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SUBHEADLINE: Thai-German beauty takes a break in Bangkok to discuss upcoming model contest to be held here

BYLINE: WANPHEN SRESHTHAPUTRA

Lolling on a mouth-shaped sofa, as red as her finely delineated lips and as velvety-smooth as her skin, Nanda Hampe, 21, takes a break from her busy schedule.

In Bangkok for a few days, the Thai-German beauty is leaving the catwalks and photo shoots behind for the moment in favour of live television shows and interviews. As one of the mascots of the Karin Models agency, with whom she has been for the past two-and-a-half years, Nanda was in town to promote the upcoming "Karin Models _ New Generation 2001", an international model search to take place in Thailand on November 2 at Bangkok International Trade and Exhibition Centre.

Given the fashion world heavyweights it will attract _ model and actress Estella Warren, designer Jean-Paul Gaultier Castelbajac, photographer Patrick Demarchelier, prominent singers, international DJs and local celebrities _ it is being described as "the most exciting worldwide fashion event of the year".

But regardless of whether she is appearing before the cameras or doing press interviews, one thing does not change: Nanda's resplendent physique. Her ideal measurements are perched on a 1.73-metre frame and brightened with a slim face and brown, almond-shaped eyes _ a stunning cocktail which turns heads and gets the cameras clicking.

"This job has given me the opportunity to discover the world, to meet different types of people, to really understand life. I'm trying to get the most out of it," Nanda says, taking stock of the last few busy years, during which she has divided her time between New York, Hamburg, London, Paris and Bangkok, earning more in one day than a minimum-wage earner here would earn over the course of a few years.

Squeezing everything possible out of the glamorous and ego-pampering world of fashion, she admits to being among the 5 to 10 percent of models who "make a lot of money, while the rest are struggling".

Born in Hamburg, her Thai-German father works for Lufthansa and her Thai mother is a teacher.

Nanda did her first fashion shoot for the popular German Max magazine at the age of 17, at the invitation of a friend. A few months later, her career was in the hands of Hamburg-based Modelwerk agency, who sent her without delay for auditions and castings "all over the place" as Nanda says _ Paris for two months, New York, London and more.

"At the start I was very shy and afraid of being turned down. I remember thinking 'what the heck!' when I took the first call from Modelwerk asking me to take part in a casting for Wella hair shampoo."

She laughs as she recalls her self-imposed training sessions, walking back and forth in her living room.

When the money began to roll in, Nanda, then a third-year university student studying mathematics and international management, decided to drop her classes.

“I felt bad about it but at the same time I was glad not to be dependent on my parents any more,” she says. “(Living on my own) really helped me mature. It was really good. I knew that if I didn’t do my own cooking, I wouldn’t eat. If I didn’t wash my clothes, they would remain dirty.”

It didn’t take long for Nanda to settle into her new life, falling in love with cities such as Paris and New York, where some two years ago she signed a contract with Karin Models agency, one of the top three agencies in the world, representing more than 400 models internationally.

As the contracts poured in – fashion shoots for Vogue, Elle, Cosmopolitan, and others; advertisements for Esprit, Gap, Guerlain; and television commercials for Clinique and LaVenus – Nanda treated herself to apartments in New York, Hamburg, Paris and Bangkok, “all fully Thai furnished”.

“It is hard, much harder than people think. It requires a lot of discipline. You don’t know where you belong. You never feel at home and travel mostly on your own. Relationships that you may develop are bound to be short and you don’t know whom to call a friend,” Nanda said. She gave up trying to have a boyfriend because of her never-ending travel.

“It’s a tough world and you have to keep up with it. It can get very depressing – if you don’t know the business, the competition is really big,” Nanda says.

But of course, the other side of the coin also has its merits. Nanda, who speaks fluent Thai, German and English and is studying French, comes to Thailand for every holiday – usually with her parents, who escape the German winter to warm up under the Asian sun as well swap the hot season here for the clement Western continental spring there.

“One also gets to meet a lot of people, one can rub shoulders with many prominent models, actors, movie stars ... We get to see the world,” Nanda says, her mind wandering back to encounters with Orlando Jones, Woody Harrison, John Scott and many more.

“I will go with the flow. I might do this job for another two years then perhaps work in the field of product management – start my own company and a line of products, for example. I don’t think I could go back to being company staff!”

Like the many models-turned-actresses from Karin agency – Sharon Stone, Milla Jovovich, Christy Turlington, Estelle Halliday to name a few – will she move on to acting?

“I’ll see if I am ready for it,” she answers.

One thing is sure: there will be endless opportunities for a profile such as Nanda’s charming one.