

JOE WYAND, FOUNDER OF HIMALAYAN POWDER DREAMS, RECALLS: "In early March 2005, 3 experienced skiers went for a substantial six-day adventure, posting a signed note - 'off to Sunset Peak for 3-6 days'. The boys caused quite a stir with Gulmarg's army, before Kashmir's press went into overdrive. Moment of the season came when an army helicopter dropped a box of Munch bars from Sunset Peak on Aphrawat, next to snowboarders hiking the ridge. There was a note attached: *Ferretters - please return to your hotel.*"

"India is a place where you can sometimes feel the world is against you, where events seemingly conspire to bring you down. This could be the electricity, the transportation or simply the sheer incompetence of some of the workers. But for every one of these experiences, there is something equally crazy that will make you laugh and smile."

Back in Srinagar, Lafarge and his team made a boudoir on running Lake Dal their base camp, turning small pre-bolled stoves into boot warmers and sun decks into rafter workshops. Then came the long wait for the local heli-skiing outfit to gain authorization to fly. Eventual clearance was again marred by incompetence of mountaintop landings, meaning that the team was limited to using landing pads - and taking long hikes.

THE REWARD was not an anticlimax for Lafarge: "I've skied all over the world but skiing in the Himalayas is different - it is the unknown." Just 10 minutes heli-time from Srinagar, the Himalayas unfold and open their arms - revealing soaring vistas, powder fields as far as the eye can see and immense vertical drops.

"I've seen a lot of mountains but the Himalaya is way bigger and higher than anything else," regaled Baptiste. "It is so impressive and makes you feel small - once you're up there, all you can see around are mountains."

Despite tales of suffering, tears and woe, Lafarge's team found the Kashmiri ski experience to be a unique, even peaceful one. "Skiing in Kashmir is something really special. The evocation of the word Kashmir itself is mystical."

By night, watching the blazing orange sunsets across the still waters of Dal and by



day, bouncing into untouched Himalayan powder, allowed the team to forget the extraordinary situation in which this corner of the Himalaya finds itself. It removed doubts of security and lulled the team into a fragile sense of calm.

Kashmir should and indeed could be a very rich state. Local people are peaceful, agriculture is prolific and the natural beauty of the region has always attracted tourism. The reality of the situation is that a huge amount of Jammu and Kashmir's govern-

ment budget is allocated to the ever-present security force, leaving little room for development. As one of India's poorer states, a small action can result in a disproportionate effect: "when there isn't much there already, it doesn't take much production to make a huge difference".

Skiing, no matter how grass-roots, can help bring crucial positive attention to the state. Whilst the Foreign Office strongly advises against any visits to the area (and I certainly do not



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IS HOME TO SOME OF THE MOST ACCESSIBLE POWDER IN THE HIMALAYAS, WITH CLOSE TO 33 KM2 OF UNTAPPED SNOWFIELDS, 2 GONDOLAS, 2 DRAG LIFTS, 40 HOTELS AND VERY FEW SERIOUS SKIERS.

Thanks to Daniel Lafarge and his team and to www.himalayanpowderdreams.com. Also see www.missiondalnag.com and www.fon.govale.



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HAS NEVER BEEN SYNONYMOUS WITH SKIING. HOWEVER, VISITS BY SKIERS FROM INDIAN AMATEURS TO PROS SUCH AS LAFARGE'S TEAM, HAVE CONFIRMED THE PRODIGIOUS POTENTIAL OF KASHMIRI SKIING.

"If you go to cash-in your family's tickets to Andorra (is favour of Srinagar), the attention that Kashmiri skiing is currently receiving is very beneficial. Things are moving in the right direction. New Delhi, home to Gulmarg's closest international airport, is the host city of the 2010 Commonwealth Games and international hotels are starting to appear in Srinagar. We are now 3 years into a cease-fire, which has at times been destabilized but not dissolved, and long may it last.

India has never been synonymous with skiing. However, visits by skiers from Indian amateurs to pros such as Lafarge's team have confirmed the prodigious potential of Kashmiri skiing. There is a long way to go and Kashmiri, military, security forces and the government must still tread a long path to peace. Indeed, they say that travelling is about the journey rather than the destination. As Baptiste summed it up: "Kashmir was simply unforgettable - both for the skiing and for the trip in itself."



AUTHOR'S NOTE

I had at first intended to write this article as an encouraging message to all adventurous skiers. Visit Kashmir! I want to write. You'll have the time of your lives! It was after many hours of research that I came to the sad conclusion that I simply could not deliver that message. The truth is that Jammu and Kashmir, India's northernmost state, is not yet wholly safe to visit as a tourist. Srinagar, J&K's garden-filled, lakeside mountain-framed capital, is the victim of regular terrorist activity and the recent Mumbai atrocities were a salutary reminder of the region's struggle for independence. Yes, things are safer than they were 10 years ago; many western visitors may have no trouble at all here. Yet, whilst Kashmir may be home to the world's highest gondolas, it is also home to the "world's highest battlefield". I therefore write this as a message of hope, supporting the potential of the region and the anodyne capacity that tourism and skiing in particular, may have upon the development of what was once dubbed "the most dangerous place on earth".