

Extreme Kashmir: Skiing's Most Dangerous Frontier

Men's Journal, November 2005

By Matthew Power

I am standing in waist-deep snow, in a forest beneath the glaciated peaks of the northern Himalayas. Large flakes swirl down fast, limiting visibility and muffling the sound of distant avalanches. In front of me a cabin with a chimney pokes out from a mound of white powder — a gingerbread fantasy, or like being inside a snow globe.

But I'm in the middle of one of the world's bloodiest and oldest war zones, the disputed border between Pakistan and India above the Kashmir Valley. Stationed throughout the mountains above us, at altitudes as high as 22,000 feet, tens of thousands of Indian and Kashmiri troops have been fighting a guerrilla war since 1989.

The woods are perfectly quiet now except for the staccato whir of a WWII-era Arriflex camera, designed to film bombing runs and the Normandy landings.

“And...dropping!”

The silence is shattered by a whooping cry. A skier flies through the air, zips along the roofline of the cabin, flips around 180 degrees, and launches off into space backward, 15 feet over a spiked metal fence, crashing in an explosion of snow 50 feet down the hill. Welcome to Kashmir, the final frontier of extreme skiing.

A week ago I arrived in India's northernmost state with a group of cinematographers and extreme skiers from Teton Gravity Research (TGR), an extreme-sports film company based in Jackson, Wyoming. TGR is here to film a segment for *Tangerine Dream*, a globe-spanning ski movie that premieres nationwide in October. The double-danger — avalanches and armed insurgents — was irresistible to these guys. We wanted to push the envelope, co-founder Steve Jones says, so this seemed like a logical destination. They are here to trek, ski, and film in the peaks above the alpine village of Gulmarg at a ski resort that was once considered the Aspen of the Himalayas. Only 10 miles as the crow flies from the Pakistan border, Gulmarg has fallen upon hard times during the war. But the Indian government is currently pitching in to build what it claims will be the world's highest gondola. With a vast backcountry and literally millions of vertical feet of unexplored chutes, faces, and couloirs, Gulmarg may be one of the last great unexplored extreme skiing destinations in the world, far wilder than the Alaskan Chugach — and with the added thrill of being in a war zone.

The crew's ultimate goal is to reach — and ski down — the 13,800-foot ridgeline above Gulmarg, a three-mile long, avalanche-riven face with 60-degree chutes and a view across the disputed border to Pakistan. With the gondola unfinished, the only way up will be to climb.

We're here in the middle of the fiercest winter in living memory. More than 10 feet of snow have fallen, causing so many deadly avalanches the local papers dubbed it the "snow tsunami". Our hotel in Gulmarg — a bark-shingled masterpiece of 1960s country-club kitsch called the Hotel Highlands Park — has been completely blacked out for days, ever since a massive avalanche wiped out four giant electrical towers, blocked the only tunnel leading to India proper, and killed 13 Indian soldiers. And despite recent progress and peace overtures between India and Pakistan, roadside bombings and assassinations are still weekly occurrences here.

Steve, 35, a wound-up dynamo of a man, sums it all up nicely: "Dude, I am totally gaped." Gaped: astounded, shocked, aghast. It is one of many new vocabulary words I acquire in the company of the TGR crew — which is comprised of Steve, two cinematographers (Matt Herriger and Dustin Handley), and still photographer Greg Von Doersten. The pro athletes along for the trip are extreme skiing legend Micah Black, 35; Juneau, Alaska snowboarder Ashley Call, 25; and 19-year-old trick-ski wunderkind Dashiell "Dash" Long, whose specialty is jumping off cliffs and landing backward.

We wake one morning to a whiteout. Eighteen inches of heavy powder has already fallen overnight, and it isn't slowing down. The Highlands Park is completely buried, with only a smokestack sticking out. For Dash Long, a skier who sees the entire world as an assortment of obstacles from which to huck himself, it's too good an opportunity to pass up. His trademark is applying the freestyle techniques of the terrain park to, well, pretty much anything. "House jib!" he shouts.

