

# BEYOND THE LINE OF CONTROL

## Touring in India-occupied Kashmir

text and photos by Carl Skoog

### Editors Note:

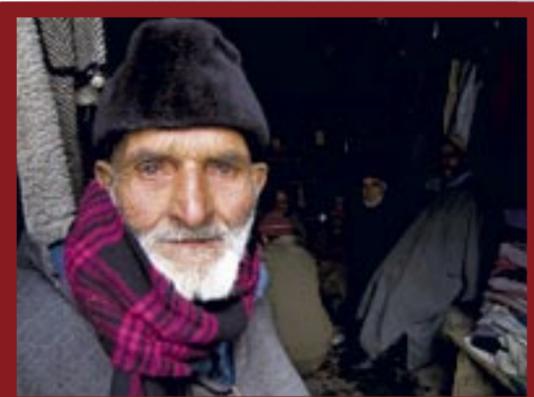
*As we went to press with the following piece, a massive earthquake hit Kashmir and surrounding Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. Though the American media primarily focused on the devastation in Pakistan, the 7.6 Richter scale quake and its 150 aftershocks—some measuring 6.0 and greater—caused massive destruction in India-controlled Kashmir where this story takes place. As of press time, 1,300 have died in Indian Kashmir and estimates are that 500 of those deaths are in the Baramulla region where the town of Gulmarg, the referential town in this story, is located. But there are also stories of hope—stories of two countries who have fought three wars over this region laying down arms to aid each other.*

*Though it had gone through our editorial processes, the Backcountry staff nearly pulled this piece out of respect for the people affected by this tragedy. We vigorously researched the fallout of the quake on-line. We made phone calls to parents, friends and folks who had visited this beautiful place—people whose judgment we trust. In the face of such loss of human life, should we run this story about skiing, we asked. Resoundingly, and to our surprise, the answer was yes. Yes, for the same reasons we delight in seeing a rag-tag jazz band play on the sidewalks of New Orleans. Yes, because until now, the images of this place so widely available are ones of suffering and loss. May this story be published as both a reminder of the past and a wish for the future of Kashmir, one of both peace and skiing.*

"Did you just see that," Eric screamed as he came to a sudden stop after airing over a pillowy bulge in the snow. "I just skied over a snow leopard." The odds that we'd see one of the most elusive creatures on earth, the Himalayan snow leopard, on our unlikely trip near the Line of Control that divides this unlikely mountain utopia between India and Pakistan were as slim as the odds that the leopard had spotted us in the



Houseboats in Srinagar.



Mohghl Abdullah Lone in Tongmarg.





# The Last Half-Century of Turmoil

When the British pulled out of India in 1947, they left in their wake the predominately Hindu nation, India, and the Muslim nation of Pakistan. Caught in the middle was Kashmir. The fate of this small semi-autonomous region was left in the hands of a Hindu maharaja, while his subjects were predominately Muslim. After tribal raiders entered over the border from Pakistan with the intent of forcing his hand in Pakistan's favor, the Maharaja sought help from India for protection. Prime Minister Nehru agreed to send his army upon the condition that Kashmir cede control to India. The transfer of power was only supposed to last for six months, after which the Kashmiri people would have a vote deciding their destiny. This vote has yet to happen. After pushing the intruding Pakistani forces back, the cease-fire line split Kashmir in two, with the Pakistan-controlled side termed Azad ("free") Kashmir.

Subsequently, India and Pakistan have fought three wars in which Kashmir has played an integral part. The most recent conflict over the inhospitable Siachen Glacier is still unresolved and called the highest war in the world. What's left is the 460-mile Line of Control. It remains the oldest and longest-running world dispute before the United Nations and pre-dates even the Arab-Israeli conflict.

The violence escalated in the late 1980s when repressive efforts by India to maintain control in Kashmir resulted in widespread fraud during the local elections. In response, the people resorted to violence. Protests, bombings, and the kidnapping of the daughter of a government official set the stage for more than a decade of unrest.

In 1998, the conflict took on an additional dimension when over three days, India detonated five nuclear explosions at an underground testing site. In a high stakes chest-beating session less than two weeks later, Pakistan responded with six detonations, resulting in condemnation by 150 countries and economic sanctions. It has been estimated that if nuclear war were to break out, 12 million would be killed from the first day of fighting, with 7 million injured.

In spite of all this, the leaders of India and Pakistan have resumed talking, and while no specific resolution seems imminent, there is more hope than there has been for years.

