

# Valley Views

LUXURIATING IN THE NICEST HOUSEBOAT ON THE DAL AND CAMPING IN INCOMPARABLE COMFORT AT SONAMARG, **AMIT DIXIT** FINDS HIS KIND OF PARADISE IN KASHMIR. PHOTOGRAPHS BY **PUNEET K. PALIWAL**

*Glamping  
in Sonamarg  
with the loveliest  
view of the  
Thajiwass glacier*

**o land in Srinagar on Burhan Wani's second death anniversary is not a coincidence** I would have wished for, but it's just one of those things you get used to in this fragile and beautiful valley. The streets, cleaner since the last time, were completely deserted, which should have been disconcerting, but was oddly peaceful instead. After all, we were looking for *sukoon* (peace/contentment); quite literally, in fact, it being the name of the houseboat which would be our home for the next two nights.

I savoured Puneet's expressions of delight. He oohed and aahed at everything from the uniform architecture of the houses to the wooden bridges and the stately chinars. Kashmir does that to first timers. Thankfully, he did not go insane with ecstasy when the Dal Lake finally swung into view. We stopped at Jetty No. 19A, opposite the inviting kebab stalls of Zabarwan Park. Rashid, our nimble boatman, hauled the luggage onto a well-appointed motorised vessel, and we were on our way.

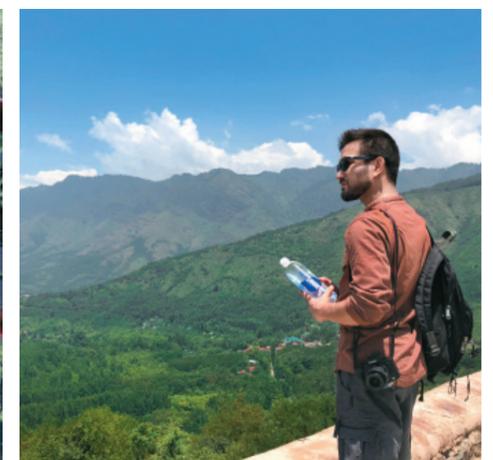
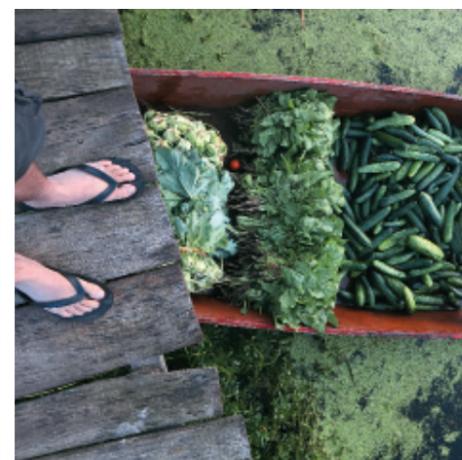
Almost immediately I felt like I was in a film. Bollywood, but before the term came into use. 1960s, perhaps. Technicolor. The classic Kashmir scene that launched a thousand shikaras. And a

million honeymoons. It is this archetypal fantasy and a desire to relive it that draws visitors in the droves to Kashmir.

When we reached the houseboat—the journey took only a few minutes—we were greeted with warm smiles and cold towels, then ushered into our respective rooms. Requests for *kahwa* were entertained right away. I knew if I got too comfortable, it would be difficult to tear myself away from this sanctuary. So I gritted my teeth and we headed out.

Tourism in Srinagar has always revolved around its historic formal gardens, which were established by the Mughals centuries ago. Our first port of call was Pari Mahal, which I hadn't seen before. Built by the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh as a library and retreat, and set high in the Zabarwan Hills, it offers some of the best views of Srinagar. It's only

*Clockwise from top left: colourful transport; lotus flowers; meal in a Kashmiri home; buying cardamom at the floating market; at Pari Mahal; vegetables for sale on the Dal; posing with the master; papier-mâché eggs at the Sukoon Houseboat; and a dried chinar leaf at Shalimar Bagh, one of Srinagar's Mughal gardens*





A suite in the Sukoon Houseboat; and (facing page) a sufi music performance on the sundeck of the boat at dusk

from up high that you realise how big Srinagar is, or that, even at a third of its original size, just how magnificent the Dal Lake is.

