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Identification of Alternate Tourism Potential and Problems in Murree

Dr. Junaid Bashir

Assistant Professor, Tourism and Hospitality Department, FUSST, Rawalpindi
drjunaid.bashir@fui.edu.pk

ABSTRACT

A naturally rich hill station, Murree is not only abundant in fauna and flora, but also in history, culture, and hospitality. This richness makes it an extremely favorable destination for people of many interests like those who come to see the natural beauty, or those who want to experience the colonial remnants, or those who just come to relax. However, Murree is quite famous, even at an international level, which is why it is now experiencing the consequences of mass tourism. The tourist spots in Murree are becoming concentrated, causing strain on its historical infrastructure, degradation of the environment and life, and erasure of its rich cultural heritage. This research identifies overlooked and ignored tourist spots like the Historical Gulu Track, a route for the British troops in the colonial era. This study emphasizes decentralizing tourist activity and diluting it by rediscovering old sites and introducing them as new tourist spots for the tourists. It also documents the region's decaying soft culture, including traditional games, folktales, and myths, as well as its tangible colonial heritage. It further proposes recommendations to conserve both the natural and cultural essence of the region. This study highlights how underutilized resources, if properly managed, could revitalize Murree and sustain it for the future.

Keywords: Murree, Sustainable tourism, Gulu Track, Fauna, Flora, Tourist destinations.

INTRODUCTION

Murree is a very well-known hill resort stationed in the Galyat region of Pakistan, known for its scenic beauty and cool weather. It attracts people in great numbers, especially in the snowy days of winter even though the weather in Murree is cool year-round due to the high altitude. Its outstanding greenery and atmosphere catch the eye of many, and because of that reason, it is also a flourishing marketplace in the field of tourism and hospitality.

Human architecture can be seen in the tight streets that seep through the hilly areas containing hundreds of street food stalls and hotels along the way. Moreover, it

also possesses a rich natural environment, because of which signs of wildlife are also observed, some of which are pests like wild boars, while others are beautiful birds and majestic animals¹.



<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murree>



<https://www.flickr.com/photos/mbukhari/2624742579/galleries/>

One of the most popular viewpoints in Murree which offers breathtaking scenery of the surrounding mountains and valleys is the Kashmir Point. Apart from its extraordinary natural qualities, Murree also holds great historical significance. During the British colonial era, Murree served as a summer retreat for the British officers who were stationed in the region of Kuldana, located near Murree. It was a military cantonment established by the British Army. Small military bases resided there, and the place was well-secured and prosperous. During the same period, a hiking track was created from Kuldana to Kashmir Point by the British as a means of transportation between these two locations. It is known as the Gulu Track which is also at the core of this research².

Murree has been a favored hill station and tourist destination since the British era. During that time, the British established cantonments and hill stations in Murree to escape the scorching heat of the plains during the summer months. The cool climate, scenic beauty, and proximity to well-off cities like Rawalpindi and Islamabad made Murree a prominent place to visit. It can also be said that the climate of Murree resembled that of their homeland.

Historical Background

In 1608 A.D. the British invaded the Indian subcontinent and began their activities in different areas. However, not every part of their conquered region had a favorable climate. Upon their arrival at Islamabad and Rawalpindi where the extremely hot summers were not tolerable for them, the naturally rich and beautiful haven of Murree which lies on the outskirts of the Islamabad and Rawalpindi metropolitan areas and has a high altitude of 2,291 meters from sea level grasped their attention. In 1871, they began the construction of the first town in Murree that served as a sanatorium and a refuge from the scorching heat of nearby cities for the British troops. The cool climate, and scenic beauty, in addition to the close proximity to cities like Rawalpindi and Islamabad, made Murree ideal due to its natural beauty and the

desire to connect these two prominent locations.

The permanent town of Murree was constructed in 1853, shortly followed by a church for the residents. A main road was established which is known as the Mall Road, which is still serving as the main route for transportation even now since there was no significant attention paid to the transportation system.

The British left a strong footprint in the area and it can be seen in the excellent architecture that they built centuries ago, yet it is still present in superb condition. Some examples of their architecture include the Holy Trinity Church, which was built in 1857.

The renowned company, Murree Brewery Company Ltd. which produces alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages was also founded by the British in Murree in the year 1860. It is still in excellent condition and well-functioning. Additionally, Forbes ranked this company as one of the best 200 companies in Asia.

