



TAKE YOUR BEST SHOT
A polo tournament in Drass, complete with costumed dancers (opposite), brings a hopeful sign of peace to the once war-torn Kashmiri town.

TEN
YEARS
2001-2011

THE LAST VALLEY

LONG MARRED BY SEPARATIST VIOLENCE, THE KASHMIR VALLEY IS FINALLY ENJOYING A RELATIVE PEACE, WITH TOURIST NUMBERS HIGHER THAN THEY HAVE BEEN FOR YEARS. BUT WILL IT BE ENOUGH TO RETURN THE BEAUTIFUL HIMALAYAN VALE TO THE RANKS OF INDIA'S MOST LEGENDARY DESTINATIONS?

BY SHOBA NARAYAN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY HIMANSHU KHAGTA



DEFENSIVE DRIVING

A line of Srinagar-bound trucks negotiating the narrow, vertigo-inducing Zoji La, a high mountain pass that connects the Kashmir Valley with Drass and Ladakh.



At 3,528 meters above sea level,

Zoji La is among the highest—and most hair-raising—mountain passes in the world. It constitutes a narrow, precipitous spur of India’s National Highway 1, which connects the serene Kashmir Valley with Ladakh. I’m en route there now, risking muddy switchbacks and plunging ravines just to see a polo tournament in the remote Himalayan town of Drass. And right when I think things can’t get any more unnerving, the convoy of tourist vehicles I’m traveling in screeches to a stop. There’s a landslide ahead.

Thankfully, a patrol of rifle-toting soldiers is on hand to clear away enough of the debris to allow a single lane of traffic to pass. Their being here is not merely fortuitous: the Indian Army has maintained a heavy presence in the area since the Indo-Pakistani War of 1947, the first of three border wars fought over Kashmir. One of our drivers tells me in a soft Kashmiri accent that there’s a high-altitude army training center nearby.

While we wait for the way to be cleared, the group of journalists I’m traveling with loiters by the gravely roadside. Some of us take pictures, or blow cigarette smoke into the thin mountain air, dazed by the raw beauty all around. The snow-capped Lower Himalayas rise on the horizon like frozen tidal waves. Far below, in the grassy plains where the River Sindh rushes headlong toward its confluence with the Baltal, Hindu pilgrims en route to the holy cave of Amarnath have populated a massive campsite. Their turquoise and yellow tents look like candy wrappers from where we stand.

Finally, we’re ready to move on toward Drass, which in winter is said to be one of coldest inhabited places on earth. It’s also the clos-

ON THE ROAD

A public bus en route to the Kashmir Valley, above. Opposite, clockwise from top left: The well-groomed grounds of Srinagar’s Lalit Grand Palace Hotel; vendors selling *halwa* sweets and *parathas* outside the Muslim shrine of Hazratbal; a sitting room at the Lalit.

est Indian town to the Line of Control, along which a tenuous cease-fire exists between India and Pakistan. Only this morning, that all sounded like a terrific adventure. Now, I’m not so sure. As our vehicle edges around the rubble, its wheels perilously close to the drop-off, I’m wishing I were back in my bed in Srinagar.

“FIVE THOUSAND YEARS ago, at the time of the great Mahabharata

War, we Kashmiris did not participate in the battles, saying that we were saints and not fighters,” says Yousuf Chapri, the owner of Discovery Tours, one of the oldest trekking operations in the Kashmir Valley. “Just look at us now.”

We are sitting in his office right across from Dal Lake in Srinagar, the summer capital of Jammu and Kashmir. It’s a mild, sunny day and the *shikaras*—canopied gondolas—are out on the water in force, carrying boatloads of tourists across the lake’s mirrored expanse.

Over cups of masala chai, Chapri recounts Kashmir’s long, turbulent, tragic history—how it was once a major center of Sanskrit scholars, or pandits; how Buddhism came to the Kashmir Valley during the third century, followed later by Sufi sages and Muslim invaders from Turkestan; and how it was eventually absorbed into the Mughal Empire during the reign of Akbar the Great, whose heir, Jahangir, was so besotted with the valley’s beauty that he penned this famous Persian couplet: “*Gar firdaus, ruhe zamin ast, hamin asto, hamin asto, hamin asto*” (“If there is a heaven on earth, it is here, it is here, it is here”).

Alas, everyone wanted a piece of heaven. By the 19th century, control over the valley had passed from the Mughals to the Durrani shahs



of Afghanistan and thence to the Sikh kingdom of Ranjit Singh. In 1846, as an upshot of the First Anglo-Sikh War, it was lost to the British, who, in turn, sold it to Maharajah Gulab Singh Dogra as part of the semi-autonomous princely state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Then came Indian independence, and Partition. Pakistan claimed predominantly Muslim Kashmir for its own, kicking off a series of wars and military standoffs between the nuclear-armed neighbors. The area became a tinderbox. In 1987, separatist insurgents, trained and armed across the border, launched a campaign of terrorism that, together with brutal crackdowns by the Indian government, would eventually claim tens of thousands of lives. Not for nothing did U.S. President Bill Clinton, in 2000, call Kashmir “the most dangerous place in the world.”

