



Vanessa and her family



Vanessa and other female aviators

As a frequent flyer, perhaps the most difficult moment in Captain Vanessa Umba's day is when she says goodbye to her three young children. Three years ago, Vanessa made history when she was promoted to the position of Captain — the first female in that post in Gulf Air's 62-year history.

Vanessa received her pilot training from Sabena Flight Academy in Belgium and then in the USA before starting her flying career with SN Brussels Airlines as first officer.

In 2006, she joined Gulf Air as first officer on long haul flights, flying A330 and A340 aircraft.

Married to a Bahrain-based French businessman, Vanessa is mother to Océane (six), Laura (four) and Lucas (one). Combining married life with such a demanding job is not easy. Vanessa reveals what it takes to manage everything smoothly.

**Woman This Month (WTM): What factors influenced your decision to work in the aviation industry?**

**Vanessa Umba (VU):** I didn't have a clear idea about what I might do professionally until I was 16. My father wanted me to become a doctor or a lawyer, but I knew these weren't careers I personally could be passionate about.

My school had organised a career day, where students could meet people in a variety of careers that they aspired to. While scanning an extremely long list of professions, I read the word 'pilot'. Strangely enough, that job had never crossed my mind. But the minute it did, I knew that was what I was meant to be.

The rest was easy. I did a two-week glider

programme in Belgium, just to make sure that I'd really like flying. It was amazing. At 18, I joined the Sabena Flight Academy in their cadet programme. Today, more than 10 years later, I'm flying an Airbus 320.

**WTM: What's it like being Bahrain's first and only woman captain? How do your passengers react when they know they're being flown by a woman?**

**VU:** I was the first female captain in Bahrain. When I joined Gulf Air in 2006, I was only one of the two female first officers. Today, there are nine female flight crew members; a majority of them are Bahraini. I'm very proud of them and happy to see things evolving positively for Bahraini women. I must say that Gulf Air management are very supportive of female pilots.

The passengers are usually surprised to hear a female voice telling them, "Welcome on board, this is your captain speaking." However, I usually get an encouraging response, especially from female passengers.

**WTM: What are the top qualities necessary for a good pilot?**

**VU:** A pilot should be knowledgeable, with good decision making skills, leadership abilities and good communication skills.

**WTM: Have you ever thought of yourself as a woman in a man's world?**

**VU:** Well, isn't it the men who are in my world? (laughs) As a matter of fact, the minute I started my training as a pilot, I was surrounded by men. But that has never

been an issue for me. Strangely enough, such working environments tend to foster stronger bonds between women working.

**WTM: What is the hardest part of your job?**

**VU:** Nothing is really hard; each flight is different. A few days ago, I had to wake up in the middle of the night to report for a flight. It was very difficult leaving my sleeping children. However, the moment I arrived at the Gulf Air offices, I got into my flying frame of mind. Later on during the flight, watching the ground from Flight Level 390 just made my day. Flying is truly magical!

**WTM: How difficult is it for a woman to balance a flying career with family life? Did you ever have to compromise on either in order to make the other one work?**

**VU:** It is difficult, but not impossible. I feel like I have to deal with two passions at the same time. The key is to be able to differentiate between both worlds. When I am home, I am 100 percent with my family. And the opposite is true when I am flying.

**WTM: What sort of support system do you have at home?**

**VU:** My husband Benoît, despite having a successful and demanding career, has always been an outstanding support for me. Of course, living in the Middle East means that life is much easier for us as we have numerous childcare facilities and dedicated professionals to help with our day-to-day needs. Last but not least, support comes from our extended family — my parents, parents-in-law, brothers and sister-in-law. They take turns visiting Bahrain and helping with the children when both my husband and I are out of town.

**WTM: What is your ultimate ambition in life?**

**VU:** I've already achieved a lot, don't you think? (laughs) I'm 33 years old, a Captain with three wonderful kids. On a serious note, I'm trying to complete my Master's degree in air transport management from City University, London. After that, we'll see.

**WTM: How do organisations such as Ninety-Nines help women in aviation?**

**VU:** Ninety-Nines is an international association of women pilots which promotes education, scholarships, and mutual support. I've been a member of its Arabian section for two years and in that time I've met some amazing and inspirational women, all from different origins and backgrounds, but united in the same passion — flying. ■