



PASSAGE TO INDIA
Micah Black, Dash Long,
and Ashley Call float past the
Taj Mahal en route to India's
disputed Kashmir region

Journey to KASHMIR

What happens when you try to make ski porn in a war zone? When the gonzo filmmakers of Teton Gravity Research noticed the ski patrol carrying Kalashnikovs, they knew they were on the right track.



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 — it's like being inside a gingerbread fantasy, or a snow globe.

But really 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

troops have been fighting a Pakistan-backed guerrilla turf war since 1989.

The woods are perfectly quiet now except for the staccato whir of a WWII-era 16mm Arriflex camera, the type used to film bombing runs and the Normandy landings. The film crew is waiting and watching. When suddenly the silence is shattered by a whooping cry from the trees above. "And...dropping!"

A skier flies through the air, launches off the roofline of the cabin, flips around 180 degrees, and soars 15 feet backward over a spiked metal fence, before crashing in an explosion of snow 50 feet down the hill.

Welcome to Kashmir, the final frontier of extreme skiing.



RAISING THE ROOF American extreme skier Micah Black, who appears in nearly every Teton Gravity Research film, flies over a cabin while freeskiing in Gulmarg, Kashmir

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 this fall. Kashmir's extra dose of danger — it's got avalanches plus armed insurgents — was irresistible to these guys. They wanted to push the envelope, and this seemed like a logical destination. They are here to trek, ski, and film in the peaks above the alpine village of Gulmarg, 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 as we arrive the Indian government is currently pitching in to finish construction on 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. Despite recent progress and peace overtures between India and Pakistan, roadside bombings and assassinations are still weekly occurrences here in Kashmir.

The crew's ultimate goal is to reach the 13,800-

HERE IN KASHMIR, WE'RE OPERATING ON A WHOLE DIFFERENT SCALE OF RISK. HUNDREDS OF PEOPLE HAVE ALREADY BEEN KILLED IN SLIDES THIS WINTER.

foot ridge above Gulmarg, a three-mile-long, avalanche-riven face with 60-degree chutes and a view across the disputed border to Pakistan. 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 a rash of deadly avalanches dubbed the "snow tsunami" by local papers. 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

one massive avalanche wiped out four giant electrical towers, blocked the only tunnel leading to India proper, and killed 13 Indian soldiers.

Steve, 35, a wound-up dynamo of a man, voices an appropriate reaction to the situation: "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 and cinematographers Matt Herriger and Dustin Handley. The pro athletes along for the trip are extreme-skiing legend Micah Black, 35; Alaska snowboarder Ashley Call, 25; and 19-year-old trick-ski wunderkind Dashiell "Dash" Long.

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, 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. The hotel's formally attired staff bemusedly watch Dash climb to the top. Apparently corporate liability is not a great concern.

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 and pauses as the hotel staff applauds. They confirm 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 Matt 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



LICENSE TO CHILL (From left) Dustin Handley, Matt Herriger, and Micah Black hitch a ride on a Kashmiri snowcat

“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. They provide no contrast and are very difficult to capture on film, and are also known, says Matt, as “shitbird.”

We stop at the Kashmir Alpine Ski Shop, a hut stocked with piles of ancient equipment left by visitors. Yaseen Khan, the 50-something, hookah-smoking, Kashmir-proselytizing proprietor, saw Gulmarg at its peak, when Bollywood films were shot here in the late 1970s and thousands of tourists came every winter. He also saw it at its worst, during the early 1990s — 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 Vökl 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 who still wears old-fashioned glacier glasses. We tell Yaseen we want to go for the top of the ridge. It can be skied, even in these conditions, he says, but the risks are real. “First mistake, last mistake,” he tells us, 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 in one slip off the trail, you could just disappear. We all have avalanche transceivers, shovels, and avalanche probes.

“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.” Almost everyone in the group has been hurt, seen people killed, or lost friends. Only two months earlier, Micah’s friend Brent Newton was buried in a cliff-jumping accident in Jackson Hole, and despite Micah’s resuscitation

attempts, Newton died from head injuries and collapsed lungs. Steve was dragged by an avalanche in Valdez, Alaska, in 1998.

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. Hundreds of people have already been killed in slides this winter; in February alone, there were at least 300 deaths. The weather goes

through drastic swings, with visibility often reduced to a few yards in a matter of seconds. For us, snowed in with no communication to the outside world, any help would be extremely slow in coming.

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

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 synch, communicating by radio in a film-geek/ski-bum patois, often spoken in a faux-European accent. The Kashmiri porters, Mohammed and Mr. Firouz, had already picked up the catch-phrase mantra of TGR: Trekking up the hill, Micah calls back to them, and they replied 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 aerial choreography usually reserved for terrain parks. When Dash lands backward off one jump, Mr. Firouz exclaims in delight: “He made change in the air!” With that, a new term is coined, and a backward landing, called “switch” in fusion-skiing parlance, will forevermore be known as “change” to the boys at TGR.

The Battle for Kashmir

A DECADES-LONG WAR HAS CLAIMED THOUSANDS OF LIVES AND PRECIOUS TOURISM DOLLARS



The origins of the bloody Kashmir conflict date to 1947, when the Islamic state of Pakistan was carved from the remains of British India. The Hindu maharaja who ruled the 95-percent-Muslim Kashmir Valley was given the option of joining either Pakistan or India, or remaining an independent kingdom. As he was (very slowly) deciding, Pakistan invaded from the north and India swept in from the south, touching off five decades of conflict.

An independence uprising, sup-

ported by Pakistan, took place in 1989; it has been repeatedly crushed by the Indian Army in a cycle of terrorism and military retribution that has claimed as many as 60,000 lives. In 2002 the nuclear-armed neighbors stepped to the brink of WWII before signing a cease-fire. Today, despite peace talks, bombings and gunfights are a frequent occurrence along the de facto border between the two countries.

