

Travel

On location 'Game of Thrones'

The TV series Based on the bestselling *Song of Ice and Fire* novels by George RR Martin, *Game of Thrones* is set in the fictional continents of Westeros and Essos, where rival clans fight for supremacy. Jokingly described as "The Sopranos in Middle Earth", HBO's cult hit is now entering its third season, and fans are preparing themselves for more tales of dark intrigue.

The locations Over the past two series, destinations as diverse as Malta, Croatia, Morocco and Iceland have stood in for Westeros and Essos, but the production is firmly anchored in Belfast, where most of the filming takes place. The show has been something of a bonanza for the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, acting as an international showcase for local attractions such as the Mourne Mountains, where scenes in the city of Vaes Dothrak are shot; the 18th-century Gothic mansion Castle Ward (www.nationaltrust.org.uk), which doubles as the ancestral seat of power Winterfell; and Tollymore Forest (www.discovernorthernireland.com), a wooded parkland in County Down that makes a perfect backdrop for outdoor action scenes. Such has been the level of interest from fans of the show that a three-day *Game of Thrones* self-drive itinerary has been developed which takes in major filming locations (www.causewaycoastandglens.com). The new series will see more action beyond "The Wall" that protects the people of the Seven Kingdoms from the wild tribes of the northern wastelands. Cast and crew decamped to the lavafields around Lake Myvatn and the Krafla volcano in the north of Iceland to shoot these scenes. More fortunate colleagues were sent to the balmy climes of Morocco, where the fortifications of the seaside city of Essaouira stand in for Slaver's Bay in Essos.

Where to stay The Europa Hotel (www.hastingshotels.com) is one of the smartest addresses in Belfast, hosting heads of state, VIPs and, more pertinently, last year's *Game of Thrones* fan convention. Most of the show's main locations in Northern Ireland are within a two-hour drive. In Iceland the crew were based at the Hotel Sel (www.myvatn.is) near Lake Myvatn. What it lacks in luxury, it makes up for with its location close to some of Iceland's most stunning volcanic landscapes (pictured below). Essaouira has no shortage of stylish riad hotels and guest houses, many of which have charming roof terraces overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Dar Beida (www.i-escape.com), a retro-styled house in the medina, is a popular base for visiting film crews.

Joanne O'Connor

Tara Fitzgerald, who has joined the cast of 'Game of Thrones', goes walking with the FT, see: www.ft.com/pursuits



Alamy

Kashmir's resurgence as a mainstream travel destination has been much heralded but, on the day I arrive, the scene doesn't look especially welcoming.

It is a chilly spring morning and we plan to visit Gulmarg, the north Indian state's main mountain resort, which now boasts a newly opened luxury hotel to complement its adventurous Himalayan skiing. But even getting out of the airport in the capital Srinagar proves something of a challenge, as our car weaves through barbed-wire barriers and out on to streets lined with camouflaged soldiers wielding automatic weapons.

A generation ago, Indian and international visitors alike flocked to this region, attracted by its soaring mountains, lush flower-dotted valleys and the chance to relax in the wooden houseboats along the edge of Srinagar's Dal lake. But in the late 1980s, local frustrations over rigged elections, economic stagnation and generally shabby treatment by India's government began to boil over. A two-decade Islamic insurgency followed, marked by violent terrorist attacks and many thousands of deaths.

The conflict is complex, dating back – at least – to India's founding in 1947. Kashmir's princely ruler dithered during partition before taking his overwhelmingly Muslim population into India, rather than Pakistan. After an inconclusive war the state was cleaved in two, the Indian portion of which is now known as Jammu and Kashmir.

Today the threat of violence remains: the military presence we observe as we begin our two-hour drive to the mountains is partly a response to mass protests the week before against the execution of a Kashmiri man convicted of involvement in a 2001 terrorist attack.

Yet there are reasons for optimism.

We enjoy run after run of largely untouched fluffy powder, all set against views of the Himalayas

An unsteady peace process has prevailed of late, with a fall in the number of militant attacks. The economy is growing. Investment in roads and infrastructure has increased. And visitors have begun to return.

Last year was one of Kashmir's best for tourism, with chief minister Omar Abdullah heralding the arrival of more than 1m visitors. Just a small fraction were foreign but that number is rising too, helped by the British and Japanese governments removing travel warnings to their citizens.

