



A Taleban fighter looks at an aquarium at the Kabul Zoo.



A boy poses for a picture with the rifle of a Taleban fighter near the camel enclosure at the Kabul zoo.



A Taleban fighter touches a deer in its enclosure.— AFP photos

GUN-TOTING TALEBAN MINGLE WITH FAMILIES AND KIDS AT KABUL ZOO

Taleban soldiers cradling AK-47s and M16 assault rifles mingle among families at Kabul Zoo, a novelty experience for many of the young fighters from rural Afghanistan. As visitors set up picnic spots in the shaded grounds, enjoying ice creams and salted pomegranate seeds, heavily armed Taleban gunmen peer into the enclosures housing lions, leopards, camels, wolves, ostriches and macaques. After years of fighting in the countryside, the capture of the capital was the first time many had entered a large city, let alone a zoo. They take selfies and pose for group photos, but the relative tranquility is upended suddenly when one fighter grabs a deer by its antlers and his friends roar with laughter.

Posing with rifles

After Friday prayers, scores of armed Taleban fighters turn out — and many more are without weapons-wearing traditional hats, turbans and shawls. Some sported the eye makeup popular among Afghan men. One Taleban member, 40-year-old Abdul Qadir, who now works for the interior ministry, said he was sight-seeing with a group of male friends. “I really like the animals, especially those which can be found in our country,” he says. “I like lions very much.” Asked about the armed presence-unheard of in other zoos around the world—he says the Taleban were in favor of barring guns from the venue so that “children or women should not feel scared”.



People enjoy their visit at the Kabul Zoo.

The zoo was long a haven for women, children and young lovers in a capital that has little public space for anyone but men. A unit of six armed men from the Taleban’s intelligence directorate-wearing full military fatigues, combat webbing bursting with ammunition and steel handcuffs, peaked caps and knee pads-huddle for a team picture with a turbaned mullah. The designated photographer coordinates the shot, which is closely examined by the group afterwards. A thumbs-up from one of the fighters, with a Taleban flag poking out of his magazine pouch, shows their approval. Later, a dif-

ferent group of gunmen offer their rifles to boys as young as eight, who take snaps with their mobile phones.

‘No Guns in the Zoo’

The showpiece is a lion, named simply “White Lion”, which sleeps on a deck in its enclosure, measuring about 20 meters by 30 meters. The zoo’s most-treasured occupant was Marjan, a male lion who was a symbol of Afghan survival living through coups, invasions, civil war and the Taleban’s first rule, until he died in 2002. A bronze statue of the big cat, once injured by a grenade attack, greets visi-



A member of the Taleban poses for a picture in front of aquariums at the Kabul Zoo.

tors on their way in, while a plaque on its grave reads: “Here lies Marjan, who was about 23. He was the most famous lion in the world.” Another popular attraction is the aquarium and reptile house, where women in niqabs, burqas and hijabs shepherd young girls and boys around the tanks. A python is coiled up in a large glass enclosure as goldfish, catfish and turtles swim around in tanks lining the walls.

Samir, who is in Kabul waiting to return to London where he lives, is at the zoo with his young son and nephew. He says they have been having “a very hard

time” since the Taleban stormed to power in mid-August. “We didn’t expect (the Taleban) to come so quickly. It’s quite peaceful in Kabul, but the thing is, the way they are, people don’t feel safe.” Nestled between steep hills and next to the Kabul River, entry to the zoo costs 40 cents for Afghans, although some Taleban soldiers walk in without paying, flagrantly disregarding the sign saying “No Guns in the Zoo”. — AFP

Russian actress says ‘too late’ to fear ISS launch

Russian actress Yulia Peresild said Thursday it was “too late” to fear ahead of her launch into space, as Moscow races against Hollywood to film the first movie in orbit. Russia’s space agency Roscosmos is dispatching the 36-year-old screen star next month to the International Space Station (ISS) along with director Klim Shipenko, 38, in the race against time to beat a parallel US project. “If you’re afraid of wolves, you

shouldn’t go into the forest. It’s too late to be afraid,” Peresild told journalists during an online press conference. The 12-day mission was announced in September last year, four months after a Hollywood project involving actor Tom Cruise was unveiled. The Russian mission will begin on October 5. Shipenko said the movie would be a “dramatic film” about a doctor who goes to the ISS to save a cosmonaut’s life. Mission commander Anton Shkaplerov, as well as cosmonauts Oleg Novitsky and Pyotr Dubrov who are currently on board the station, will also appear in the film, he added.