As far as how the unrest affects tourists, the most publicized case dates to 1995, when six tourists were kidnapped. One American escaped; the rest were never seen again, except for the beheaded remains of Norwegian Hans Christian Ostro. The kidnapers had ties to a terrorist organization in Pakistan.

Everyone we talked to concurred that the current militant activity was not directed at tourists. Even hassling or cheating tourists would be enough to bring a vigilante mob of Kashmiris upon the offender. Having been absent for so long in the Kashmir valley, tourists are almost revered. Kashmiris hope that one day, like it has before, tourist currency can revive the local economy, which has been stymied by its remoteness from the rest of India and stifled by the proximity to Pakistan, whom they are still unable to trade with due to tensions.

- Carl Skoog

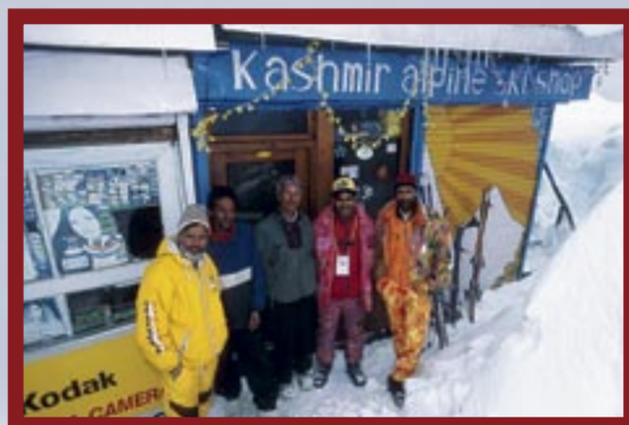


Adam, Cyrille and woodcutter.

enigmatic Kashmiri backcountry. So slim, in fact, that by all accounts Eric's sighting of the big cat made him one of a handful of westerners to see the creature in the wild in the last fifty-odd years. Fifty years is a long time—long enough for paradise on earth to become the most militarized place on the planet.

Shutter-shocked, I was too late to take a photograph as the cat bounded away. Truth be told, all I saw were tufts of hair as I peered into its vacated den. It's only fitting. Like the people in this beautiful, tenuous place, the landscape itself likes to keep its secrets. Only days before, I'd been told to holster my camera while attempting to shoot the rather comical spectacle of Adam, Tobias, Eric and I sacked beside the road with our gear tossed into the slush as our taxi driver fixed a flat tire. We'd pulled over in front of a roadside barracks and into the crosshairs of a sentry's machine gun. In a flurry of Indian dialect, he made it clear that a snapshot on my part anywhere near the pillbox he was guarding, might result in a snapshot of his own.

We had the mixed blessing of having arrived in Srinagar, in Indian-controlled Kashmir, during the middle of the heaviest snowfall cycle in 37 years. Srinagar, which normally would see little more than a foot, ended up receiving three, turning streets into a muddy, slushy slurry. The area around the Jawahar Tunnel saw 18 feet from this storm. This closed the single route to the movement of supplies like food and fuel for a week, stranded 7,000 passengers, killed a dozen security personnel in avalanches, and forced 300 people to take refuge in the tunnel without food or heat. A traveling Peace Corps worker and her sister visiting nearby Gulmarg told tales of being stranded at a military outpost for five days and



The ski shop.

kept in a single room with other tourists for protection from the militants that were claimed to be in the area.

Some areas in the higher mountains along the Line of Control supposedly recorded 70 feet of snow by mid-winter. In all, 333 rural villagers were killed in avalanches in Jammu and Kashmir—many of them were in homes that collapsed, and the remaining bodies weren't recovered until a month after the storm. The electricity for the Kashmir Valley was knocked out as well.

We traveled the 32 miles from Srinagar to Gulmarg ("gul" means flowers in Urdu, while "marg" means valley or destination). This area is marked by an open meadow that had been the summer refuge of the Maharaja (Indian prince) and the British before they split after WWII. Featuring a couple platter pulls and a gondola, the ski area at Gulmarg was opening a new upper section of the lift that would access huge vertical. Up until now, these lifts had been used mostly as tourist rides in the summer. There were also a few hotels spread out around the meadow. One was the Hotel Highland Park, which was in many ways similar to a well-equipped lodge like Tioga Pass Resort in California.

