical features have to be the same as the actor or actress you're standing in for—skin tone, height and measurements. I was just lucky that Naomi Watts and I have these traits in common.

There are scenes with me running while a camera in the air on a crane followed me from the back. There was a helicopter scene, too, where I am wading though the remains in a torn T-shirt. It was a really good experience to see how a Hollywood movie is made from the inside out.

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HOW DID YOU BECOME A MAKEUP ARTIST, ON TOP OF ALL OF THIS?

When I realized I was never going back to the corporate world, it was time to do something of my own. Freelance modeling and acting are great, but they're not consistent enough to be a full-time career, certainly not in Thailand. One needs to have a backup plan.

I have always loved arts and drawing and doing my friends' makeup. So, after years of working in the beauty industry with L'Oreal and also having people make up my own face, I knew that I had a pretty good knowledge base in makeup artistry. I went back to school and studied to become a professional make-up artist in Thailand. I went to school for it in Russia, too. The actual skill is all practice and a sense of taste when something is too much or not enough. You need to have an eye for it.

Now, seven years later, I'm proud to have my wonderful team that helps me service the most prominent weddings, magazine cover shoots and celebrity bookings. I love what I do, my clients and the fact that every working day is different.

The rewards of seeing people enjoy and appreciate my work are enormous. I love helping women feel more confident in their own skin.

HOW DO YOU MANAGE HAVING MULTIPLE PROFESSIONS, ESPECIALLY AS A MOM WHO LOVES TO TRAVEL?

I don't want to be limited to just acting or being a mom or having my makeup artistry business. I want to have it all, and so far it's making me very happy. I'm trying to be less of a perfectionist, and I'm learning how to delegate better. Letting go of the small stuff is one of the lessons I'm learning this year.

The balance of work and kids and travel is a tough one. I travel more than your proverbial salesman. It's not been easy. I'm working on letting go of some things and not being such a control freak about everything! Wearing this many hats and being this busy has really helped me learn to be completely present when I'm with my kids. When I play with them, I'm all there, not thinking about the next thing to do, as I used to.

My children are my highest priority. My daughter was born in Africa and my son here in Thailand. They are growing up with international friends; they are open-minded and don't see things like skin color or religion. It's exactly as I would like them to be.

WHEN YOU'RE NOT WORKING OR SPENDING TIME WITH YOUR FAMILY, WHAT DO YOU LIKE TO DO?

I love to read. I also have been working on a pet project for about five years, which I hope will eventually be published in Russia. I am writing a book about some very special and old buildings in Moscow, the history of their architecture and the lives of their inhabitants throughout the centuries. I'm very passionate about it and spend most of my rare free minutes reading nerdy history books.

Whenever I go back to Moscow, my mom and I visit buildings and do research for the book. It's going to be a 10-year project, but it makes me happy. I am not in a rush.

WHAT IS YOUR ADVICE ON HAPPINESS AND FULFILLING DREAMS?

Life is not great for anyone all the time. It's short and beautiful, and if you dream of something, you need to just go and get it. Nothing happens without a constant effort and work on our part. I like to take sometimes small but constant steps in the direction of my dreams. It's scary but most of the times you have to take the risk. Either way, it's all right because you either win or you learn.

I think, especially as women, we don't have it easy in life in general. But if we choose not to be miserable when life throws us for a spin, then great things will come into our lives and surprise us. I truly believe that.

My advice on happiness is about recognizing the power and energy of "now." The present moment is all we ever really have. And to truly understand and realize that with all of your bones at once—that, to me, is real happiness.

Learn more about Natalie Lorence and her makeup artistry at www.natalielorencemakeup.com