

# GULMARG—KASHMIR—INDIA

By Thomas Lang

THESE are many ski-ing countries where the methods of arriving at one's ski-ing destination are entirely different. In England one goes to Switzerland or Austria—braving the Channel, and placing one's fate in the hands of the French railway driver—eventually arriving in a slightly shattered condition. In Eastern Canada and North European countries one expects to find ski-ing at one's door step, and in Australia, railway and up-to-date automobile transport carries one to the various ski-ing centres. But Gulmarg in India, is perhaps the most unique ski-ing centre in the world.

Gulmarg is two hundred miles by car from the rail head at Rawalpindi. The road climbs over the Murree Hills and down to Kohala, after which it follows along beside the river Jhelum. The road ends at Tangmarg (6,500 feet) where visitors are met by a mob of wild-eyed coolies who are more than anxious to be allowed to carry one's baggage up to the hotel. For the equivalent of eight pence they will carry a very heavy load, but they are very careful not to overburden themselves so that their friends may earn something as well. Ponies are provided for visitors to ride up the steep road to Gulmarg itself, although one may walk, but that is a very strenuous undertaking, and not advisable after a long journey.

On arrival at Gulmarg (8,500 feet) through the "Residency Gap"—the extraordinary similarity to Switzerland is noticeable. The name Gulmarg means "rose pasture," and the place could be mistaken for a typical Swiss "Alp." Normally it is a summer resort for those who are fortunate enough to escape the scorching heat of summer on "the plains" of India. A golf course has been laid out and in winter parts of it form a good practice ground for ski-ing. The summer residential houses consist of small wooden bungalows and a large hotel "Nedous"—which is famous throughout India. It has been constructed from light timber, and in winter can be very cold, but the management have made and are making improvements, and stoves are fitted to every room as well as heavy rugs covering the windows. In the evening one wears the warmest clothes possible—dinner jackets are not worn.

The hotel building does not include bedrooms—but small wooden huts have been built round the hotel. It must be remembered that these were built for use during the summer, and consequently one must not object to draughts. Excellent wood burning "Canadian" stoves have been built in each bedroom, and an abundant supply of firewood is always at hand. There is a bath room attached to each room but one generally has a bath (in a large tin tub) in front of the fire. Beds, mattresses and furniture are provided but it is necessary to bring one's own roll of bedding—a thing which everyone possesses and always uses everywhere in India.

The cuisine is very good—especially when one considers the tremendous difficulty of keeping meals hot while being taken from the kitchens across a road and into the hotel dining room. "Hot-plates" are provided to keep the food warm in the hotel. Lunch boxes are provided for those who wish to lunch up at the Khillanmarg or elsewhere.

The usual day's programme is to hire a coolie costing 8 annas to carry one's ski and rucksack up through the wood; this may sound a lazy method of ski-ing, but it is easier to walk on foot, and one does arrive at the Khillanmarg after an hour's climb feeling comparatively fresh.

The vertical ascent from the hotel to Khillanmarg is about 1,500 feet, and a good climbing track is soon stamped out for everyone to walk on. The ski hut, built for the Ski Club of India on the edge of the Khillanmarg (10,000 feet) was built during the summer of 1932 to replace the old hut which was destroyed by a spring avalanche. The "Marg" or "Alp" is a gentle slope about three miles wide—which, gradually steepening as it rises up the mountain side, finally becomes extremely precipitous, but quite safe for ski-ing except after a heavy fall of snow or a strong wind. With good snow conditions it would be difficult to find a better centre for ski-ing outside European countries. It is not unlike Switzerland with its fir and pine trees, and, as fortunately the trees do not grow close together, several excellent runs may be found through the wood back to the hotel. In a normal year there is usually sufficient snow on which to ski even at Gulmarg, but occasionally the snow arrives late in December, and until then the ski-ing is difficult above the trees as there are many rocks which remain uncovered, as well as those which are only just covered by the snow and which are the most dangerous. Above the hut the ski-ing is good, and it is possible to obtain a continuous downhill run of over 5,500 feet, depending upon the height to which one climbs on the Apharwart. The area of the Khillanmarg and its neighbouring slopes is not very large, but nearby there seem to be excellent mountains for ski-ing. Ferozepur Nulla is said to be a good tour, but unfortunately it is rather a long one-day expedition in winter. Perhaps the Ski Club of India will be able to build another hut, so as to enable tours to be made in this district. Thus the area of Gulmarg would be increased considerably and excellent ski-ing country opened up. The slopes of the neighbouring district appear to be even better than the Khillanmarg ones, but it was not possible for the writer to gain first hand knowledge of them during the winter of 1933.

Although the slope of Khillanmarg itself is comparatively gentle, both above and below are steep slopes. Climbing the Marg one comes to the lower slopes of Apharwart, and the higher one goes the

finer the run down. There are several runs down the mountain, the best known being "Christmas Gully" and "Lone Tree Slope." The former gives one a grand run down a comparatively narrow and steep gully for about 2,000 feet, before emerging on to "Lillywhite Shoulder," which gives one a further 1,200 feet on to the Marg. This run is really excellent as a rule, except after a high wind, when the gully quickly becomes wind-swept. "Lone Tree Slope" gives one a run of some 3,000 feet down a fairly wide shoulder, seldom wind-swept or crusty, and a grand place to practice turns.

