



A flower vendor approaches a houseboat in Kashmir. Like the gondolas in Venice, shikaras are cultural symbols of Kashmir.

Photos by: Mansoor Ladha/The Calgary Herald



A expansive tulip garden in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir.



The vice regal lodge in Kashmir where the decision to partition India was made. One section has a museum while the other houses the Indian Institute of Advanced Study.

# India’s ‘heaven on earth’

## Disputed Kashmir piece of paradise

MANSOOR LADHA  
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

It was third time lucky for us; on two previous visits to India, we were advised not to venture into Kashmir, the disputed area sought by both India and Pakistan.

India has occupied Muslim-dominated Kashmir from 1947 and has to face Muslim insurgents said to be supported by Pakistan. The two countries have fought several declared wars over the territory. The Indo-Pakistani War of 1947 established the rough boundaries of today, with Pakistan holding roughly one-third of Kashmir, and India one-half.

After arriving in Srinagar, the capital, one can understand why India doesn't want to give up this area known as "Heaven on Earth." Kashmir is blessed with natural beauty, lakes, mountains, flowers, fruits and friendly people.

Aptly described as the Switzerland of India, Kashmir is based in the Himalayan regions, offering picturesque views and majestic mountains for skiing in winter.

Our Kashmiri experience started with a three-day stay in a houseboat. The four of us made our home in a houseboat moored in Dal Lake. The two-bedroom boat had all modern facilities such as hot/cold showers, formal dining room and a living room richly decorated with plush cushions and Kashmiri carpets. We also had at our disposal two people who were responsible for cooking and cleaning for us. The standard of food was excellent and made fresh every day to satisfy our culinary buds.

The pair cooked all three meals, sometimes dishes request by us, smilingly. Hot, delicious spicy hors d'oeuvres were prepared before our pre-dinner

cocktail sessions. The highlight was a trip in a smaller boat called shikara. A shikara, with a driver sitting at the lower end, is padded with a comfortable couch allowing a couple to enjoy a romantic ride on the lake. Like the gondolas in Venice, shikaras are cultural symbols of Kashmir, used for transporting people, fishing, harvesting aquatic vegetation and selling merchandise to people residing in various boats. It was very common to see a flower seller or a retail merchant plying his wares to tourists living in neighbouring houseboats.

Kashmir boasts an unrivalled tradition of craftsmanship and some of its specialties are finely carved and chiselled woodwork of walnut and oak and beautifully worked silver. Undoubtedly, Kashmir is internationally renowned for the variety and design of its carpets. Another specialty is pashmina — goat's wool of extreme fineness and intricate embroidery — dried fruits, nuts and pure saffron.

Pahalgam, situated at an altitude of 2,130 metres, is a two-hour comfortable drive from Srinagar, through saffron fields, fir covered mountains and flower-strewn pastures. It's probably the most popular hill station resort in the Kashmir valley. The area has beautiful streams and one can hear the roar of the nearby waterfalls. A common sight in this rural community of alpine beauty is of shepherds driving their flock of sheep around town.

Tourists in Pahalgam can explore the countryside on ponies or go on day hikes in the thick-forested hills. Pahalgam's mountain streams and rivers are rich in trout and anglers can try their luck at trout fishing.

A hub of India's tourism sector is Shimla, which was declared the summer capital of British India. It is at the historical vice regal Lodge, where the famous Shimla conference of 1945, paving the independence of India and Pakistan, was held. Today, one section

has a pictorial historical museum while the other portion houses the Indian Institute of Advanced Study. Home to well-recognized colleges and research stations in India, Shimla have a large number of temples and palaces.

Shimla is considered among the top 10 preferred entrepreneurial locations in India and is famous for its buildings styled in neo-Gothic architecture dating from the colonial era.

According to one source, there are 800,000 Indian troops stationed in Kashmir. India is hypersensitive about security in the country following the bombing of the Taj Hotel in Mumbai in 2008. The presence of armed troops in Kashmir is a familiar sight. On every street and corner, at tourist attractions, hotels and other public places, there are soldiers openly sporting guns. Airports, train stations and even five-star hotels all over India have tight security and screening procedures, sometimes more than once, frustrating foreigners unused to such treatment.

The fight for control of this "paradise" will continue because none of the parties is willing to compromise despite several conferences and meetings on the issue. Kashmir will remain a "no man's land," but unfortunately, it is the Kashmiris who are suffering.

India's Union Minister Jairam Ramesh criticized his own government publicly by saying that India's Kashmir policy is dictated by spy agencies. "Kashmir is transforming but has India changed it mindset towards it? We are not showing enough sensitivity to Kashmiris, who suffer suspicion and humiliation in our cities. India should respect their culture and embrace them wholeheartedly," he said.

As usual, these words fell on deaf ears and there seems to be no solution to the "paradise" question.

MANSOOR LADHA IS A JOURNALIST AND TRAVEL WRITER BASED IN CALGARY.

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