

Hotels

GULMARG: THE KHYBER HIMALAYAN RESORT & SPA

Spread across 7 acres of forests, The Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa has rooms with stunning views of the snow-covered Aflarwat

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The two dogs came rushing, skidding down the mountainside. Ears puffed down against their heads and thrashing tails whipping up a cloud of snow, they tumbled and slid their way down the gully fringed by the silent pine and deodar forest—a thary of white against the somber black of the venerable trees rising up to a blue sky. I was spending alone myself, head down and leaning forward, knees bent towards in the braking mode, with the distant exhortations of my instructor Tansoor ringing in my ears.

But the dogs went faster, snatching over in their excitement, until one of them did a little somersault and lay totally still. My heart jumped into my mouth for a split second. Had the idiot hurt himself? But no, there he came again, cartwheeling down the snow slopes with his friend, the hapless ball of fur for miles around.



There was little I could have done anyway but speed along, feeling gravity's pull. I had never skied before, so I had no clue just how much fun this would be. I was on my third bunny down from Konglori, a little over halfway up the Aflarwat range that dominates the plateau of Gulmarg. My friend Krishna and I made our way through the upper snowfields, through the pine forests and past the seasonal Gajjar hats buried deep in the snow and down steep snow gullies, our heads down, leaning into the breeze with the gentle swish of the skis and the occasional cry of a raven in our ears. I was probably the slowest person on the slopes. Not that I cared. I'm not a huge fan of speed on mountains, and as brightly clad people on snowboards and skis raced past me in little furies of snow, carving graceful patterns, I grinned to myself, bawled The Chiffons' "He's So Fine" in my head and concentrated on not falling.



Gulmarg in winter proves all the right buttons. From thick, stately pine forests that hug the lower flanks of the range, lying under a deep freeze of piled-up snow, to the Aflarwat itself, looking like a giant beached whale, shining in the bright sunshine, I was staying at the best possible place to enjoy the magnificent snow slopes—The Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa.



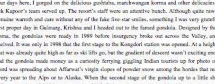
This opulent resort, situated at the rear of the forested Monkey Hill, is only a few months old, and yet it was fully booked up when I arrived. It had been a short flight from Delhi to Srinagar, with fantastic Himalayan views for company. The Valley stood bare and dusty under the winter sun, but as we approached Tangmarg, snowdrifts appeared. These deepened the higher we climbed, and when we finally reached Gulmarg, the mountains were dressing in a sea of white, the result of a heavy blizzard which had swept through a couple of days before.



I was shown into one of the resort's south-facing balcony rooms. The view was to die for. Snow lay piled high all around. Forgive my enthusiasm, but I hadn't seen snow like this in a very long time. Huge chunks of it were lying heavy on the pine branches, defying gravity. And yet, every now and then I would hear a soft crackling sound and look out to see a flurry of white hanging around like a fine mist about the trees—a mini tree avalanche. Behind the expanse of forest, the range rose up steeply, wispy clouds streaked across the sky glowing in the last rays of the setting sun, adding to the drama of an already incredible scene.

The Khyber is a completely Kashmiri affair, clearly on display in the beautiful decor of the resort. From the hargul on its marthead to the teakwood floors and the walnut paneling and the carpets in the rooms, the place feels authentic.

The best thing that a luxury property can do in a place like Gulmarg would be to get out of the way of the scenery, and gently add to it. The Khyber, now the proudest member of the exclusive Srenal Luxury Hotels of the World group, does this beautifully. There are great views to be had from the rooms, of course, but also from the tea lounge and patisserie Chaikash and the restaurant Greves.



