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KASHMIR

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**Dishes to die for**

Tabak maaz,  
harissa, rogan josh

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**Edenic Charm**

The formal Mughal  
gardens are a hit

\*\*\*  
**Out of Town**

Pahalgam and  
Gulmarg are great  
day trips

# ODE TO Autumn

*We adore Kashmir in spring, summer and winter,  
but could autumn be its loveliest season? Text  
and photographs by*

**AMIT DIXIT**

Chinar  
leaves line  
the ground,  
Nishat Bagh

## SAW MY FIRST FADED CHINAR LEAVES WITHOUT WARNING,

although it wasn't unexpected, heading out of Srinagar's Sheikh ul-Alam Airport, gazing up absentmindedly from the shiny world of my smartphone. It was a solitary tree, not even a particularly large one, on Airport Road, but striking nevertheless, an amuse-bouche, hinting at the russet riches to come. Having experienced Kashmir in every season bar one, I was keen to set the record straight by taking in the valley's autumn hues and flavours.

I was staying at my favourite Srinagar haunt, the Sukoon Houseboat, a short boat



ride across the Dal Lake from Ghat 19A. There were organic cotton masks, a temperature gun and copious quantities of sanitiser.

Otherwise, I was grateful to note, it was pretty much business as usual, down to the beaming smiles. My friend Altaf Chapri has elevated the houseboat experience with a sun-kissed upper deck—great for meals and yoga lessons when the weather is nice—full service, gourmet meals, stylish décor and, most important, running hot water.

Altaf is a man with a big heart. Combine that with the Kashmiri compulsion for hospitality and you have the predicament I was in within an hour of landing on the boat: neck deep in a trami platter, Kashmiri wedding food, laden with more meat than us wusses eat in a year. There was the famed tabak maaz (lamb ribs fried to a crisp and

The pheran may be the quintessential Kashmiri garment of choice but, according to some sources, it was introduced in Kashmir by Akbar in the 16th century. The traditional pheran extended to the feet; the modern version typically ends below the knees. Summer ones are lighter and the version women wear tends to be embroidered.



dripping with fat), seekh kabab, methi maaz, spicy lahabi kabab, a chicken dish I was too intoxicated by the taste to note the name of, and rista and gushtaba, meatball gravies to die for. There was haq, the beloved collard greens of the Kashmiris, on the side. We were dining on the upper deck, neglecting the gorgeous vista of the Dal Lake right in front of us. No less a personage than Emperor Jahangir had called Kashmir 'paradise on earth'. But, above all, Kashmir is a foodie's paradise.

