

ALEK and ITALY



Supermodel Alek Wek chats with Julia M. Chiarella about her love for Italy and her handbag collection among other things

IN YOUR LATE TWENTIES did you have your head on your shoulders? Did you know what you wanted to do with your life? Had you made a difference to the world by aiding those in need? Sudanese top model, Alek Wek, is not one to toot her own horn by any means, but her accomplishments to date are overwhelming. Most women in their twenties are just starting to grasp what their lives are all about. Alek has seen more than many and accomplished more than most. Growing up in Sudan during a civil war could only be described as a nightmare. Add to that losing her father and being sent to England with only one of her siblings and leaving the rest of her large family behind. Hard to believe that from all these hardships there developed a woman with a sincere joy for life and with an appreciation for everything in it.

Standing at 5'11", Alek greets me (standing at 5'1 1/2") thank you very



much) with her unmistakable and infectious smile. You can't help but feel good in her presence. Alek has a way about her – as if we have known each other for the longest time. Her natural, easy-going attitude makes it a pleasure to talk with her and time flies by so quickly. Like two girlfriends catching up, we chat about everything...

BREAKING THE MOULD

Discovered on the streets of London, Alek was catapulted into the world of fashion at age 18. As young as she was, her fame did not cloud her judgment or her goals. Her reputation geared her to become a spokeswoman for more than one issue. First off, she became the first African face to grace the cover of American *ELLE* in 1997. The 'risk' (as some considered it) that *ELLE* took to put Alek on the cover, created an incredible stir. Her presence literally changed fashion for the 90s. 'If there was one vision of what a woman's beauty is, we wouldn't all be in this world. We are here to make a difference and make (life) worth our while.'

Facing challenges has never been a stumbling block for Alek. 'I always took on challenges, I love to learn.' Coming to England, Alek did not know English but learned it quickly. 'I remember looking at book 12 of



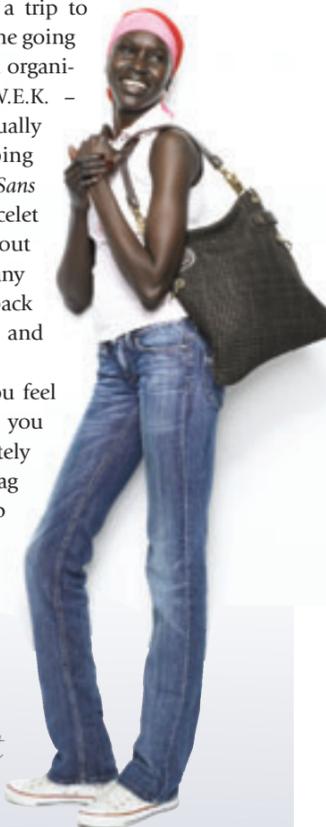
Travelling to Italy for work during fashion week and now for her handbags can be tedious but Alek has a true love for Italy. 'Italians are so passionate. They love to work hard and live hard and that is wonderful.' Now dealing with Italy directly for her designs, she notes 'Do not mess with their vacations! They know how to take a break.' Her favourite city is Florence and her favourite vacation spot is Sicily even though she was there for work. A great hot spot in Milan is Armani's Nobu restaurant for fabulous sushi, and Italy is truly the only place where Alek loves to shop, 'You cannot just window shop in Italy, you will always find something amazing.' When it comes to Italy, there is one thing that she can't talk enough about... that amazing food! From the fresh pastas, to the virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar, to the *bufala mozzarella* and *rucola*, to the simply best sandwiches in the world, Alek loves Italian food. Oh, and there may be one other thing that holds her heart to Italy... Ricardo Sala, her boyfriend of three years.

RETURN TO SUDAN

'My mother always told me to continue in what you believe in. It affects your whole way of living.' With that in mind, Alek has used her status in fashion as an opportunity to help others. 'I've seen war tear my family apart. People weren't even aware of what was happening in Sudan and it had gone on since 1983 when the civil war broke out.' Just last year, Alek took a trip to Sudan with her mother. It was their first time going back together. She developed a non-profit organisation after that trip, cleverly called W.E.K. – Working to Educate Kids. Alek has continually devoted her energy and time to helping those in need. Alek works with *Médecins Sans Frontières* and helped inaugurate their Bracelet of Life campaign raising awareness about malnutrition in Sudan. Only one of the many charities that Alek is involved in, giving back is a huge factor for her living a balanced and fulfilling life.

'I think the sky's the limit, really. If you feel you have the passion for something and you can follow it through you should absolutely do it.' A flourishing career, her own handbag design business, a wonderful relationship and family and a true love for life, she's even learning Italian now. Needless to say, Alek Wek's beauty is not only external. In fact, what made this person even more stunning to me was her beautiful soul.

www.alekwek1933.com 



the 'Peter and Jane' collections and asking my teacher, 'Will I be able to read this one day?' And learn she did. Before long she was studying design and history at the London Institute. Unable to devote enough time to modelling and her education, she met with her headmaster and decided to give it a go, heading to New York that summer. Her first call-back was a shoot with photographer Steven Miesel for Italian *Vogue*. Not bad...

BRANCHING OUT

Alek is now one of the most expensive top models, according to *The Sunday Times Paylist* in 2002. With a lucrative career, Alek decided that same year to begin a new endeavour. Her handbag collection, WEK1933 (the year her father was born), was launched in top stores such as Barney's and Maxfield in the States with much acclaim. Art has always been a part of Alek's life. 'I always knew I would be involved in some way in the arts,' says Alek, 'it's always been a part of my life. You can find a sense of self and a gratification in art.' Her signature is the inner lining which showcases her drawings, adding a personal touch to each piece. Now in its fourth year, Alek has established a factory in Florence, which brought us to chat about her love of Italy.

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