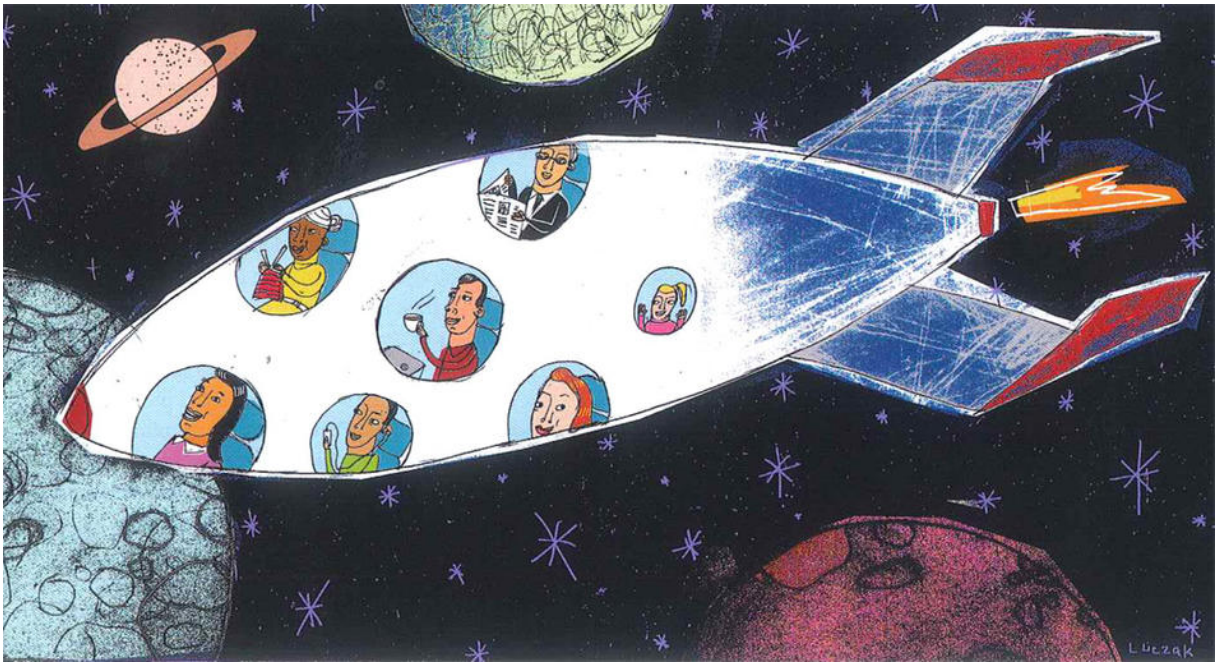
Science & Technology

Airfare for the Common Man

Artist and peace activist Namira Salim '96SIPA buys a ticket to space.

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|
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“I have a very strange life,” Namira Salim ’96SIPA said recently while in transit between her homes in Monaco and Dubai. “I never plan things — I literally follow my dreams.” This January, for instance, Salim flew to New York, then to Punta Arenas, Chile, then five hours to the ice-blue base camp of Patriot Hills, Antarctica, and then another five hours to her bitter, barren destination. In so doing, she became the first Pakistani woman to reach the South Pole.

Collecting “firsts” has become a habit with the Karachi-born artist and peace activist, who last spring made an expedition in the other direction. No Pakistani

woman had ever reached the North Pole until Salim arrived there on April 21. Acting as Pakistan's Honorary Ambassador of Tourism, Salim, a striking woman with long black hair and an ambassadorial smile, planted several flagpoles into the melting permafrost, their banners bearing the colors of Salim's various addresses: Pakistan (green and white), Monaco (red and white), the European Union (blue and yellow), and the United Arab Emirates (red, white, black, and green). Salim also hoisted a rainbow- colored Peace flag. Later, she told reporters that the rippled formations of the Arctic tundra reminded her of the sand dunes of the desert near Dubai — a comparison, one imagines, that few could make firsthand.