NEVER A DULL

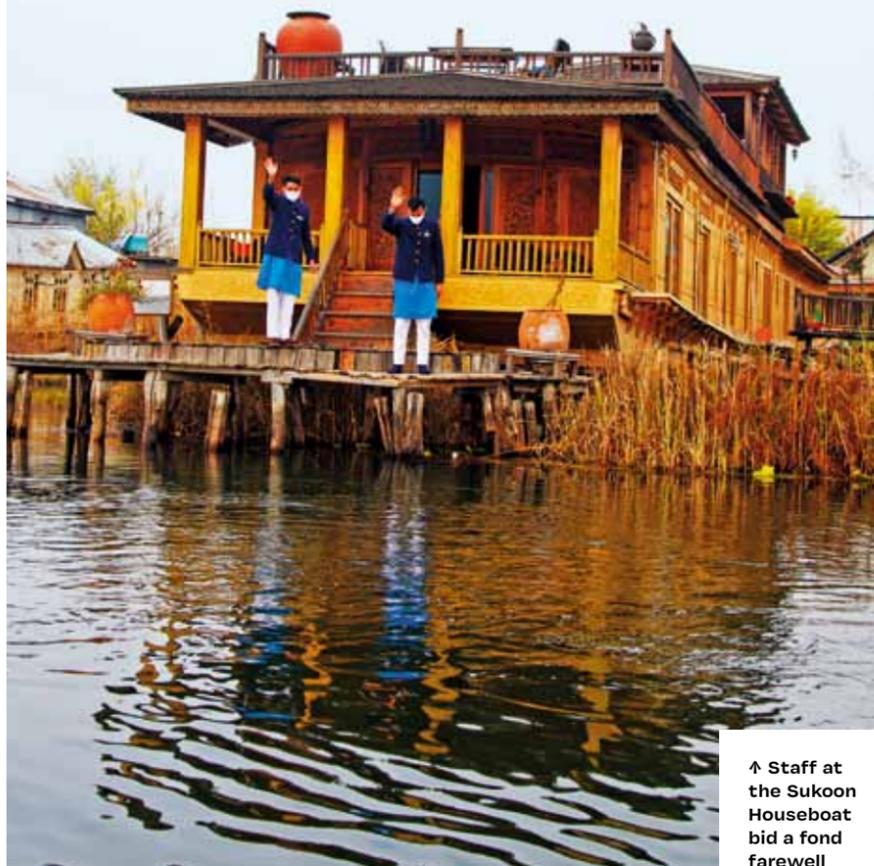
## Moment

In the late afternoon, I took a shikara ride on the Dal. Because, well, every visitor to Srinagar must. And, after all, what better way to work off that monstrous feast than let someone else do all the hard work of paddling! It was cold—more than a nip, but not quite winter—but there was a flask of kahwa at hand, so I wasn't worried.

\* **The Dal Lake—referred to in ancient Sanskrit texts as Mahasarit—covers an area of 18 sq km with a 16km-long shoreline that is lined with gardens dating from the Mughal era. The lake has floating gardens known as *rad*, where lotuses bloom**

The Dal's beauty is not seen so much as felt. You have to take it in gradually. It's a sprawling, unwieldy waterbody, not neat or possible to encompass in a single glance. But it commands you to relax. Maybe it's the sluggish ripples made by the paan-shaped paddle. Maybe it's the gentle motion of the shikara. Maybe it's the periodic nuggets of information imparted by the boatman in his sweet Kashmiri accent. ("Haider was shot in this house... boats are only built with deodar, they're very expensive these days but can last 30-40

## Sukoon has elevated the houseboat experience with a sun-kissed upper deck, full service, gourmet meals, stylish décor and running hot water



↑ Staff at the Sukoon Houseboat bid a fond farewell



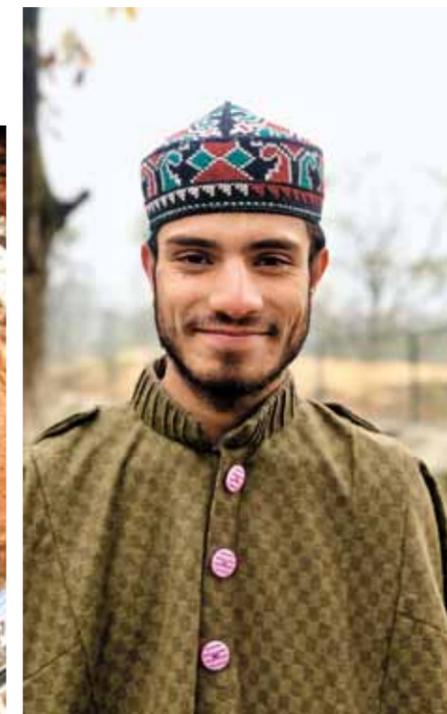
↓ A relaxing shikara ride on the Dal Lake



↑ The living area in the Sukoon Houseboat

↓ Harissa, a seasonal breakfast delicacy

⇒ A dashing youth on the road to Pahalgam





Srinagar is a city of fine gardens, many of them built by the Mughals in the formal style they are so famous for, hundreds of years ago. It's in these resplendent gardens that the passing of the seasons is best observed

Naseem Bagh has the most magnificent chinars

years...those are lotus farms, nadru is being harvested right now...")

We occasionally sent families of Eurasian coots—who'd come all the way from China to winter here; no visa required—flying off. Or skittering, to be exact. They have a peculiar way of half-flying across the water, wings flapping wildly, conveying the impression of running on the water.

Scenes of quotidian life are made magical when played out on a beautiful body of water. A wizened old granny steps into her canoe and goes off on some errands. A grandfather-grandson duo overtakes us, grandson paddling enthusiastically in the lead. A shop in the middle of the lake accepts a boring consignment of goods. Bengali tourists drive a hard bargain at the crafts market in the middle of the Dal. The autumn sun is soft, and will soon be a gentle, orange orb.

