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Tourist Flow and Tourism Potential Regions of Gulmarg in Kashmir Himalayas

Nissar A. Kuchay [α] & M. Sultan Bhat [σ]

Abstract - Gulmarg has a rich and diverse touristic product that holds the potential to be one of the most attractive tourist destinations for both leisure and sports tourism across the whole Kashmir Himalayan region. The place owes its importance mainly to its beautiful geo-environmental setup and unique climate. The destination has a history of tourism activities for more than five centuries. The resort has been a great attraction for several British officials posted in India and their families made Gulmarg their home for the summer months. This his to-geographical personality of the place has resulted in the development of tourist regions of interest to a range of tastes especially for holiday makers and sports and adventure tourists. Therefore present study aims at identification and delineation of the different tourist potential regions of the place which would help in proper marketing of the tourist product, management of tourist flow, optimization of economic returns and management of the environmental health of the destination for sustainable tourism development in the region.

I. Introduction

Sustainable tourism is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems (World Tourism Organization).There has been an up-trend in tourism over the last few decades, Tourists have a wide range of budgets and tastes, and a wide variety of resorts and hotels have developed to cater for them. The developments in technology transport and infrastructure made many types of tourism more affordable. This is substantiated by the fact that international tourism receipts grew to US$1.03 trillion in 2011, corresponding to an increase in real terms of 3.8per cent from 2010.

Sustainable tourism can be seen as having regard to ecological and socio-cultural carrying capacities and includes involving the community of the destination in tourism development planning. It also Involves integrating tourism to match current economic And growth policies so as to mitigate some of the negative economic and social impacts of 'mass tourism'. Murphy (1985) advocates the use of an ecological approach, to consider both plants and people when implementing the sustainable tourism development process.

A tourism region is a geographical region that has been designated specifically for tourism purposes. The names often evoke certain positive qualities of the area and suggest a coherent tourism experience to visitors. Countries, states, provinces, and other ad-minis-trative regions are often carved up into tourism regions. In addition to drawing the attention of potential tourists, these tourism regions often provide tourists who are otherwise unfamiliar with an area with a manageable number of attractive options. Besides it also helps in the management of environment and regulation of tourist flow for the sustainable management of tourist destinations.

II. Study Area

The Gulmarg is believed to have been called '*Gurimarg*' in ancient times and the modification of the original name is said to have been made at the instance of 15th Century Kashmiri king Sultan Yusuf Shah Chak, who was enamored with the place. If it were historical endorsements that Gulmarg sought, then the visits of the Mughal emperor Jahangir established the measure of its worth. The resort was a great attraction for several British officials posted in India and their families made Gulmarg their home for the summer months. The presence of these holiday-makers was also responsible for the foundations of the two activities that Gulmarg today is best known for – golf and skiing, initiation of both dating back to the early twentieth century. Gulmarg is located 46 km from Srinagar city, geographical coordinate's 34.05°N 74.38°E. It has an average elevation of 2,690 m above mean sea level. The average temperature varies from its minimum of -4°C in January to maximum of 31°C in the month of July. The location of Gulmarg is visualized in Fig.1.

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Figure 1 : Location map of Gulmarg Development Area

III. Materials and Methods

The survey of India tope sheets at 1:25000 scales along with IRS P6 satellite data were used for the delineation of Gulmarg development area. Data regarding different variables was generated through primary survey in addition to the available secondary data. A series of indices based on natural beauty, adventures and sports, infrastructure, transportation and communication etc. were prepared and their composite score were used for the delineation of different tourist regions.

IV. Results and Discussions

a) Tourist Flow to Gulmarg

Gulmarg has a long history of tourist activities as it has remained a favourite destination of early Muslim rulers like Yusuf Shah Chak and the Britshers ruling India. Table I depicts the category wise flow of tourists during last five years. Gulmarg remains a preferred destination not only to locals but to the domestic and international tourists as well. Generally most of the tourists who visit Kashmir valley prefer to visit to Gulmarg as well. The category wise annual pattern of tourist flow to Gulmarg is represented in Fig. 2 which reflects the increasing trend in the flow of tourists to Gulmarg, in the year 2011 about 1.4 million tourists visited the place however this number has been reached in July and the total tourist flow has cross 2 million mark by the end of this year (2012).