Dash and Micah get out their avalanche shovels, while Steve and Matt unpack the Arriflexes. They also carry an HD digital camera as a concession to modernity, but as Steve says, "Nothing looks as sexy as film." Everyone packs down the snow on top of the hotel's peaked roof, creating a natural ramp down and then up the side of a neighboring cabin. As Dash climbs to the top, the hotel's formally attired staff stand bemusedly in the snow. Apparently corporate liability is not a great concern here.

With cameras rolling, Dash flies down the roof, hits the ramp, and executes an off-axis front flip 15 feet in the air, planting himself up to his neck in the snow. He wades out laughing, brushes the snow off, and pauses as the hotel staff applauds. "It makes me feel like a kid again. I mean, I know I'm not going to be able to jump off of roofs forever." It's generally agreed upon that nothing like this has been done before in Kashmir.

We decide to boot pack and skin (a method of backcountry ski touring using removable straps that help skis stick to the snow) to see what the surrounding terrain has to offer. TGR prefers to do their backcountry work by helicopter, but even with good weather, heli-skiing this close to the border of Pakistan would require a mind-boggling dance with the Indian military's red tape brigade.

We set out looking for good snow and hoping for good light. As Herriger explains, the ideal condition is “bluebird”: clear blue skies. And then in descending order “graybird,” “milkbird,” and the kind of dark gray Himalayan overcast light we have now, dubbed “Addams Family.” We are also taunted by “sucker holes,” dinner-plate size windows of blue sky that light up the valley for just long enough to start filming before being swallowed by the bleak gray. No contrast, very difficult to capture on film, also known, says Matt, as “shitbird.”

We stop at the Kashmir Alpine Ski Shop, a little hut stocked with piles of ancient equipment left by visitors over the past three decades. Yaseen Khan, the 50-something, hookah-smoking, Kashmir-proselytizing proprietor oversees a scruffy international band of ski bums from Denmark, New Zealand, Finland, Israel, and Canada, many of whom bunk down in the loft above his shop. He has seen Gulmarg at its peak, when Bollywood films were shot here in the late 1970s and TK,000 visitors came every winter. He has also seen it at its worst, during TKwhichyears of the grinding, desolate years of the insurgency when hotels were shuttered and the tourism industry collapsed. “Now is getting better, last few years more people come, and then when the gondola is running, it will be so good.”

More than anything (besides, of course, a lasting peace) Yaseen needs modern equipment. He sets me up with a pair of Volkl Tour Extremes that were top-of-the-line during Reagan’s first term in office. He joins us as a guide, as does Mr. Firouz, an impish, bearded 65-year old porter from Gulmarg with glacier glasses and 10 children to provide for. We tell Yaseen we want to go for the top of the ridgeline. It can be skied, even in these conditions, he says, but the risks are real. “First mistake, last mistake,” he says, turning dead serious.

A few hours later, we’re skinning up a 40-degree slope through an old-growth forest of five-foot-thick fir and Himalayan pine. The snow is preposterously deep, and one slip off the trail, you’d just disappear. We all have avalanche transceivers — small radio devices that transmit a signal detectable within a hundred-yard radius or so. Each person in the group carries a shovel and an avalanche probe, a collapsible 10-foot rod that can be used to find the depth of a buried victim.

“We take safety very seriously,” says Steve. “Don’t get me wrong, there’s nothing safe about what we do, but to the extent it’s possible, we do it.” He isn’t speaking lightly. Steve himself was dragged by an avalanche in Valdez, Alaska, in 1998. Almost everyone in the group has been hurt, seen people killed, or lost friends. Only two months earlier, Micah was on the scene of a cliff-jumping accident in Jackson Hole, where Brent “Newt” Newton, an extreme skier and friend, was buried jumping off a 50-foot cliff. Despite Micah’s resuscitation attempts, Newt died from head injuries en route to the hospital.

Danger is what the entire free-skiing industry is built upon. But here in Kashmir, we’re operating on a whole different scale of risk. The weather goes through drastic swings, with visibility often reduced to a few yards in a matter of seconds. An unstable layer of snow the consistency of tiny ball bearings, known as gropple, has fallen, so the chances

that new snow above it could slip are greatly increased. Hundreds of people have already been killed in slides this winter; in February alone, there were at least 300 deaths. For us, snowed in with no communication to the outside world, any help would be extremely slow in coming.

