

QATAR— A NATION ON THE WING



Business-class cabin



First- and business-class meal service



Qatar Airways and Doha International Airport are setting their sights high, with CEO Akbar Al Baker at the helm. Alex Féthière reports

Plucky enthusiasm soars to new heights in the forecasts of Akbar Al Baker, CEO of Qatar Airways: it's impossible for him to talk about the airline without promoting the capital's Doha International Airport and the country at large. Though the national airline is symbolic, its progress is anything but. "The real history has been made by my airline, by growing at this rate of over 35 percent, year on year for the last ten years. I don't think any airline in the history of aviation since the Kitty Hawk flight has been able to achieve this."

Having landed its maiden flight to North America at Newark Liberty airport in June, Qatar Airways promises to continue raising the bar for service, luxury and security while expanding its route umbrella at breakneck speed. The inaugurated route travels from Doha to Newark via Geneva. July brought the opening of a direct route to Washington D.C., in a year that is seeing nine new routes added.

Industry firsts are as important to Qatar Airways as being first. In addition to the customary CDs, movies, TV programs and videogames available in first and business class, all passengers may enjoy live international satellite television beamed to

every plane, a first that Qatar Airways implemented in 2006. Depending on region, available channels include Al Jazeera, BBC World and CNN International.

The human resources of the airline, too, boost its prestige. Skytrax awarded Qatar Airways a Five Star ranking for service and excellence (shared with only four other airlines worldwide), and named the airline's cabin crew as the Best in the Middle East for four consecutive years as of 2006. And the planes shine almost as brightly as the crew: "The average age of our aircraft is under three years. I'm sure this will be the envy of Delta, United, and the rest of the airlines in this country—but don't forget that they are also our partners," says Al Baker.

Al Baker is quick to balm such a challenge by declaring a codeshare partnership application with United, announced just after the Newark landing and approved in late July by U.S. Department of Transportation regulators. Fifty destinations in the U.S. have been opened to Qatar Airways through this collaboration.

Also sensitive to airline industry concerns, he underscores the balance of planes in Qatar Airways' fleet: "As Americans, you should not be disappointed knowing that we are an all-Airbus operator. We have placed a large order

for Boeing aircraft, and we intend to do so in the future again." He adds, "We will be receiving 777s on average of one aircraft a month during the next year." These will help the airline open more U.S. destinations. At the time of this writing, Al Baker spoke of 22 firm orders with Boeing and 18 options.

In such a spirit of fostering mutually beneficial good relations on all sides, Qatar Airways has codeshare agreements with several airlines, including Lufthansa, Asiana and bmi. The cooperative spirit doesn't temper Qatar's competitive edge, and with good reason. "I had a very clear mandate from his Highness the Emir [Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani]. He wanted to have a world-class airline that will be the envy of many." This driving loyalty has made Al Baker look for ways beyond luxury, service and routes to distinguish the airline.

Research and development between Qatar Gas and Shell has interested Qatar Airways in GTL (gas-to-liquid natural gas) flight. "We will be the first airline to fly across the Atlantic powered by GTL, and I will make sure that people have confidence in that because I will be on the first aircraft," says Al Baker, hastening to point out the interlocking interests; Qatar has the world's second-largest reserves of natural gas. Nor is this fuel talk all hot air, for Al Baker

reports that he'll be on that first trans-Atlantic flight by the end of 2008.

AKBAR AL BAKER CEO, Qatar Airways

Qatar Airways CEO Akbar Al Baker cuts the profile of a man who prizes education and cosmopolitanism, seasoned with dry wit. While boasting of the five-star hotel facilities at the Premium Terminal of Doha's International Airport, he quips, "There are some businessmen who have become very cheeky, checking out early from their hotel and then coming and staying free of charge in our terminal."