The state government's hopes are high that this year will prove better still, an expectation bolstered by Abdullah's attendance at the official opening of Gulmarg's Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa last December – the first five-star hotel outside the capital, and only the third in the region.

The resort sits in the Pir Panjal mountain range, a section of the Himalayas renowned for heavy snowfall, and it is the sheer quantity of the stuff that strikes you as you arrive. At least a couple of feet have fallen the previous night, forcing us to swap our car for a rugged 4x4.

The village itself is encircled by snow-encrusted pine trees, while its few low wooden buildings lie half-buried in a deep, unbroken white carpet. A single road snakes through the drifts, populated mostly by local men in heavy cloth ponchos straining to pull tourists behind them on sledges.

Mammoth snowfalls make hotel-building problematic too, hence the Khyber took five years to complete. In truth the place still isn't finished – the pool and spa open in the autumn – but even so, as we enter the teak-panelled atrium the result is impressive and



High time

Will 2013 be the year of Kashmir's tourism revival? By James Crabtree

cups of almond-flavoured Kashmiri *kahwa* tea banish the cold outside.

The 85-room property is the brainchild of Umar Trambo, son of a prominent Kashmiri industrial family, who conceived it as a homage to his homeland with architectural flourishes borrowed from traditional homes and temples. The rooms are decorated with colourful local handicrafts and papier-mâché murals, alongside elegant double-sized sunken bathtubs fit for weary walkers and skiers.

The owners now plan similar properties to entice a high-end clientele. Most will visit in summer, when Gulmarg offers mountain meadow hikes and a chance to play one of the world's highest golf courses; but they come in winter too: the Porsche SUV parked outside (complete with snow chains) suggests the upscale push is beginning to work.

Luxurious surroundings aside, Gulmarg isn't a place for the faint of heart. We experience a feeling of rising intimidation that begins as we commander one of the Khyber's 4x4s the next morning and career down the icy driveway to rent ski equipment.

Almost none of the mountain area is groomed and there is a sufficiently serious avalanche risk to necessitate the hiring of transeivers, shovels and probes as well as extra-wide powder skis. The resort also lies just a few miles from the "line of control" that separates India and Pakistan, meaning a heavy military presence. Uniformed soldiers are occasionally to be seen cutting ahead in the lift line.



Skiers prepare for their descent in Gulmarg, Kashmir (above); waiting for the ski lift (below left); the view from the Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa in Gulmarg (below right)

Jon Wyatt



Just a few dozen people stand, blowing into their gloves, eager to cram into the resort's four-person main lift, which rises to 3,979m. A sign at the middle station tells expectant skiers that they are about to climb into "The Highest Gondola in the World". (This isn't strictly true – there are higher ones elsewhere – but it can claim the record for being the highest ski lift.) Most of those waiting are young, adventurous ski bum types, with cameras attached to their helmets and an assortment of European, Russian and New Zealand accents. A smattering of chain-smoking Kashmiri ski guides stand alongside, an essential addition to any trip outside the region's main avalanche-controlled bowl.

On our first day thick cloud sees the mountain's upper level closed off, leaving our group to navigate the treeline lower sections – a challenge given the metre-deep powder and limited visibility. The next morning, however, the gondola's second stage opens and the ride up to the middle station whisks us above the cloud line, revealing clear skies and distant mountains. Those in the lift queue for the final ride up hoot in anticipation, and with perhaps only 100 others for company, we set off to enjoy run after run of largely untouched fluffy powder, all set against views of the Himalayas.

We rest from time to time at the middle station, to recharge on chocolate sold by enterprising hawkers and watch the Indian tourists emerging from the gondola building, dressed in formal full-length coats and Wellington boots. One elderly couple stop me at the end of a run and ask to take a picture. They have come from the eastern city of Pune, they explain, as we stand posing together – not to ski, just to enjoy the view, walk in the snow and head back down on the lift.

It is almost certainly the best day of skiing I've had in more than two decades on the slopes but, having returned in celebratory mood, we discover that the hotel doesn't serve alcohol – necessitating an icy evening scamper across town to the Highland Park, whose bar provides a meeting point for thirsty foreign visitors.