The need to push on, to get out to the ragged edge of things, keeps everyone going. If we get a window of opportunity, everyone's going to the top. From high above, the rumble of avalanches echoes throughout the valley.

After a grueling skin up into the hills, the group picks several lines through waist-deep untracked powder, and sets up a series of shots. They are working in perfect tandem, communicating by radio in a film-geek/ski-bum patois, often spoken in a faux-European accent. The Kashmiri porters, Mohammed and Firouz, have also picked up the catchphrase mantra of TGR: Trekking up the hill, Micah calls back to them, and they reply in cadence, "Harden up!"

On cue, Dash, Micah, and Ashley come barreling through the trees, over fallen logs and boulders, flying off natural features with the aerial choreography of a terrain park. When Dash lands backwards off one jump, Firouz exclaims in delight: "He made change in the air!" With that, a new term is coined, and a backwards landing, called "switch" in fusion-skiing parlance, will forevermore be known as "change" to the boys at TGR.

The weather above the treeline is closing in, with snow piling up at more than an inch an hour and visibility dropping to almost nil. The Himalayas seem to be conspiring against us — the ridge attempt will have to wait. The fun is also checked by the frequent reminders of the war. Trekking back along a road later on, we come across an Indian army patrol, with AK47s and cheap glacier glasses, slogging the other way, looking for roadside bombs or insurgents trying to sneak across the border through the mountains.

Exhausted, we reach the Highlands after dark. The sky is dumping snow again, the power is still out, and a thunder-and-lightning show that echoes off the Himalayan peaks illuminates the blizzard in iridescent purple. "Snow lightning?" asks Steve, perplexed by the weather. "Who the hell ever heard of snow lightning?"

I ask Micah what he gets out of traveling the world making ski films. For him it's an exploration of boundaries, internal and external. "You have to keep pushing further to get to the edge of things." And how does the group deal with these remote and dangerous places? "Well, we're not a Christian rock band. We work very hard, and we unwind very hard. We like our après."

True to form, we fill the hotel bar after dinner. The decor is an ornately carved mix of opium den, hunting lodge, and 19th-hole circa 1965. There are bear and snow leopard skins (antiques, I am glad to learn), deer heads, wagon-wheel chandeliers, Kashmiri rugs and cushions on the floor, as well as an enormous hookah, which the TGR crew promptly

dubs the “hubbly-bubbly.” On one wall is an oil painting of Arnold Palmer in his prime. The windows look out (when visibility is more than 15 feet) on what is claimed to be the world’s highest golf course. In gonzo-après ski fashion, we proceed to drink the Hotel Highlands Park out of house and home. While the proprietors are Muslim, Kashmiris are first and foremost merchants. They don’t drink, but they have no qualms about letting visitors have their fun.

The guys are singing Poison and Guns’n’Roses anthems at the top of their lungs, and communicating almost entirely with dialogue from *The Big Lebowski*. But at some point a line is drawn. “Next person who says dude is cocktail bitch!” shouts Micah. Even without electricity, civilization must be upheld. Kashmir, the Led Zeppelin version, pumps out of an Ipod. Steve has brought a battery-powered drink mixer and the ever-attentive manager, Mr. Hassan (who has acquired Matt’s \$500 North Face parka in exchange for a Kashmiri pheran) has been dispatched to the roof to bring back icicle swizzle sticks. Still, Steve has safety on the mind: “Careful. That Indian beer is 8.25 percent At altitude.” It is a refreshing debauch that Gulmarg has not witnessed in 15 years, and while the Kashmiri staff thinks these Americans are a bit crazy, they seem genuinely happy to have us as guests.

The next day it’s still snowing. Hard. And the next, and the next. The entrance to the hotel looks like a cave, dug through massive drifts. Every morning after breakfast, we pack up our gear and hike further up into the mountains above the town. This is skiing returned to its primal beginnings, no lift, no heli, just hard work and gravity.