Table 1 : Category wise Tourist Flow to Gulmarg

Year	Local	Domestic	Foreign	Total
2006	104247	390311	8101	502659
2007	268968	330466	20109	619543
2008	287934	422756	12994	723681
2009	270123	308136	6003	584262
2010	135921	319545	6773	462239
2011	425189	990460	7282	1422931
2012*	615849	1456128	7370	2079347

Source: Office of the Assistant Director Tourism, Gulmarg
*(*Figures for December, 2012 are projected)*

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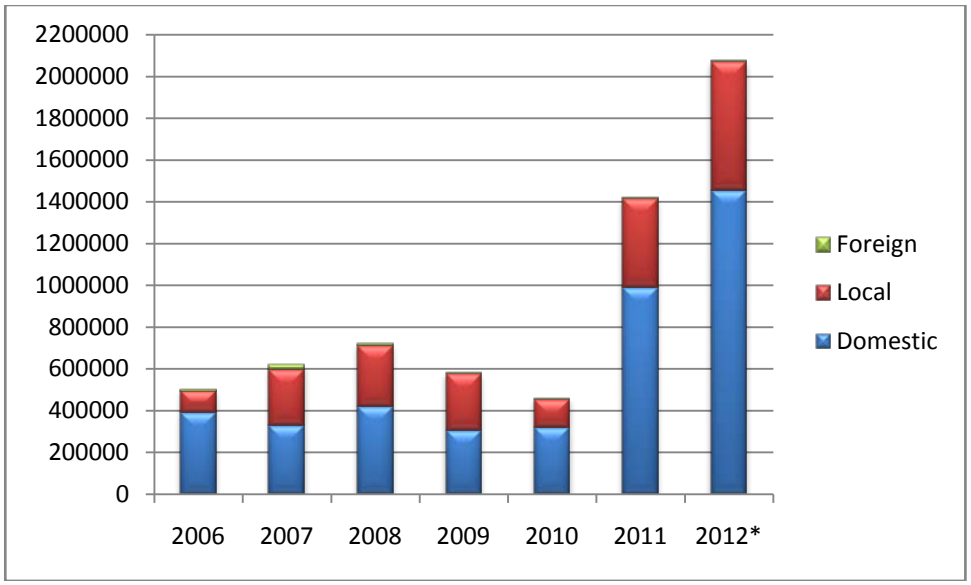


Figure 2 : Category-Wise Annual Pattern of Tourist Flow to Gulmarg, 2006-2012
*(*Figures projected for December, 2012)*

Gulmarg is an all-weather resort with refreshing summer meadows and pastoral scenes and deep-powder, long-run skiing and snowboarding during winters. Therefore tourist flow to this all season tourist destination continues throughout the year. Table II reflects the monthly flow pattern of tourists of different categories visiting Gulmarg. It is clear from the Fig. No 3 that in the year 2011 maximum tourist flow has been in the months of June-July and October-November, whereas, this year the flow has been consistently increasing from February itself and all the months have registered an increase over the past year except the month of July.

Table 2 : Category wise Monthly Tourist Flow to Gulmarg (2011,12)

Month	2011			2012*		
	Domestic	Local	Foreign	Domestic	Local	Foreign
January	12533	7366	334	30694	15691	444
February	9355	7303	785	68388	32888	749
March	19544	9961	664	105868	50187	763
April	32463	10470	1043	150371	80304	916
May	78661	35175	324	180346	70781	508
June	216957	103105	445	290525	110201	311
July	222298	159335	479	133337	130790	363
August	73835	25729	432	97641	23241	449
September	35756	18982	601	59292	37245	587
October	124391	17855	488	156328	26585	502
November	118456	15934	447	127715	17439	463
December	46211	13974	1240	55623	20497	1315
Total	990460	425189	7282	1456128	615849	7370

