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PHOTO INSIGHT

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VII Agency photographer Anastasia Taylor-Lind takes a trip on the Trans-Siberian railway to meet the girls who are groomed to become tomorrow's most celebrated supermodels

THE IDEA for my series Siberian Supermodels had its genesis, as most photographic projects do, in one simple question: who are the most photographed women in the world? As my work largely focuses on women living and working within patriarchal societies, it was a question that I couldn't help but ask and feel compelled to explore. The first answer, and in many ways the most obvious, was models. These women (who are in reality often young girls) are on one hand instantly recognisable and occupy the covers of countless premier fashion publications and adorn the looming billboards that we see in every major city. But conversely these same women also find themselves stranded in an inescapable mode of anonymity. Even though we see them everywhere, we have no idea who these girls really are. They are utterly convincing actors.

The great thing about working in photography is that it cultivates the inquiring mind. If you have a question, you can grab your camera and find your answer. My question evolved and became 'Who are these girls?' The images that make up Siberian Supermodels are the answer.

The real quest began when a friend of mine contacted me to tell me that she had just watched a television interview with a famous model from Russia called Natalia Vodianova. In that interview Vodianova spoke of a mass migration of beautiful young Siberian women who travel to Novosibirsk, the capital of Siberia. It is their hope that they can then travel to Moscow and eventually find their fortune as an international model. Once I understood that, I knew where I had to be in order to understand the process of how supermodels from this region are born.

The key to the project lay with one agency: Noah Models International. They are the link between the highly respected international agencies abroad and the agencies that are local to the Siberian region. I contacted Noah Models via email and explained exactly what I wanted to do with the project. To their credit they were more than accommodating.

With Noah Models on board I was able to make contact with many of the local model agencies in the Siberian region. I was also able to travel with Noah Models along the 9,259-km Trans-Siberian railways and witness the auditions they set up.

The reason we are seeing so many more models coming out of Siberia and central Asia is that these regions are essentially untapped markets. Model scouts are going further and further afield to find their girls. But more than that, many Siberian girls

have a very distinct look, and it's a look that is highly appealing to international agencies, particularly those found in Japan. These girls are born in the area where Europe and Asia meet, a region that housed many of the ethnic groups who were forced into exile under Josef Stalin's regime. Over the years these communities lived side-by-side and inevitably intermingled. The result is a generation of girls who have large almond-shaped eyes, elfin ears, beautiful copper-coloured hair and snow-white skin.

Russia is a society that has very strongly defined gender roles. The culture dictates that men must be chivalrous and masculine and the women must be entirely feminine. It's with that mindset that girls are expected to go through a rite of passage and attend agency-run modelling schools from the age of five and up. While there, they'll learn how to walk, pose, diet and apply make-up.

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The audition process for these models is where hopes and dreams are either fulfilled or swiftly crushed. The castings take place in drab community halls or gyms and each girl carries a prison-style board with her vital statistics – name, age, weight, height, bust, waist and hip measurements. Each girl must fit the strict international measurement parameters. This is because when it comes to the models taking part in fast-paced international shows the clothes can all be made to one size and will therefore fit any model that comes through the door.

Each girl approaches the panel in turn where they must demonstrate their walk, talk and pose. It's all over in a matter of seconds and in just that short amount of time the judges will decide whether to change these girls' lives or send them back to the life they so desperately want to escape from. Those girls who are identified as having potential are then photographed and videoed and the files are then sent to model agencies all over the world.

The model that you see in the image is called Nastya Karzan and she is one of the real success stories to come out of Siberia, despite being just 18-years-old at the time of this shoot. She's travelled to New York, London, Paris and Milan and modelled in five Christian Dior shows.

The photograph was taken in London Fashion Week and it was there that I saw just how exhausting a model's life can be. The models are whisked in, have the clothes fitted, have their hair and make-up applied in lightning speed and then are pushed out onto the catwalk. Once their role in the show is complete they run onto the metro and dash to the next fashion show or audition. Here we see Nastya having her hair and make-up undone from the previous show and then reapplied for the show she is about to walk into. You can see how many people are working on her at one time. Unfortunately, that means that models can get hurt by being poked in the eye with eyeliner, or having their hair pulled. It's all part of the course, unfortunately.

The motivation of the girls I met and photographed was the same as any young girl. They want to travel the world, to have new experiences and to live life in an exciting and engaging way. They have the spirit of adventure burning inside them. Modelling is their ticket, much in the same way that photography offered me a way to live a life of high adventure. I suppose that's the reason the lives of these girls resonate with me. I understand that desire to escape and experience the world. **AP**

Anastasia Taylor-Lind was talking to Oliver Atwell



ANASTASIA TAYLOR-LIND

Anastasia Taylor-Lind is an English/Swedish documentary photographer who is a member of the VII Photo Agency. She is based in London and works for clients such as *CEO Germany*, *The Telegraph Magazine*, *The Observer Magazine*, *the Sunday Times Magazine*, *Marie Claire*, *ELLE France*, *Newsweek*, *Time* and *the New York Times*. Anastasia's work has been exhibited internationally and she has received a number of international photography awards. Anastasia has degrees from the University of Wales Newport and the London College of Communication.

To see more of Anastasia's images visit www.anastasiataylorlind.com