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## An Airline Magazine That Makes Travelers Want to Pull the Rip Cord

*Safi Shows the Real Afghanistan, From Dog Fighting to Dry Swimming Pools*

By MICHAEL M. PHILLIPS

KABUL—Safi Airways, a start-up Afghan airline, ventures where few air carriers dare to go: Its in-flight magazine tells the ugly truth about the place where you're about to land.

American Airlines' magazine lists the 10 best pizza parlors in America. United Airlines has a spread headlined "3 Perfect Days: Amsterdam," presumably perfecting its 2007 article, "3 Perfect Days: Amsterdam."

In the seat pocket in front of you on Safi, you will find an article on Kabul heroin addicts, photos of bullet-pocked tourist sites and ads for mine-resistant sport-utility vehicles.

### Safi Magazine Articles



Courtesy of Safi In-Flight Magazine

In a piece in the magazine headlined, "Live Entertainment in Kabul: Dog Fighting," the writer says dogs in Afghanistan don't fight to the death, just until one proves dominant. "They are usually pulled apart before they can inflict serious damage on each other," the article assures passengers.

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Afghans carrying away a limp black-and-white behemoth from the fight.

Safi flies routes between Kabul and Frankfurt, Dubai and Kuwait. Its passengers are mostly aid

The airline provides this insider's tip about one of the city's leading luxury hotels: "The rooms are individually air-conditioned, accessorized with amenities you will find in 4-star hotels abroad, sheets are clean, view from the room is nice, and—after the suicide bombing that took place—security measures have been implemented."

Says Christian Marks, the magazine's cheerfully blunt German editor: "I would like it to be a magazine where you can read interesting things, not just get brainwashed by some marketing agency that says you can't show problems."

One recent edition featured a long, approving piece headlined, "Live Entertainment in Kabul: Dog Fighting." The writer says dogs in Afghanistan don't fight to the death, just until one proves dominant. "They are usually pulled apart before they can inflict serious damage on each other," the article assures passengers, despite the photo of two worried

workers, security consultants, journalists, defense contractors and diplomats, who go to the war zone with eyes wide open. "Let's face it—anyone who is going to Afghanistan is not some tourist who is going hiking," says the airline's chief commercial officer, Claus Fischer.



CHRISTIAN MARKS

Mr. Marks lived in Kabul for two years, developing economic-development-themed radio soap operas, and he believes that each new wave of Safi passengers needs a guide to the restaurants, hotels, stores and tourist sites the city has to offer.

"It's not only bombing, and it's not only terrorists around," says Mr. Marks. "I lived long enough there to know you can go out every evening. If you go to the French restaurant, you can drink champagne and eat foie gras."

The magazine is heavily tempered, however, by the realities of a country facing an angry, anti-Western insurgency given to ambushes and kidnappings. When he is in Kabul, Mr. Marks himself says he carries a Russian pistol under his jacket, since he doesn't intend to go down without a fight.

In one recent edition of the magazine, Tom de Geytere, Safi's chief financial officer, honors two British Safi pilots wounded by flying glass when a car bomb blew out the windows of their hotel rooms just as they were emerging from their showers. "It was difficult to hear the reports of those staff physically and mentally injured, but wonderful to see them all back safe and sound, no doubt a mix familiar to many of you."

Indeed, the magazine warns, "riots happen occasionally and are often accompanied by looting." The Bibi Mahru swimming pool overlooking Kabul offers a beautiful view of the city, but contains no water, the magazine reports. Its diving platforms were "notorious as an execution spot" under the Taliban.

One sightseeing recommendation is the Kabul zoo, former home to Marjan the one-eyed lion. Marjan was a gift from Germany in the 1960s, but 30 years later the zoo was on the front lines in a civil war and Marjan's keeper went AWOL. When a Taliban fighter climbed into Marjan's enclosure, the hungry lion killed him.

"The man's brother returned the next day for a revenge attack and threw a grenade into the cage, leaving Marjan blind and lame," the magazine says. After Marjan died in 2002, China donated two new lions, two bears, two pigs and a wolf to the zoo. "Conditions are poor, but it is a popular place for Kabulis," Safi reports.

The magazine's audience attracts advertisers as specialized as its content. There are an Australian firm that offers medical services in scary places; a Middle Eastern satellite-communications company whose gear works in the phoneless hinterlands; and a war-zone car-repair service with outlets in Kabul, Baghdad and Monrovia. The ad for Alpha Armouring Panzerung, a Munich company, shows an armored Mercedes SUV cruising through the flames of a roadside bomb.

Safi was established in 2006 by a prominent Herat family of the same name. The Safis launched their fortune in the early 20th century, trading dried melon seeds, and have since expanded into the oil, steel, real-estate and hotel industries. The family knew little about the airline industry, though, and soon brought in German managers. The first plane got off the ground in 2008, and the airline hopes to expand its routes to Beijing and New Delhi.

The company claims to offer better safety and convenience than its rivals, and charges a bit higher fares. Among other things, it keeps its planes overnight in Kabul rather than flying them to safer

parking spots abroad. This allows passengers to make faster connections to other airlines.

Last year, Mr. Marks bumped into a Safi executive at the Dubai airport and pitched him on the idea of a magazine aimed at expatriates living in Kabul and distributed on airlines flying into the country. The executive countered with a proposal: Could Mr. Marks instead produce an in-flight magazine for Safi's inaugural flight to Frankfurt two week later? He did so, and has published five issues since then.

Safi executives don't edit the articles for content; like Mr. Marks, they say they don't want to paper over the facts of Afghan life. "Anyone who is going to Afghanistan knows about these issues anyway," says Mr. Fischer, the chief commercial officer. "What would be the point of not talking about them openly?"

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