Source: Gulmarg Development Authority

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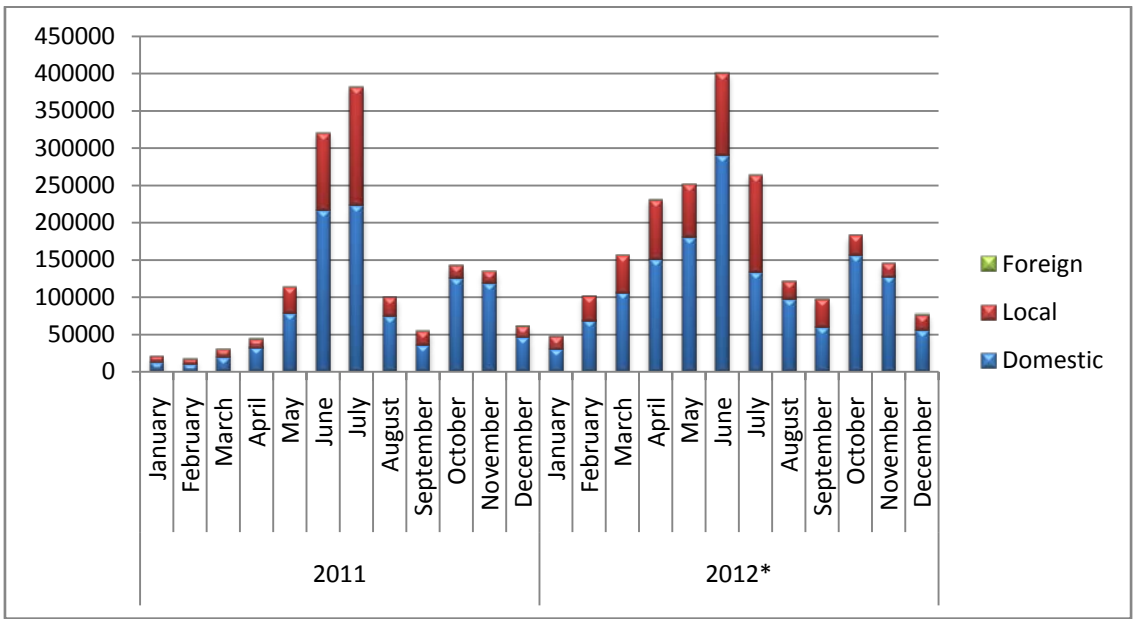


Figure 3 : Monthly flow of tourists to Gulmarg during 2011-12
*(*Figures from August to December, 2012 are projected)*

b) Tourist Perception

A brief survey of tourist perception in order to gauge the level of satisfaction about the availability of various tourist services has been conducted as reflected in Table III. The tourists have expressed mostly a positive level of satisfaction about most of the services. However, the level of satisfaction about the tour operators is considerably poor which needs to be improved by way of initiating necessary measures.

Table 3 : Index showing level of satisfaction of the tourists with respect to selected indicators at Gulmarg

S. No	Selected indicators	Tourist Perception (in percentage)				
		Excellent	Best	Good	Satisfactory	Poor
01	Climate	87	10	03	0	0
02	Attitude of Local People	14	65	10	05	06
03	Availability of tour Operators	0	25	30	10	35
04	Accessibility	51	27	13	09	0
05	Accommodation	57	20	10	06	07
06	Satisfaction with the fulfilment of vow	0	11	49	25	15
07	Local Traffic	48	21	10	08	13
08	Parking facility	51	21	12	10	05
09	Events	0	45	38	10	07
10	Souvenirs	0	15	0	55	30
11	Pedestrian ways	28	24	31	05	12
12	Parks & Green areas	53	31	5	04	07
13	Landscape beauty	80	20	0	0	0
14	Quality of water & sanitation	38	23	20	06	13
15	Shopping facility	38	24	21	07	10
16	Food availability	32	32	18	07	11

Source: Sample Survey of Tourists, 2011

Note: The weight age of the above indicators was derived with the help of scale 1-5.Here 1 means that tourists are very unsatisfied with a particular component & 5 means that tourists are very satisfied with a particular component.eg, for each indicator 20 persons have been approached and they have showed different responses to different indicators giving their own weight age.

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c) Traffic Flow to Gulmarg

The traffic flow of Gulmarg varies from season to season round the year. A perusal of Table IV highlights the fact that there is a huge flow of tourists during the summer season including local, national and international tourists, while during winter season the traffic flow declines to a larger extent. As depicted in Fig. 4, from April to October (warmer season) the traffic flow to Gulmarg is high as compared to other months. This includes all the tourists, local, national and international. The tourists visiting Gulmarg during winter season are mainly of national and international character because of winter sports activities.

