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COMPLIMENTARY
COPY



Jammu & Kashmir

The ethereal
Pangong Lake

The Persian poet Firdaus once famously said of Kashmir, if there is a heaven on earth, it is here; it is here, it is here. One would be hard pressed to deny that claim, even though the state has seen a fair amount of political upheaval. While certain areas remain off-limits and the presence of the military may be daunting to some, there's a certain Helen of Troy sangfroid about this gorgeous Indian state.

SRINAGAR

WHAT TO SEE & DO
A city of lakes and gardens like **Nisat Bagh**, **Chashme Shahi Bagh**, **Nehru Park**, **Botanical Gardens**, the list is endless. The most popular by far, and built by a besotted Jahangir for Nur Jahan in the 17th century, the 31-acre **Shalimar Bagh** has starred in many Bollywood films. It is laid out on the banks of the limpid **Dal Lake**, the other

jewel in Srinagar's crown. More than just ornamental, the Dal Lake is intrinsic to daily life in Srinagar and is India's answer to the Venetian canals. You can spend a pleasant hour or two watching daily life go on across the water: children going to school, flower and vegetable markets vending their wares, and the **Pir Panjal** mountain range watches over the lake. For those who want more than just a passing engagement with Dal Lake, a ride in the intricately carved **shikaras** is a must do. You can also book a houseboat and spend a night on the lake – though a little worn from the outside, most have sumptuously decorated interiors. With electricity, running water, waste management and other such creature comforts, they're very liveable.

The architecture of the exquisite **Hazratbal Mosque** reflects Persian influences. Unfortunately, women are

not allowed into the sanctum sanctorum. The 14th century **Jama Masjid** is renowned for the 350 pillars that support it, each one a whole deodar tree trunk. Another interesting feature of this mosque is that it has spires instead of domes and minarets, hinting at unique influences. The **Shankaracharya Temple**, set on the eponymous hill, dates back to 250 BC and cameras are not allowed, for security reasons. Of potential interest to sports fans are the cricket bat factories in the area – as the Kashmiri willow bat is well known among enthusiasts and players of the game.

Sonmarg (about 70 km from Srinagar) is a popular trekking base and an equally popular family destination. Have a picnic or angle for **mahaseer** (freshwater carp) that can be later cooked for lunch. The **Thajiwias Glacier** at the base of Sonmarg is another handy camping site. The **Dachigam National Park**, a mere 22km from Srinagar, is home to leopards, the Himalayan gray langur and

a dazzling variety of feathered creatures. **Pahalgam**, at about 95km from Srinagar, requires a little bit more of a journey for a day trip so plan well. Once there, it's worth it for great trekking, camping and fishing.

WHERE TO STAY

THE LALIT GRAND PALACE SRINAGAR
Once the palace of the royals, it was built in 1910 and has hosted many eminent personalities dating back to the British era, from Lord Mountbatten to Mahatma Gandhi. The carefully restored building is a short distance from the airport and is just the right spot for those who want nothing more than to soak in the atmosphere and treat themselves at the spa.
Doubles from AED 900; 0091-194-250 1001, thelalit.com/the-lalit-grand-palace-srinagar

VIVANTA BY TAJ – DAL VIEW, SRINAGAR

One of the best views of the Dal Lake you'll get while nursing your morning cup of tea, the Vivanta by Taj is right up on the **Kralesangri Hill**. It's a contemporary structure that incorporates elements of Kashmiri culture in copper and timber carvings. Twenty kilometers from airport, the beautiful tree-lined drive to the hotel gives you a taste of what lies ahead.
Doubles from AED 1130; 0091-194-246 1111, vivanta.by.taj.com/dal-view-srinagar

Gulmarg means meadow of flowers, and lives up to its name with a profusion of wildflowers bursting into bloom

GULMARG

WHAT TO SEE & DO

About 56 china-lined kilometres from Srinagar, Gulmarg means meadow of flowers, and lives up to its name with a profusion of wildflowers bursting into bloom everywhere you look. A tiny hamlet, it is famous predominantly as a skiing destination. There is only one monument of any historic importance – the Church of St. Mary's, lone witness since 1890. The 13th-century shrine of **Baba Reshi** now lies in ruins but is a striking example of Kashmiri architecture.

The cable car ride from Gulmarg to **Mount Aparhat** is one of the highest in the world and the best way to get a stunning view of the surrounds. It works in two phases, with the second being prettier.



You can also take a pony ride to the top, for about Rs 400 (AED 23) per hour; once there, you can also take a sledge ride. Even novice skiers can try their hand at skiing in Gulmarg. Ski champions rent out equipment and are available to guide you. The Gulmarg Golf Course is another leisure activity on offer, at Rs 800 (AED 46) for Indians and 1,200 (AED 69) for non-Indians. Nature lovers must visit the **Gulmarg Biosphere Reserve**, where you can spot musk deer, black bears, brown bears, leopards and red foxes. Visit **Strawberry Valley** in summer to pick berries.

