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Ingushetia Unveils Plan to Lure Skiers

By Nikolaus von Twickel

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Bilalov, left, Yevkurov, center, and Palankoyev, right, unveling a plan to create a ski resort in Ingushetia Monday. **Nikolaus von Twickel**

Skiers, mountain hikers and sports enthusiasts can add another unconventional destination to their travel schedule: Ingushetia is to open its first ski lift next month.

There is a catch, however. To get to the resort in the remote mountain village of Armkhi, Russians and foreigners alike need special permits because it is part of the country's closed border zone, being just a stone's throw away from Georgia.

And because of the precarious security situation in the mainly Muslim North Caucasus republic, where violence between Islamist insurgents and security forces is ongoing, most foreign embassies advise their citizens not to visit the region at all.

Ingush President Yunus-Bek Yevkurov downplayed those issues Monday when he unveiled the plans to reporters.

He said that overall crime levels in Ingushetia had fallen and that the resort would have sufficient security.

"We are working on that," he said, adding that any additional measures would be invisible. "We do not want to scare visitors with armed men."

Yekurov said tourists could easily enter the border zone with vouchers they obtain when booking a tour.

"It's easy," he said.

Officials said Moscow has not yet responded to a request by Ingush authorities to remove much of the Dzheirakh region, where the resort is located, from the restricted border zone.

"This is a political decision to be made at the federal level," Yevkurov's spokesman, Yakub Mankiyev, told the Moscow Times.

The resort is part of North Caucasus Resorts, a high-flying project worked out under Dmitry Medvedev's presidency and consisting of a string of resorts ranging from Lagonaki above the Black Sea to a Caspian shore project in Dagestan.

The government hopes that the whole cluster will one day attract some 5 million to 10 million visitors per year.

While the western resorts Lagonaki, Arkhyz, Elbrus and Mamison are located in regions rated as relatively stable, Armkhi is the first to go operational in a region that remains troubled by rebel violence and has been closely associated with the war in neighboring Chechnya.

Located in a spectacular, rugged gorge some 1,500 meters above sea level, Armkhi currently consists of a huge spa building that opened in the late 1990s and offers some 240 beds for visitors.

The 650-meter-long chairlift, which, after multiple delays, is to be opened on Feb. 5, comes with a 1,220-meter-long slope.

Yevkurov seemed to acknowledge that persuading people to go skiing in Ingushetia would be a hard sell. He said that while he welcomed everybody, he was not particularly hoping to attract foreigners.

"First and foremost, this is for inhabitants of Ingushetia. Once they come to Armkhi, then people from [other] Russian regions will also come here," he said.

Investment in North Caucasus Resorts' Ingush branch has been 200 million rubles ($6.6 million) so far and could reach up to 27 billion rubles ($900 million).

"If we had spent the 27 billion already, people would no longer go to Courchevel but to us, Yevkurov joked about the posh resort in the French Alps, which is popular with wealthy Russians.

Ingushetia is among the region's poorest republics, and Yevkurov said the ski lift would

operate for free this season but would cost 500 rubles ($16.50) per day next winter.

He also said he has no plans to attract foreign investors at this stage.

"We are looking to support local small and medium-sized companies," he said, adding that the project currently envisages the creation of about 28,000 jobs.

North Caucasus Resorts comes with a special economic zone, meaning investors are exempt from most taxes.

In later stages, Armkhi could boast at least one more lift and a couple of other ski slopes, Akhmed Palankoyev, a Federation Council member for Ingushetia, said at Monday's news conference.

Officials also announced that the resort will be fitted with swimming pools and other sports facilities that will also cater to the disabled.

"We want to entertain visitors year-round," Yevkurov said.

The Armkhi Gorge, which the resort is named after, is one of the Caucasus' remotest outposts. One of its villages, Olgeti, became famous in the 19th century for refusing to accept Islam and sticking to local pagan traditions until at least 1865.

It is accessible by paved road only via North Ossetia, which has seen simmering ethnic violence between Ingush and Ossetians since the early 1990s.

Even more ambitious is a planned extension, where a second resort called Tsori could be set up high in the Assa Gorge, located between Armkhi and Chechnya.

That project, like Matlas in Dagestan, is still in the planning stages, officials said Monday.

Chechnya has not been included in the North Caucasus Resorts program. However, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov has announced similar plans for his republic.

The state-sponsored North Caucasus Resorts initiative has a budget of 1 trillion rubles ($32 billion). Government money is funding infrastructure development with the expectation that private investors will join to develop hotels and other amenities.

The company announced a $1.3 billion joint venture with French state bank Caisse des Depots et Consignations that is supposed to attract more foreign investment.

North Caucasus Resorts chairman Akhmed Bilalov announced Monday that the developer will even have an airline subsidiary. He refused to elaborate, saying that talks were still ongoing.

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