Lunch was at Ahdoo's, the grande dame of Kashmiri restaurants, which began life in 1918 as a modest bakery, subsequently evolving into a Kashmiri *wazwan* restaurant, the first such in the valley. Ahdoo's is a favourite with the locals, and that's always a good sign. It didn't disappoint, although there are whispers of other places which are at least as good, if not better. There was *rista* and *gushtaba*, the classic *roghan josh* and a mutton in coriander gravy that I hadn't encountered before. And there was *haq*, the Kashmiri leafy green staple that I can never have enough of.

After lunch, we drove to the next garden, Shalimar Bagh, built by the Emperor Jahangir for

his wife Noor Jahan in 1619. Yup, it'll be 400 years old next year. In fact, it's built on the site of an older garden dating from the second century. Shalimar is noted for the carved niches behind the waterfalls called *chini khana*s, where lamps were once lit in the evenings. We walked up towards the central pavilion, a gorgeous bit of architecture, abandoning our footwear along the way and, instead, walking gingerly up the shallow but slippery stream. It was a hot summer day and schoolboys were horsing about in the water. I regretted not getting my swimwear along.

The final garden of the day was the venerable Nishat Bagh, with its 12 terraces corresponding to the 12 signs of the zodiac. We were soon bewitched by a portrait photographer and his array of colourful costumes. I only wanted one photograph, but ended



up with a 'discounted' package of 10. My smartphone can take better photos but there was something about the whole process I enjoyed immensely ('human interaction', was it?). Even getting fleeced in paradise is fun.

In the evening, there was a sufi concert on the sundeck, Sukoon being one of the few houseboats to even have one. With the matchless backdrop of the Dal, it was a divine experience. It's little touches like this that set Sukoon apart from the crowd.

Kashmiri houseboats are said to have come up in the late 19th century, built by the boat-dwelling Hanji community to cater to British visitors and residents who were not allowed to own land in Kashmir by the maharaja. Today, there are hundreds of quirkily named houseboats lining the Dal, although ours, true to name, was set in one of

the quietest corners of the lake.

With only five bedrooms, one of them a suite, there's a lot of elbow room on the Sukoon. It used to be called the 'Neil Armstrong' and was run by Altaf Chapri's father. A few seasons ago, Altaf, who runs a tour company, apart from a tranquil beach retreat in north Kerala, rented it from his father

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Another view of the Sukoon Camp at Sonamarg



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and transformed it into Sukoon. The wood has not been painted over, and the original carving shines through. The bathrooms are modern, verging on posh, and even boast bathtubs. Colourful silk fabrics add a contemporary touch to the furnishings and play off beautifully against a neutral base. Incidentally, they have zero tolerance for plastics, so no mineral water bottles here. And they do not release any sewage into the lake.

My favourite space soon became the leather

chaise longue in the lobby area. Altaf remarked that it was a spot favoured by all the writers he has hosted, including Pico Iyer. Guess all great writers know a good couch when they see one.

Next morning we were up before dawn. A shikara was already waiting. Once a pot of *kahwa* and a box of cookies had been loaded, we were declared fit to depart. It's only on that ride to the early morning floating vegetable market that I truly realised how integral water is to the Kashmiri way of life. There

*The Sukoon Houseboat in all its understated beauty, belying the luxurious experience it offers*



were lotus farms along the way, and floating shops, full-fledged villages even on the water, an entire way of life just beginning to wake up. At the crossroads of a few slim waterways was a tangle of boats carrying vegetables. We had arrived. Brisk business was being conducted, like it had probably been for centuries. I was a tad disappointed to note though that there were almost as many boats ferrying tourists, with the attendant retinue of souvenir vendors, also on boats.