## GARDENS FIT FOR Kings

Srinagar is a city of gardens, many of them built by the Mughals in the formal style they are so famous for, hundreds of years ago. It's in these resplendent gardens that the passing of the seasons is best noted. Before we hit the well-trodden garden trail though, Altaf took me to Naseem Bagh, part of the Kashmir University campus, which boasts glorious stands of chinara—and no tourists. You wouldn't know it, but it's one of the oldest Mughal gardens in Kashmir, established by the emperor Akbar in 1586. A hundred years later, Shah Jahan planted over 1,200 chinars here. Around 700 remain today, interspersed with university departments as diverse as development studies and sculptural art.

Also known as Old World Sycamore or Oriental Plane, the chinara may have been introduced into Kashmir by the Mughals, who were avid gardeners. Today, it is a symbol of the, well, union territory, giving close competition to that other popular icon—the shikara. The

The chinara or *Platanus orientalis* is a deciduous tree that can grow to a height of 30m or more and is noted for its longevity. It's a popular landscape tree in Kashmir and Srinagar's gardens are full of it. It can be easily recognised by its palmate leaves.

chinars are graceful giants and you can spend hours staring at them, awed by their majesty.

From Naseem, we headed to Shalimar, everyone's favourite bagh, its centrepiece the famed pavilion made of black marble. The water channels were dry, in preparation for winter. The last time I had visited, there had been children frolicking in the waters. Even now the gardens were brimming with visitors: lovers and photographers, picnicking children, tourists all the way from South India... There were peals of laughter and friendly banter everywhere. The sun had graced us with its company. All in all, a lovely day to be outdoors.

Kashmir's autumn colours are predominantly brown, dominated by chinara leaves. There are other trees going through their fall transformation—maple, for instance—but the chinara is dominant. At

Nishat Bagh, that magical garden of the 12 terraces on the banks of the Dal, the ground is carpeted in chinara leaves, which crunch softly under one's feet.

We romanticise autumn. But, in Kashmir, where probably trillions of chinara leaves fall to the ground each year, they meet a prosaic end, burnt to create a fine charcoal powder which is used as the top layer in the kangri, a portable brazier that Kashmiris tuck under their pherans for warmth in winter.

A climb up and down Chashme Shahi and I'm tired. We relax by an open fire at Qayaam Gah, a cosy retreat Altaf is building in the Zabarwan hills. There are kababs, to be pulled straight off the skewers with paper-thin lavasa bread, washed down with noon chai. We roast chestnuts in the dying embers. The evening is cold and there are whispers of the mercury dipping below

An icon of Kashmir, no trip here is complete without a (often) romantic ride by shikara on the Dal Lake in Srinagar. They're designed in a way to provide complete privacy. The boatman might as well not be there. Just be wary of the salespersons who'll sidle their boat next to yours and try to sell you overpriced souvenirs.