Before I left for Gulmarg, I had promised myself that I won't going to eat anything other than Kashmiri food. I'd heard far too many friends rhapsodizing about the culinary delights of the Valley, and I was determined to eat as much of it as I could. Fortunately, the Kashmiri menu at Greves was superlative. In my four days here, I gorged on the delicious goshits, manch-wangan korras and other delicacies that chef Vikas Kapoor's team served up. The resort's staff were an attentive bunch. Although quite raw, they exuded genuine warmth and care without any of the false five star smiles, something I was very grateful for. On our first proper day in Gulmarg, Krishna and I headed out to the famed gondola. Designed by the French firm Poma, the gondolas were ready in 1989 before insurgency broke out across the Valley, and plans were shelved. It was only in 1998 that the first stage to the Kongdori station was opened. At a height of 10,050ft, that was already quite high as far as ski lifts go, but the gradient of descent wasn't exciting enough for pros, and the gondola made money as a curiosity ferrying giggling Indian tourists up for photo ops. However, word was spreading about Aflarwat's virgin slopes of powder snow among the hordes that make their way every year to the Alps or to Alaska. When the second stage of the gondola up to a little shoulder of the Aflarwat peak at 12,982ft was opened in 2005, Gulmarg became a bona fide skiing destination.



We bought our tickets and stood in line. Our tickets weren't for the second stage but only for the first, as conflict in the Valley had prevented operators from Tangmarg getting to Gulmarg. The line was a colorful mass of puffa jackets and eager sun-burnt European faces and a veritable forest of skis and snowboards. The gondola chattered its age, creaking and clanking its way up through the thickly wooded lower slopes, every inch of which seemed to be raked with ski tracks.



The Kongdori station is a gigantic snowfield a little way above the pine treeline. Above it rose the final three thousand feet of the Aflarwat massif, bare except for clumps of birch thickets. There was the usual collection of 'snow tourists' who populate places like Manali and Shimla in the winter, taking pictures, throwing snowballs and walking around shrieking in their fake furs and wools. Men sold chocolates and cigarettes while the skiers humped their gear up the slopes to start their runs. A clump of shacks with names like Aflarwat King, Las Vegas Restaurant, Sob Sunshine and Snow View Parjati Dhaba did brisk business with skiers and tourists alike. Instructors from towns offered day-long skiing courses around the Kongdori snowfield, and a surprising number of Indian tourists were actually taking them up on their offer.

The next day the curfew deepened and the gondola didn't run at all. It didn't really affect our plans as we were scheduled for our first instructions on the baby slopes with Tansoor Ahmed, who, like all good instructors everywhere, wouldn't take no for an answer:

"I can't go down that slope, Tansoor?"
 "No, bhai, you can."
 "Hold on to me, I'm falling!"
 "No, no, you won't fall!"
 "That was fun, can we please do that steep slope again?"
 "Of course you can, we can carry on even after sunset if you wish."

The baby slopes were thronging with people, mostly Indian children, and they have to be the world's most difficult bunch. Yet, despite long ski lift queues, waiting children, parents doing mothers, overbearing fathers and other Indian jewels, the Kashmiris in charge of the government-run skiing

operations handled the whole scene with aplomb, ensuring everybody got their runs. Krishna turned out to be a natural, mastering the braking techniques and hard pole coordination in about an hour. Of course, he fell quite a lot, which is par for the course if you're learning how to ski. I took far longer, with my safety-first approach, and my determination not to fall. But once I figured that falling on your butt in the soft, powdery snow is actually quite fun, I made some progress, much to Tansoor's happiness. "See, bhai, you're the best first day student I've ever had," he said with a straight face.

But my falls were mostly restricted to negotiating the ski lift. We had to stand in a sideways line and edge along like crabs in a mass of skis and poles, for a chance to grab onto the whizzing poles on an electric line and be hauled uphill while balancing on our skis. The trick is to keep the skis parallel and not let go until you reach the top of the incline. I failed to do both a number of times, so I ended up sprawling on either halfway up the hill, struggling to get out of the way of the next person in line, or sliding backwards downhill.

It was a very productive day, and bumping our gear back to the resort in true skier style. I felt virtuous enough to celebrate with a couple of cups of excellent kabrua and a delicious croissant sandwich at Chaikash. I followed that up with a long soak in the tub in my room overlooking the delightful snow panorama. The slanting sunlight disappeared slowly from the frozen bowl behind the resort and the snow turned a dark black. The bits of snow sticking to the branches started glowing a luminous white and far above, the Sunset Peak glimmered in the sun.

