



Daily life in Dal Lake.

الحياة اليومية في بحيرة دال.

Kashmir

A paradise lost and found again

By Geoff Hann

For many, Kashmir is an emotive political destination but, politics aside, it is a truly beautiful part of the world. It is difficult to write about a place like Indian Kashmir and Pakistani Kashmir without offending someone, including those who feel that there should be only one Kashmir.

When speaking about present day tourism we are speaking about Indian Kashmir. Its capital Srinagar, has been described as a pre-eminent tourist destination: "The Happy Valley", "The Vale of Tears". Certainly the Moghul Emperors, who built the famous Shalimar Gardens, delighted in the summer retreat climate. During early British colonial days in India, the British also found the mountain climate congenial after the intense summer heat of the Indian plains and they set in motion the tradition of houseboats, now the centre of a luxury style of

relaxation for which Dal Lake is justly famous. But, what of today - 2004? The torment of Kashmir, cruelly divided since 1947 between Pakistan and India, is well known and documented. The last 15 years have been particularly intense for the indigenous people, Muslim and Hindu alike, although most Kashmiri Hindus have long since left. Even more catastrophic, particularly for Srinagar, was the demise of the tourist trade, its main source of income. It lost its domestic Indian market, first and then the Western market.

A luxury resort always suffers when insecurity strikes. Last year and this year, New Delhi tour operators and travel agents have been telling the world that "things have changed and people are travelling to Kashmir once again". Try telling that to the British travel insurance market which is bound like a housewife to the apron strings of the British Foreign Office Travel Advice department. It was therefore with some trepidation that a short week to Kashmir was discussed and tentative plans made with a tour operating

friend in Delhi who also subscribed to the philosophy - "all is now well".

Yes it is- almost! The Srinagar tourist trade has vastly improved and the security in Srinagar and surrounding districts such as Gulmarg and Sonamarg is also much improved. The Indian army maintains an astonishing presence in and around Srinagar. This is indicative of the determination of all sides to achieve their aims. It is true that this summer has seen a large number of Indian tourists in Srinagar and the signs of relief on the faces of the traders were obvious. The ordinary Kashmiri is tired of conflict, many of their young men have had to leave to support themselves elsewhere in India or abroad. This summer has seen some of them return.

Coming from the UK as I do, I was greeted by many who knew exactly where I had come from, including the roads and streets of London. I was one of the few Westerners however - most foreigners are from Malaysia, Singapore and China.

An interview with the Director of Tourism for Srinagar revealed some stark statistics: an economy on a knife edge, with domestic produce still at low levels of export and a vast number of parentless children. But low level, long term loans are now being made available by the Indian Government for renovation of the lake houseboats. As the tourist trade picks up

more and more houseboats owners and hoteliers are taking advantage of this source of finance. The signs are visible, newly painted buildings, renovated bathrooms, new woodwork and an eagerness to please which is essential in any tourist resort.

Interestingly, the carpet and shawl dealers and the wood work and paper mache men have their work cut out now. So many traders were forced to move out of Srinagar for economic reasons during the past 14 years. These people set up shops in many Indian cities and of course worldwide. We are all now very familiar with Kashmiri products and the prices naturally have to be cheaper in Srinagar than back home - such is the nature of the tourist beast who wants a bargain - or at least the joy of haggling over it.

No one can deny that Srinagar's Lake Dal and Nagin are for relaxing. To take a Shikara boat ride around the lakes for a day is to be transported into another world. The pace of the boat, the warmth of the sun and encounters with other like minded relaxants, the diversity of the wonderful bird life in the backwaters are all the source of lifetime memories. We return to the other world of the Moghul Emperors. Gardens are being renovated everywhere, especially the renowned Nishat and Shalimar Gardens full of glory and promise for the future.

Looking on are the mountains and the meadow resorts of Gulmarg and Sonamarg which boast golf courses and a ski resort with a strengthening reputation. Pahalgam is at the entrance to the mountain passes where many people begin to trek. Unfortunately, for westerners, the whole mountain area north of here, renowned for the wonderful views and the challenges of high mountain passes, is still insecure although I do not think that it will be so for much longer.

When looking into the future, rumours abound and politicians love to speculate. But it is a fact that the road connecting Pakistan and India and its border, just two and a half hours east of Srinagar, is being upgraded by both sides and good progress is being made. This will open up trade, restore local relations and re-unite families. These positive developments will inevitably be enhanced when 'Pakistani Kashmir' opens up to tourists. Is the political will strong enough to make this a reality? The consequences are immense for the whole region and for the international tourist market. Visit now before the rest of the world decides to do so! ■

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في ظل الجبال.

In the shadow of the mountains.