

Skiing in Afghanistan - it's one hour up and two minutes down

There's no ski lift and no chalets, but a growing number of adventurous skiers are heading to Afghanistan for virgin snow and warm hospitality

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"I am like a mountain goat!" says 24-year-old Ali Shah Farhang, smiling broadly. "When I was very young, I would walk for five hours every day to school and back, five hours across the peaks in all kinds of weather: minus 20 degrees, through deep snow, all on my own. These mountains are in my blood."

The vibrant young Afghan is sharing the story of his rapid rise to sporting glory as we sit in bright, spring sunshine, drinking green chai from a battered thermos. We're high up on a hillside by the crumbling shell of a hotel, looking out across the valley towards the towering [Buddha niches of Bamiyan](#), in the Hazarajat region of central Afghanistan.



 Bamiyan, home to the Buddha niches. Photograph: Simon Urwin /Sidetracked.com



 Ali Shah, Afghanistan's number one skier. Photograph: Simon Urwin/Sidetracked.com

Pointing at the cliffs where the 6th-century statues were dynamited and destroyed by the Taliban in 2001, he explains: “When you live in a country like Afghanistan, you have a different way of thinking about danger. I think this is another one of the reasons why I am a good skier. I am a fearless person; I love the excitement of it all. I am a speed freak.”

Growing up in the hamlet of Kushkak in the mountains nearby, Ali Shah was accustomed to spending the winter months working as a shepherd and tending to his family’s flock. That was until he picked up a pair of skis for the first time. “An Italian came to the Bamiyan Ski Club (a project funded by a charitable organisation to help develop tourism in the area) and I got the chance to go ski training, which was very serious, very tough. But I loved it. It came very naturally to me.”

Four years on he now boasts the title of Afghanistan’s number one skier and reigning champion of the annual [Afghan Ski Challenge](#), the only competition of its kind in the country. “I feel freedom when I’m skiing; freedom from the restrictions and repressions of my country.”

Alongside a small group of equally enthusiastic and talented countrymen, Ali Shah is now using his knowledge of the mountains and his skills on the snow working as a ski guide, serving the increasing number of foreigners who come to Bamiyan looking for an adrenaline fix with a difference.

“I think Bamiyan is perhaps the fastest-growing ski destination in the world,” he jokes. “Before, no one came here, now every year in February and March we are welcoming more and more adventurous visitors from Australia, New Zealand, the UK, France, Germany, Switzerland and even the US, sometimes as many as 30 people in one month. They love the dry snow, the fast runs, the jumping from rocks when they go off-piste; Afghanistan is a real challenge, even for experienced skiers.”



Adventurers on the slopes during a ski tour. Photograph: James Robertson/Sidetracked.com

To access the vast swathes of virgin snow here, Ali Shah takes skiers on foot up the steep slopes of the Koh-e Baba range, part of the [Hindu Kush](#), where peaks soar to almost 5,000 metres.

“We are yet to build a ski lift,” he laughs. “So, it’s one hour to go up and just two minutes to get down again! But there are no complaints. I take lamb and chicken kebabs in my backpack to share during the climb. On the way we see beautiful landscapes and experience the local way of life: boys looking after their goats; people carrying water home on their donkeys. It’s totally unique.”

Initially, there were fears among the more conservative members of the local population about westerners coming into their midst. “Some worried about infidels coming here, trying to change them to Christians, but their opinion soon changed,” he says. Now they are more likely to welcome travellers into their homes to drink tea and eat biscuits, while young village boys are particularly enthusiastic about going head to head on the slopes.



Skis fashioned from planks of wood. Photograph: James Robertson/Sidetrapped.com

“They decided to copy us - making their own skis from planks of wood and tying them to their shoes with fabric and rope. Skiing with them is all part of the fun of being here.”

From his own humble beginnings, Ali Shah has now reached the lofty heights of an invitation to train in St Moritz, Switzerland, with a view to representing his homeland in the next Winter Olympics. “That’s my dream, to win a gold medal and be the hero of all Afghanistan.”

He is just as eager to change the image of Bamiyan in the eyes of the world, “Forget about explosions, this is far away from the crazy mullahs. Come and see for yourselves. You will experience many great things, especially the real Afghan hospitality. Then, when you get home, you can show off your passport stamp, and best of all, tell your friends that you are one of the few people to have ever skied Afghanistan!