

A FINNISH GIRL IN NEW YORK

Every great dream begins with a dreamer. But in fashion the dream of a modeling career is often realized by those who have yet to dream.

Kate Moss was discovered as she passed through JFK International Airport with her father; Naomi Campbell was approached while window-shopping in London's Convent Garden; and Gisele Bündchen was first spotted eating at a McDonald's in São Paulo, Brazil. The key to global stardom for the then-fresh-faced teenagers was to conquer New York.

Kirsi Pyrhönen is the latest new face to arrive in the Big Apple. The 6-foot Finnish beauty was discovered at the age of thirteen while shopping with her mother at an IKEA in the city of Espoo. Like most models discovered at such an early age, Kirsi was too young to leave the quiet Finnish city on her own. With both parents working and having her older brother and sister to consider, she had to wait another three years before finally being allowed to head to Paris to obtain her first taste of life as a model. "I was discovered in IKEA at the age of 13, but only started modeling when I was 16," she recalls.

Kirsi's star began to rise almost as soon as her plane touched down in Paris. Signed to Viva Model Management, her tall, lithe figure, exotic green eyes and

exceptional bone structure made an instant impression on photographers and clients as she arrived on a school break to build her portfolio. By the time London Fashion Week approached she was being publicized as one of the highlights of Viva London's Fall 2010 show package (for shows in February 2010).

Such was the buzz surrounding the 16 year-old Finn that on her very first experience of the catwalk in February she was thrown in at the deep end. "I opened for my first show ever and they [Ann-Sofie Back] only told me about 20 minutes before the show started. I was quite nervous, but as soon as I stepped out onto the catwalk all of the nervousness vanished," she said. Kirsi walked four shows in her first season at London Fashion Week, including opening and closing the show of one of the hottest names in British fashion, Christopher Kane.

"From there I went to Milan for Prada, as an exclusive. In Paris I did shows for Givenchy and Loewe, before I had to go back to school." The year 2010 was still in its infancy, and already it had been a phenomenal success for the young Finn. Adjectives to describe the newly ranked

top ten newcomer were flowing thick and fast: promising, youthful, mysterious, fabulous, one journalist even called her a beautiful "alien Laplander". The one most resonant was "unique."

Kirsi's singular features immediately caught the attention of the legendary fashion photographer Steven Meisel who photographed her for the cover of *Vogue Italia*, May 2010. This was followed by a 14-page editorial shot by Paolo Roversi for the July issue of the magazine. Shortly after, Kirsi found herself once again in front of Meisel's lens for the September 2010 issue of *American Vogue*, by which time she had earned the right to be photographed for a special editorial alongside some of the most influential models, actors, musicians and designers in the United States.

Within a matter of months, Kirsi had become one of the most sought-after models in the world. The bookings began to pour in, and Miesel a reliable barometer of model hierarchy, photographed her as one of the faces of the Balenciaga Fall 2010 campaign, alongside Freja Beha Erichsen and Stella Tennant. But despite her growing popularity, Kirsi



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was still only a part-time model. High school in Espoo has always taken priority. Her modeling jobs are fitted around her school timetable, and not the other way around. It's not easy to concentrate in lessons in a classroom in Finland when you have been told Valentino has asked you to do his haute couture show in Paris.

“Doing school and modeling at the same time is very difficult and basically it means no free time,” says Kirsi. “I do my schoolwork whenever there is time during the day: while I'm waiting in a casting or before a show when my hair and make-up is being done, on an airplane, or at airports.”

Now seventeen, Kirsi is still trying to find the right balance between school and a modeling career. “My life has changed so much. I am now traveling all the time and being in school at the same time,” she says. Apart from the much talked about collaborations with Steven Miesel, the highlights of her year and a half as a model include starring in the Marc Jacobs and Barneys Spring 2011 advertising campaigns photographed by Juergen Teller and being featured on the covers of *Dazed & Confused* and *i-D Magazine*. Mario Testino also captured her as a classic beauty in a wedding editorial to celebrate the royal union of Prince William and Kate Middleton for the May issue of *British Vogue*.

Despite her age, Kirsi's family is aware that in order to make a name for herself, she will have to travel thousands of miles away from home. Espoo may only be a 10-mile ride from Helsinki, but Helsinki is over 1,000 miles from Paris, Milan or London, and over 4,000 miles away from New York.

“My friends understand that I am often away because of my work. They are very supportive and I miss them a lot,” she said when we caught up with her in New York. “When I'm in Finland I try to spend as much time as possible

with my family and friends.” Kirsi stays in contact with her loved ones in Espoo via her iPhone or the Internet. “Skype is a savior!” she declares.

Friends and family are not the only things Kirsi will miss while staying in New York. She will also miss Juhannus, a popular celebration of the midnight sun in Finland, that takes place on the Saturday after the summer solstice. However even though she has a hectic schedule of appointments with vital clients as well as fashion shoots, she will find time to reflect on festivities back home. The lights of Manhattan may not be the perfect substitute for the incredible beauty of the midsummer Nordic sky, but the city's lights are on all night and are known to inspire a cheerful spirit in the people of New York.

Kirsi's first visit to the Big Apple was for New York Fashion Week last September. Her unique look made her the perfect signing for DNA Models. While here this summer she will also meet clients considering her for the upcoming New York Fashion Week. She has walked for Marc Jacobs and Carolina Herrera for the past two seasons, and she strutted her stuff in 29 shows on the international circuit last February, including Louis Vuitton, Alexander McQueen and Kenzo in Paris.

Kirsi's secret to her powerful presence on the catwalk is no a secret at all. The first thing she does in the morning is wash her face and have something to eat. She doesn't like coffee. Her favorite hot drink is ginger tea or Chinese green tea. She likes to have fruit and yogurt in the morning, but sometimes grabs a bite to eat on her way to a show or casting. During the day she considers water the best beverage to hydrate the body, before admitting: “when I'm in Finland I drink a lot of milk.”

Like most catwalk models, Kirsi does not use make-up on fashion week morn-

ings. “Normally my make-up is very simple: mascara (Kanebo), powder blush (Chanel,ysl Touche Éclat) and sometimes lipstick or lip gloss.” When choosing what to wear, her personal style depends on the day. “I love vintage and I combine it a lot with designer clothes,” she says.

Once she arrives at the show venue, the atmosphere backstage depends on the show. “Normally it's very good and everybody is excited,” she says. “I like the little nervous feeling I experience before going out onto the catwalk because it gives me some good energy.” However Kirsi has one very big problem on the runway: her shoe size is 42½! “On the catwalk my feelings depend a lot on the shoes. Normally I just try to keep my face normal, even when the shoes are two sizes too small.”

Apart from sore feet, Kirsi acknowledges that her future looks bright. “I have had to pinch myself a few times. I could never have thought that at 16 (now 17) I would be traveling around the world, all the time, to amazing places, and that I would be working with so many inspiring people,” she said. “I was a normal schoolgirl attending high school who enjoyed playing basketball. I never really thought that I would become a model.”

Whether Kirsi follows in the footsteps of other former new faces who have conquered New York to become supermodels remains to be seen. There is no doubt in New York fashion circles that she has the talent and the potential. However her stay in the Big Apple will inevitably be cut short: Kirsi has to return to school to do her exams – and she won't be wearing Valentino haute couture there. ■■

MAGAZINE EXCERPTS PHOTOGRAPHED BY SAMULI KARALA / STYLED BY TEKLA KNAUST

