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THE PRICE OF BEAUTY

Beautiful women have it good. Just ask the bery of beauty queens from past Miss Universe contests who were in town to attend for the Singapore F1 Grand Prix. The seven headturners, including Angolan Leila Lopes, the newly crowned Miss Universe 2011, were given VIP treatment everywhere they went.

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First, there are the vicious critics who taunt them about their supposed imperfections. Said Ms Katie Taylor, 24, who was Miss New Zealand 2009: "Many people think it is okay to criticise beauty queens just because they are in the public eye. That can be hard because some comments can be very harsh." Ms Nadine Thomas, 23, Miss Malaysia 2010, agreed. "Because I am part Indian, people have commented that I am too dark," she said. "Others have said my neck is too short or that my nose is hooked - but I cannot change those."

It is not just Miss Singapore who gets brickbats for her national costume, which has included a Merlion-inspired gown and a dress shaped like an orchid over the years. Ms Maiko Itai, 23, who was Miss Japan 2010, said her national costume, which was designed by Canadian designer duo D'Squared2, drew flak in her country. "They didn't like the shape or the colour of the costume. Many said it was too fashion-forward for a beauty pageant but I loved it because it was something unique," she said. Thus, the first lesson every beauty queen learns is to ignore the criticisms. Otherwise, the attacks can be hard to stomach, especially when they become personal, as Ms Lopes found out. After she won the crown earlier this month, rumours about her faking application documents to enter a qualifying pageant in Britain began swirling.

Miss Universe pageant contestants tell KAREN TEE about the bumpy road to being crowned beauty queen

They include hair and make-up lessons, posing and catwalk training, fitness training and for some - although all the girls Urban spoke to denied it - plastic surgery. Ms Thomas of Malaysia was trained by actress-model Andreea Forseka, who was Miss Malaysia 2004, to prep her for the international stage. Ms Forseka, 27, who is the national director of the franchise in Malaysia, said she took Ms Thomas out to attend events so she could observe her social skills. "If you are at an event and you are busy taking photographs or tweeting, you are not socialising and giving yourself opportunities to be photographed," she pointed out. "It may sound trivial, but this could make all the difference at the pageant where the contestants spend about a

month attending events, during which they are observed by the judges. The scrutiny carries on till a contestant "closes the hotel room door". Language barriers are another big obstacle that many girls have to overcome. This year's first runner-up, Ms Olesia Stefanenko, 23, of Ukraine began learning to speak English two years ago, when she started modelling in Europe. After she won the pageant in Ukraine, she began speaking English two hours a day with a coach. She is now conversant in English but still cannot read well. A final-year law student in Ukraine, she has been offered jobs in showbiz and modelling, but said she would like to concentrate on getting her degree. Still, she admitted that she would

have loved the chance to live in New York City for a year, which is part of Ms Lopes' prize. Another prize is her diamond and ruby crown, which is valued at more than US\$200,000 (S\$240,000). But this trophy can become a burden. It has

to travel with her wherever she goes. When she is not wearing it, it is stored in her bag, out of sight. "I don't have to wear it all the time, but people will ask for it and I'll have to put it on." Security is sometimes an issue and a bodyguard is required to accompany her if she travels to a location that is deemed less safe. She quipped: "But Singapore is safe. Everyone wants to see the crown, but no one wants to steal it."

Miss Japan 2010
Ms Maiko Itai, 23

"I used to have dry and itchy skin but after I changed my diet to include brown rice, olive oil, macadamia nuts and avocado, which are rich in oils that are said to be healthy for the skin, my skin has improved and is now glowing. I apply Moroccan rose oil to my skin after showering to lock the moisture in. "When I am on modelling assignments, I have to wear whatever make-up artists use on me. But when I do my own make-up or on my days off, I prefer using mineral foundation from Laura Mercier as it does not clog my skin."

Miss Malaysia 2010
Ms Nadine Thomas, 23

"I was overweight as a teen, weighing about 80kg, and suffered from chronic acne so I had a lot of problems fitting in. I outgrew the acne after about 10 years. I do martial arts, such as kick-boxing, taekwon do, and yoga to keep in shape and now weigh about 55kg. "I do not diet but eat in moderation. I try to cut down on food such as beef rendang instead of depriving myself. "Because of my past acne problems, I prefer to keep to a simple routine of cleansing, toning and moisturising. I won't aggravate my skin. I use skincare from Simple and Himalaya Skin Care. "I've found that SK-II Cellulamination Cream helps to even out my skin tone - I tend to get darker patches around my mouth and eyes. "I also apply Bio-Oil to my knee caps and underarms to lighten the pigmentation in these areas."

Miss New Zealand 2009
Ms Katie Taylor, 24

"I don't wear a lot of make-up and I've found that Rachel K's CC Cream is useful for evening out my skin tone in a jiffy. A few lashings of mascara - I use all types - and I am good to go. "I use SkinCeuticals products to cleanse, tone and moisturise my face. "I come to Singapore about once a year for a holiday and when I am here, I get a treatment, such as microdermabrasion or laser, for my face to smoothen and brighten my skin."

Miss Ukraine 2011
Ms Olesia Stefanenko, 23

"I use a home remedy to get rid of puffy eyes and dark eye circles. I leave a slice of raw potato on my eyes for half an hour and my eyes will look brighter and less puffy."

Miss Universe 2011
Ms Leila Lopes, 25

"I prefer wearing a little make-up as possible. As I have darker skin, it is very difficult to find a shade that matches my skin without looking patchy or grey. But I've found that M.A.C has shades that match my skin tone. "I've also been introduced to Rachel K, the cosmetics brand of Ms Rachel Kum (Miss Singapore Universe 2009). I like the Iplagos as it is not sticky and has a slight plumping effect. "I exfoliate once a week and use only oil-free skincare and sunscreen that is prescribed by my dermatologist."