

TRAVEL

SATURDAY, MAY 1, 2010

16

In a classroom just a few hundred meters from the towering niche that once housed a giant Buddha statue, someone has pinned up a poster detailing the attributes of a good ski guide: optimistic, articulate, patient, reliable, active, cheerful, punctual and extroverted.

Sitting around a table in the middle of the room, the 10 young men who hope to become Afghanistan's first ski guides are being taught how to avoid avalanches, and the importance of taking enough food and water on trips up the snow-capped mountains that loom over the town of Bamiyan.

They have all the poster's key attributes in spades. Indeed, it's hard to think of a more agreeable bunch of enthusiastic young men, who chatter in excellent English. The only problem is the one characteristic they all lack: the ability to ski.

Last week, they had their first taste of the rapidly melting spring snow, out on the slopes of the stunning Koh-e-Baba mountain range. Their motley collection of borrowed and secondhand skis had been carted up the lush valley on the back of a donkey. The rookie skiers had ignored the classroom guidance to layer up, and hit the slopes wearing jeans and fake designer tops. Soon they were shivering.

They had just half a dozen pairs of skis, two pairs of which were borrowed from an American couple, Chad Dear and Laurie Ashley, ski consultants who believe central Afghanistan has some of the best "outback skiing" in the world. The shortage of equipment is a problem, and the mix of Telemark and alpine skis had been partly supplemented by a few pairs of "bazaar skis," lethal wooden planks knocked up by enthusiastic local carpenters. With the bindings little more than a few leather straps and the undersurface wrapped with metal, the overall effect is terrifying, as I discovered when I tried them.

"Jon, you've never done this either!" was the crushing verdict of Abdullah Mahmood, a 25-year-old novice skier, after he had watched me flounder around for a traumatic 10 minutes during which I wondered whether, despite decades of skiing experience, the sport was finally about to claim a broken leg from me.

These are the deeply humble beginnings out of which Bamiyan, an impoverished but heart-stoppingly beautiful province, hopes to develop a robust ski industry. There is serious weight behind the plan to encourage winter "ecotourism" here, including the province's governor, the Aga Khan Development Network and the New Zealand government (the country has troops in the province).

Dear, a development worker from Montana, says that in a few years' time Bamiyan could boast ski-rental businesses (which will probably rely,



This photograph taken in 2008 shows the cave-monasteries of Bamiyan and the niches where the 53m-tall Buddhas, which were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, once stood. PHOTO: AFP

at least to start with, on the charity of the big ski manufacturers), a nursery slope with a simple tow-lift to drag beginners to the top, and maybe even some heliskiing. To start with, it is hoped that a mix of Afghans and foreigners working in Kabul will help pump-prime a ski industry, after which Bamiyan will be ready for the world. "We hope that people in Europe and the US will put it on their five-year wish list," Dear says.

He and Ashley are currently spending several days a week exploring Bamiyan's unskied peaks, with the aim of publishing a guidebook later in the year giving adventure skiers some basic information on what the Koh-e-Baba range has to offer. And while it would be easy to be cynical about trying to establish skiing in a war zone, after spending a few days with Dear, Ashley and the would-be ski guides, I am soon swept up in their enthusiasm.

For a particular type of tourist, Bamiyan is quite a draw. But it will never appeal to those who like the chairlifts, restaurants and creature comforts of a European or American mega-resort. In Bamiyan, if you want to get to the top of slope you have to propel yourself, using Telemark skis where the ankle is free to move up and down and synthetic skins are attached to the bottom. It's the sort of old-school skiing that would have been familiar to skiers in the Alps in the 1950s: a day of grueling ascent for perhaps just one or two runs back down to the bottom. But it's worth it, says Dear: "The terrain here is just fantastic in so many ways, and we have only been exploring the eight valleys that are closest to Bamiyan center. There are literally thousands of opportunities for beginners and experts."

Dear thinks many tourists will elect to stay above the snowline for days, skiing over huge areas, overnighing in shelters used by farmers in the summer that could be converted into winter refuges. And it's a fair bet that Bamiyan's apres-ski scene will never boast beery Brits, downing gluhwein at the bottom of the chairlifts as the sun sets over the mountains. Instead it's chai, and maybe some rice, naan and greasy meat on the roof of a farmer's house.

What Dear calls the "apres-tea" experience would be worth a holiday in itself. First of all, the scenery is extraordinary. Below the snowy peaks, farmers living in mud houses busily plough their fields with ox teams. The sense of time travel is only broken with the occasional sighting of a satellite dish, a sign that, after years of neglect, things are starting to pick up here. And that is the other benefit of skiing in Bamiyan — contributing much-needed cash to subsistence farmers in the high, isolated valleys of a poor and neglected province that could use all the help it can get. Not only were the famous giant Buddhas blown up by the Taliban in 2001; the fundamentalist militia was also responsible for massacres of the largely Hazara population (Afghanistan's most put-upon ethnic group).

Today Bamiyan is an island of security in a country where insurgency has spread like a virus, and the valley is Afghanistan's main (or rather, only) tourist attraction. Visitors don't come simply for the World Heritage site where the Buddhas used to stand, but also the lakes and extraordinary natural dams of Band-e-Amir. The young men who aspire to be ski guides already try to make ends meet by showing tourists the main sites in the summer.

But despite Bamiyan's considerable charms, the summer tourism market does not add up to much: Last year its historic sites were visited by 1,560 Afghans and 756 foreigners (slightly down on 2008, probably because of disruption caused by last year's presidential election). Even those low numbers generates around US\$250,000 a year in the three hotels the tourist authorities have information on.