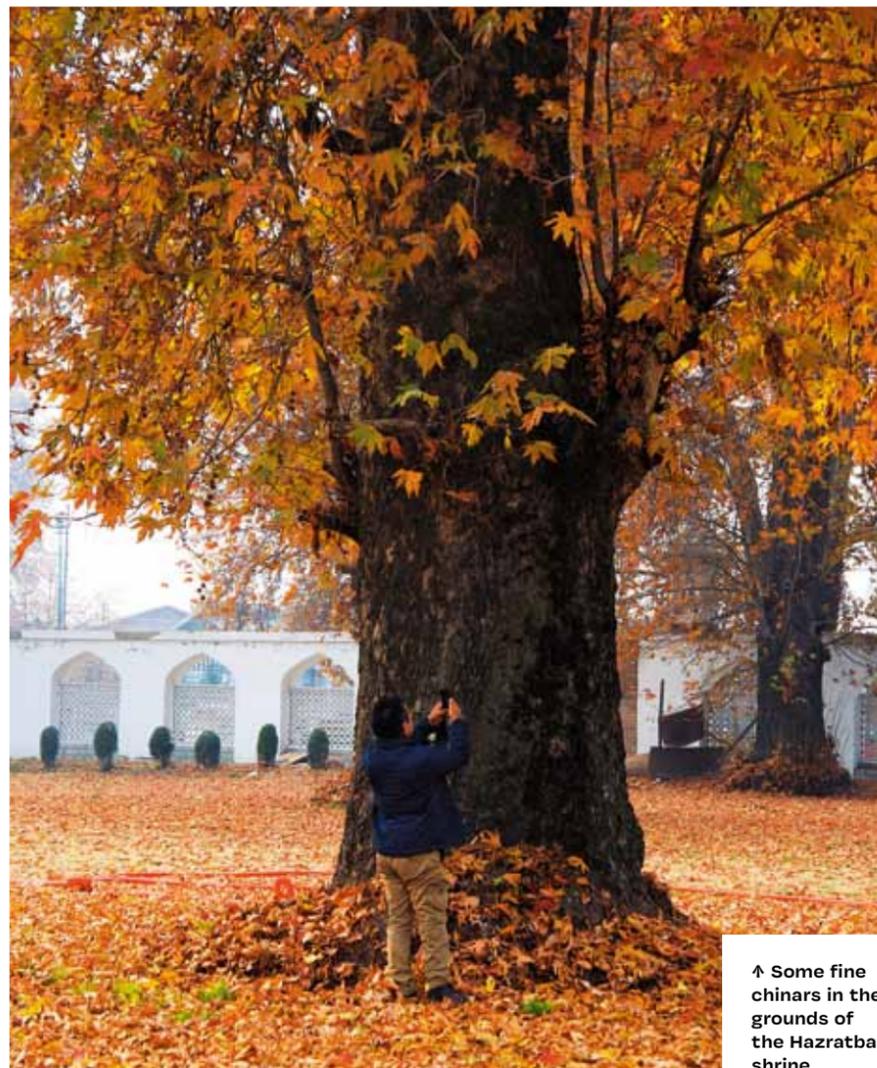


zero that night. Thankfully, there's heart-warming rajma-chawal for dinner and a bathtub with piping hot water to soak into back at Sukoon. They don't call it 'solace' for nothing. Next morning, I awake to the loud and melodious call of Himalayan bulbuls.

## SONG OF Fire & Ice

Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness, Keats called it. One of the mellow fruits of the Kashmiri autumn is harissa—cousin of the Armenian harees and the Hyderabad haleem—a slow-cooked grain-and-meat gruel that is a popular autumn-winter breakfast in downtown Srinagar. Next morning, we drove through the mist to Kong Posh in Nawa Kadal—one of the few authentic harissa joints still surviving—to experience it, quite literally, in the flesh. There was a beeline of hungry customers when we arrived. Inside, the muscular proprietor sat on the stove, extracting portions of harissa from a pot built into the hearth, tempering them with mustard oil in a display that would put the finest flambé to shame. In Kashmir, harissa is made with rice and leg of lamb. The meat and rice mixture is stirred over a slow fire overnight, and mashed with a wooden pestle till it becomes a glutinous paste—not a bone shard in sight—as soft as rose petals.

We sat around the hearth, which was still warm from last night's labours, and tucked into the harissa with pieces of crisp tsot (an encyclopaedia could be written on the different breads of Kashmir). I'll be honest here—I've never tasted anything like it. Aromatic and satisfying, purists swear by the traditional method of making harissa, and I can see why. Then, I ordered a second



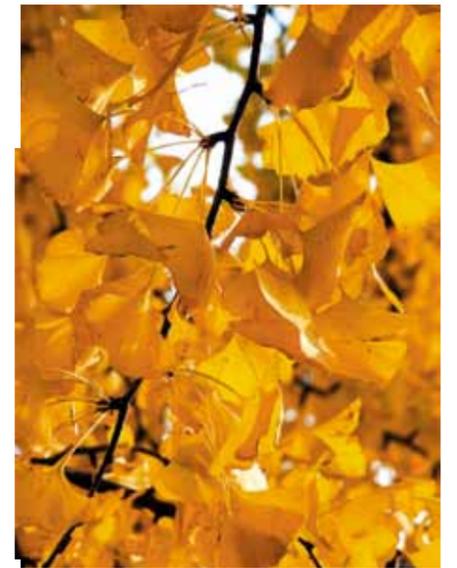
↑ Some fine chinars in the grounds of the Hazratbal shrine



← Chochwor, preferred bread for afternoon tea

↓ Shikara on the Dal Lake, an iconic sight in Srinagar

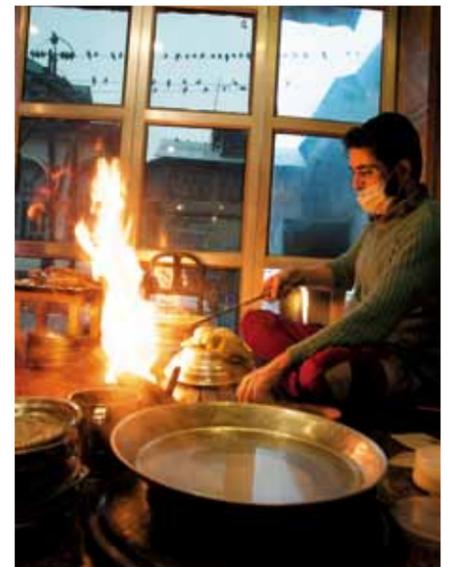
→ A tree in Shalimar Bagh in all its fall glory