“If the dispute between India and Pakistan had been settled during Partition, we would not have had to suffer so many decades of terrorism,” says Chapri with a sigh. “Now, we have lost our infrastructure, our education, our youth. Politics can be settled overnight at a table. But if we lose Dal Lake, the *chinar* trees, and these mountains, then what do you have left to fight over?”

Kashmiris are given to such poetic turns of phrase, partly out of nostalgia, and partly out of a sense of what could have been, had the politics of independence taken a different turn. “Disillusionment is a cottage industry in Kashmir,” a Srinagar cab driver tells me.

And yet the valley’s tourism amenities remain largely intact, including Dal Lake’s famed houseboats, vestiges of the colonial days that still bear fanciful English names such as *Jewel of the Thames* and *Queen Victoria*. As for hotels, there’s the historic Lalit Grand Palace, which was first built as a residence for Maharaja Pratap Singh in 1910. It’s almost perfectly situated, with the snowy peaks of the Zabarwan mountains as a backdrop and Dal Lake in front. Perfectly symmetrical chinar trees (a member of the maple family) CONTINUED ON PG. 154

OPENING SPREAD TYPOGRAPHY BY TBA+D WITH WOOD GRAIN SPECIMEN PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAXWELL BRODÉN

KASHMIR

CONTINUED FROM PG. 119



tower above sprawling lawns where tables have been set up for tea.

After checking in to my wood-paneled room in the hotel's old wing, I head down for lunch and run into Daisy Nedou, whose family owns hotels in Srinagar and the ski resort of Gulmarg, 56 kilometers to the southwest. Taking a table together, we talk about Kashmir's famous cuisine, both the vegetarian fare of the pandits and the meat-based, 36-course *wazwan* feasts, where guests are seated around a common plate called the *traami*, and share dishes such as *rogan josh* (an aromatic lamb curry), minced-beef kebabs, mutton *kurmas*, and yogurt-based *yakhni* stews. Nedou invites me to go skiing in Gulmarg (home to the world's highest cable car) during the season, which begins in December.

Lunch lasts almost three hours, and by the end, we are sated by both the food and the view. "Where else can you find this?" Nedou asks rhetorically. "You look up and see the pine forests; you look down and see the lake. This beauty..." Her voice trails off.

That evening, I go downtown to the shopping district near the narrow Jhelum River. Almost everyone directs me to a handicraft store called Suffering Moses. There, I'm shown a rare *khani* shawl, seen these days only in museums. Mohammed Sadiq, the shop's second-generation owner, then shows me the design for a lacquer tray that he's working on with local craftspeople.

"The British did us a huge favor," he says. "They taught us to incorporate a certain utilitarianism in our arts and crafts so that we could create lampshades, cigar boxes, biscuit tins, and other household items instead of mere objects of beauty." Only in Kashmir is beauty taken for granted.

Nearby at Asia Craft, owner Afzal Abdulla walks me through two floors of high-quality carpets, lacquered papier-mâché boxes, pashmina shawls, and carved walnut furniture. The highlight is a reproduction of the oldest known hand-knotted Persian rug, the Pazyryk Carpet, unearthed from a Scythian burial mound in the Altai Mountains in the 1940s and

now exhibited at St. Petersburg's Hermitage Museum. Abdulla's copy is no knockoff: he tells me it took 18 months to make, and has more than 600 knots per square inch. The price? US\$10,000.

"Most of the Kashmiri crafts came to us from Persia, brought over by the 14th-century Sufi mystic Shah Hamadhan," he says. "Unfortunately, 20 years of terrorism has taken its toll. Many of our artisans have left the valley."

Kashmir still bears the scars of those decades, but in the last couple of years, a degree of normalcy has returned. The once-deserted streets of Srinagar are now full of traffic. Along the banks of the Jhelum, families sit peacefully on the lawns eating corn: women in headscarves peel oranges; boys play ball; girls in pink frocks hold up matching cotton candy; white-capped men talk softly about politics and the state of affairs.

"Kashmir today is as safe as any other part of the country, or any part of the world, for that matter," the area's top cop, Inspector General S. M. Sahai, tells me during an interview at his Srinagar headquarters. "We are in control of the situation. While there are still some incidents, violence is at its lowest levels, ever."

Tourists, primarily from elsewhere in India, have responded in kind. As of July, more than 500,000 people had visited the Kashmir Valley in 2011, the highest numbers seen in years. And that doesn't include the hundreds of thousands of Hindu pilgrims that have come to Kashmir for the annual *yatra* ("sacred journey") to the holy cave of Amarnath, which has been worshipped as a Shivaist shrine for five millennia. Theirs were the candy-wrap-

per tents that I saw from the heights of Zoji La, en route to a polo game in Drass.

