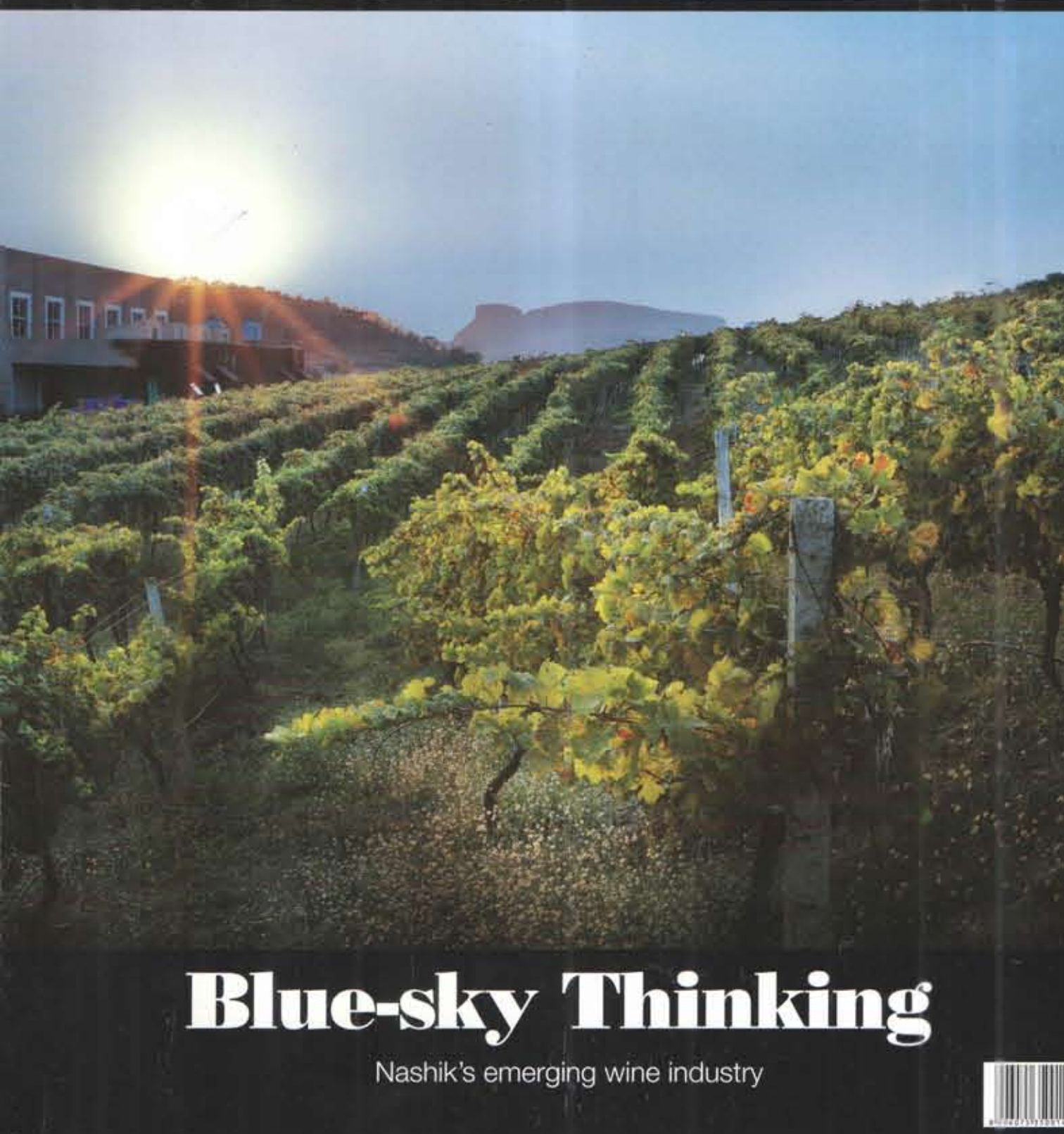


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WEEKEND IN... Gulmarg

Ice Ice Baby

Neha Gupta spends a cosy weekend in Gulmarg, nestled in the lap of the Himalayas

My panoramic view of the forest slopes is a nebulous one. Clouds float just above the coniferous trees that are dusted with snow from the night before. Their branches look dual-coloured, white on the top and green at the bottom. A thickening fog hangs in the air with a nip. Too bad I have to say goodbye to this fairy-tale landscape in all its white splendour as I drive back to Srinagar to catch my flight.