Table 4 : Monthly Traffic Flow to Gulmarg for the Year 2011

Month	Private Cars	Sumo/Matador	Buses
January	2106	3330	170
February	3274	4216	225
March	7322	8102	308
April	8417	9209	347
May	12200	13887	340
June	12748	14019	352
July	13122	14513	363
August	11584	12781	251
September	10356	11223	302
October	9693	10336	263
November	7621	7782	207
December	6233	6597	184

Source: Gulmarg Development Authority

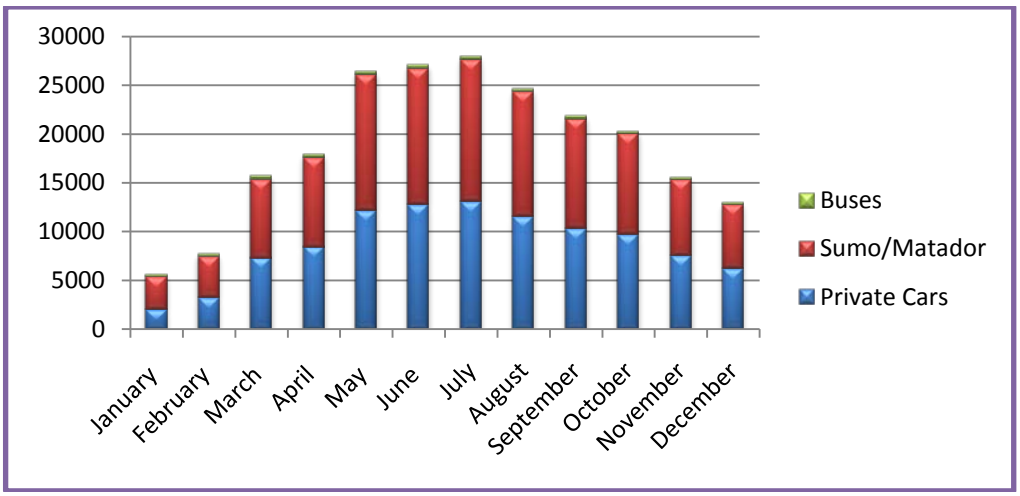


Figure 4 : Monthly Traffic Flow Pattern to Gulmarg

V. Tourism Potential Regions

Gulmarg is a multiple attraction tourist place and offers a varied range of tourist related attraction, therefore to analyze the different areas of tourist interest it has been divided into following tourist regions.

a) Gulmarg Gondola Region

Gulmarg Gondola is the world's second highest and Asia's highest and longest operating cable car since the closure of the Mérida cable car of Venezuela in 2008. The gondola operates in two stages – first stage is from Gulmarg base to the bowl of Kangdoori and the second stage is from Kangdoori to Ararat peak. The two-stage ropeway ferries about 600 people per hour to and from the gondola main station in Gulmarg to Ararat Summit.

i. *Gondola Lift - Gulmarg to Kangdoori*

Gondola car is one of the main attractions of the place. The first of two sections of the cable car rises from the cable station at Gulmarg at an altitude of 2700 m to bowl shaped Kangdoori at an altitude of 3100 m – a vertical rise of 400m.

ii. *Gondola Lift – Kangdoori to Afarwat*

The second stage of the Gulmarg-Afarwat cable car project connects Kangdoori station at 3100 m with the heights of Afarwat peak at 3,979 m – Afarwat is the mountain that looms over Gulmarg and is the magnet for serious skiers.

b) Golf Course Region

Gulmarg Golf Course is the world's highest golf course. The 18-hole, par 72 Gulmarg golf courses is

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quite hilly. The golf club itself was built in 1904, by British residents. It also offers table tennis and billiards. Temporary membership can be bought for the duration of stay. Course remains open from April to November, after which it is covered in a blanket of snow. This Government Golf Course was the second to be built by the British in India after the Royal Calcutta Golf Club. By the 1920s the resort had two 18-hole courses, the 'Upper Course' and the 'Lower Course' and one 9-hole middle course (the "Rabbits Course"). The only course to survive, however, exists where the Upper Course used to be. It was redesigned in 1970s by Peter Thomson. At an altitude of 3,730 m Gulmarg golf course is among the highest & most beautiful green golf course in the world.

