

ACTIVE SPORTS REPORTS

Cool Kashmir: skiing Gulmarg, India

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Gulmarg, India

India's sport revolution

With high-profile sporting events and a new luxury ski resort in the works, India is being cited as a destination to watch in the sports industry.

As New Delhi prepares to host **India's first ever Grand Prix** in 2009, followed by the Commonwealth Games in 2010, India's sporting profile is about to be raised to new heights. Snowsports are no exception, with Gulmarg and other resorts leading the way.



Alfred Ford - great-grandson of legendary industrialist Henry Ford - is planning **India's first five-star luxury ski resort**.

It has already been suggested that the **Himalayan Ski Village might be large enough to host a Winter Olympics**, and this ambition may well be in India's sights, given that Indian Olympic Association president Suresh Kalmadi has already announced his intention to start work on the bid for the 2020 Summer Olympics.

Gulmarg's monkeys and machine guns

A group of snowboarders queue for the ski lift, their brightly coloured high-spec jackets a stark contrast to the bleached pastel shawls worn by the local Kashmiris.

A pair of armed soldiers, rifles slung over their backs, keep a close watch on the proceedings - as do the wild monkeys that also inhabit this area.

A region long troubled by bombings, bullets and beheadings, Kashmir is now on track for a ski explosion as word of Gulmarg, India's biggest and best ski area, reaches the global skiing fraternity.

Facts



- New Delhi will host **India's first Grand Prix** in 2009, and the Commonwealth Games in 2010
- India's **first five-star luxury ski resort** - the Himalayan Ski Village - will be built in 2010
- Gulmarg boasts the **highest gondola lift in the world**, at 3,980m above sea level
- The Kashmir government expects **tourist traffic to rise** exponentially over the next five years as word of the Himalayan powder paradise spreads
- Gulmarg hosted the Indian National Winter Games in February 2008.

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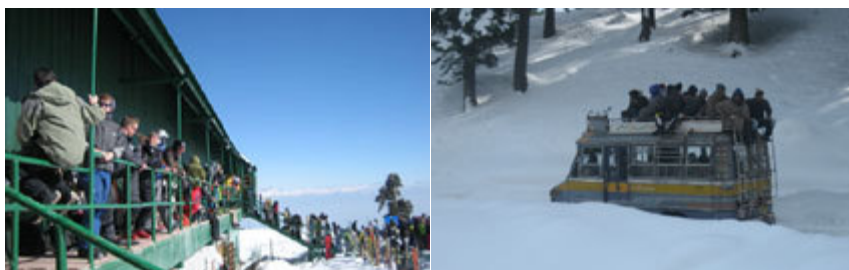
Gulmarg attracted skiers' attention when, in May 2005, work was completed on **the town's gondola lift - the highest in the world, at 3,980m above sea level.**

Gondola over troubled snow

The British FCO currently advises against "all travel to or through rural areas of Jammu and Kashmir" - which includes Gulmarg. However, the Kashmir Valley has seen a significant decline in violent activity over the last five years, and Western governments' warnings are doing little to dissuade keen skiers and snowboarders from visiting **Gulmarg's powder-laden slopes.**

Gulmarg's recent surge in popularity can be largely attributed to the Australian entrepreneur Peter Robinson, who founded the company Ski Himalaya in 2005 after identifying Gulmarg's massive potential as a ski resort.

Ski Himalaya deals directly with local hotels, guides and drivers, making the process of travelling to and skiing in Gulmarg attractively simple for foreigners, while and at the same time **empowering Kashmiris** (rather than Westerners) to play host to tourists.



In the first year of the gondola's operation (2005) about 100 guests made the journey to Gulmarg; the following year 500 arrived. The numbers are now double that and, if the volume of new hotels under construction is any indication of the future, **it seems the Jammu and Kashmir government expects tourist traffic to rise exponentially over the next five years** as word of this Himalayan powder paradise spreads.

The Kashmir clientele

Adventurous Americans, Australians, Russians and Europeans make up the bulk of visitors. A handful of local Kashmiris can also be seen on the slopes, though most work as guides rather than skiing for recreation.

Gulmarg is also attracting more domestic tourists, though few are here to ski. After arriving in a Tata Sumo (India's answer to the Land Rover), the majority settle for a sledge ride, a few photos and the novelty of experiencing snow for the first time.



However, **as India grows richer and increasing middle-class wealth permits greater leisure time** it's likely that Indians will develop a thirst for skiing, and the country will undergo a ski boom, as with Japan in the 80s, and China now.

High-tech gear

Right now Gulmarg's biggest draw is the volume of powder - and the absence of others you have to share it with. On a busy day **you might see just 200 people on the mountain. In a ski area of Gulmarg's size that translates as almost empty slopes.**

Only a small portion of the terrain is patrolled, and **avalanches are a serious risk**. Most skiers here are advanced - carrying transceivers, shovels and probes, and using local guides to navigate the mountains. Avalanche safety sessions are held regularly throughout the season.



New ski and snowboard hardware is hard to come by. The Kashmir Alpine Shop, owned by Yassin Khan, hires out ski and snowboard gear, most of which has been donated by Western skiers passing through.

As yet **no major ski brands have braved setting up in Kashmir**, but with the influx of foreigners it's **only a matter of time before they smell a profitable market.**

However, other western brands have penetrated the region - local shops sell Coca-Cola, Nestlé chocolate, Fuji film, Vaseline and Nescafé coffee alongside locally made pashminas and carpets.

The future of Gulmarg: turning powder into profit

Gulmarg hosted the February 2008 **Indian National Winter Games**. Participants in the five-day event included teams from the country's armed forces, which have played a pivotal role in advancing skiing in India. The disciplines tested were Alpine skiing, cross-country skiing, ice-

skating, ice hockey, snowboarding and biathlon.

The event was also **a chance for India to review the abilities of its athletes in preparation for the next Winter Olympic Games**, to be held in Vancouver, Canada in 2010.



In an area that has seen very few foreign visitors over the last decade, the return of tourists is a welcome boost to the local economy. There are **plans to begin construction of a new chairlift in the summer of 2008** as part of ongoing expansions to the ski area.

For some Western skiers the strong military presence is part of Gulmarg's allure - a little slice of visible danger that adds to the thrill of their holiday.

Gulmarg has the snowfall and terrain to rival world-class ski resorts like Whistler or Chamonix. As long as it can keep the peace it could become an internationally renowned ski resort, with **the power to transform one of India's poorest regions into a cool cash cow**.

WGSN comment:

India has secured a **key place on the forthcoming sports calendar**, with events such as the Grand Prix in 2009 plus, in 2010, the Commonwealth Games and the completion of India's first five-star ski resort.

Interest in **Gulmarg has been simmering for a while but it is now that we see the real changes emerging**. Snowsports enthusiasts are drawn to this destination for the thrill of the deep snowfall and the adventure of testing new ground. For others, India's **rich culture** is what sets Gulmarg above other leading snowsports resorts. For snowsports brands looking for a new place to market themselves, **India is waiting**. It will be interesting to see who gets there first.

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