Other architectural heritage from the colonial era include; the Cecil Heritage Building, Brightland State, General Post Office, Lawrence College, etc. Another noticeable yet undermined aspect of Murree is the Gulu hiking track from Kuldana to Kashmir Point which was initially created by the British as a means of transportation between these two locations. Apart from its initial function which was to serve as a route for military officials, Gulu Track is also capable of catering to hikers of all skill levels, making it accessible and enjoyable for families, solo adventurers, and nature enthusiasts. Over time, the Gulu track may have gained popularity as word spread among hikers and outdoor enthusiasts³.

Aims & Objectives:

The objectives for this research were simple and are given below:

- To identify alternate areas for tourism in Murree.
- To identify problems hindering Murree tourism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Alternative tourism has gained traction in academia and development as a sustainable solution to the negative impacts of mass tourism. It has been observed how destinations undergo stages from discover to decline due to their saturation and overuse⁴. A once serene hill like Murree is now facing critical problems in infrastructure and environment, which is why the tourist traffic should be dispersed to maintain ecological balance and promote long-term economic viability⁵.

Studies in sustainable tourism say that introducing lesser-known, natural, and community-centric destinations helps in distributing the economic benefits while also conserving the ecological footprint of that destination⁶. According to Pakistan Tourism Development Corporation (PTDC), the recent influx of domestic tourists into Murree has exhausted the region's capacity. Parallel to that, UNEP (2005) identifies unmanaged tourism growth in fragile hill stations as a contributor to deforestation, waste management, and cultural dilution⁷. These findings are echoed in regional research, including works by Khan et al. (2017), who documented the seasonal overcrowding in Murree and the urgent need for integrated planning involving local stakeholders. In contrast to that, community-based tourism models, particularly in

mountainous regions like Gilgit-Baltistan, have demonstrated success in balancing economic gain along with cultural preservation and environmental protection⁸. Models like this advocate empowering local populations, enhancing their role in decision-making, and ensuring equitable benefit sharing. This framework is highly relevant to Murree's context because it holds a very suitable environmental and ecological structure which can attract tourists who seek authentic and peaceful experiences. And through this rediscovery of alternate tourist destinations, the deteriorating tourist strain will be alleviated and diluted, leading to a more sustainable environment in near future.

METHODOLOGY

The data was collected through the typically used primary research mechanism where I personally visited the local communities dwelling in the Murree area and interviewed individuals from among them in order to collect information about their local culture and tradition. Furthermore, the undermined and overlooked places that hold great potential in the tourism industry were visited. The data was collected from those potential tourist spots via personal visits from the team. Those visits also included some interviews from the locals as well as the tourist vendors at the destination spots.

Decaying Soft Culture of Murree: Folktales

The folktales of Murree are similar in nature to its mountainous charm. Some notable folktales gathered from local interviews include:

- **Patriata:** A place named after a language barrier between a British officer who inquired about the location where he was, and a passerby woman responded "Puttar Ata" which translates to "Son, Flour" as in she was asking for flour.
- **Baba Lal Shah:** A mystical man believed to walk snow-free paths riding a lion.
- **Ghora Gali:** A place name that translates to "Horse Street" whose origin was to be where British horse caravans used to pass from.
- **Darya Gali:** This is another place linked to a legend where a man redirected the Jehlum River by simply pointing at it. And the name translates to "River Street".
- **Kashmir Point Ghost:** Another location where haunting voices were heard from a water tank which were then silenced after a forty-day exorcism.

Traditional Games:

According to the local interviews the traditional games were basically divided between males and females.

Some games played by males include:

- Marbles
- Guli Danda
- Kite Flying
- Arm Wrestling
- Tug of War

- Hide & Seek, etc.

Other games that females often play are:

- Har Kabootar Doli: A finger-counting indoor game with dares.
- Kokla Chapati: A chase game involving a hidden cloth.
- Akad Bakad: Another finger counting game.
- Hopscotch
- Swinging
- Rope Skipping, etc.

Beyond the gender specific games, there are some ceremonial games, board games, and also card games played by both. The more popular among those are the board games like;

- Ludo
- Checkers
- Chess

Myths:

Murree also bears some interesting myths that fascinate the people who shared:

- **Virgin Mary's Tomb:** Believed by some to be in Murree, where sightings of lights and apparitions have been reported near a hilltop grave.
- **Convent of Jesus and Mary:** Built nearby the hilltop grave, adding further to the myth's credibility.
- **Galiyat Demon:** The story of the mysterious disappearance of women and children in secluded parts of the region, sparking fear and speculation, later revealed to be a leopard.