c) Gulmarg Skiing and snow-boarding Region

While Gulmarg is an all-weather resort with refreshing summer meadows and pastoral scenes, the main reason to come here, at least in winter, is the off-piste, deep-powder, long-run skiing and snowboarding. The Himalayan resort of Gulmarg is one of the newest and increasingly popular ski destinations. Due to its geographic location Gulmarg gets some of the heaviest snowfalls in the Himalayas and it has earned the distinction of being the best ski resort in the Himalayas. Skiing was first introduced to Gulmarg by two British Army officers who established the first ski club in 1927 although it wasn't until 7-8 years ago when Gulmarg's name really first started to appear on the cognoscenti's hot list. Some of the best slopes in the country for beginners and intermediate skiers are available at Gulmarg. Skiing equipment is available on hire from the Ski-Shop. In winter Gulmarg's natural slopes and inclines turn into the country's premier skiing resort. Not all tourists who visit in winter come for skiing – some simply are there to watch the skiing or to enjoy a holiday in the snow. Among the multitudes of slopes, there are a few which are serviced by ski lifts. Most of the skiing becomes centered on these slopes, which are specially suited to beginners and intermediate level skiers, with ski runs ranging from 200 m to 3kms, instructors are available for both levels. With the operation of the Gulmarg Gondola Cable Car, it has become all the more convenient for advanced skiing enthusiasts, as they can gain a ski run of nearly 3 km with the help of this cable car which goes through Kangdoori to Afarwat.

d) Other Attractions

i. *Khilanmarg*

A path of some six kilometers and an ascent of about six hundred meters from Gulmarg take to the little highland dale of Khilanmarg. The narrow bridle path is lined by grassy knolls and a variety of trees and shrubs that include masses of daises, mulberry, berberis and walnut among others.

ii. *Alpathar Lake*

At a distance of about 13 kilometers from Gulmarg, at an altitude of around 3840 m is the little lake of Alpather. Like many other high-altitude lakes in the mountainous parts of the western Himalayas, this lies in a shallow mountain bowl and is surrounded by limited plant growth.

iii. *Religious Shrines*

There are four main religious shrines in and around Gulmarg. A few kilometres from this glade, is the tomb and shrine '*Ziarat*' of the noted Muslim saint *Baba Rishi* built in 1480AD. Other important religious sites include Rani temple, dedicated to *Lord Shiva,* and the old St. Mary's Church built by the British holiday-makers. Also in Gulmarg's vicinity is the Avantiswami temple that dates back to the ninth century and is dedicated to *Lord Vishnu*.

VI. Conclusion

Nestled with stunning peaks in the Himalayan ranges, Gulmarg is a spectacular picnic spot attracting all kinds of tourists with its lush green backdrop, beautiful landscapes, flowering gardens, serene lakes and pleasant climate during the summers and falls. This imposing hill station was a pleasure resort for kings and royal family members and a summer retreat for the British officers during the British rule in India. Gulmarg Gondola, one of the highest cable cars in the world, reaching 3,979 meters. Gulmarg is the heartland of winter sports in India. Due to its steep terrain, the region is popular amongst advanced and extreme skiers from around the world and has been visited by a number of ski professionals. Gulmarg golf club is the highest green golf course in the world. There are a few places of religious importance near the resort. The summer is equally busy. With temperatures ranging from 25 to 30 °C, Gulmarg attracts outdoor sports fanatics with its world class golfing, trekking, mountain biking, horse riding, water skiing, and fishing. It has been observed that the tourist flow is highly imbalances vis-a-vis the various tourist regions and different seasons of the year. During the summer months certain regions remain over crowded, beyond their carrying capacities which is a great threat to the fragile ecological setup of the region. Therefore, there is an urgent need to regulate the tourist flow across the different tourist regions and different seasons of the year through proper marketing, infrastructure development and better accessibility. This in turn will help in minimizing the adverse environmental impacts, maximizing the economic gains and over all sustainable development of the region.

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