But where else to go once you've conquered the ends of the world?

The answer came last spring, when Salim saw an article on the Internet about Virgin Galactic, a space tourism concern established by British billionaire Sir Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin Group of companies, which include Virgin Records and Virgin Atlantic Airways. Hoping to go where no venture capitalist has gone before, Branson planned to send private citizens into the void as early as 2009.

Salim promptly called Virgin Galactic's offices and, with the help of her family, became one of the first 100 people to purchase a $200,000 ticket, securing her spot alongside such luminaries as actress Victoria Principal and theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking in the top-tier "Founder" category of Virgin Galactic leisurenauts. She also assured herself of becoming the first Pakistani woman to leave the earth's atmosphere.

Salim will take off from the Mojave Spaceport in the Mojave Desert in the prosaically named SpaceShipTwo (SS2), currently being built by aerospace guru Burt Rutan, who also designed Space- ShipOne, the world's first privately developed and manned reusable spacecraft. (SS1, which first went up in 2004, is now docked in the Smithsonian.) The ascent will be brisk. At an altitude of 50,000 feet, SS2 will separate from its mother ship, ignite its hybrid rocket, and climb to 360,000 feet in 90 seconds — roughly three times the speed of sound. Visibility through the ship's large windows will be 1000 miles, meaning that a flight over New York would afford a view of Florida. During the twoand- a-half-hour journey inside SS2's roomy cabin, Salim will experience four minutes of the pièce de resistance of space travel: free fall. Four minutes to float and do astronaut somersaults might seem painfully brief at such prices, but the whole trip will last a small eternity by the standards of suborbital flight. The entire 1961 voyage of Alan Shepard, the first American in

space, took just 16 minutes.

Not everyone is fit for the pressure, physical or mental, of suborbital flight, and Salim's ability to tolerate and adapt to increasing gravitational forces was at the heart of her training regimen last fall. Ensconced in the STS-400 Simulator, a 25-foot arm centrifuge housed at the NASTAR Center in Philadelphia, Salim withstood the same g-forces as Alan Shepard himself.

"If you go to the Hall of Fame at the Kennedy Space Center in Florida, the first thing you see is Alan Shepard's life-size bronze bust," said Salim, noting that you don't have to go to the moon, or even into orbit, to earn your wings in space. "It's not Neil Armstrong at the entrance. It's Shepard."

As a teenager in the 1980s, Salim would stay up all night peering at the sky through her telescope. Back then, the surest way to make it to outer space was in a NASA flight suit; for a young Pakistani girl, a distant dream indeed. Now, thanks to technology and entrepreneurship, a trip to space requires not the right passport, but the right gold card. Salim believes that today's $200,000 ticket holders are paving the way for affordable space travel, just as the wealthy airline passengers of the 1920s facilitated the cheap commercial flights of the future. "It's an investment," she said. "The birth of the private space-travel industry has already taken place, and sooner or later it will be available for the common man."

Salim makes no apologies for her own uncommonness, having always used her advantages to promote a utopian global vision. Aside from being an Arctic explorer and artist (her bejeweled creations, inspired by European decorative art, have been exhibited at humanitarian summits of the UN and UNESCO), she's the founding president of the International Association of Students in Economics and Business Management, a student-run nonprofit that promotes peace and cooperation through corporate and cultural exchange programs. It's a far-flung resumé that promises to become even more expansive.

But as much as Salim relishes the role of pioneer, she would not be the first woman who attended Columbia to make aeronautic history.

In 1919, an adventurous young Kansan came to the University to study for pre-med. She quit after a year, and then returned in 1924, only to drop out again. In 1928, she became the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, though she didn't pilot the plane.

“Maybe someday I’ll try it alone,” she said. Four years later, Amelia Earhart did just that.

Of course, Namira Salim doesn’t see herself as an aviator — or even as an adventurer. “Perhaps I’m a risk taker,” she said, then reconsidered. “Actually, I think I’m more of a dreamer.”

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