Decaying Culture of Murree:

Despite its richness, a part of Murree's interesting culture has decayed with the rest of it on the verge. There are several reasons that are causing the decay of Murree culture such as:

- Media advancement,
- Change in the way of life,
- Ignorance of conservation authorities, etc.

Tangible Belongings of the British Era:

Murree was a favored retreat for the British, which is the reason that there remain lasting architectural imprints after their departing in 1947. These architectural masterpieces still remain today and have become a tourist attraction.

They include:

- **Holy Trinity Church (1857):** Built not much later from Murree's establishment, it has the capacity to hold over 400 worshippers and it reflects the British devotion to their faith at the time.
- **Cecil Heritage Building (1858):** Originally which used to be a summer retreat for a British Army Colonel, later became the Viceroy's summer residence in 1940 and then a hotel in 1957. Now it is owned by Lakhani Group and developed into a 4-star luxury hotel under the Pearl Continental Brand.
- **Brightland Estate (1860):** Located on Imtiaz Shaheed Road, this building which used to be a private British residence is now owned by Ghulam Qadir.

- **General Post Office (1867):** Though the original structure of this GPO was demolished in 1970 for modernization, it still remains as a remnant of British presence.
- **Lawrence College (1860):** Founded by Sir Henry Lawrence, it began as a home for orphans and soldiers' children, and then it later turned into a prestigious residential school with currently hosting over 700 students.
- **Murree Brewery (1860):** Primarily established to supply beer to British troops, it later shifted at Ghora Gali and evolved into an international standard brand.
- **Convent of Jesus & Mary (1876):** Founded by Claudine Thevenet, it was a girls' school that aimed to groom young women into capable homemakers and individuals.

Gulu Track:

A track built for the purpose of serving as a route for military personnel in British Colonial times now holds great potential for the tourism industry. It was designated the name "Gulu Track" by the researchers of Tourism and Hospitality Management from Kohsar University, Murree through mutual consensus.



The Gulu Track is located between two of the most beautiful places in Murree; Ghika Gali and Kashmir Point. There is a single kilometer distance from Ghika Gali to this track through GT Road and Two kilometers from Kuldana.

The track itself is 3 kilometers long and accommodates walking for tourists from Ghika Gali to Kashmir Point. As for the width, it measures around 5.5 feet for the most part. It is an excellent walking track that takes around 45-50 minutes to cover. It is usually visited in the summer when people set out to capture the essence of the area's natural beauty and enjoy the cool weather.

The coordinates that mark the center of this track are 33 °55'1"NL & 73°24'9"EL, from its start at the side of Ghika Gali it may be found at 33 °55'6"NL & 73°24'1"EL, and it ends at Kashmir point on the coordinates of 33 °54'1"NL & 73°25'8"EL.

Being a mesmerizing, yet underestimated and disregarded attraction in Murree, this Hiking track is quite a popular feature of this serene region. It is situated 7000 feet above sea level and provides majestic views to tourists. The track ascends through lovely green trees, and waving flowers that add to the beautiful atmosphere, especially at the time of rain. The amazing hills of Murree can be seen from the incredible height of this track.

Two kilometers into the track from Ghika Gali which would take about 30 minutes, a few picnic spots can be observed for the families to spend their day and



have quality time.

Towards its ending near Kashmir Point, temporary camps and weakly structured houses can be seen of the nomadic people who came from Punjab and far-flung areas of Kashmir.

The architecture of the track:

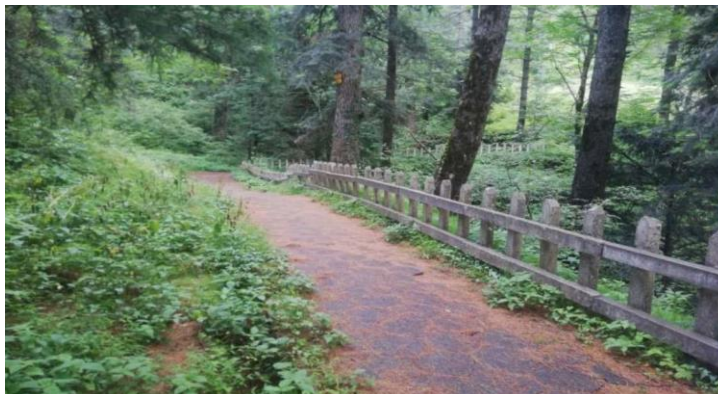
On top of its natural richness, there is also another factor that completes the fascinating beauty, it is its fine and historical architecture that dates back to centuries ago. The track itself is made up of rough and thick tiles, shaped into fine hexagons. At steep parts of the track, there are steps present that are also made up of hexagonal tiles of rough texture.