POLO HAS BEEN PLAYED in Drass for generations, but today's tournament is special. Organized by the Lalit Suri Hospitality Group, it's part of the centenary celebrations of the Lalit Grand Palace. It's also meant to show that the winds of peace have swept over Drass as well, with various government bigwigs on hand to press the point. Midway through a match pitting a Delhi-based team against the local club, the youthful chief minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Omar Abdullah, arrives by helicopter and takes his place in the VIP tent. I see him tapping away on his BlackBerry between chukkas.

The entire town has gathered to see their men compete. Folk music played on oboe-like *surnas* and *daman* drums cheers the players on. The Delhiites are in smart red shirts, the locals in white. Horses run, swirling up dust. "The horses of Drass are smaller, but generous," notes the commentator enthusiastically. But not generous enough—the Delhi team trounces the defenders. After the final, there's a filling lunch by the banks of the raging Drass River, and then I'm on the road again for the five-hour, hair-raising trip back to the Srinagar.

The next day, I wake early to take a shikara to the morning vegetable market in the middle of Dal Lake. I quickly learn that Dal isn't a just lake; it's a community. There are hundreds of families living on the water in floating villages, complete with schools, vegetable gardens, and lotus ponds. The market itself



THE DETAILS KASHMIR

—**GETTING THERE**
Srinagar's recently upgraded Sheikh ul Alam Airport is connected to Delhi by numerous daily flights (90 minutes).

—**WHEN TO GO**
The Kashmir Valley is at its most pleasant

during the summer months of June through August. Gulmarg's ski season typically kicks off in mid-December and runs until mid-April.

—**WHERE TO STAY**
Lalit Grand Palace Srinagar
Gupkar Rd.; 91-194/250-1001; thelalit.com; doubles from US\$210.

• **Vivanta by Taj - Dal View**
Kralangri, Brein, Srinagar; 91-194/246-1111; vivantabytaj.com; doubles from US\$294.

Houseboats
For a more romantic lodgings option, stay in one of Dal Lake's renowned houseboats, which range in standard from budget to five-star luxury and come with sun decks, lounge areas, two or more bedrooms, and the use of a *shikara*. Contact the **Houseboat Owners Association** (91-194/245-0326; houseboatowners.org) to learn more.

• **WHERE TO EAT**
Shamyana

• This elegant Srinagar dining room specializes in top-notch Mughlai cuisine. Boulevard Rd., Dalgate; 91-194/245-3360.

—**GETTING THERE**
Sri Pratap Singh Museum Hazuri Bagh; 91-194/213-2859; spsmuseum.org.
Pari Mahal
Located five kilometers west of downtown Srinagar.

—**WHAT TO DO**
Discovery Journeys
In business since 1870, this operation arranges custom tours and treks throughout Kashmir. Boulevard Rd., Nehru Park, Srinagar; 91-194/250-0337; discoveryjourneysindia.com.

KASHMIR

comprises a knot of about two dozen vegetable-filled canoes. Men haggle with each other and lift sacks of tomatoes, melons, cucumbers, and marrows from one boat to another. As the sun rises, the market disperses, and the produce is carried to bazaars all over Srinagar.

That evening, a group of us drive half an hour to the Muslim shrine of Hazratbal, where the Meraj-ul-alam festival is taking place. Thousands of devotees stand on the lawns facing the mosque and pray. The women wear hijabs, but are not dressed in black. Instead, they hold aloft colorful *dupattas* (scarves), as if to catch a blessing. At the appointed hour, an imam appears on the balcony, carrying a holy relic that is displayed only 10 times a year. Called *Moi-e-Muqaddas*, it is thought to contain a lock of Mohammed's hair. Upon seeing it, women break out into tears and chant Koranic verses. It's all over in a few minutes. The imam ambles back inside, and families return to picnicking on the lawns.

The roads outside are packed. Lines of stalls sell giant fried *paratha* flatbreads served with sweet yellow *halwa*. I sample a piece—it tastes like a Latin American churro, without the dusting of sugar. On the way back around the lake, we spot the brand-new Vivanta by Taj hotel, yet another hopeful sign for the valley's tourism industry.

The Mughal gardens of Srinagar are best enjoyed alone. For this, you have to go early in the morning, which I do, the following day. The Pari Mahal is set amid the ruins of a palace built high above Dal Lake in the mid-17th century by the eldest son of Shah Jahan, builder of the Taj Mahal. It's worth the hike for the views alone. And next to it is the Chashma Shahi, a modest garden with pools and fountains arranged over three terraces. The spring here is said to be the source of medicinal water.

Later, I spend a solitary hour at the Sri Pratap Singh Museum, which has a fine collection of textiles, weaponry, and relics. While I'm pondering Kashmir's rich past, my phone rings. It's Yousuf Chapri, telling me that I forgot my notebook in his office.

Chapri is waiting for me when I arrive. He hands me my book and some brochures about the successful travel company that his sons are running in Delhi. They have a great life there, he says. So why hasn't Chapri joined them?

The old man pauses. "I love Kashmir," he says finally. "I love its lakes and mountains and the valleys that nestle between them. I pray to Allah to give me paradise after death. But in the meantime, I can ask for no better place to be than here." ☉