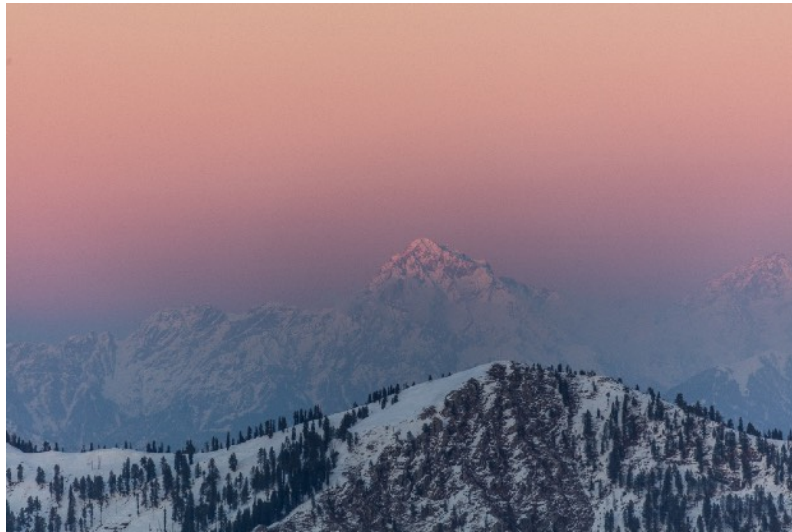


## **ZOM 2021 - The story of Pica :**

Wednesday 20th of January, 5pm, we are enjoying our first sunset from the top of Malam Jabba's hill! Everything makes sense right now and we are ready to start one of most intense journeys of our life.



Two years ago after my accident in the Hunza valley, I decided to help local communities from the mountains to get access to snowboarding equipment. After sending 60 snowboard kits to Pakistan in winter 2020 and getting great feedback from local riders, it felt like it was time to get deeper in that project of development of winter sports in Pakistan. The Zom Connection organization is born a few months ago, dedicated to an authentic development of winter activities in the Pakistani mountains. Its first project has been time consuming to organise, Covid adding an extra unknown until the last moment!

Our team is finally made up of nine people with varied skills: Jean Remi Ceron (cameraman), Arthur Ghilini (photographer and ski instructor), Victor Lanel (economist), Paul Millet (ski instructor), Gilles Herry (ski instructor) ), Mathieu Maynadier (Himalayist and mountain guide), Helias Millerieux (Himalayist and mountain guide), Victor Daviet (pro snowboarder) and myself.

With some help from here and there we managed to get all the green lights to start our project and after travelling non stop for 40 hours it feels like a proper reward to stand here, watching some of the highest mountains on earth getting on fire with the sunset light

Malam Jabba is a small village. Ski was introduced there almost by chance when the government decided to implant a small chairlift on the slope above! Unfortunately, after 9/11, some talibans decided to occupy the area and somehow the lift was taken down. The place has been cleared for the past decade and the lift has been rebuilt but police and army are still really present around. More recently the local tourism has been growing well and visitors are coming from big cities around to have a little taste of snow in winter or to find a bit of fresh air in summer.



The ski resort invited us to take part in the 2nd annual snowboard festival, in order to discover the area and teach the local snowboarders. Over 50 snowboarders from Afghanistan, Chitral, Gilgit Baltistan and Lahore area are present and eager to learn. From the beginner terrain to the icy red slope, we do our best to teach them basics and prepare them for the competition.

At our big surprise, the festival's organisation is asking us to prepare the Giant slalom for the race the next day. None of us ever did that before but we understand that the competition won't happen without our help.



The following morning we take the most smoky lift ever on the gruming machine and try our best to make a Giant Slalom suitable to everyone.

Our team logically trusts the 3 first places and decides to use the prize money (1000 Euros) earned to send equipment next year to the local communitie of Malam Jabba.

In the afternoon we also have to make a Parallel Slalom and race again but this time we luckily get out of the competition quickly and are stoked to just be spectator of the race for a bit. The final, with the last bit of light before night, is just amazing. The young local snowboarder makes it to the finish line and wins the race.

What happens next is just surreal: local kids and afghani racers are singing together and hugging each other for a while, a true reward for our team after a long day of work.



Before leaving France, Malam Jabba was just a chairlift for us. We were only seeing it as a way for the Pakistani riders to improve skills more quickly, so they would follow us more easily later in the Hindu Kush mountains. In one way we were true, it is allowing some local friends to ski more negative denivellation in a day than they did during the past ten years! But we were definitely not expecting such a nice relationship with the local young riders! From the first day they always want to take the chairlift with us, follow us in the backcountry or play UNO with Victor D. They also easily get involved in a trash picking we decide to organise after we saw all the garbages on the side of the slopes. We end up bringing them with us for short backcountry runs from the lift, enjoying sunsets from the top of the hill before racing down to come back to the village before night.