Steps with Hexagonal tiles

Additionally, at some particular places, the track is guarded by fences and water pipelines can also be seen which were installed by the old Englishmen as well

as the locals. These pipelines make the work of transporting fresh water from the springs to the track.



Fence on Track-side

Flora:

This marvelous track is surrounded by rich flora that can be divided into three categories:

- **Plants:** Fruit plants can be seen around the track at places that include plants of; Orange berries, Blackberries, Red Berries, Chamkat, and Wild Strawberries. There are also flowering plants of; Wild Rose, Wild Jasmine, and Wild Motia present there.



- **Herbs:** Many tea herbs, mushrooms, and other medicinal herbs can also be found in the deeper woods around this track.



- **Trees:** The thick woods comprise Dewdar, Pine trees, Ban kharot, Maple, and Partal trees.



Fauna:

Along with vibrant and rich flora, the fauna of this track is also quite diverse and fascinating for an isolated area surrounded by population. Many species of Birds, Arthropods as well as several Mammals are reported to be seen here. Some of these are common while others are endangered and rare.

- **Birds:** A variety of beautiful birds is also seen in the woods including; Booted Eagle, Khalij Pheasant, Spotted Dove, Little Brown Dove, Slate-head Parakeet, Plum-headed Parakeet, Barbet, and many more.



- **Arthropods:** Species of Mantids, several different kinds of ants, and beetles have been observed.
- **Reptiles:** The reptiles recorded to be seen here include; Snakes, Salamanders, Common Geko, Chamelion, etc.



- **Mammals:** Many species of Mammals are seen and reported around the track which includes sightings of; Leopards, Porcupines, Warthogs, Monkeys, Foxes, Giant Red Flying Squirrels, and many others.

Apart from the above-mentioned classes, this track is filled with many other smaller species of Mollusks, Arachnids, and Amphibians.



Administration:

This marvelous adventure track is administered and maintained by the Town Municipal Authority (TMA) and Pakistan Tourism Development Authority (PTDC) Punjab Chapter.

Problems:

Murree is a mass-tourist attraction year round and especially in the winter when its cool weather attracts people from the nearby hotter regions. Currently, this luscious and magnificent place is severely overlooked from the tourism perspective. It is facing several issues that hinder its popularity among tourists.

Those problems include;

- Insufficient promotion and advertisement.
- Over-construction in the populated areas and commercial buildings mushed together surrounding the entire roadway.
- Businesses (especially in hospitality) are overflowing and have become a nuisance for tourists.

- Ignorance of Authorities in this region has made it mismanaged and certain areas are not as pleasing to the Seeing Eye any longer.
- Vandalism and degradation of land, along with pollution are beginning to make a significant and negative environmental impact.
- Improper garbage disposal is an issue that makes even the most beautiful places seem unpleasing, such is the case with certain areas in Murree.
- Lack of Management brings forth chaos and disruptions in the order through which an organized system works.
- Only one route to the area (Mall Road) is built since the British era is used for multiple purposes and causes congestion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to solve the above-listed issues, the following steps must be taken:

- Improvement in Road infrastructure
- Proper city planning
- Mechanism to develop
- Exploration of new tourist spots by keeping in view the protection of natural habitats of both; fauna and flora.
- Encourage ecotourism in newly explored spots.
- Proper conservation of colonial architecture/remains.
- Overflowing and more than necessary businesses should be controlled.
- Prices of goods must be monitored.
- Garbage disposal must be planned and carried out in the proper manner.
- Mall Road is incapable of supporting such heavy transport and because of that more routes must be drawn out and constructed with proper planning.
- Authorities must take action to control Vandalism and degradation of land to protect the natural beauty of Murree.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this investigation, we can say with confidence that Murree is a truly blessed area with many eye-catching spots for tourists to enjoy. However, the fact must also be pointed out that there are many other areas that have great potential for tourism but are not looked at through the proper lens. Gulu Track is an excellent example of such overlooked spots which could not only generate great revenue for the government but also prove to be a sanctuary for city-worn tourists where they can come to enjoy and relax. And it is clear to any common eye that with little investment and sustained management, those spots can truly reach up to their potential. And if done so likewise with the entire area of Murree, it could very possibly be that it may be recognized internationally.

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