We returned to a much anticipated breakfast of *harissa*, a minced lamb dish cooked overnight with herbs and spices to a softness that is hard to believe until you dig into it with some flaky Kashmiri bread. The rest of the morning was devoted to walking around the old town, taking in the towering Jami Masjid and the exquisite Khanqah-e-Maula or Shah Hamadan mosque. My Kashmiri chilli vendor was right at the street corner where I had left him last and I made sure to get my annual supply.

We stopped at a home on the outskirts of Srinagar for lunch, and had it Kashmiri style, on the floor. The food was to die for. Maybe we ate a bit too much and had to abandon our planned climb into the Zabarwan Hills. Instead, we went off to survey Altaf's pet project, a property in the hills overlooking Srinagar. It should have opened by now, but work has stalled because of the uncertainty of the last few years. When Qayaam Gah, the 'place of deep rest',

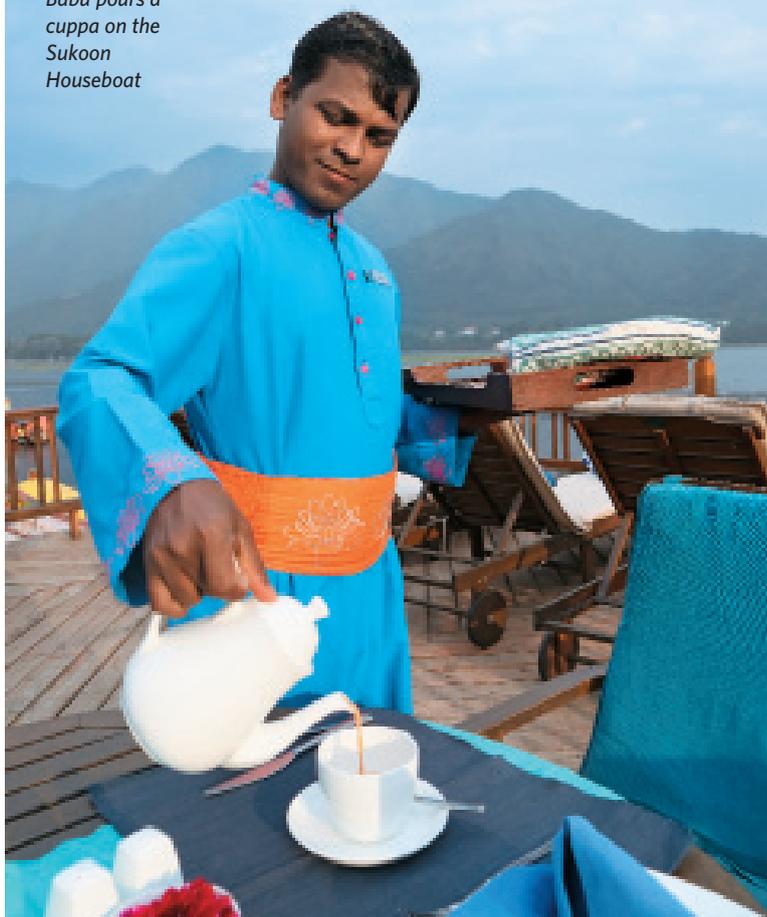
named for the next stage of the Sufi experience (the first being *sukoon*), finally opens—and which I hope will be soon, if only for my own selfish ends—it will offer an experience like no other in Kashmir. Set in a sprawling orchard but with a deliberately low inventory, the all-weather retreat will offer stunning views of both the Dal Lake and the Zabarwan Hills, from the comfort of your bed.

