

It's All Downhill in Chechnya, This Time at a Ski Resort

By [ANDREW E. KRAMER](#) JAN. 31, 2018



Performers of Vainakh dance, a Caucasus staple, at the opening ceremony of a new ski resort in Chechnya. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

VEDUCHI, Russia — Sporting a camouflage ski suit, Ramzan A. Kadyrov, the leader of Chechnya, pulled a gigantic ceremonial lever to start this once war-wrecked region's first ski lift. "God is great!" some spectators yelled as the machine whirred to life.

High in the Caucasus Mountains, a ski resort is rising on slopes that once teemed with Islamist militants. The Veduchi resort, which takes its name

from the local village, is a multimillion-dollar development featuring a hotel and spa center, chalets and a helicopter pad. It is the centerpiece of an improbable effort for Russia to ski and snowboard its way out of a long-simmering insurgency.

The potential for winter sports as a method of diplomacy came into focus recently in South Korea, which is preparing to welcome [North Korean athletes to the Winter Olympics](#) this month. But Russia has a longer-term strategy: putting winter sports to use as a tool for economic development and pacification in a decades-old conflict in the Caucasus.

A state-owned company, North Caucasus Resorts, is building a string of ski resorts in the restive, predominantly Muslim areas of the Caucasus. Three have opened so far, the most recent here in the Argun Gorge of Chechnya.

The intention is to create jobs, though even the developer conceded that it might be difficult to convince winter sports enthusiasts of the merits of Chechnya, where Russia brutally repressed an Islamist insurgency and where thousands of militants may be returning from Syria after fighting for the Islamic State.

“I am confident it will become popular not only with the Russian population but also with foreign countries,” Mr. Kadyrov said at the opening this week.



The new resort in Veduchi, Russia, currently has only one chair lift, serving one trail. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times



Ramzan A. Kadyrov, the Chechen leader, attended the resort's opening. "I am confident it will become popular not only with the Russian population but also with foreign countries," he said. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

Ruslan Timukayev, a spokesman for the regional government, said the region had seen an uptick in tourism as "Chechnya became a brand." About 100,000 tourists came to Chechnya last year, he said, adding with a shrug, "Some people like extremes."

About \$35 million has been invested so far in the ski resort, which is expected to cost \$500 million when completed. The plans call for 19 ski lifts and 28 miles of trails fanning out over a serene alpine valley though the resort opened with only one modest, half-mile lift, serving just one trail.

After pulling the lever to start the lift, Mr. Kadyrov, who does not ski, hopped on for a ride. The lift stalled briefly, leaving him dangling for a few moments

before jerking back into motion.

Professional skiers flown in from St. Petersburg zigzagged down the slope for the television cameras, and local children were offered free lessons.

The war in Chechnya has mostly petered out; the last insurgent attack in near Veduchi took place in 2009, officials say, and the last [significant terrorist attack](#) in Chechnya was in 2014. But rights groups have documented a staggering cost of peace and of propping up the rule of Mr. Kadyrov, a former rebel whose powerful family allied with President Vladimir V. Putin in 1999.

They have cataloged an array of continuing abuses, including arbitrary arrests, house burnings as punishment, and [the detention and torture last spring of about 100 gay men](#).



The slopes near the new resort once teemed with Islamist militants. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

“How is a ski resort going to solve all that?” Tanya Lokshina, the Russia director of Human Rights Watch, said in a telephone interview. “How is it going to solve the problem of a state within a state, where lawlessness and abuses are the norm?”

More recently, rights groups have expressed alarm at what they see as a cruel and capricious response from Mr. Kadyrov to the cancellation last month of his Facebook and Instagram accounts.

Facebook, which also owns Instagram, said it had [deactivated the accounts](#) after Mr. Kadyrov was added to a United States sanctions list over rights abuses.

The block came as a blow to Mr. Kadyrov, who had amassed millions of followers by posting pictures of himself cuddling a cat and lifting weights, along with the [dead bodies](#) of his enemies. “He rejoiced in it, really, and he was clearly livid about losing it,” Ms. Lokshina said.

On Jan. 10, [Oyub Titiev, the Chechnya director](#) of the rights group Memorial, was arrested, ostensibly over possessing marijuana. But Mr. Kadyrov went on television a few days later to criticize rights activists as “enemies of the people,” adding that he would “break the spines of our enemies.”

While talk like that might scare foreign tour operators and other visitors from traveling to Veduchi, it seems to have had little effect on the main market: Russians.

While conceding that many impressions of Chechnya start with a “negative background,” Khasan Timizhev, the director of North Caucasus Resorts, said market research had shown that Russian skiers were more concerned about the condition and safety of the slopes rather than lawlessness or terrorist attacks.



The opening of the Veduchi ski resort drew a crowd. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times



A portrait of a Mr. Kadyrov, dressed like a medieval Russian knight, hangs on the wall of a shop in Veduchi selling traditional Chechen instruments. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

Whatever doubts outsiders might harbor about Chechnya, the few who turned out from nearby villages were more enthusiastic, saying the only other living to be made was in sheep herding.

“We think the Chinese will come,” said Albert Rabuyev, principal of the Itum-Kale village middle school, gazing at the chairs of the new lift gliding up and down the mountain.

Mr. Rabuyev said he would even welcome gay men, because as visitors they would “rent rooms, rent skis and then leave.”

Isa Abkarom, a vendor at a stand selling cups and other collectibles, said the long-promised resort came as good news for Chechnya. “Everybody was just

waiting for normal life to return,” he said. “We are happy to see the last of the war.”

The vision of ski resorts as pacification tools sprang from preparations for the 2014 Winter Olympics in the Black Sea resort of Sochi. The North Caucasus insurgency had raged over mountain territory, and so winter sports were a logical postwar development goal, officials said. Two additional resorts are planned by 2025, one in Ingushetia and the other in Dagestan.

The two other resorts opened last season in neighboring regions reported 383,000 skiers combined. Crisp, sunny mountain weather draws visitors to the resorts, said Ekaterina Zhigalo, a spokeswoman for North Caucasus Resorts. “It’s a very good climate for health.”



At prayer on the slopes. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times