

PLAYING IT COOL

Photographer: Quang Thanh
Stylist: Whisky

SONIA COULING ON
CHEATING BOY-
FRIENDS, POSING
NUDE AND
STAYING OUT LATE.





“I NEVER REALLY THOUGHT OF MYSELF AS SEXY THE WAY EVERYONE ELSE DID”

“What have I been up to recently? Well, I got married six months ago.” Her first crushing blow of the day. The deluded hopes of a thousand men fall to the earth so fast that a light breeze flutters through the lobby of the Millennium Resort. In the flesh Sonia Couling, a 21-year veteran of the modeling world, reveals an understated sex appeal that outdoes even her more daring photo shoots.

The slender model is the epitome of confident poise; her body language relaxed and secure, but there is something so newly pleased about her smile that gives you the sense that she hasn't always been this happy.

Sonia Couling was born in Bangkok, studied in England, worked in Singapore and married in France. An international woman of the world, she has been a stalwart of cover shoots for more years than most models have been alive. Idolized by women and fantasized about by men, the former wildchild of the modeling world is all grown up.

The product of a Thai mother and an English father, Sonia is one of a number of high-profile Eurasians in Thailand who have dedicated their lives to the entertainment industry. Fame came early; at just 13 years old, she was thrust into the limelight in an advertisement for Sprite. “At 13 years old” — that would make her 34 years old today. Clearly all her work as the face of Olay's anti-aging products has paid dividends.

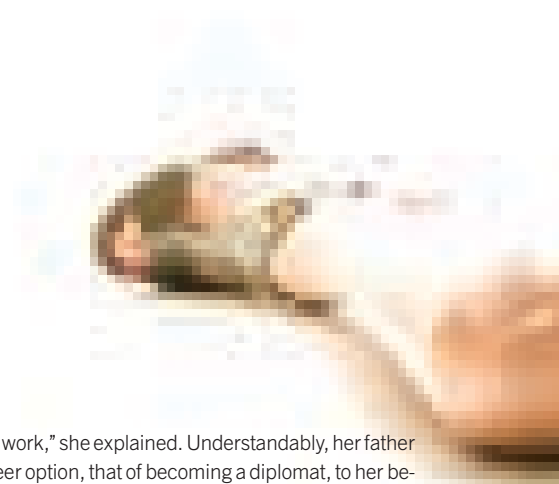
“My dad was an advertising executive and I grew up watching him. He never

wanted to associate me with his work,” she explained. Understandably, her father preferred his little girl's first career option, that of becoming a diplomat, to her becoming part of the louche world of advertising and modeling. But the young Couling was hooked after her first job, “There I was, on stage, with all this makeup and beautiful clothes among gorgeous women and I immediately felt like I belonged and I was one of them,” she says. It wasn't just the glamour that caught her young eye, “It was more like, ‘Yay! I made some money and I can do whatever I want.’”

Oh yes, a beautiful young daughter with her own income — every parent's worst nightmare. Sensing that their beloved daughter needed her feet kept firmly on the ground, Sonia's parents then sent her to St Michael's all-girls boarding school in Surrey, England.

“For the first few weeks, it was a shock,” she says, “but I managed to sweet-talk my way through and play the teacher's pet when I needed to. I blended in really fast with both the good and the bad crowd.”

Despite being packed off to a testosterone-free learning environment, the saucy model-in-training still managed to bag the head boy of a local boy's boarding school. By day a model pupil and Head of House, at night she recalls tucking in her girls, switching off the lights and then climbing out windows and fire escapes, sneaking off to see her teenage Romeo. “We were just young, virgin lovers. It was quite sweet really,” she laughed.







Top by Martin Margiela
Shorts by Mercibeaucoup



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The modeling career continued to vie with her academic pursuits; while working for Storm modeling agency in London during her secondary school years, throngs of photographers from Thai magazines flew to the UK to snap her until she graduated. “There were so many I can’t even remember which ones now,” she says apologetically.

Doubts still persisted as to the validity of a modeling career. After a brief fling with German literature at University College London — “One year of reading Goethe and I was like, ‘What am I doing? I’m out of here.’” — Sonia began studying international business with French at the European Business School in London. “I made really good friends and it gave me the business skills that I needed later on in life. Education is always priority and when you are done with your studies, you can choose to do whatever you like.”

With her studies complete, Sonia spent six months in Bangkok until in 1997 she landed a life-altering job as a VJ for MTV Singapore. “I got the job at MTV by chance after I did a casting at one of their parties. Two weeks after that, I got a contract,” she recalls. Singapore was to remain her home for the next four years, during which time she used her business skills to set up her own production company. “Then I went back to Bangkok to do other stuff.”

“Other stuff” included being the leading lady in TV shows, movies, commercials and advertising campaigns. With a look and a presence that could make grown men stutter, Sonia’s beauty became a hot commodity.

Although her assets have been on numerous swimwear commercials, she has never posed nude — and nor would she consider it. “I’m sure my husband wouldn’t approve. I doubt very much that I’d do that,” she says firmly, delivering her second crushing blow of the day.

Flawless and untouchable — are there cracks anywhere? What about plastic surgery? A nip here or a tuck there? “I’ve never had surgery. I don’t think I need it, do you?” Touché. “My husband has made me confident.”