But Amir Foladi, manager of the Bamiyan ecotourism program, wants to see that increase. He hopes that by 2015 the 116 hotel beds currently available will have increased to 1,000, creating at least 1,000 jobs. He expects 10,000 foreign visitors and 100,000 Afghans to come each year, generating around US\$5 million for the valley, excluding income from drivers, restaurants and handicraft shops.

That's big money for Bamiyan, and it would make tourism its third major source of income, behind agriculture and mining. "It's all about getting Bamiyan ready, helping hotel owners improve their facilities, so that when we are ready to receive more tourists it will be the people of Bamiyan who benefit and not outsiders," says Foladi.

And the wind is in Bamiyan's sails, with various plans to make the valley more accessible. Currently there are two main land routes from Kabul: the slow but safe road via the Sibber Pass, which despite being only 200km takes a grueling eight hours, or the relatively fast but potentially lethal four-hour road trip through Taliban territory to the south.

The Sibber Pass route, which takes travelers



A man rides his donkey beside the Band-e-Amir lakes on the outskirts of Bamiyan. The lakes rank as one of Afghanistan's most astounding natural attractions. PHOTO: AFP

through some unforgettable landscapes, is currently being flattened and widened by hundreds of workers, most of whom were last week inexplicably wearing fluorescent orange Royal Mail jackets. When the road is finished and covered with asphalt, the whole journey should take less than four hours — a much more attractive proposition for weekenders from Kabul who want a few days' skiing.

The country's airlines are being lobbied to start commercial flights, which may one day land at a new airport out of town. That will replace the current dirt airstrip — among the hazards of flying into Bamiyan is livestock wandering on to the runway.

And it's just possible that Bamiyan may get its Buddhas back — although this is currently the subject of a debate among conservationists, over whether the statues should be pieced back together from recovered fragments, or rebuilt afresh. Foladi says he favors the reconstruction of one Buddha, leaving one empty niche as a permanent reminder of unhappier times.

But will Bamiyan ever become more than a summer destination, even with these improvements? Ken Adams, Bamiyan's first ever ski tourist, thinks so.

A former ski industry worker in the French Alps, he is now a project manager for an NGO in Kabul. Paying just US\$30 a night for a hotel room, he skied for seven days in Bamiyan this spring. Despite some hairy moments involving avalanches, he reckons Bamiyan is the place for anyone who wants "some pretty challenging skiing."

"For everyone else, there is just the sheer amount of snow and a season that in a normal year should continue until late May or early June," he says.

The big unknown is whether Afghans will take up skiing in any numbers. Dear and Ashley say the locals, who are already fond of sledding on homemade *yakhmolaks* and other winter games, have been enthusiastic. With everything under snow for five months of the year, they could certainly do with more winter distractions, says Foladi.

And skiing is not totally unknown in Afghanistan. Afghans got involved in the sport back in the 1960s and 1970s, when it was last popularized by foreigners. In those days Kabul's diplomatic classes headed for the slopes at weekends at a mini-resort close to the capital. The piste even had its own basic rope-tow and was serviced by restaurants, tea shops and even a sunbathing area for the foreigners. Various ski clubs, including one run by the ministry of education and another by Kabul University, raced against each other. With the Soviet invasion of 1979, and the national resistance that rose up to fight it, the area was soon seeded with landmines and became unusable.

Mohammad Yousuf Kargar first encountered skiing as a young boy when he saw a German employee of Siemens throwing himself down a hill in Kabul. He has kept the sport going, at least within his own family. Now the national football team coach, Kargar tested the slopes of Bamiyan for the first time this winter. But he believes Bamiyan is still too far away from Kabul to be the focus of a skiing rebirth. Instead he takes his family to the Salang, a mountain pass north of Kabul. "The government really needs to take a strong decision to redevelop the old piste outside Kabul," he says. "In the meantime I am taking my family in the Salang because I don't want this sport to die in Afghanistan."

Even though Bamiyan is so untouched by violence that it feels like another country, Dear's hope that it might be ready for foreign visitors in five years seems optimistic at a time when the Taliban insurgency continues to strengthen.

Around the time I was embarrassing myself on the wooden skis, Kandahar city was rocked by a massive vehicle bomb parked outside a hotel. I was blissfully unaware of another terrible day in Afghanistan's second city as we trudged down muddy fields towards our apres-ski lunch. Later that day, a compound housing foreign contractors was attacked by an even bigger bomb.

Adams wonders whether it might be possible to fly into Kabul airport and then transfer directly on to a Bamiyan flight — essentially isolating the province from the rest of the country as far as foreign tourists are concerned. But, as Dear says, Bamiyan can only remain a bubble for so long. "You've just got to have hope that things are going to get better in Afghanistan. If the country goes down, Bamiyan will go with it."

Correction: Urban Nomad Film Festival's (城市游牧影展) opening party takes place tonight from 8pm at Warehouse E3 (烏梅酒廠) at Huashan 1914 Creative Park (華山1914), not at nearby Legacy Taipei, as stated in an article published on Page 13 of yesterday's *Taipei Times*. We regret the error. For more information, go to urbannomadfilmfest.blogspot.com

Afghanistan's slopes: the new destination

It's one of the world's most dangerous countries and certainly not an obvious tourist destination. But Afghanistan has a burgeoning new industry — skiing

BY JON BOONE
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