The weekend flew by quicker than I had anticipated. I reached on a Friday afternoon with a prejudice that Gulmarg is a sleepy town in Kashmir with little to do, except for a seasoned skier, which I'm not. The only excitement at the time was the chance of seeing snowfall. My taxi driver, Khalid simply shrugged saying, "If God wills it, you will see snow," as he drove me 56km from Srinagar's airport to an altitude of 8,957-feet.

Gulmarg has been an alternative for seasoned skiers who would rather beat the long queues in the Swiss Alps and enjoy a quiet winter.

after 90-minutes of driving through lonely roads. I feed sugar to tamed horses while Khalid refills his fuel tank.

We're on our way again and within 30-minutes we're in Gulmarg. Fallen snow from last week begin appearing in sparse patches. It gets thicker with each kilometre into town. The air is getting denser and our breaths are visible in condensation.

Khalid starts slowing down for the risk of skidding is high. There is ice on the road that is barely visible enough for two vehicles. On one side, children are tobogganing down eight-feet high snow-mounds that have hardened over the days. They are rented from the locals for a small fee. Pony owners are tempting them too with short rides around the area.

Winter and summer from November to May are

Left: View from Phase II



WEEKEND IN... Gulmarg

"If I took that road," Khalid points out to a bifurcation, "we will reach Pakistan." We take the one leading to Gulmarg instead. As soon as we cross the city's borders the scene changes dramatically. From dilapidated homes and men in woollen kaftans, we are now passing stout shrubs and bare trees, in hues of dull green and rustic red. En route we take a pitstop at the town of Tanmarg — a sudden burst of civilisation

Soon we are turning into the gates of The Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa. It is the last construction of its kind in Gulmarg, as ecologists have stopped further development in the area for the sake of the environment. Khyber got its permissions sanctioned much before the ban in 2008 and was launched in 2012.

This luxury property has 80 Premier and Luxury balcony rooms, four Luxury cottages and one Presidential cottage. My Luxury balcony room is a 52 sqm wooden space with views of the Himalayan peaks. Wooden flooring and central heating keep me snug. Though the heating extends to the bathroom, the floor remains icy. Thankfully room-slippers are a saviour. I unpack in the well-sized designated area of the room that has a bench and a cupboard for convenience.