Under construction since the late 1980s, the extension of the gondola was the event that had brought us here. The base starts at 8,750' and carries you to what now has become the mid-station at Kongdori (10,050'). From there, the new extension continues to just shy of the summit, part of the broad ridge that makes up the five-kilometer crest of Apharwat (13,530'). In the heights of the Pir Panjal Range, one of the foothill ranges referred to as the Lesser Himalaya, it would be a single lift that, with a little hiking, would serve a sizeable amount of terrain. The drawback is that it is only three miles from the Line of Control, putting it within shelling distance of Pakistani artillery. As a concept, it bears more resemblance to Silverton than La Grave, since it is without the no-choke rocky couloirs of the French Alps. At one time, this also was one of the locations used by the heli-skiing outfit started by Sylvain Saudan, the Swiss-born extreme skiing pioneer.

While the recent storm brought 20 feet of snowfall to Gulmarg, the avalanche hazard was not severe enough to prevent us from skiing, but at first the snows were so deep that even skinning with fat skis had us wallowing nearly knee deep. Not having seen much of the area yet since it was still snowing heavily, we decided to stick to the nearby trees.

We took some of the steeper lines down toward the Baba Reshi Shrine, which was established to commemorate a courtier of a Muslim ruler who, in 1480, chose a simpler life than that of his royal friends. Another route included skinning up Monkey Hill, named after the monkeys that liked to hang out there in the trees. From here, widely spaced tree glades provided runs all the way down to the village of Tongmarg, where we'd catch a ride back to town. If we wanted a bigger tour, we'd ski down to the Drang Nala valley, though the exit required a strategic traverse to catch Tongmarg versus the lengthier exit out of the bottom of the valley.

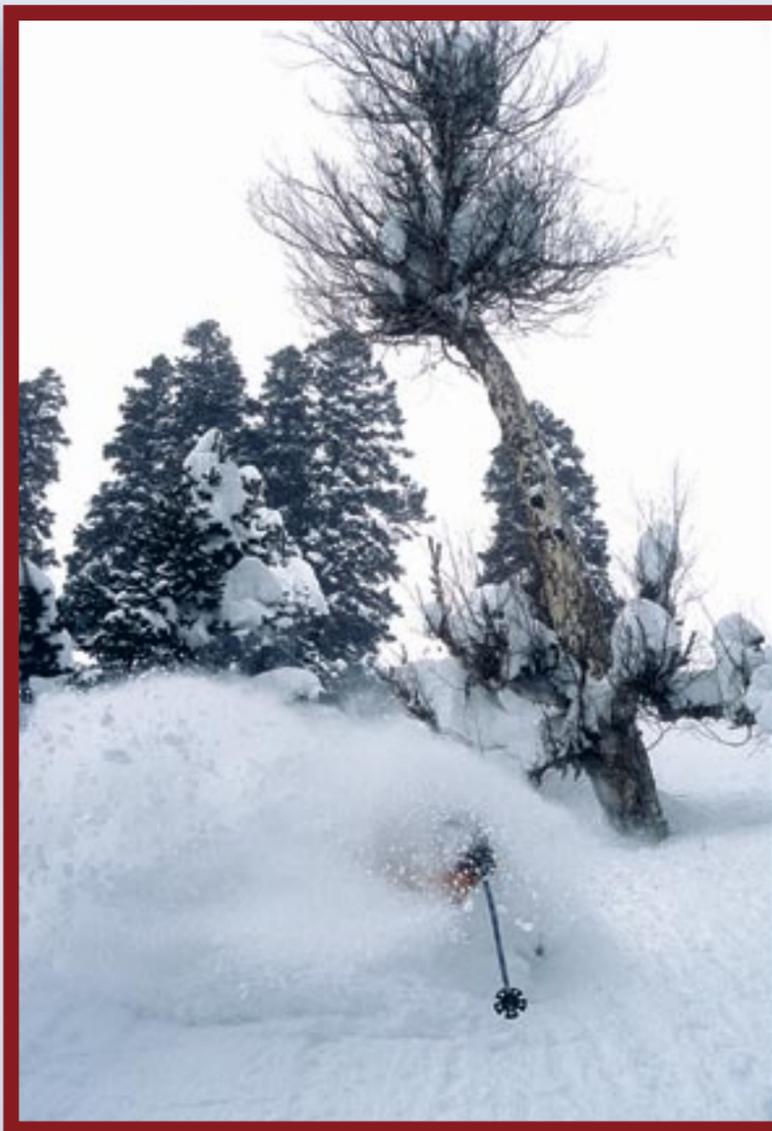
For vacationers from India, a winter visit to Gulmarg is largely a novelty visit to somewhere with snow. Most seemed content to go sledding on wooden sledges or just to rub snow in the faces of their spouses and giggle. Many of the Indian or Kashmiri skiers we encountered were there for race training with guest foreign coaches. Only a handful of other locals spent much time away from the platter pulls. One such local was our guide Hamid, who



Fresh tracks.