On our last day in Malam Jabba, we decide to go and explore a bit further by ourselves. After a few hours hiking on ridges, riding some couloirs and pillows and skinning more gentle terrain, the all team is standing on the highest point of the area at 3000m with an amazing 360° view around. The potential is huge with a better snow cover! Still we are happy to enjoy mellow couloirs with good and safe old powder snow.



After 5 days in the area, it is time to move forward and go West toward our main destination: Madaklasht valley in the Hindu Kush range. After touching goodbyes with the kids and 8h travelling in the minivan, we finally enter the Chitral valley and soon after reach Drosh, the Head Quarter of our generous hosts here: the Hindu Kush Winter Sports Club. Their welcome is amazing



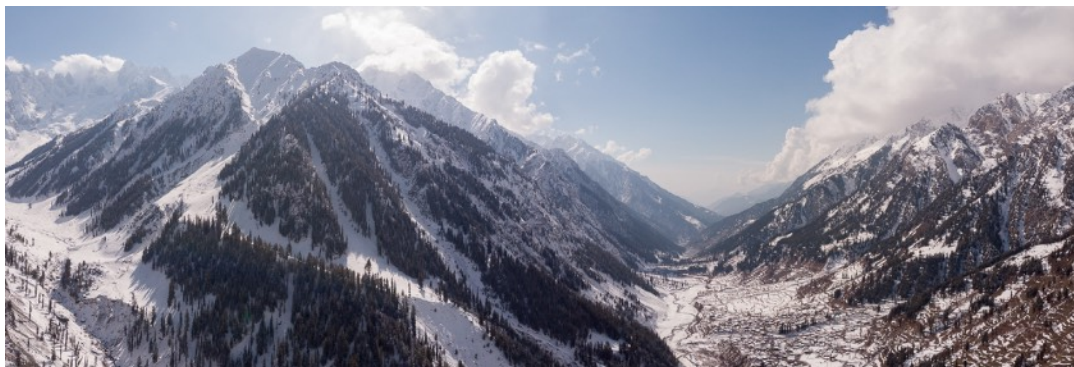


and after abusing of the local products until late at night, we can finally discover this new amazing panorama in the morning. Hasham is the president of the club, but he is also one of the Princes of the Chitral area. Owner of a big house and many lands, he is dedicated to the development of Winter Sports in the Hindu Kush range.

After visiting the garden and meeting the horses, it is time to get in the jeeps and reach our final destination: Madaklasht.



Madaklasht is a unique place in Pakistan because of the amount of local riders there! 3500 people are leaving in the whole valley and 1000 of them are officially registered as skiers! Skiing was introduced in the area by the British army in the 1920s and the local community kept it as a tradition, building and riding hand made wooden skis. More recently, through the daily access to 4G via their smartphones, the local riders opened their eyes on the international freeriding scene and are now eager to use more modern equipment and discover the hidden corners of their playground!



Arriving in this valley with over a ton of winter sports equipment destined to the local community, we know that we are bringing problems and jealousy as much as we are bringing joy and happiness. After carrying all the equipment in two different school classrooms, the lack of organisation when packing this equipment last autumn in Chamonix becomes obvious and there is now much more work than expected. Following the advise of many local people, all the equipment is remaining

under the Zom Connection property, and we do not give any gear personally. With the help of the local council and the Hindu Kush Snow Sports club, we try to give an equal access to this equipment for everyone! Soon, everyday are distributed a few dozen skis, snowboards, cross country skis and ice skates, and the smiles on the kids faces are easily erasing our doubts about adults jealousy.



In contrary to previous trips in Pakistan, this time we do really live the local way for a dozen days in the heart of the winter! Thanks to the HinduKush Snow Sports Club, we are accommodated in a nice (and cold) house in the village and we also get (local) food during our stay. Luckily the sun warms the village for a few hours everyday before long and cold nights. The temperatures easily drop to -15 degrees Celsius during the night, so we have to heat our bedroom with a local fire stove that makes our room really smoky depending on the direction of the wind outside.

After 2 days in the valley, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Hindu Kush Snow Sports festival is already starting! Despite the lack of accommodation, a lot of Pakistani tourists are coming to have a taste of the winter sports. It is also a real celebration for the local community, all the kids are playing outside and taking part in the competitions. Small conferences are also happening and I get a chance to talk about global warming and gender equity in sports! All our team is spending its time and energy to teach ice skating, hockey, cross country skiing, snowboarding and skiing during day time, and trying to improve local dancing skills in the evening! After three intense days, the festival ends in joy and happiness and the valley slowly becomes more quiet again.