Adding more layers on myself, I'm ready for a

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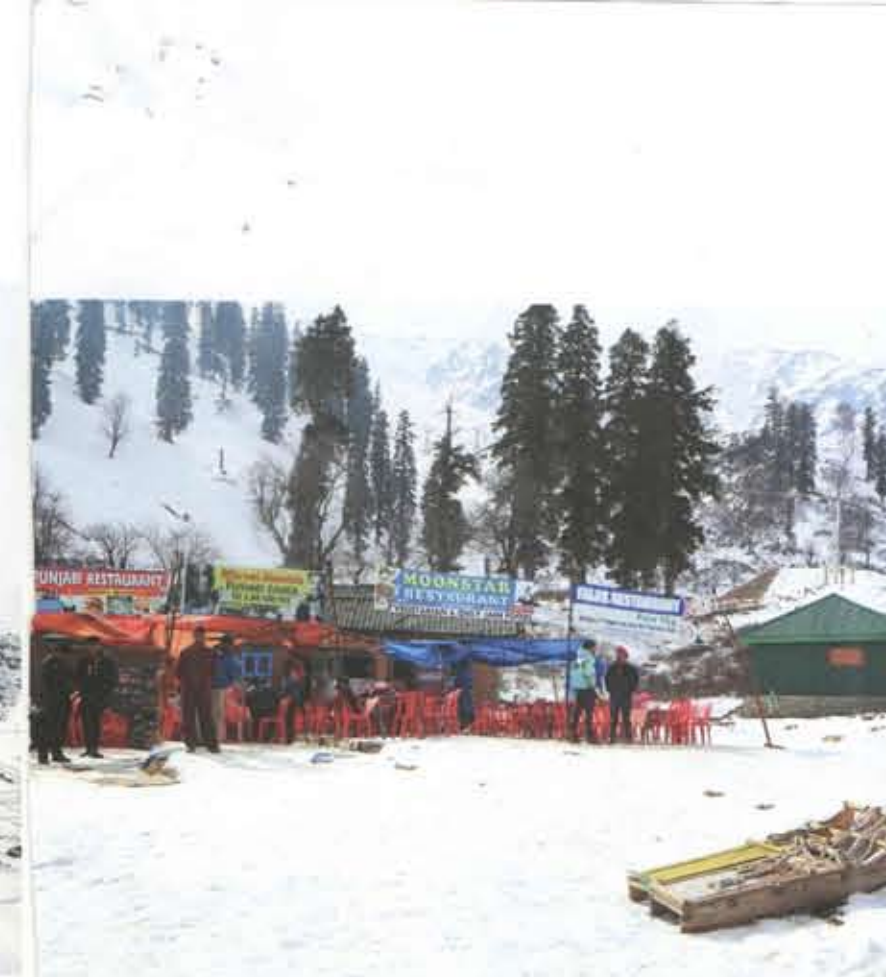
the only months when Gulmarg earns anything. This is when the number of tourists probably exceeds its approximate population of 2,500 people. My chat with the tourism office revealed that Gulmarg generates close to ₹200 crore annually from tourism alone, its only means of survival. It also explains why I can see more hotels than homes.

"Life can get dull during off-season," Khalid tells me. "It is wet and gloomy. We have people visiting, but it is hardly worth staying back for." Most who gain from tourism such as food vendors, pony owners, souvenir shops, taxis, guides, and the like prefer staying in Tanmarg or other neighbouring villages during the monsoons.

Next morning I wake up to a white landscape visible from my room's balcony. It's a good day to visit the Gulmarg Gondola, one of the highest cable cars in the world at 3,979 metres. The ride is divided into two — Phase I and II, and tickets are available at the base station. (Open daily 9am to 4pm; ₹600 to Phase I and ₹800 to Phase II; gulmarggondola.com)

The base station is walking distance from the hotel and we ditch the car. No sooner do we step out of the hotel, we attract vendors of sunglasses, gloves, jackets — handy if you've packed in a hurry. If you give into temptation, haggle starting with 50 per cent of the quoted price.

In the same way as school children on a field trip, we pile into the gondola full of excited chatter. Our cameras are synced perfectly with the first jerk to signify our ascend to the Aparwath peak (Phase II)



meal at Cloves, Khyber's multi-cuisine restaurant. Wazwan, a traditional mix of Kashmiri cuisine (can go up to 36 courses) served commonly during weddings, is the meal of the day. Khyber serves a smaller version for individuals, but even this can have you struggle, and you're not even halfway there! It comes with kebabs, a fiery gravy, lamb's leg, lotus stem, sautéed green leaves, and rice, to name a few.

Satiated, I curl up in Chaikash, a tea lounge, with a cup of kahwa, traditional spiced green tea that helps digestion and to stay warm. I'm advised to acclimatise myself before stepping out. And so that evening I book myself into their spa for a 90-minute treatment that massages me into drowsiness.