WHERE TO STAY

THE KHYBER HIMALAYAN RESORT & SPA
Sprawling luxuriously over seven acres and 8,825ft above sea level, locally sourced pine and slate have been used in the construction, keeping this hotel true to its Kashmiri heritage. There's a sheesha lounge and a cigar lounge for connoisseurs; the spa is a bonus. If the view of the Aphrawat peak doesn't tempt you, perhaps the proximity to the world's highest golf course will. Fairly secluded, the resort is perfect for long walks, bird watching, or simply sunbathing.
Doubles from AED 1,480; 0091-990-660 3272, khyberhotels.com

THE VINTAGE

Contradicting its very name, this is a contemporary, 4-star hotel, and a great option if you're on a budget. There are

Incredible India

India TRAVELLER PROMOTION

fantastic views of the ski slopes for those who'd rather watch others than work up a sweat. The Indian restaurant 1860 is a tribute to the year the Maharaja lent his boat to European sportsmen for a cruise down the Jhelum, marking the first official "tourist" visit. When the weather is mild, guests can spend a pleasant evening at the Garden Grill feasting on fresh fruits, hot bread straight from the oven and, of course, the mandatory grilled meats.
Doubles from AED 725; 0091-195-425 4582, thevintage.in

LADAKH

WHAT TO SEE

Ladakh is a thrill-seeker's dream come true and a dreamer's paradise. Stark yet stunning landscapes, endless winding drives, rugged mountain heights and plunging valleys. One could simply sit by **Pangong Lake** and stare into its endless saline depths. Or drive up via **Khardung La Pass** (the highest motorable road in the world) to the beautiful **Nubra Valley**. The capital of Nubra is **Diskit** and while it doesn't lean to luxury, you can find reasonable accommodation there.

Little more than a village, Diskit requires that all non-Indians carry a Protected Area Permit (PAP). Any authorised travel agent should be able to organise one, failing which, you can pick one up at the District Commissioner's Office in Leh, for Rs 600 (AED 34). You need to be in a group of at least two people or more and ensure that you carry copies of it with you – you could be asked to produce it at any checkpoint. The **Diskit Monastery** is one of the oldest in the area and history buffs, or those who simply want to soak in the atmosphere of peace, can also check out the **Shey monastery** (once the summer palace of the royal family), the **Shanti Stupa** and the **Alchi Monastery**. Special mention must be made of the **Lamayuru Monastery**, the oldest Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the world, with a collection of artefacts that would make a connoisseur's heart sing. The **Hemis Monastery** however, is the one that draws the largest crowds. It's famous for the colourful Hemis Festival held in the courtyard, involving song, music, dance and drama, in age-old traditional costumes.

The **Leh Palace** is a must-visit, simply for its architectural uniqueness – stark, sturdy, unadorned. Nine stories high, this 17th-century structure offers a stupendous view of the town as well as the **Indus River**. The museum attached to the palace has an array

WHERE TO STAY

THE GRAND DRAGON, LADAKH
The only luxury hotel in the region, the Grand Dragon has the dual distinction of also being an ecotel, with solar panels, double-glazed windows, waste water treatment, and so on. It's also won a number of awards. A short walk from the main

Incredible India



Traditional boats called shikaras ply across the Dal Lake. Below: The Khyber Himalayan Resort & Spa

of jewellery, clothes and crowns on display that bear testimony to Tibetan culture (*Open 7am-4pm all days. Ticket Rs 15/AED 1 for Indians, Rs 100/AED 5 for non-Indians.*)

The double-humped camel and the yak are the vehicles for two safaris you're unlikely to experience anywhere else. The **Hemis National Park** is home to the snow leopard – this is, in fact, referred to as the Snow Leopard Capital of the world. Sightings are not unusual, so make the time to visit. You can stay at the Hemis gumpa (the monastery) or set up a tent of your own for Rs 50 (AED 2). Bird watchers should go between April and June, and September and December; animal enthusiasts from September to June. The winters are harsh, so come prepared if you travel then.

Adventure seekers can also go white-water rafting (June to August) on the Indus River, or kayaking on the **Zanskar** and **Tsarap Chu** rivers, an unrivalled experience where the snow-capped Karakoram range and the Himalayas tower over you on either side as you pass little hamlets, remote gompas and stunning scenery. Cycling or motor biking through Ladakh with the wind in your hair and a feeling of being enveloped by nature in its wildest form is yet another option for those with a taste for adventure. Come winter, Ladakh is a skier's paradise with a large number of sites opening up.

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bazaar, with sprawling lawns and great views, this is a covetable oasis.
Doubles from AED 1,245; 0091-990-698 6782, thegranddragonladakh.com

THE GRAND HIMALAYA

The Grand Himalaya takes its Kashmiri heritage seriously, and traditional carving on the windows and balconies greet you when you arrive. Pick a higher-level room for stunning views of the Leh Palace, Stok mountain range and Khardung La. There's also free Wi-Fi, if you'd like to share what you're seeing out the window with the world. Walking distance from the main market, yet away from the bustle, the staff are courteous and accommodating about most requests from guests.
Doubles from AED 350; 0091-941-920 8786, grandhimalaya.com