Below Khillanmarg one can run down to Gulmarg by a variety of ways. In addition to the two mentioned below, the best known are "Gadarene" and the "Dhobi Ghat," and I would remark that "Gadarene" is steep enough to kill most adventurous swine. The top 300 feet has a slope of about 35 degrees, the run then eases out running down through the trees to the summer residence of Major Hadow. This run, really, is a continuation of the "Lone Tree" run. The "Dhobi Ghat" run is seldom used, as one arrives out at the bottom faced with a Langlauf of about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  miles to the hotel. It includes some really steep descents in fairly thick forest, and is not recommended to beginners.

There are also several other excellent runs of considerable length, amongst which should be mentioned the various runs from the neighbourhood of "Lone Tree" hill down to different parts of the Ferozepore Nullah, and also the outstanding run in a north westerly direction from the top of Apharwat mountain down to the frozen lakes, and thence for about five miles with a descent of 4,000 feet to Ningle Nullah and so back to Gulmarg.

The enterprising Ski Club of India—founded in 1928 and with a membership of 192 members during 1933—has done excellent work, organized by its ex-president, Major Hadow, and by Captain Bake-well, who supervised the arduous task of removing fallen timber and of clearing two runs through the wood as well as building the new hut in 1932. Each run is clearly marked with red and blue signs which have been blazed on the trees, so there is little possibility of losing the way. The two runs are really excellent—the red run is the better of the two—steep in places, but sufficiently wide enough to allow turns to be made.

On the higher mountain slopes of Mount Apharwat there is always the danger of avalanches of new snow and wind slab—the latter variety has been known to occur, as occasionally the district is swept by high winds; large avalanches have been known to sweep across the gentle slopes of the Khillanmarg and uproot trees on the edge of the wood.

There are two ski meetings each winter; at Christmas and in March when the usual downhill and slalom races are held, as well as a Services Trophy—consisting of a combined downhill and slalom race for teams of two from each of the Services stationed in India. This trophy is competed for during the March meeting, when there are always excellent spring conditions with deep snow everywhere. Langlauf and jumping have not yet

made their appearance at Gulmarg, mainly owing to the shortness of each meeting and the altitude being rather too high for langlauf; although to those who could become acclimatized it should not be too great a strain. It would be possible to lay a good 18-kilometre langlauf at Gulmarg, as the country is ideal for long distance racing, and it would be almost a unique site for a course, as most of it could be seen from one control position. Jumping has not been attempted mainly owing to lack of jumping ski and the shortness of each meeting; perhaps next year there may be a small band of enthusiasts who will want to learn this branch of ski-ing. But the country is ideal for downhill and slalom racing, slopes of thirty degrees or more on the Khillanmarg and in the wood. Slalom racing has an equally high standard and all open slaloms are set with the intention of being fully up to the standard of those set in Europe. Ski-joring races are also organized on the Gulmarg polo ground when there is sufficient and not too much snow.

A ski-ing holiday at Gulmarg is not expensive, when the distance from Rawalpindi and the heavy freightage on all supplies carried up to the hotel is taken into consideration. The cost of staying ten days at Nedou's is approximately Rs. 250 (about £20) including the cost of sharing a hired car from Rawalpindi and return, as well as a modest wine bill and sharing a "bearer" or man servant. If a party of three or four travel up together the cost of a car is not so great for each person. Nedous charge Rs. 12 a day (about £1 sterling) to non-members, and Rs. 9 per day to members of the Ski Club of India. By joining the ski club members are given reliable information about the club meetings, the details of road transport as well as other useful advice. An extra subscription of Rs. 10 is charged to those members who visit Gulmarg during the season. Those who are in India and wish to visit Gulmarg during the winter should communicate with the honorary secretary, Ski Club of India, care of Grindlays, Peshawar Cantt, N.W.F.P. India, and they will obtain accurate information as to the club's arrangements for the season. This article is not intended to give detailed particulars of the ski-ing arrangements but is only a general outline of the ski-ing at Gulmarg. There are other small centres in parts of India, but the writer has not visited them. Should a ski-ing holiday at Gulmarg be contemplated, it is advisable to bring one's own ski-ing kit, and a supply of ski wax. Waxes may be obtained at Pestongees Ski Shop, but are expensive owing to the 50 per cent customs duty. Ski can be hired from the shop, but it is always more satisfactory to have one's own. Steel, brass or fibre edges are satisfactory—as occasionally the snow is hard—especially in March before it has melted to form spring snow. Ski and kit may be bought from Messrs. Pestongee, and the quality of their ski and accessories is very reliable.

In conclusion to those visiting India during the winter and having nostalgia for the greatest of all sports, I can promise that Gulmarg will not be a disappointment, and really good ski-ing may be enjoyed between the end of December and April.