

WINTER BREAK

LEAP OF FAITH

Two novice skiers try to find their feet amid Gulmarg's snow-whipped slopes

TEXT & PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI

We stood atop a gentle beginners' slope, watching some colourful ski gods schussing down distant trails, curling and uncurling their bodies with ease. Plagued by doubt, we balanced ourselves on unwieldy skis clipped onto large ski boots weighing two kilos each, a pole in each gloved hand,

For rookie skiers like the authors, even adventures on Gulmarg's benign bunny slopes come with a share of trips and tumbles.

and dithered.

But then we remembered how lucky we were to be here: in Gulmarg, Jammu and Kashmir, at the country's premier ski resort in a high, forested valley at the base of Mt. Apharwat looming at 14,403 feet. We had long dreamt about revelling in the cold caress



Riding a ski lift (top) packs a double dose of adrenaline and beauty; Meals at the Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa (middle) and small bites at an open-air café (bottom) at the first station of Gulmarg's gondola are belly-warming affairs.

we lay in a tangled heap from which only our instructor could extricate us.

After a few more runs we called it quits. We had spotted the Gulmarg Gondola, and gliding mid-air looked way more inviting than chugging down inclines like oversized penguins. So up we went, squished with a group of international skiers shouldering heavy skis.

The travellers told us about planning to ski all the way down from Gulmarg to the town of Tangmarg, weaving through pine forests, over snow drifts, and on trackless slopes along with an expert guide. "The virgin runs of deep, curry powder-soft snow in Gulmarg are so exciting," said

of a Himalayan winter, and learning the daunting sport. Gulmarg welcomes both expert skiers and novices (like us) who learn the basics on a few groomed bunny slopes at private and state-run ski schools. So, leaving all caution to the chilly wind, we swooped down the incline, elated at a glimpse of the snow-whipped Pir Panjal range which rings Gulmarg like a forbidding army of stone. Evergreen trees rose around us like protective totem poles.

It might take a while to learn skiing, but it sure teaches you how to laugh at yourself. Our first attempts were undignified tumbles beside five-year-olds on wee skis, stopping by to offer help. Mortified and embarrassed, we'd decline. Those nimble-kneed little ones would then bend down, scoop up fistfuls of snow to pop into their mouths, and whiz away!

After a few hours, we got better at donning ski boots, clipping on skis and taking them off, flexing our legs, bending our knees for balance and control, and—finally—skimming down

gentle bunny slopes. By day 4, we had graduated to a relatively steep slope, and whooshed down with relative ease. Our handsome instructor, whose eyes crinkled in the winter sun, shouted at us to look ahead and not down while we trained. This is fun, we thought, as snow sprayed around like white confetti. And then—crash! We had forgotten how to slow down by wedging our skis in a triangular pizza slice stance. After a blurry sequence of events,



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one of them. Their faces were alight with a sense of adventure, undeterred by the icy calm of the Himalayas, where you can ski from over 14,000 feet down to 8,694 feet. These are some of the highest ski runs in the world. Nearly eight feet of snow accumulates here in January and February, making Gulmarg a skier's dream run.

Back on the ground, we began chatting with a fellow skier who had picked up skiing at the age of 39, and couldn't stop. Delhi-based pilot Capt. Amit Kapoor has flirted with slopes across the world, including New Zealand, Australia, and Argentina, but feels that few places knit together the gorgeous tapestry that Gulmarg offers. The backdrop of the mighty Himalayas and dense evergreen forests cast a spell, while the powder-like snow is catnip for expert skiers. Plus, Gulmarg has a two-stage gondola that soars pretty high, uncongested slopes, and opportunities for

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the freeriding style of skiing on ungroomed, natural terrain. "Skiing in the Himalayas, in and around Gulmarg, is on the bucket list of most skiers for a reason," he smiled.

Come January, and the skiers of Gulmarg resemble airborne ballerinas in neon gear. Billa Majeed Bakshi, founder of Kashmir Heliski, regularly ferries skiers 15,000 feet up amid the Himalayas in his choppers. Heli skiing deposits skiers on peaks to allow them to glide down the snow fields. Bakshi revealed that with an expansive area of high rumpled ridges and remote mountains, skiers do not have to repeat a single run in Gulmarg. Gulmarg differs from swish

ski resorts in the West in that it does not have an après-ski scene with gala parties after a day of careening down the slopes. So we too retreated to the serene Khyber Himalayan Resort and Spa and sat by a crackling fireplace, sipping *kahwa*. Beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows of the tea lounge, a shiny moon rose, and the snow-shawled mountains glimmered like stranded spaceships. ■



Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa's swimming pool (top) serves up a spectacular view of peaks and pines; A skier eyes her next conquest (bottom).

The Essentials

GETTING THERE

Gulmarg is located 56 km north of Srinagar which has the nearest airport. It is well connected to major cities like Mumbai and Delhi. The nearest railhead is Jammu Tawi (305 km). Driving from Jammu to Srinagar (315 km/10 hr) is a popular option, too.

WHEN TO GO

The ski season generally extends from mid-December to March, but the best months are January and February.

WHERE TO STAY

The centrally heated Khyber

Himalayan Resort and Spa is the top of the heap (khyberhotels.com; doubles from ₹16,675).

WHERE TO SKI

The premier Indian Institute of Skiing and Mountaineering offers six 14-day courses for beginners between mid-December and mid-March each year. The all-inclusive programme includes all meals, and the use of facilities and equipment. This year the programme is priced at ₹6,000 per head for those under 25 and ₹13,000 for those 25 and above.



Skiers are drawn to Gulmarg's silver winters for its abundance of fresh powder.