A houseboat can be a bit too relaxing, and there are chances you will go soft. That's probably why

*Trigger-happy photographer finds willing models at the Naranag Temple; and (below) interiors of the tent at the campsite*



Babu pours a cuppa on the Sukoon Houseboat



Altaf also offers walking safaris across Kashmir. Stay is in well appointed deluxe tents, with attached bath and toilet, which follow you around as you walk from campsite to campsite. Next morning, the scenic road to Kargil, along the playful Sind River, took us to Sonamarg, where we were scheduled to set up camp. Of course, the tents had already been pitched by the time we huffed and puffed our way up to the campsite and there was fresh trout on the table. Once we reached, we realised how well chosen the site was.

It was far from the clutter of main Sonamarg and offered unparalleled views of the Thajiwas glacier. There were tribal villages perched on the hillsides above the camp and we paid their shy residents a visit after scampering over a few small streams. At dinner, the food came in courses, although a sudden spell of rain did mean that we couldn't dine al fresco as planned. A fire was lit and we warmed ourselves. By the time the fire died out, the sky had cleared, and Puneet had his first proper view of the Milky Way. His ecstatic sighs, which had accompanied us through the trip, were positive grunts now. Having witnessed this coming-of-age event, I retired to my comfy bed, for once, content with the bounty of this world. It's against this quiveringly scenic backdrop that the tragedy of Kashmir has played out for way too long. The valley longs for *sukoon* and *qayaam*.

## THE INFORMATION

### GETTING THERE

Srinagar now has flights from all across India, making it a somewhat busy and chaotic airport. **Security** is extremely strict, so you absolutely must factor in some extra time for screening at the time of departure (keep at least one hour extra in hand).

### WHERE TO STAY

We stayed in the lap of comfort on the **Sukoon Houseboat** (from ₹13,400 doubles; [sukoonkashmir.com](http://sukoonkashmir.com)). Sukoon stands apart from other houseboats on the Dal Lake with its exceptional service and style. For more information on the Sukoon Houseboat, their walking safaris, as well as the group's beach-facing property in north

Kerala and the Lotus Houseboat there, see [abchapiiretreats.in](http://abchapiiretreats.in). For pricing of the **walking safaris** and any other details, contact the reservations department at 88, Chapri House, Sector 23, HUDA, Gurgaon-17; +91-124-4010072, 0194-2500450; [sales@sukoonkashmir.com](mailto:sales@sukoonkashmir.com).

### WHAT TO SEE & DO

Walk around Srinagar's atmospheric **old town**. Must-visit sites include the **Jami Masjid** and the **Shah Hamadan Mosque**. The Jami Masjid is an impressive wooden structure, notable for the more than 300 soaring pillars supporting the roof; each made of a single deodar tree trunk. There is a spacious inner courtyard with great views of the Srinagar Fort.

Shah Hamdan Mosque is one of the oldest in Srinagar. The wooden mosque stands right beside the Jhelum and is noted for the papier-mâché work on its walls and ceilings. No nails or screws were used in its construction. Originally built in 1395, it was destroyed by fire twice, in 1479 and again in 1731.

The **Zaina Kadal Market** is redolent with the aromas of spices and dry fruits. Almonds (the local variety) and walnuts are highly recommended, as is the Kashmiri saffron. You could also buy dried morels here. Charming though the interaction is with the floating vendors on the Dal Lake, buying from them is not a great idea: prices are hugely inflated and the weight measurements are wildly

off. Just pick up what you need from the spice market in town.

Do have a meal at one of the *wazwan* restaurants in Srinagar. **Ahdoo's** ([ahdooshotel.com](http://ahdooshotel.com)) is by far the most popular. They also run a nice bakery downstairs, where you can pick up some Shrewsbury biscuits to take back home.

The **dargah** at Hazratbal, with its striking white dome, is said to have a few relics of the Prophet Muhammad and is near the Nigeen Lake.

The **floating vegetable market** on the Dal Lake is a not-to-be-missed experience.

En route Sonamarg, you can take a detour to the ancient temples at **Naranag**. The temples are somewhat worn down but it's a serene spot for a picnic.