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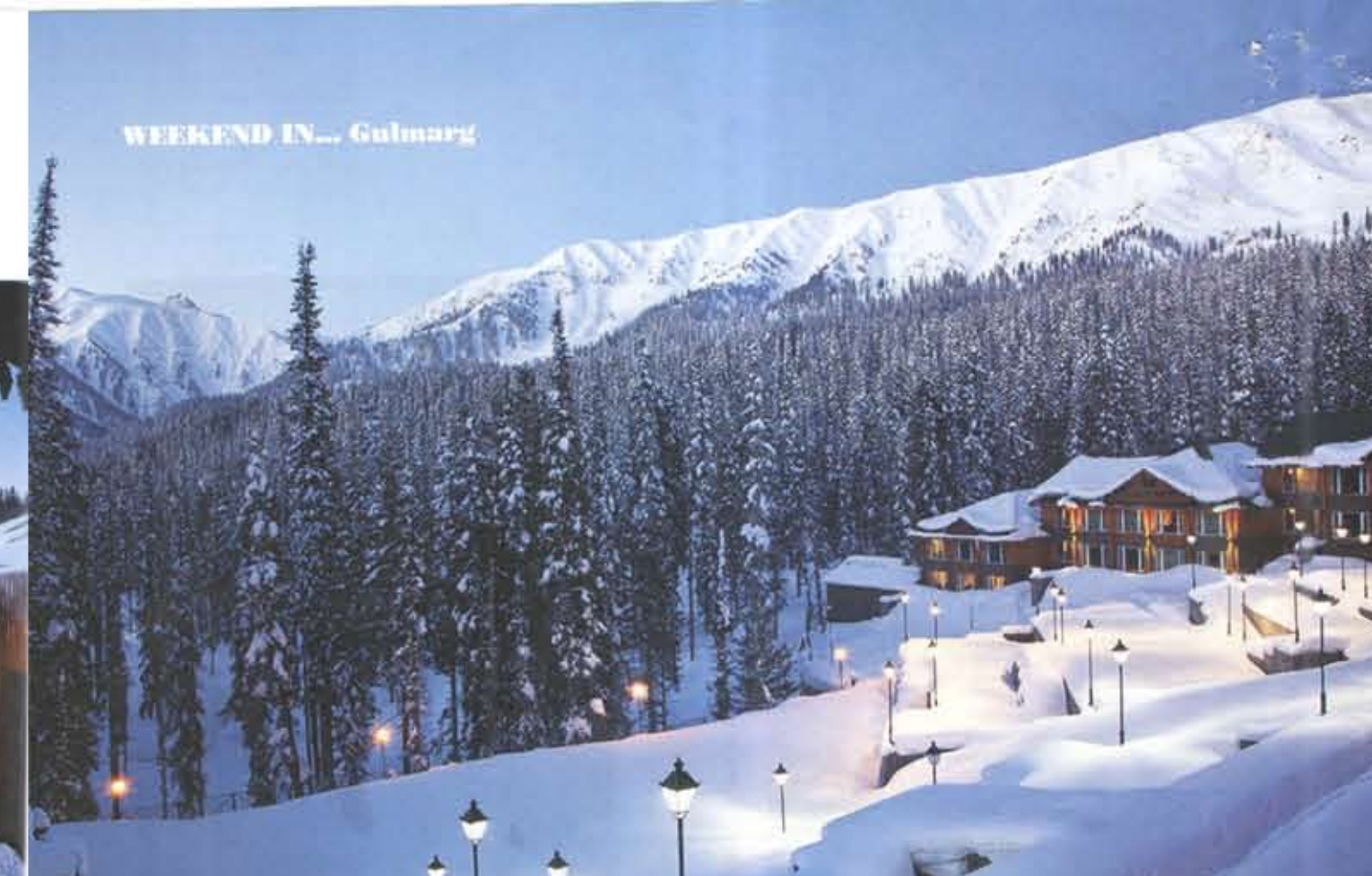
of the Himalayas. A breathtaking aerial view of the ski tracks and the first few skirts of the season speeding downhill, dodging around fir trees and stray rocks emerge. These slopes will only get busier in the months to come.