← Two gentlemen we met en route to Pahalgam

↓ Maple leaves turn a delicious red in autumn

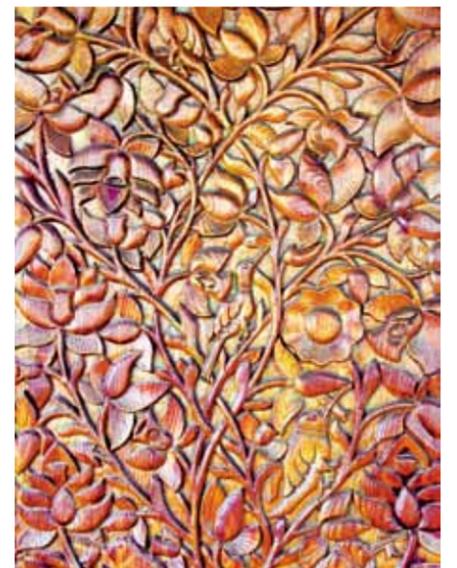
→ Harissa being tempered at Kong Posh in Nawa Kadal



← Mural on a wall, Black Pavilion, Shalimar Bagh

↓ A cosy bedroom on the Sukoon Houseboat

→ Fine wood carving inside the houseboat



portion. Artery-clogging eventually, but I wouldn't have missed it for the world.

The rich and warming repast can keep you sated for the entire day. Which was just as well, because I was heading to Gulmarg. There was news of snowfall there, so I simply had to squeeze it into my itinerary. After all, if autumn is here, can winter be far behind? And two seasons for the price of one? No contest.

Gulmarg, carpeted in a thick layer of powdery snow, lived up to its promise. I had last been here as a child, so it was nostalgic. I had every intention of rebuffing the guides who descended on me like vultures, but after I slipped and landed hard on my bum, the deal was sealed. So I was sledged, photographed, and temple-visited in double-quick time, as requested. I couldn't have done it without you, Sahil and Imtiaz.

Rain rang in the next day, but we stuck to our guns and drove out to Pahalgam as planned, on an excellent highway not more than a year old. On the drive, I couldn't help noting the unseasonable number of pregnant women in the valley, until I realised the kangris were already out. Where Gulmarg is compact, Pahalgam is a sprawl, with the merry Lidder flowing by, with lots of camping and trekking options.

↓ A chilly yet playful Lidder River at Pahalgam



← Sledge riding in Gulmarg is not for the faint hearted

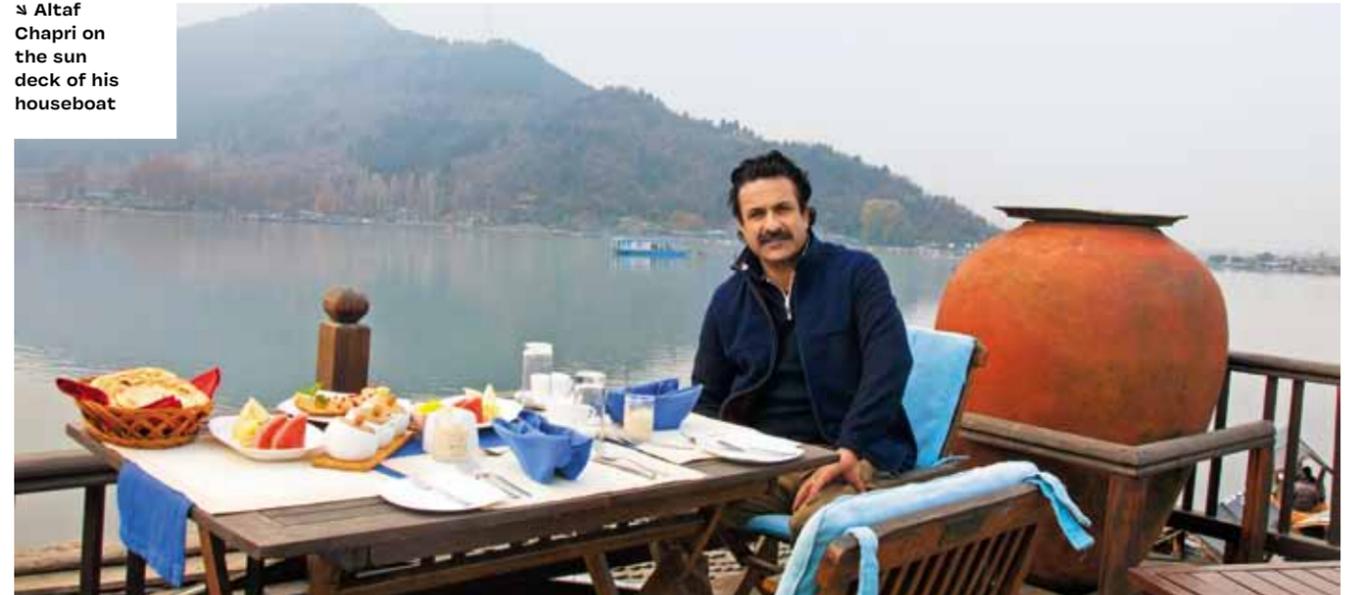
Snow fell in gentle drifts as we lunched on trout at the grand ol' Pahalgam Hotel.