Peresild said of the intensive training that the crew was undergoing, she had particularly enjoyed experiencing weightlessness. “It was so great for us. We real-

ly enjoyed it. I only regret that we just got to do zero gravity once,” she said.

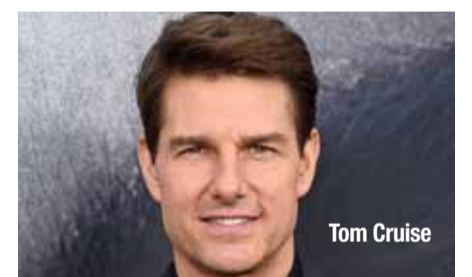
Peresild said she had difficulty putting together a make-up kit for the trip with no glass and only specific plastics allowed on board. “The saleswoman didn’t understand what I was looking for. So, I explained: ‘I’m putting together a cosmetics bag for space,’” she said laughing. Shipenko said he was looking forward to experiencing ISS food, with a menu that includes dishes from the Caucasus region and traditional beetroot soup. The movie project comes despite a series of incidents on board Russia’s segment of the ISS, including smoke and burning smells this month, that has spurred safety concerns over conditions. — AFP

SpaceX tourists talk to Tom Cruise from orbit, provide update on flight

Four space tourists orbiting the Earth in a SpaceX capsule at 17,500 miles per hour (28,162 kph) talked to movie star Tom Cruise on Friday and provided a live update about life aboard the spacecraft. The first space tourism mission by Elon Musk’s SpaceX blasted off from Florida on Wednesday for a three-day voyage that is to end with a splash-down in the Atlantic Ocean at 4:06 pm Pacific time (2306 GMT) on Saturday. Mission control said the crew members-Jared Isaacman, Sian Proctor, Hayley Arceneaux and Chris Sembroski-spoke with Cruise, who is hoping to make a film in space, from the vessel on Friday.

“Rook, Nova, Hanks, and Leo spoke to @TomCruise sharing their experience from space,” said the Twitter account of Inspiration4, the official name of the first ever space mission to take place without an actual astronaut. The names are the call signs of the four passengers aboard SpaceX’s Dragon capsule. “Maverick, you can be our wingman anytime,” the tweet added, accompanied by a video clip of Cruise playing the elite fighter pilot whose call sign was Maverick in the movie “Top Gun.” Last year, former NASA administrator Jim Bridenstine announced a film project starring Cruise to be shot in zero gravity on board the International

Space Station. However, no details have yet been delivered about the project, which would be done in collaboration with SpaceX.



Tom Cruise

The four crew members shared their experiences in space during a 10-minute live webcast with mission control on Friday. Proctor, 51, who teaches geosciences at a college in Arizona and was a finalist to become a NASA astronaut, displayed a picture she drew with metallic markers of the Dragon capsule being propelled into space by a dragon. Arceneaux, a 29-year-old physician assistant at St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital in Memphis, Tennessee, demonstrated her impressive spins in zero gravity. “Hayley is a champ at spinning,” Proctor said. “She has been spinning from the moment we got on orbit.”

“It’s a lot of fun and allows us to lift very heavy things without any issue,” said Arceneaux. “We’ve also been taking several swabs of different parts of our body to evaluate the microbiome and how that changes in these three days in space,” she added. And “we have been spending so much time in this cupola,” she observed. Sembroski, a 42-year-old US Air Force veteran, pulled out his ukulele and played a few chords. — AFP



In this file photo actress Yulia Peresild, member of the International Space Station (ISS) expedition 66, attends the complex examination training at the Gagarin Cosmonauts Training Centre in Star City outside Moscow.