Skier: Tobias Liljeröth



Kash-shmere.Skier: Nacho Ferrer-Catena

"After numerous delays trying to negotiate with subordinates that had no ability to render the critical 'executive decision,' we did what we should have done in the first place and skinned up Aphaarwat."

along with his partner Yaseen, operated a guiding and rental outfitter, the Kashmir Alpine Shop.

For many years, Yaseen has been guiding various mountain trips in Kashmir, the tales of which made for great entertainment over many cups of sweet, traditional kawa tea. Hamid decided to devote his lifestyle to skiing here in 1983, and he and his friends have been waiting 15 years for political tensions between Pakistan and India to ease, allowing clients to return. Since last summer there has been a growing peace effort between the two nations, and with the promise of the completed gondola, Yaseen and Hamid are optimistic.

Each day, we'd ease into the mountain on Kashmiri time. "Come, coooooome," Hamid would say in the morning. "First, we have tea, then we go to the Tongmarg." But when it came time to taste the powder, he was hooting and hollering as much, if not more, than we were. I got the impression that the quantity of new snowfall was definitely not the norm here, and powder fever crosses all cultures. A more normal year would bring more clear spells, and while the depth of powder might not be as great, backcountry travel would be much easier. The locals, who have been able to get by with booting up for their big runs, salivated over our touring gear and skins. But gear has been hard to come by here and what they do have has been updated largely through the kindness of visiting foreigners who leave their gear behind, while perhaps making room in their luggage for a carpet purchased in Srinagar.

Skinning for our turns gave us options; this was a good thing as only a few days of our stay did they have power, employees and the will of Allah to allow the gondola to run. While the lift-ticket prices were low, the cost was high after you've accounted for the toll on your patience in the equation. Self-propelled turns avoided those potential frustrations and allowed us to keep in better touch with our surroundings. In fact, it was on one of these tours when the lift was down that we had our encounter with the snow leopard.

After enjoying several days of touring, we were told that "our presence was mandatory" at an event billed as the Himalayan International Cross-Country Ski Championship. Due to the decade of political unrest, this was the first international event to be held in Kashmir since they had two cricket matches in the mid-1980s, and it was India's first international cross-country event. The championship was well-monitored by military presence, and I passed by more rifles and automatic weapons in one day than I have while hiking for 25 years during hunting seasons in the States. And I was deliberate when pulling my camera out to take photos.

While discussing politics with a newfound Kashmiri friend in the staging area, I heard him give an expression of disgust. Turning around, I caught sight of several people clustered around a flagpole trying to set it into the ground much like the classic WWII photo of the soldiers in Iwo Jima. Only in this case, they were erecting the Indian flag on Kashmir soil. From my friend's perspective, that symbol represented the event itself, where the race event was a display to portray "normalcy" and that both Kashmir and the militants were under control.

The next day, we had been promised the first ride for the public on the new phase of the gondola. Yet when it came to the appointed day, under bluebird skies, the head of the whole operation, Farooq Shah, left town to go back to Srinagar. Not only did he leave no instructions for his subordinates, he put barriers in our way.

After numerous delays trying to negotiate with subordinates that had no ability to render the critical "executive decision," we did what we should have done in the first place and skinned up Aphaarwat. Some hasty pits showed no major issues, and we continued up with ever-increasing views of the Himalaya, including Nanga Parbat. Reaching the summit at sunset, we watched the rosy light over the Himalaya to the east. We could see some interesting terrain on the backside, which I wished we had more time to explore. Bows and other summits then fell away to Azad Kashmir, the Indus River, and the plains of the Punjab with Pakistan beyond. Supposedly on a clear day you can see K2, but as clear as our day was, a few clouds in that direction hid the view. Cold became the motivation to keep moving as the wind whipped up. The moon provided the glow to make the run waiting for us below. After getting used to the illumination, we found the powder to actually still be light and not wind-affected, and I was amazed at the speeds we'd ski in the near dark.

Only time will tell if Gulmarg benefits from a reliable, operational gondola, but with use of skins, it may not matter. Aphaarwat will always be there; the friendly Kashmiris will always be there. And elusive as he is, so will the snow leopard.



Hiking through the open-air market in Tongmarg.



Aphaarwat and Hotel Highland Park under heavy snow.



How low can ü go? Skier: Adam ü