When faced with supposed perfection, a natural response is to search for its weaknesses. Does she drink? Smoke? “I drink and smoke. But I don’t drink coffee.” With reassurance given that Sonia Couling is human after all, balance is re-

stored in the world.

Back to the fairytale of Thailand’s leading lady — Sonia talks about a romance so sweet it could destroy teeth. Recently she married her longtime sweetheart and best friend, the half Thai, half Corsican Paul-Dominique Vacharasinthu; the COO of the We Are event management company. While the engagement may have been swift, the courtship was long. “My husband has been a friend for 10 years. “I think deep down inside, we both had this attraction for each other, but either he wasn’t single or I wasn’t single. We’d always find excuses to see each other and try to meet and talk.” But when the full force of attraction finally hit, Sonia and Paul wasted no time, they became engaged after three months of seeing each other and solemnized their vows in two ceremonies, one of which was held in the cathedral where Napoleon was baptized.

“We had two receptions because some family members couldn’t make it and we had to do the reception in Bangkok for our friends and 200 press,” she explained, sending me a mock suffering look that says, “We got married once for ourselves and another time for you guys.”

While we’re on the subject of the press, Sonia’s line of work has kept her in the public eye, and the subject of much gossip and rumor, which we of course are too gentlemanly to print here. She is a model of pragmatism when it comes to dealing with the press. “I tell them what they need to hear and what they want to hear. I think I’ve established that art of knowing how to talk to them. They’re human beings too; they need respect.”

That’s not to say that she has not had her wilder moments. In 1999 Ms. Couling was voted Thailand’s sexiest woman by FHM, a reputation that brought her more than her fair share of suitors and invited the press to zero in on her love life. The normally cool model gets indignant when asked if the tabloid rumors about her going through men faster than a box of tissues were true, “I’ve dated a few people and had a lot of really bad relationships. Many of them cheated on me. From one relationship to another, I became more paranoid. People say, ‘Well, she’s had a lot of boyfriends,’ but if those men didn’t cheat on me I’d have had the same boyfriend all this time,” she shrugged. “I had a lot of people after me. Whether or not

Jacket by Ne'-Net
Necklace with apple locket by Disaya
Sunglasses by Marni





“THE FAME CAME REALLY
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Jacket by Y-3
Necklace and ring by Malina Amanita
Necklace by Kenneth Jay Lane from Onpedder
Sunglasses by Marni
Shoes by Jimmy Choo



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Special thanks to the Millennium Resort Patong

“SEXY IS ON THE INSIDE . . . I FEEL SEXY ALL THE TIME NOW”

I'd call them boyfriends is a different thing. There was a time when people were chasing me left, right and center. I guess that was normal. That was during my late teens when boys were beginning to feel confident about themselves.”

It's strange to think that this paragon of beauty ever had a moment of self doubt, but Sonia is remarkably modest, “I never really thought of myself as sexy the way everyone else did,” she adds after a brief reflective pause. “Sexy is on the inside and is how you feel about yourself. Confidence and self-control is a huge part of it, so in that sense, I feel sexy all the time now.”

Amidst the proposals and romance however, there were the late nights and inevitable debauchery that go hand in hand with the modeling industry. “The fame came really fast and I wasn't quite prepared for it,” she explained frankly. “Entering the fashion scene with people drinking and stuff — I saw all of that and it was only a matter of time until I got sucked in with the same crowd through a sense of belonging, peer pressure, whatever you want to call it,” she says. “I got in trouble with my parents a lot, either coming home late or climbing in through the balcony, or else coming home drunk or not coming home at all.”

Now a little older and wiser, Sonia's priorities have changed. “I've been through wild days, but recently, in the last three or four years, I've calmed down. I'm doing yoga, meditating — all the Zen stuff,” she adds. Along the way to this state of inner calm, the appeal of fame and exclusive social circles seems to have lost its charm for Sonia, who seems more than a little cynical towards the many ‘hangers-on’ that populate the fashion scene. “The friends I have who are in the ‘celeb circle’

are people I have known forever. We're not affected by the fake crowd,” she said dismissively. “Some people just want to hang out because they know that if they do, I'm going to pay the bill.”

With a husband, two dogs and a career to take care of, next step for Sonia is to start a family — and a huge one at that. “I would love to have a big family. I'm in my 30s now, so I don't know how many I'm able to have, but I want as many as I can,” she says. As well as having her own children, Sonia is mulling the idea of adopting.

“I just want to give somebody a chance because I've seen how bad it can be for some people. There are many children in the world who need a family and there are not enough families for everyone. Children need help, they need education, and they need love. We've got so much love, so why can't we give some?” says Sonia.

But before tries her hand at motherhood, she'll be busy setting up a media company, as well as producing and starring in several TV shows and movies, the details of which she is keeping close to her chest at the moment.

Sonia now sees herself as a role model for the next generation of would-be celebrities. “I like to think that I'm a role model because I started really young and I've had a degree of success. I've always been well-behaved in the public and there are a lot of good things that I've done. I think I can be an inspiration.”

Perfect skin, the perfect marriage, the perfect job — who wouldn't be inspired? Meanwhile, in the realm of the mortals, the late-night partying, cheating and coming home drunk continues.