Gulmarg, a remote hill station, has largely been spared the violence, but

the impact of a 98 percent drop in tourism has economically devastated the town. Gulmarg’s gondola, begun in the late 1980s during a time of optimism for the region, lay half-completed for over a decade. The lower section went online in 1997, becoming the only one in the world with armed guards and a metal detector at the gate. The upper section was under construction since the 2002 cease-fire, and was completed this past May — attracting, it is hoped, a new generation of powder-mad visitors. —M.P.



EXTREME TOURISM (Clockwise from above) American Dash Long and local skiers Hamid Dar and Mr. Firouz at the gondola; Micah Black explodes through Himalayan powder; gondola rules, Gulmarg; TGR's Steve Jones, Dustin Handley, Matt Herriger, and Black, from left, Hotel Highlands Park, where TGR waited out a blizzard

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 frequent reminders of the war. Trekking back along a road later in the day, we come across an Indian army patrol, carrying AK-47s and wearing cheap glacier glasses as they slog the other way, in search of roadside bombs or insurgents trying to sneak across the border

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.” An oil painting of Arnold Palmer in his prime hangs on one wall. 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. Although the proprietors are Muslim, Kashmiris are first and foremost mer-

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. Steve still has safety on the mind: “Careful. That Indian beer is 8.25 percent. At altitude.” Gulmarg has not witnessed a debauch like this in 15 years, and while the Kashmiri staff thinks these Americans are a bit crazy, they seem genuinely happy to have us as guests.

A KASHMIRI POLICE COMMANDER AT THE HEAD OF AN ARMED PATROL APPROACHES ME. “ALL FOREIGNERS ARE ORDERED TO LEAVE GULMARG IMMEDIATELY.”

through the mountains.

I ask Micah how the group lets off steam in 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

chants. They don’t drink, but they have no qualms about letting visitors indulge.

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

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 lifts, 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 ridge is visible at last, the thin line of the half-built gondola snaking up the spine of the mountain. Everybody is excited to get up top. But as we're about 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 Mr. 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 we certainly aren't going anywhere on the first clear day we've seen. "If you do not go down," he shouts, "I will push you down!"

While Mr. 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 ridge.

The following morning, after much cajoling and wheedling, we convince Gulmarg's director to let us use a snowcat to get up the mountain. All the gear, the whole crew (plus 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. We climb pitches and tilt over sidehills, constantly on the point of flipping, or falling off and being run over by the huge cat tracks.



THE HIGH LIFE Dash Long goes airborne above Gulmarg

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 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 range, stretching north toward the Karakorams, fill the horizon, and a mile below the floor of the Kashmir Valley is a snow-dusted patch-

work of frozen rice paddies. It is an exquisite, infinite view, and fraught with danger. 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. Before long, we can barely see past a hundred yards.

Huddled in a group, we contemplate our options. 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 enough treacherous faces and have seen enough people hurt or killed that they know they can't rail against weather and luck too much.

Micah, Dash, and Ashley aren't the least bit deterred. 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.

The snow is exquisite, falling fast and silent among the huge old trees, and the cameramen track shot after shot of the boys launching off the roof into space and down the hill. It is hard work, trying to make a film with Himalayan light and Indian politics, but everyone has fallen in love with the magic of this place, and the creative mission, at last, has been achieved. Steve, waist deep in powder in his Kashmiri outfit, looks above us into the swirling whiteness that obscures the high ridgeline. "I'm coming back here. Definitely." Ⓜ

The Laws of Gravity

AFTER 10 YEARS, TETON GRAVITY RESEARCH IS STILL MASTER OF THE EXTREME

It's been 10 years since Teton Gravity Research revived the ski-movie industry — like a shot of epinephrine — with *Continuum*, the first of 18 films charged with no-you-didn't footage, driving punk soundtracks, and new-school ski and snowboard stars. TGR's latest feature, *Tangerine Dream*, premiered September 17 in Jackson, Wyoming, and goes on a national tour in October. Kashmir is showcased in *Tangerine Dream*, along with Turkey, Switzerland, France, Alaska, Utah, Wyoming, and Colorado.

TGR was founded near Jackson Hole by brothers Steve and Todd Jones and their friends Corey Gavitt and Dirk Collins. They spent their

early twenties ski-bumming around the American West and earning travel money by working on Alaskan long-lining fishing boats in the off-season. By the early 1990s they were guiding heli-skiing clients in Valdez, Alaska.

Dissatisfied with what they saw as the commercialized, buttoned-up world of ski films, and taking cues from the stylistic revolution being led by snowboarding, they decided to make their own film. They used their fishing funds to buy their first Arriflex camera, and even though none of them had gone to film school, they began shooting. "There was a lot of trial and error, loading film backwards, but I think our



lack of technical background made us look at things differently," says Steve Jones.

Skiing was what they knew, and they had a vision to take it further than other filmmakers, with pro racers like Jeremy Nobis straightlining 60-degree slopes in the Alaskan Chugach and Micah Black catapulting off cliffs in Norway. One of the premier big-mountain snowboarders in the world, Jeremy Jones, appears in most of their films — and also happens to be the

youngest member of the Jones clan.

Each shot is a sublime, almost-perfect example of balls-to-the-wall free skiing: vast cliffs, treacherous couloirs, tiny figures outskiing avalanches. With less than one percent of footage making it into a final film, the amount of work — and patience — this relentless perfectionism requires is stunning. "Now it's a real business, and I get to ski a hell of a lot less," says Jones. "But that's the price of going professional." —M.P.