

Travel Tales

Meet the New Miss Vanuatu! Part 1

by

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Valerie Martinez, Miss Vanuatu, shows off her charming personality

Recently a new Miss Vanuatu was selected, the first one since 2005. She will go on to represent her country at Miss Asia-Pacific World in Korea. I interviewed her at the famous L’Houstalet Restaurant in Port Vila, Vanuatu, which is owned by her father and which was the location of negotiations that led to Vanuatu’s independence in 1980. I found her charming, engaging, sincere and of course, beautiful. This month we will explore her background, and next month find out about the competition.

Q: What is your full name?

A: Valerie Navalak Martinez –“Navalak” means “money” in my local language on Tanna island. I was given the same first name as my grandmother’s cousin.

Q: Where were you born and raised?

A: I was born in the Port Vila Central Hospital in September 1989 and mostly raised in Port Vila. I am 23. I attended the Ecole Francaise de Port Vila.

Q: So what is your “sign,” and do you believe in that?

A: Yes, I am a Libra, “la balance” or the scales, and I think it describes me accurately. I am generally happy and friendly, but if something goes wrong, I can’t accept it.

Q: Did anything go wrong in your childhood?

A: Yes, my parents split up when I was 12, and as a teenager I drove my father a little crazy, so I was sent to a boarding school in New Caledonia for four years. But I didn’t

like it there, even though it was beautiful, since some of the people were rather cold, insisted that I be exactly like them, and even said some rude things about people from Vanuatu. I was not so nice as a teenager, but I am very different now. I love my father and appreciate all he has done for me.

Q: Tell me about your family.

A: My father's mother was French, while my father's father was Spanish but lived in France. My mother is from Tanna island in Vanuatu, but one of her grandfathers was Russian. My father has owned L'Houstalet restaurant for 40 years, and my mother met him when she worked as a waitress. They divorced later, and I now have eight siblings and half-siblings through my father, in Vanuatu, Tahiti, Fiji and New Caledonia. We are a true trans-Pacific family!



Valerie worked in her father's famous restaurant, where independence for Vanuatu was negotiated

Q: Do you all get along?

A: Oh, yes. I particularly like spending time tutoring my nine-year-old little brother and eight-year-old sister, and I think my father's present wife is very nice.

Q: Did your family support your pageant efforts?

A: Definitely. My father worked with me every night on the ukulele and helped rehearse my speeches, since I don't like public speaking. My mother helped make my costumes, and taught me how to paint my face Tanna-style.

Q: Did you compete for Miss New Caledonia?

A: Yes. I had never thought of entering a contest, but a friend of mine submitted my name without telling me, and I got the call in 2008 while in school. It was tough, because I was heavier then, about 143 pounds, instead of the 128 to 132 I am now. I didn't win, but learned a lot.

Q: What are your measurements, if you don't mind?

A: I am 5'8.5" tall, and my chest, waist and hips are 33, 25 and 38.6 inches.

Q: Do you like travel?

A: I went to Paris when I was very young, but I don't remember it. I have been to New Caledonia and the Gold Coast of Australia. I would love to go to Egypt to see the pyramids.

Q: Tell me about your job and studies.

A: I am studying accounting at the University of the South Pacific, and I work full time at QBE Insurance as a credit controller. I think accounting is very interesting, and I like the fact that I don't have to deal with clients – I am rather shy -- but can just focus on the numbers and stay in my "zone." My goals are to get my four year accounting degree, be a very good accountant, and someday have my own business.

Q: Many people in Vanuatu believe in black magic. How about you?

A: My mother believes but my father doesn't. I think if you believe in something it can affect you. But I want to see hard evidence.

Q: Tell me about your love life.

A: I am engaged to a wonderful guy. He is 24, from Ifira island. He is studying management and sells parts at a Ford dealership. We met at a party and have been together eight years. He is my first and only boyfriend. He is very kind, treats me well, and always asks my opinion before we make a decision. He is very smart and I have learned many things from him. He and his family are religious and he changed my life.



Miss Vanuatu painted and costumed in the Tanna style of her native island

Oddly, he is the opposite of me in many ways. He likes all the foods I hate. Even our taste in French fries is different! But we are made for each other.

Q: Are you religious?

A: I have always believed in God and read the Bible, and I go to Presbyterian church with my boyfriend sometimes. I like the beautiful church songs. But I don't sing much – you don't want to hear me sing! Before the contest I asked God to give me confidence and intelligence, and be able to face my fears.

Q: How did you prepare for the Miss Vanuatu contest?

A: It was difficult, because we only had three weeks, unlike the two months in New Cal. We were taught how to walk in heels and how to smile. The former Miss Vanuatu, Glenda Laban, told us to be ourselves, and taught us to carry a short sarong. I normally eat whatever I want and don't gain weight, and I love French food, lap-lap and my dad's chicken pizza and "Mt. Tabwemasana" -- a giant mound of vanilla ice cream and meringue, named after the tallest mountain in Vanuatu. But before the contest I switched to a breakfast of yogurt, toast and cereal, a small salad for lunch, and a small dinner of chicken and rice. I normally don't exercise much, but before the contest I did bike spinning and ran an hour a day. Of course, right after winning I had a big Mt. Tabwemasana!

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Lew Toulmin is working on contract in the Prime Minister's Office in Vanuatu. Normally he lives and works in Silver Spring.

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