Dash, Micah, and Ashley jump off of every rock, tree, and roof they can find. Totally isolated (and after a few days, having fully depleted the Hotel Highlands bar), time acquires a Groundhog Day quality. There is no news of the outside world. Finally, on the sixth morning, the sky dawns the beautiful, stratospheric blue of low-moisture content and high altitude. Bluebird. Gulmarg’s enormous ridgeline is visible at last, the thin line of the half-built gondola snaking up the spine of the mountain. Chutes have been scoured out by huge slides, and it’s difficult to tell how safe the snow conditions are. Everybody is excited to get up top. But just when we are getting ready to start skinning for the ridge, a Kashmiri police commander at the head of an armed patrol approaches me.

“All foreigners are ordered by the district commander to leave Gulmarg immediately.” I ask Firouz to explain to him that we aren’t going anywhere. He insists that because of bad weather and the danger of avalanches, all foreigners have been ordered to leave, no exceptions. None of us believe him, and certainly aren’t going to leave on the first clear day we’ve seen. “If you do not go down,” he shouts, “I will push you down!”

While Firouz chats up the policeman, the TGR crew takes some evasive action. We ski down toward the woods, and begin bootpacking our way up to a spot called Monkey Hill, a steep, heavily wooded area where we can hide out until the heat’s off. “This is like trying to ditch the ski patrol,” says Steve, “except they’ve got Kalashnikovs.” Sure enough, when we return to the lodge that night, the police are gone, the matter dropped.

But the weather threatens to close again, and we don't know if we'll get another clear shot at the peak.

The following morning, after much cajoling and wheedling, we convince Gulmarg's director to let us use a Snow Cat to get up the mountain. All the gear, the whole crew (plus Firouz, Muhammed, and Firdous, our intrepid guides) pack onto a deck the size of a kitchen table on the back of the Cat. Grinding gears and belching diesel smoke, we set off. Holding on for dear life, we climb pitches, tilt over sidehills, seem constantly on the point of flipping, or falling off and being run over by the huge Cat tracks. Everyone is holding on to everyone else, achieving a chaotic sort of equilibrium, screaming at the top of their lungs.

The Cat takes us high up above the gondola mid-station, close to 11,000 feet, drops us off and heads down again. The unfiltered sunlight is blinding, and burns my skin instantly. The snow-capped peaks of the Pir Panjal, stretching north toward the Karakorams, fill the horizon, and a mile below the floor of the Kashmir Valley is a snow-dusted patchwork of frozen rice paddies. It is an exquisite, infinite view, and fraught with danger. Beauty veiled with peril, the allure that has gotten explorers and empires tangled up in this region for centuries. There is no avalanche control here at all, and even from 2,500 vertical feet below the ridgeline, massive cornices and huge natural slides are visible. And then, sucker hole, the weather closes in on us and it begins to snow again. We can barely see past a hundred yards.

We huddle in a group, trying to decide the best move. Steve and the crew are reluctant to turn back from the ridgeline quest — outskiing avalanches is one of the signatures of a TGR film, after all. But they have skied treacherous faces and have seen people hurt or killed. They know they can't rail against weather and luck too much.

The boys decide to make the best of the situation. They find a lovely cabin in the woods, and build a huge ramp adjacent to it. Hitting it lengthwise, they ski along the roofline and fly off into space, across the front yard, over a spiked fence, and down the hill. Dash knocks a hole through his lip that would require stitches if we were anywhere near a hospital. He holds a bloody snowball to it instead. Micah sticks the landing a few feet past the spiked fence. "You should see what I do on vacation," he says, laughing.

Skiing down through the woods as the light fades, I spook a beautiful dark brown Himalayan fox, which runs directly in front of me. It turns down the fall-line, and I chase it at top speed, 10 feet behind as it flies down through huge trees and sends up a spray of powder behind it. There is no one around, and I follow close and fast on its heels like a hound until it darts between two trees and disappears. The moment alone with the fox seems one of the hard-won epiphanies that coming out to a place like Kashmir makes possible, a small gift from the unforgiving mountains.