The following day, our equipment is designated to girls only. Not knowing what to expect on our side, more and more girls are finally arriving at our storage. A bit shy at first, they quickly smile and laugh, excited to try a new activity. All our team is stoked to finally see more girls playing around, improving their skills really quickly. Personally teaching cross country skiing to a group of smily girls that day was one of the highlights of the trip



In between festivities, teaching the locals and organizing the storage, we still find a bit of time to go riding for ourselves, to discover a bit better the area! Conditions have been special this winter with an unusual big snowfall in November and nothing after, resulting on the most sugary snow we ever saw. Luckily no other snow layer on top of that sugar is allowing us to ski quiet safely. The potential is huge, from steep couloirs between 4000m and 5000m to pillow runs just by the village, but the terrain is also dangerous and mostly destined to pretty good skiers. After attending a long couloir in the shade above 4000 meters, we realize how long approaches are and how cold it can be up there late January. Getting slowly tired as well we decide to play on shorter and lower terrain, enjoying a few tree runs by the village, building and riding a banked slalom, and finding narrow couloirs in between the lower cliffs. It is interesting to find old bootpacks from the local riders and understand how much they've been exploring already.

The most experienced riders from the village also get the chance to participate to a Safety Shred Day organized by Victor D. As we managed to send over 30kits (transceiver/shovel/probe), it is obvious that we need to educate the local riders about avalanches and risk management before bringing them further in the mountains. During the following days we get the chance to accompany them ski touring and split-boarding, teaching technical skills first but also talking about mountain dangers and how to deal with them.



A part of our project is also about doing an inception phase, to understand better how we could help in the future in terms of development, energy, education. We quickly understand that hydropowered energy works well here and that the local communities are already self sufficient on this side! We also quickly understand that one of the main problems is the plastic litters being thrown on the floor anywhere in the streets, in the nature! Hopefully we can help on this side in a close future.

Time is filing and it is already time to leave Madaklasht! We still need to tidy the storage and make final arrangements about an equal way of distributing daily the equipment. Finally the storage is left under the Hindukush Snow Sports Club management and under the supervision of the local council. Victor D is bringing a team of local snowboarders for a 3 days «Trip Roulette» at the end of the valley but most of our team decides to leave Madaklasht in order to explore another area. We are looking forward to visit a new place but we also understand that foreigners might not come in the area only to visit Madaklasht valley. The developpement of skiing in other neighboring valleys seems to be the best option for potential ski tourism development in the whole region in the future.







Hasham keeps telling us about a Karimabad village in Chitral area. Having spent many weeks previously in Karimabad in Hunza valley I am curious to discover this place. After driving 4h from Drosh, first on a good road through Chitral city, then on dirty exposed roads but with an amazing open view on snowy slopes and old glacier moraines, we finally reach the village, at almost 3000 meters, which is really nice and authentic! Surprisingly no locals know how to ski here even if the slopes look more gentle than in Madaklasht. That would probably be a great place to build ski infrastructures, but Pakistan being 50 years behind us in term of ski resorts development, it is hard to believe that a ski resort will grow up here in the coming decade. Having a few hours in front of us before night, we decide to go and ride on the first slopes above the village. Quickly we are swimming in sugary snow and when getting higher we find a small layer of compacted fresh snow on top of the sugar. After a few whoomps, we decide to take it easy and ride back down to the village. Most of the slopes around the village are really dry (South exposure) or really sugary (North exposure), or too far for our tired bodies. Still we manage to find a mellow sun affected spur for our last day skiing in Pakistan with Gilles and Helias. Fifty meters below the summit at around 4400m , it is impossible to avoid a last sugary and unstable slope so we have to turn around and





unfortunately we can't get the view on the other side. But riding some spring snow for the first time of the trip feels great and now we understand better the big potential of this area at the foot of the highest summit of the region: the Tirich Mir (7708m).

Next day all the team is back together in Drosh and ready to go back to Islamabad for a Covid test 24h before taking the plane. My friend Hamza is showing us the storage in Rawalpindi, where almost a ton of our equipment is getting ready to be sent in different valleys of the North of Pakistan. Hard to leave this peaceful country to come back to our Covid chaos but we will come back soon, Inshallah.



During this trip we made so many connections through the mountains passion, we found reliable partners and made amazing friends. But we also and mostly connected motivated pakistani riders from different areas together and we hope they will build the future of winter sports in Pakistan.

Big thanks to Shamyl for his essential help when building the project, to Shahid Mahmud for his help on logistics/tranports, to the Hindu Kush Snow Sports club and Hasham for hosting us, to all the locals we met for their kindness and happiness.

A big thanks to everyone who made it happen from here as well.