But of course, he had everything to do with the terminal, too. In fact, Al Baker appears to have been instrumental in the development of many elements of today's Qatar. A travel industry polymath, Al Baker is CEO of several divisions of the state airline (Qatar Airways Holidays, Qatar Aviation Services, Qatar Duty Free Company, Doha International Airport, Qatar Distribution Company and Qatar Aircraft Catering Company), and he also understands flight from the cockpit as a licensed pilot. A graduate in Economics and Commerce, he held diverse positions in the Civil Aviation Directorate prior to his appoint-

ment as the CEO of Qatar Airways in 1997. With all that under his belt, one realizes that when talking about Qatar, he's actually speaking of himself and his life. Because of the country's prosperity and promise, his elaboration of its many projects rings with the confidence of someone in a surefire job interview. Rather than talking about his own education, he speaks of the one available today in Qatar—which is an international product. "Qatar is establishing itself as the most



First-class dining area, Premium Terminal, Doha

modern, and most progressive education city in the whole region,” Al Baker says. He goes on to list some of the U.S. universities open in Qatar; among them are Cornell Medical College, Georgetown and Texas A&M.

This U.S.-Qatar cooperation extends into the business world. “Americans have invested billions of dollars in my country. So it shows that Qatar really is an oasis of peace,

security, and tranquility,” says Al Baker.

As such, it’s a good time to get acquainted with the country, and to further that, Al Baker has donned the tourism hat. As chair of Qatar Tourism Authority, Al Baker has been instrumental in raising the visibility of Qatar as a tourist destination. Numbers are up, and a number of multi-billion dollar projects are underway in Doha, including five-star hotels, prestigious resorts, and international sports facilities.

Al Baker also is steering the development of the New Doha International Airport, which opens in phases from 2009. ■

HIGH DESIGN—DOHA’S NEW INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

A veritable mini-city of design and engineering wonders, Doha’s new airport breaks a lot of records: largest span (space between supporting columns, here equal to almost 394 feet) of any building, world’s longest runway (15,500 feet), largest aircraft hangar without columns ever built—able to house 13 aircraft at any one time, including two A380s and three A340s. The first phase will open in 2009, and when it is completed in 2015, it looks set to be the pride of all involved.

The airport’s CEO, Akbar Al Baker, notes that St. Louis-based architecture heavyweight HOK designed the airport. Quite casually, he adds that engineering behemoth Bechtel is the project manager—familiar partners in the region, with another joint project in Saudi Arabia’s King Khaled International Airport near Riyadh. Bechtel also takes credit for King Fahd International Airport near Qatif, Saudi Arabia.

Such powerhouses are needed, given the scale of the project. When completed in 2015, the airport will have a capacity of 50 million passengers annually. Eighty contact gates, six of which will serve A380s, will open on 269,098 square feet of retail space, lounges, and multi-story short-term and long-term parking facilities. Its total footprint will be a whopping 4,477,787 square feet.

The first phase will accomplish a fraction of this, but build steadily. Starting passenger volume will be 12 million a year, and 24 contact gates will span from the aforementioned retail space, lounges and parking. As with the rest of the terminal, natural sunlight and water features will figure prominently in the design. A mosque and prayer rooms will be incorporated harmoniously into the whole.

Doha International’s \$90-million Premium Terminal opened in late 2006, and will be retained for the new airport when the transitional airport is retired. It offers facilities such as dedicated check-in for first- and business-class passengers, a spa, saunas (separate facilities for men and women), massage chairs with entertainment systems, squash courts, Jacuzzi, duty-free shopping, business center, fine dining restaurants and a cocktail bar. This terminal has another superlative feature, says Al Baker, in that its Jacuzzi is larger than that of any hotel Jacuzzi in the region. Furthermore, a two-hour spa treatment is included for Premium Terminal visitors: “When you travel Qatar Airways, make it a point to go early to the terminal to enjoy the facilities,” Al Baker says. He is also referring to the food, which is complimentary for travelers in that terminal. Families with toddlers will be happy to know that a nursery with full kitchens is at their disposal.

An interesting feature of this terminal is a sort of 21st-century printing press, which Al Baker describes thus: “International newspapers and magazines are printed in the terminal via satellite, so you can get a newspaper of your liking, in any language in the world, printed fresh for you.” Business travelers may also take advantage of free secretarial service and conferencing facilities, and reserve individual meeting rooms for privacy. Internet access is free all over the terminal.

Al Baker feels that the spotlight is on Qatar to take advantage of its resources, progressiveness and location to lead the region. At times, he waxes symbolic about it: “We are situated right in the center of the Arabian Gulf. We are really the heart of the peninsula. Coincidentally, the shape of my country also is the shape of a heart.”