Soon we pull into the Phase II station and step out to a view of the icy blue Himalayan peaks. Tourists and their cameras can't get enough of each other, and the two or three odd men selling bottled water are happy for the unaware, thirsty tourists. (Khyber packed us off with two bottles each — dry air can be dehydrating.) Skiers are trudging through the snow to a point from where they can fling themselves into a thrilling ride; braver ones take the ski-chair to a higher altitude. Army personnel on break are relaxing at their camp, which is out of bounds to the public.

Though we can easily walk towards the valley, being pulled by sledge-owners for a negotiated price — about ₹1,100 for a return trip that totals 1km — is more fun. We reach a spot where the snow hasn't been touched yet, a perfect spot to leave our own snow angels. There is an abandoned board that reads: "Prohibited area don't move ahead", which used to be an army base years ago, and was under red alert. Now, it's just a photo prop, the kind where you assume a clichéd pose as a rebel.

To be able to stand on the Himalayas and admire its peaks is an unexplainable feeling of exhilaration. It makes you want to scream and your voice echoes for seconds. Even the sun loses its splendour as the

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mountains use its light to boast its hues. Tilt your head to the side and the blue appears minty green, walk closer and it is suddenly white. A couple of hundred photos later we take the gondola, this time downward, to Phase I (Kungdoor peak). A stretch of food shacks immediately have our attention. Don't expect the most satiable food here, but then again, it isn't often that you are munching down on biryani, pulao, and kebabs under the sunny sky, surrounded by snow, on the slopes of the world's tallest mountain range. Stomachs full, we're ready to try our hand at snowmobiling and ice-skiing.

The next day is more relaxed. We're bundled into a car and on our way to Baba Reshi Shrine built in 1480. Believers travel distances to pay their respects here, and some even check into the humble accommodation in the same shrine compound to do charity work, much like the saint whose tomb, with beautiful woodwork, rests inside. You can sit inside for a while if you wish; we decide to move to the next stop before it gets dark.

We're driving through the marketplace that hasn't received its crowd yet. At 11am, it is still early. We halt at a flight of stairs that takes us to an old Hindu temple that is interestingly manned by a Muslim who has dedicated himself to its upkeep. Being at a height of about 50 steps, we enjoy an aerial view of the market. The green roofs and trickle of visitors look out of place in a sprawl of fallen snow against a backdrop of fir trees.

A small market, it offers shawls, trinkets and woodworks. Don't be convinced by the vendors trying to palm off the shawls as pashmina. And if you do decide to buy, follow the "50 per cent of quoted price" rule. Next we head to the High Altitude Warfare school. Recognised for its high calibre of training, it played an important role in giving Indian troops a crash course for the 1999 Kargil war, as it did during the 1965 and 1971 wars against Pakistan. We won all three.

These sights may seem few, but Gulmarg still receives its share of visitors annually. The main attraction is the gondola of course. Further, Gulmarg has been an alternative for seasoned skiers who would rather beat the long queues in the Swiss Alps and enjoy a quiet winter. However, even these Himalayan slopes are soon expected to lose their niche status. Social media and government efforts have exposed the town in the international markets. From receiving 3,000 tourists each winter, the government anticipates the number to triple this decade. Snow festivals, winter games and holiday packages are all part of the plan. I'm only too glad to be here when it still has its small-town charm. Back at Khyber, I take a seat by the window and watch the snow fall lightly over the property. I sip on a warm brandy cocktail at Calabash, a cigar and sheesha lounge, in the company of the Himalayas; an unforgettable tryst with one of Earth's jewels. ■

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Top: The Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa

From left to right: A man snowboarding; Gulmarg Gondola; restaurants at Phase I; The Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa

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