

WORLD

features

AfriSki, the skiing hub

Africa's 'bucket list' ski resort dreams of Olympic racers



A snowboarder performs a jump

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AFP | Lesotho

Nestled high in the mountains of Lesotho, skiers and snowboarders from around the world rub shoulders at Africa's leading ski resort, which is cultivating a loyal clientele despite its diminutive size and remote location.

Since 2002, Afriski in northeastern Lesotho has also become a hub for the country's young winter sports enthusiasts to hone their skills and maybe one day compete for gold at the Winter Olympics.

"Afriski was always a unique option as a destination," said resort snowmaker Martin Schultz, 35, who comes from South African surfing hub Jeffreys Bay but swapped his surfboard for a snowboard to take to the slopes. "It's been a nice progress -- nice amounts of terrain we've been able to open up," he added, wearing stylish wrap-around blue mirrored sunglasses and a lemon yellow crash helmet.

Schultz is responsible for maintaining the quality and consistency of the artificial snow on the slopes, used by the 12,000 visitors who travel to the resort in the Maluti Mountains every season.

"We use high-pressure air, high-temperature water and a certain temperature and humidity," he said, of the resort's state-of-the-art snowmaking equipment, used when snow is not falling naturally.

Afriski's main kilometre-long piste is a strip of brilliant white

snow between brown grassy ridges and dotted with artificial snowmakers, although, on average, its three slopes are covered with natural snow for several weeks a year.

'Lesotho at the Olympics?'

Both expert and novice skiers go down the pristine slope from a height of 3,222 metres (10,570 feet) to the compact alpine-style resort below. There, visitors drink Gluehwein and listen to chart music in sub-zero temperatures.

"Ready? Go!" shouts one ski instructor, from the United States, as she loads her young charge onto the lift, while more experienced snowboarders spin and flip on ramps nearby.

Schultz, who worked as a ski instructor at resorts across Europe before spending nine seasons at Afriski, hopes the resort will help the tiny kingdom one day win medals at the Winter Olympics.

"One of Afriski's biggest priorities is to try and expand the skiing community in Lesotho and we have kids' programmes that generate a lot of interest from the local communities," he said, of the resort which employs 240 staff, three-quarters of whom are locals.

"Some of our kids like Thabang Mabari, the son of one of the guys who works here, has been skiing for about five years and he's brilliant. There's a good future for kids like that," he said.

"Hopefully in the future we can aim to get those kids to an Olympian standard so they can actually fly the Lesotho flag at the Olympics."

Ten-year-old Thabang's mother, Mathabang Mabari, who also works at the resort, told AFP that he had started skiing at the age of three.

"It's something he liked a lot. Of course it's in his blood to compete, of all the other kids of people who work here, he was



A ski instructor swirls fire ahead of a torchlight procession from the top of the main 1km slope

the first to ski and teach the others," said Mabari, 36, who is from the nearby village of Moteng.

Outside, slender-framed Thabang glides down the slope with ease dressed in yellow boots, a black puffer jacket and red snow trousers.

Despite some promising youngsters, southern Africa has yet to make a mark at the Winter

Olympics.

'Huge potential'

South African alpine skier Sive Speelman qualified for the Sochi games in 2014 -- but was blocked from attending by his own Games Committee who said he was too slow.

His dream to be his country's first black contender in his discipline was also thwarted at this year's tournament in South Korea and he was instead a technical assistant to South Africa's solitary winter games participant, Connor Wilson.

Lesotho has never put a Winter Olympian forward.

Afriski is Lesotho's sole ski resort -- the only other one in sub-Saharan Africa is Tiffindell in South Africa which has two runs and relies on artificial snow.

"Afriski has been a great help in my training. I don't think I would have got to the Winter Olympics without them," said Wilson, 21, who was training at Afriski for a fortnight.

"There's huge potential here. I always join in with the (local kids') training... they're copying what I'm doing and they are always interested.

"One day hopefully, they will go to the Winter Olympics for Lesotho."

Ski in Africa

Despite its small size and relatively limited facilities, Afriski still sees itself as a destination firmly on the global winter sports circuit.

It even pays homage to its European competitors, naming its chalets after renowned ski centres like France's "Meribel" and "Courchevel".

French ski and snowboard instructor Thomas Frontoni, 23, said that he would recommend skiing in southern Africa to Europeans despite the relatively short piste.

"Try it -- it's always beautiful, perfect views, friendly people. Southern Africa is cheap for European guys," said Frontoni, originally from Nice. A full-day "snowpass", which gives access to all the pistes and lifts, costs \$34 (29 euros).

"It's a small resort... but I think if a French or European skier came here they'd have a good time.

"I have seen lots of South African pupils, Argentine pupils, Canadian pupils."

"They don't come here because it's a kilometre of skiing, they don't come here because of its massive mountains," added Schultz. "They come here to ski in Africa, because it's on their bucket list."



This general view shows the entrance to the 'Sky Restaurant' at Afriski