The next day the gondola was running, and Tansoor had decided that his students were too good to be snacking about on the baby slopes. First we caught the gondola to the second stage, that is, to the top of Aflarwat. We shared our gondola with a couple of British guys, leaders of a skiing package group from England, who were poring over a ski map of the range. "You think Steve and the others can find their way to the nose of the ridge here, and we can catch up with them before we hit the birch forest there?" one asked. "Well, I've been wanting to do the traverse to the Aflarwat North Bowl and come down that way till Shepherd's Bowl at the base of the Army ridge," replied the other. "Sure, if we can make our descent down Mary's Shoulder quickly first, you and I can come back up and do some off-piste," agreed his companion. The upper slopes of Aflarwat was another world, one which only skiers knew.



As our gondola rose higher, and more of Aflarwat's snow-covered ridges fanned out beside us, I realized why Gulmarg's slopes are considered off-piste heaven. This term basically means virgin slopes, where experienced skiers pit their skills against the snow. On Aflarwat, apart from the two snow bowls on the either side of the gondola line, which are monitored and controlled for avalanches, the rest of the slopes are strictly off-piste.



The Aflarwat station, despite its height, was nice and warm. Long lines of skiers and snowboarders were snaking up the final slopes to the summit to begin their descent. Many were already on their way down, carving graceful parabolas in the snow. From here, the entire Valley was visible. The upper slopes of Aflarwat tumbled down into the distant belt of pine forest and then finally to the bowl of Gulmarg. Beyond and below the Valley glowed with a green, aquatic light. I could imagine how, eons ago, it was a gigantic lake. Beyond it to the east rose a wall of mountains with the peak of Hararakh and the Nuz-Ken massif enjoying pride of place. To the south, the ridges of Aflarwat stretched away in a series of snowfields. To the north glared the giant Rapal face of Nanga Parbat, one of the most magnificent mountains in the world. It was now time to descend to Konglori for a day of sking thighs, twisted knees and a sore butt. After all, I had to earn my guthabs.

THE INFORMATION:

GETTING THERE
 Several airlines fly to Srinagar from Delhi, including SpiceJet, IndiGo, GoAir and Jet Airways from approx. Rs.6,000 (one way). Gulmarg is about 50km from Srinagar. You can hire cabs from Srinagar airport to Gulmarg for Rs.2,000 (car type Toyota or Indica) for one day return trip.

GETTING AROUND
 Gulmarg is pretty small, and you can get to most places on foot.

THE RESORT
 The Khyber Himalayan Resort and Spa opened in December 2012, and it has already become the premier luxury property in the Kashmir Valley. TARIFF Premier Rooms with breakfast: Rs.17,400 per night; Luxury Room with Gulmarg view: Rs.22,000 (all rates inclusive of taxes) CONTACT 01954-254666, khyberhotels.com. The all-weather resort can also arrange for pick ups and drops to Srinagar airport, and help you with skiing and trekking guides and gear during winter and summer respectively.

WHAT TO SEE & DO
 In winter, there's really only one thing you can do, and that is ski. Both the stages of the Gulmarg gondola are non-operational, so you can take it all the way up to Aflarwat station for some great views of the Valley and the Kashmir and Himalayan ranges. Skiing rates vary, but try excellent instructor Tansoor Ahmed (7298739464, sub@tansoor07@gmail.com) charges Rs.2,500 per day. I hired a pair of Powder Ski from Billa Majid Bakshi's ski shop (254519, billa@kashmirhelixi.in, kashmirhelixi.in) for Rs.1,000 per day. Billa is also the director and lead guide of Kashmir Helixi. The outfit has also tied up with The Khyber to offer week long luxury heli-hike packages from Rs.95000 per person for Mt. Aflarwat. In summer, you can trek to Aflarwat peak, Kilnashang and Alpinar lake, or visit the Nagia valley.