Then it is time. I prepare to bid another teary-eyed farewell to Kashmir, gathering up my chinar-leaf souvenirs into a fatal, crushing embrace. Over our nth cup of kahwa, Altaf is matter of fact in his assessment of Kashmir's tourism potential. No other destination in the country has a lake like the Dal, he proffers. Within a couple of hours of landing at the airport you could be skiing. Or setting off on a

scenic trek. Or enjoying a boat ride on the Dal. All this a short flight from Delhi. Other places in the Himalaya take longer to get to, often entailing long drives. With foreign travel at a standstill, domestic destinations, including Kashmir, are getting a lot of attention from Indians. All those avid skiers who used to escape to Europe in the winters are lining up at the ski slopes of Gulmarg, for instance. It's a flawless proposition.

Kashmir is safe. And it's open for business. Was paradise ever so accessible? 📍

↘ Altaf Chapri on the sun deck of his houseboat



## traveller KASHMIR

**How to Reach** Srinagar airport is well connected by flights with Indian metros. At the time of writing, rapid COVID tests were being conducted for all passengers arriving at Srinagar airport.

### Where to Stay

☒ **Sukoon Houseboat** The houseboat experience doesn't get better than this

☒ **RK Sarovar Portico** The perfect city hotel, this well-located property boasts cosy rooms (there's even a spa but it's currently closed due to the pandemic)

☒ **The Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa** In Gulmarg, the grand Khyber has set a new benchmark for hotels in Kashmir

☒ **Pahalgam Hotel** As old as the resort town itself, this hotel has featured in several Bollywood movies



### What to Do

☒ Take a walk around the Old City, which has charming shrines, vibrant bazaars and lots of atmosphere.

☒ Explore the Dal Lake by boat. Great for birding too. If you can wake up early, there is a floating vegetable market on the Dal.

☒ The gardens—Shalimar, Nishat and Chashme Shahi among them—are justly famous and the best spots to catch autumn colours. In



spring, the Tulip Garden is a huge attraction.

☒ Srinagar is also a city of shrines and mosques. The Jamia Masjid (*pic above*) with its towering deodar pillars is a sight to behold as is the

Khanqah-e-Moula, a fine example of Kashmiri wooden architecture. The mesmerising Hazratbal, on the banks of the Dal, is believed to hold a hair of the Prophet Muhammad.

☒ Have tea at Chai Jaai (*pic above*), a café in the erstwhile Mahattas Studio.

☒ The Dachigam National Park is nearby, where you can see the endangered hangul.

☒ The Harwan Monastery is a Buddhist archaeological site that has been restored beautifully.



### What to Eat

☒ Kahwa, green tea, infused with cardamom, cinnamon and/or saffron, is a Kashmiri staple best had from a samovar.

☒ You can try the salty noon chai too—it has a distinctive pink colour—but it's definitely an acquired taste.

☒ Have a Kashmiri wazwan. Sukoon can organise it for you, but there are restaurants in Srinagar serving it as well.

☒ Harissa, a winter delicacy cooked overnight over a slow fire and available in only a few shops in downtown Srinagar, is a must-try.