Outside, an exuberant troop of snow monkeys dash about in search of scraps of food. Inside, it is warm and lively, with heat pouring from two rickety metal wood-burning stoves. We run into Tim O'Leary, an amiable New Zealander with a deep tan, who is the lead guide at Gulmarg's only heli-skiing company. Gulmarg Heliski launched in 2010, another sign of the growing numbers of wealthier visitors. O'Leary hopes that the trend will be accelerated by the Khyber hotel.

"It's going to make a massive difference having accommodation of this quality," he tells me. "If it means Gulmarg now gets just a tiny slice of the market for really rich, adventurous Russian skiers, it will totally change this place, and our business as well."

Back in Srinagar, where we spend our final night in a five-room houseboat on the lake, a similar transformation in Kashmir as a whole seems less likely. A lasting political solution remains elusive, while the threat of violence endures – as demonstrated by a suicide bombing in the city in March.

Yet such things seem far away as we gaze out towards the mountains on the far shore of the lake. Our cheerful host throws more logs on the fire and I think back to my long final run in Gulmarg, carving through deep snow in blissful sunshine. Kashmir might be a destination for the more adventurous but it seems likely that many more will want to come and try it, too.

James Crabtree is the FT's Mumbai correspondent

Details

James Crabtree was a guest of Ampersand Travel (www.ampersandtravel.com), the Khyber Himalayan Resort (www.khyberhotels.com) and Gurkha Houseboats (www.welcomheritagehotels.in). Ampersand offer a week's skiing in Gulmarg, staying at the Khyber and on a houseboat, from £3,540 per person including domestic flights from Delhi or Mumbai, or £4,190 including flights from London

Part beach resort, part world's best furniture showroom

Trisha Andres on the unusual origins of Dedon Island

The view from the dining pavilion at Dedon Island in the Philippines takes in a glorious stretch of beach and sea but it is the furniture that really catches your eye. To the left, there are two seats, or "nest rests" to give

them their proper name, hanging from coconut trees whose trunks have been bent at remarkable angles by 1984's Typhoon Nitang. To the right is "Daydream", an Arabian Nights-inspired canopy day bed that resembles a flying carpet. Next

to the infinity pool is a sun lounger constructed to look like an oversized leaf, all the more striking against the backdrop of blue skies and white sand.

Is this a resort or a beach-based furniture showroom? The answer is both. It's also

second home to Bobby Dekeyser, founder of chic German outdoor furniture brand Dedon. In the early 1990s, Dekeyser and his uncle, a plastics extrusion expert, developed a unique waterproof fibre, then travelled to the Philippine city of Cebu to see if its celebrated rattan weavers could use it to make furniture. Six months later, Dedon was born and the company's manufacturing arm has been based in the Philippines since. From a small family company, it has grown into a global brand with more than 3,000 employees, and boasts of collaborations with high-profile designers including Philippe Starck, Stephen Burks and Richard Frimier.

The company is based in Lübeck, Lower Saxony, and Dekeyser himself lives in New York but he frequently travels to the Philippines, and decided he needed a weekend retreat there. "I found this magical island in Siargao through a friend who had previously owned the resort," he says. "I immediately fell in love, and bought it."

Designed by Jean-Marie Massaud and Daniel Pouzet,

the new Dedon Island celebrated its first birthday this month. Among four acres, on the southeastern tip of Siargao, it has nine villas, a mangrove pagoda, games lounge and outdoor cinema.

Luxury lifestyle brands moving into hospitality is

'I wanted to create my perfect holiday destination. It's very personal'



A 'nest rest' on Dedon Island in the Philippines

Paul Barbera

it's very personal to me."

Certainly, there is something immensely personal about the place, making it feel like home or at least an immaculately kept holiday house. Then again, it could also just be that, as a result of the wet season, my mother and I had the resort all to ourselves except for one charming family of four.

There are no schedules, rules or menus on Dedon Island. You have an "adventure manager" at your disposal to plan bespoke itineraries to neighbouring islands, surfing trips to Cloud 9 (celebrated as home to some of the world's best waves), paddle board training among the mangroves, motorbike adventures to nearby towns, cooking classes or yoga sessions.

Or, if the heat makes you feel lethargic, you can always be assured of a (beautifully designed) seat in which to doze off.

Rates at Dedon Island (www.dedonisland.com) are from \$480 per person per night, full-board and includes excursions and activities

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