

## FREEZE FRAME

Gulmarg is thriving all of a sudden. But it could go downhill just as fast, reports **Rebecca Byerly**

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On a March afternoon, the scenic town of Gulmarg is overrun by tourists armed with snowboards and skis. “Take off your board and run,” shouts one among a group of adventurers. Yanik Turgeon, known as the ‘Pink Panther’ to his familiars, boards from Phase II down Mount Apharwat at 4,124m and sprints to the finish line in a hot pink jumpsuit. It gets him a prize for being best dressed in the first annual Gulmarg Global Derby, a downhill ski and snowboard race. “This race will become an annual event,” says Muddasir Mir, the organizer of the race and owner of the Pine Palace Heritage Hotel, with a hint of a New York accent. “We want the world to see that Gulmarg is a safe place for boarders and skiers.”

There is no doubt that this little town, 52km from Srinagar, has the potential to become the world’s next adventure ski destination. Winter tourist numbers have tripled in the past three years from just a few hundred to nearly 1,000 this season and are projected to double in 2009. “The number of season tickets sold for Phase II increased by 220 per cent this year,” says avalanche safety expert Brian Newman. “And it’s only going to go up as more people hear about Gulmarg.”

In addition to tourists, the town also buzzes with foreign investors eager to introduce heli-skiing, build hotels, and market the world’s highest lift-accessible ski terrain. “The riding here is too good to be kept a secret,” says Dave Watson, an American skier who was hired by the private outfit, Ski Himalaya, to create a training program for Kashmiri ski and snowboard guides. “Compared to last year this place has already taken off and next season we will probably host twice the number of tourists we had this year.”

Yet while tourism is bringing money and jobs to the region, there is concern that development is not occurring at a sustainable pace. Some visitors question how the ecosystem in an area with an already inadequate infrastructure will survive— even today Gulmarg lacks adequate running water and proper sanitation. The state government’s plans for building are still unclear, and seem to vary depending on which government or tourism department official you speak to. And as the number of tourists visiting Gulmarg increases, the infrastructure is further strained.

Skiers talk of the best powder runs of their lives followed by an unpleasant ski through the municipal dump, now part of the ski terrain. A stroll between hotels reveals piles of discarded waste, delicacies for the local monkeys. The garbage collected in the winter months is often dumped in the woods by trash collectors or pitched into the local stream by hotel staff. The High Court’s ban on polythene bags is not observed. Without the winter’s snow cover, Gulmarg’s summer tourists are greeted by piles of plastics consisting of grocery and chips bags and discarded water bottles.

Tourism consultant Carin Jodha gave the state’s tourism department his recommendations for eco-friendly development. The plan involved implementing a waste-management system like the one used in Kovalam. The idea was to train hotel staff to segregate, compost, and dispose of

trash properly. A similar system could be used in Gulmarg and would provide additional employment for the locals, but nothing seems to have been done about it so far. "Outsourcing the sanitation system to local and international NGOs has been considered but presently no decisions have been made," says Farooq Lone, chief executive officer of the Gulmarg Development Authority.

Another important step, according to Lone, would be the implementation of the ban on the use of polythene bags. However, rather than immediately implementing an eco-friendly waste management model, the tourism authorities are contemplating building a landfill outside the forest area on the outskirts of Gulmarg.

Water is another chronic problem in Gulmarg. Since water often freezes in the pipes, most hotels leave water running in winter. "If you leave water running 24 hours a day for 45 days at a time it is inevitable that it will run out," says Mir. "It is not a question of water scarcity, it is how water is managed. All hotel owners—government and private—should insulate the pipes."

The Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Department, however, has grand development plans for Gulmarg. According to those plans, the existing 800 hotel rooms in Gulmarg will double in the next few years—more hotels have been sanctioned, and a state-of-the-art golf course with six manmade lakes is in the offing.

The ecological damage being done to Gulmarg is just one side of the coin. The other is the inconveniences faced by Gulmarg's tourists—from water and electricity shortages, non-functional ski lifts and bad roads. "The system in Gulmarg is highly erratic," says Alexander Yurtsev, a Russian tour operator. "A number of people who come here never get to ski down Phase II. To come here and not experience skiing down one of the highest lift-accessible terrains in the world because the lift is not working leaves a terrible impression." He estimates that only 10 per cent of his clients will return. "The workers who run the lift under the Department of Tourism do not care if the lift operates since they get paid regardless," adds Mohammed Yaseen Khan of the Kashmir Alpine Ski Shop, one of Gulmarg's first skiing outfits. "The lift should be run by a private organization."

Travelling on the roads in winter is also a problem. "We came all the way from Hungary and waited for four hours to travel just a few kilometers from Tangmarg to Gulmarg," says Norbert, a Hungarian skier. The roads are rarely cleared and there are very few cars with four-wheel drives and snow chains.

It is a frustrating situation. The tourism department will say that they understand there is a problem and will explain their plans for action, which include introducing battery-operated cars this summer for tourist transport, installing solar street lights in the park and building a model 'green cottage'. All of these sound promising but the fact is that it's imperative for the government to come up with a comprehensive management plan for Gulmarg. The basic issues of water, electricity and sanitation need to be addressed first. Otherwise, there is a very serious risk that Gulmarg, which could usher in the revival of tourism in Jammu & Kashmir, and perhaps become one of the world's best ski resorts, will go downhill even before it attempts to take off.

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