In this file photo (From left) Members of the International Space Station (ISS) expedition 66, Russian cosmonaut Anton Shkaplerov, director Klim Shipenko and actress Yulia Peresild, attend the complex examination training at the Gagarin Cosmonauts Training Centre in Star City outside Moscow. — AFP photos

Netflix finally eyes TV’s top prize with ‘The Crown’ at in-person Emmys

Netflix is tipped to finally win television’s biggest prize today as its critically adored British royals drama “The Crown” battles “Star Wars” series “The Mandalorian” at an Emmys ceremony held in front of a scaled-back live audience. Despite turning the entire TV landscape upside-down since its groundbreaking online platform launched in 2007, leading streamer Netflix has never won for best

drama at the small-screen version of the Oscars-nor best comedy, nor best limited series. “The Crown” does feel like it finally has come to the moment where it’s going to have its moment,” Variety awards editor Clayton Davis told AFP. “It’s going to be the first big series win for Netflix.”

As well as “The Crown”—which in its fourth series depicts the ill-fated marriage of Prince Charles and Princess Diana—the streaming giant is banking on the wildly popular “The Queen’s Gambit.” Starring Anya Taylor-Joy as a gifted but troubled chess prodigy, that show sent chessboard sales skyrocketing worldwide, and is the favorite to win top honors in the fiercely competitive limited series section-for shows ending after one season.

Add in nominations for wide-ranging offerings from Regency romp “Bridgerton” to nature documentary “David Attenborough: A Life on our Planet”—plus 34

Emmys won in technical categories announced ahead of Sunday’s gala-and Netflix could be eyeing an all-time record haul. “What we’re seeing is Netflix finally breaking through. They’ve always done well with the nominations, but never the final tally,” said Deadline columnist Pete Hammond. “This is a turning point for them,” he told AFP. If anyone can ruin the party, it will likely be Disney+, the new kid on the TV streaming block in just its second year, bringing beloved big-screen characters from “Star Wars” and Marvel films to the Emmys party.

Baby Yoda and a digitally de-aged Luke Skywalker helped “The Mandalorian” jointly top the overall nominations count alongside rival drama “The Crown.” The other outside bet for best drama is “Pose”—Billy Porter’s LGBTQ-focused show exploring New York’s 1980s underground ballroom culture has mounted a dazzling Emmys campaign

for its final season. In limited series competition, quirky sitcom-inspired Marvel superhero show “WandaVision” has exceeded all critical expectations. The category also features Kate Winslet’s small-town detective drama “Mare of Easttown,” and British break-out series “I May Destroy You,” which examines the aftermath of a rape-both from traditional Emmys juggernaut HBO.

‘Fun, ritzy party’

Last year’s ceremony-held before coronavirus vaccines were available-was an entirely virtual affair, with comedian Jimmy Kimmel standing in a deserted downtown Los Angeles auditorium as winners beamed in via video. This time, comedian Cedric the Entertainer takes on hosting duties, with a strict guest list of 500-odd nominees gathering in the venue’s outdoor section, under strict pandemic precautions including proof of inoculation.

“Making that level of celebrities ill is not on our agenda,” Emmys producer Ian Stewart told Variety, nonetheless promising a “fun, ritzy party” for those who clear security. With the Delta variant still raging and international travel complicated, some overseas contenders including the cast of “The Crown” are expected to dial in from a London satellite hub. The strategy echoes the approach adopted last year by the cast of “Schitt’s Creek,” who swept every comedy acting prize at the start of the Emmys ceremony as they beamed in from their base in Toronto. This year, Apple TV+ phenomenon “Ted Lasso” is the comedy frontrunner, including and Jason Sudeikis is a favorite for best actor for his work as an out-of-his-depth American football coach handed control of an English soccer team.—AFP