

Condé Nast Traveller

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INDIAN EDITION



INDIAN ESCAPES

INDIA'S HOTTEST NEW HOTELS SECRET HOMESTAYS LADAKH ON A PLATE
OFFBEAT EXPERIENCES AGRA BEYOND THE TAJ NAGALAND OFF THE ROAD
CULTURING HARD IN KUMBAKONAM DO THE ANDAMANS DIFFERENTLY

NOBEL LAUREATE ABHIJIT BANERJEE ★ RANA SAFVI ★ SANDIP ROY ★ MONISHA RAJESH

CNT EXCLUSIVE

QAYAAM GAH SRINAGAR

The boutique hotel is a stylish nature retreat with Sufi vibes.
By **Saumya Ancheri**. Photographs by **Himanshu Lakhwani**

Four villas stand on a ridge backed by the green carpet of the Zabarwan Hills, overlooking the shining crescent of Dal Lake far below. Sitting in bed in my villa named after Habba Khatoon, the mystic poet and love of Kashmir's penultimate native ruler, I am flanked by windows that open out to sunset views of the Dal on one side, and a panel that frames peaks lit by the rising sun on the other. Anchored between valley and peak, sky and lake, the sun and moon, Qayaam Gah has a mystical air by its setting alone.

A seven-key property spread over three acres, this is a retreat for those who want to experience mountain solitude with access to the city's sights, a 40-minute drive away. Built of cedar wood, glass and stone, and made sumptuous with rugs, woodwork and flowers, Qayaam Gah exudes spaciousness and has an easy indoor-outdoor flow.

While each villa has a secluded view, the three suites rest on a lake-facing terrace, and can be interconnected. The focus on sustainable luxury extends from ceramic jars refilled with Kama Ayurveda bath amenities, to sourcing local produce and keeping the orchards lush with wildflowers. An infinity pool, the deck Qalb (or "spiritual heart") where music is played by a local troupe at high tea, and a canopied pavilion for private dinners take in the 360° mountain views. The panorama stretches from the Zabarwan Hills to the Pir Panjal and Shamshabari ranges; the play of light on the Dal is mesmerising.

Design lovers will appreciate the contemporary framing of Kashmiri craftsmanship, for instance, marrying delicate pinjrakari latticework with the solidness of stark black walls. The medley of sensibilities extends to the table at restaurant Ruh (or "soul"), where a basket of Kashmiri breads with walnut and radish chutneys can be followed by an apple juice shot with a canapé, garden-fresh salad, chicken saffron broth, trout in lemon butter garlic sauce, and mango sticky rice dessert.

That said, the famous wazwan-style traami is prepared by chef Tabassum, a local who learned the art from her uncle who worked as a waza (master cook).

Surrounded by such natural and cultural bounty, there's a lot to do around. With local guide Nisar Malik, we stop at the shrine of the Sufi saint believed to have blessed the village with natural spring water, which also channels to the resort's heated infinity pool and bath tubs. He takes us on a heritage trail of the Old City, and a lavish picnic in the Dara hills. Qayaam Gah offers a variety of hikes, from a trek into the nearby Dachigam National Park to a contemplative walk led by the yoga teacher, Archana Shekhar. After a calming meditation, Archana leaves me with food for thought: "I'm from Jharkhand," she says, "and I want people to know that Kashmir is different from what is usually portrayed. They don't see any religious differences here, everyone is welcome."

Perhaps it is this ease with faith that led Altaf Chapri to draw on Sufism to build Qayaam Gah in Srinagar, as he drew on Shaivism to construct Neeleshwar Hermitage in a Kerala temple town. Qayaam signifies the highest mystical state in Sufism, Altaf explains, the next level after "sukoon" or unshakeable peace. It is no coincidence that the resort is sister to a grand restored houseboat on Dal Lake named Sukoon. If Sukoon embodies the feminine essence of a richly decorated vessel on the lake, Qayaam Gah is the masculine counterpart with dark colours, solid shapes and clean lines against the rugged peaks. The retreat offers wellness journeys, though even a casual weekend can leave a traveller feeling tranquil. 🧘

QAYAAM GAH Astanpura Village, Brein, Srinagar, Jammu & Kashmir 191121 (abchapi.retreats.in; doubles from ₹50,000 for a suite and ₹58,000 for a villa for a two-night minimum stay, inclusive of airport transfers, all meals, morning yoga, and a guided hike and picnic in the hills)



