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Kashmir — an earthly heaven less treaded

by Mahmoud Al Abed | Aug 24, 2014 | 21:51 Updated: Aug 24, 2014 | 21:56

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A view of the Sindh River in Sonamarg, a mountain resort in Kashmir, known as the Valley of Shepherds (Photo by Mahmoud Al Abed)

KASHMIR, India – Anees, 21, went to school for only two years before he dropped out, like many of the children in his village nestled in the mountains of Kashmir that only shed their green when they are cloaked in the white snow of winter, which offers its own gifts to visitors.

Anees considers himself lucky. The enchanting beauty of his home Indian state has started to attract more and more tourists. Europeans seems to prefer a white Kashmir, when its mountains and valleys are blanketed with snow, making it one of the best destinations for skiing. He works now as a guide and a skiing trainer for beginners, satisfied with the few dollars he earns.

In fact, he says, tourists have found a new Switzerland for their winter hobby, but much more affordable. Beginners pay around \$6 for a training session, while professionals, who ski from a height of just over 4,000 metres pay a few hundred dollars a day for a full package of services. They are offered a genuine Kashmiri hospitality at the cottages and lodges scattered in the hills in return for less what they pay in a two-star hostel in any city in Europe, or any of the famous destinations in the world.

In the summer, tourists come mainly from India and the Middle East seeking refuge from the heat of Delhi, Mumbai, Muscat or Dubai. They enjoy the mesmerising scenery, horseback treks across the mountains, also for a few dollars, and the Kashmiri cuisine, a source of pride for locals.

However, Anees and his people are more proud when they speak about the peace and stability the area has gained, as violence, the way the area knew in the past decades, has ceased to be for long years.

As witnessed by Jordanian media in a tour of the region arranged by Kashmir's tourism authorities, life was normal across the areas visited, despite reports of violations to ceasefire and brief exchanges of fire on the border with Pakistan.

Anees wants to see a permanent peace, more tourists and better living conditions for his people. He told The Jordan Times in Gulmarg that he supports the People's Democratic Party, whose acronym, PDP, also stands for Peace, Development and Prosperity.

The guide says that the party has better ties with the central government and is intent on more cooperation with Delhi authorities to promote tourism and development in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, where nine million people live. The PDP won three of the six seats in the Lok Sabha (central House of People) in the August elections this year.

Join the elite

What seems to be the secret about the Kashmir experience is that things that are in a normal context exclusive to the elite can be attainable by average people. Apart from transportation costs, there are offers to spend a week in Kashmir and indulge in all the activities offered, including golf, skiing, rafting, hiking, houseboat accommodation, and other activities and adventures for prices within the reach of middle-class visitors.

The basic price for a five-night, six-day package for a couple is a little more than \$500, according to the Jammu and Kashmir Tourism Development Corporation (JKTDC). This includes accommodation and a car transport to and from the destination.

However, tourists need not bargain over any service or activity they have to pay for in the summer or winter. The JKTDC announces on its website and on billboards in the destinations an official prices list of services, including pony hiring, guides, ski guides, trekking guides, sledge, skiing gear, all-terrain vehicles, rafting, cycling, shikara ride, motor boat and others. This saves a lot of hassle. Besides, there are tourism offices in every resort that are willing to offer help.

Mountain resorts

In a mountain resort like Gulmarg, in Baramula district, 57km from Srinagar, there are activities and wonders tourists should not miss.

The name, which means land of flowers, was given to the area by Sultan Yusuf Shah in the 16th century. According to historical sources cited by JKTDC, the sultan was impressed with “the stunning spectacle of the grassy hills adorned with colourful flowers”. The Meadow of Flowers is a huge cup shaped, lush and green with slopes where the silence is broken only by the tinkle of cowbells.

What was noticed during the tour of several resorts in the mountains of Kashmir is that authorities are environment-conscious. One of the strict rules is that polyethylene, the material used to make plastic bags is totally prohibited. Instead, the shops there use a kind of environment-friendly paper bags.

In general, all the areas visited are clean, except for the hard-to-control horse droppings as hundreds of these animals are used for treks.

The same applies to other mountain resorts like Pahalgam and Sonamarg, which turned from simple shepherd towns to Kashmir’s premier resorts. They are cool even during the summer peak and feature a number of hotels and lodges that cater to all preferences and budgets.

The roads leading to these places need more attention. The Pahalgam road, which leads you through a string of small beautiful villages, needs a lot of maintenance, while other roads need more direction signs, although services like public convenience stations are available and plans are under way to

improve the situation and perfect the experience.

Srinagar experience

Srinagar, the state's capital, has a lot to offer, so much so that activities there can fill days of your Kashmir vacation. Mughal gardens, romantic shikara rides and the charm of houseboats on Dal Lake are some of the town's enchantments, if you can avoid the peak-hour traffic jams in the city.

However, you can forget all about the city centre noise when you are on a houseboat or a shikara ride. You can relax on the cushioned balcony of the houseboat and watch birds fishing in the lake, or take a ride on shikara to see the floating tulip gardens.

There is a unique experience that few tourists might know, the fish foot massage, or fish pedicure. Wait until nightfall, sit on the foot of the wooden stairs of the boat and dangle your feet in the water. Hundreds of small fish will immediately invite themselves to literally eat all the dead skin off your feet, giving you a sensational feeling.

On the shores of Dal Lake are the great Mughal Gardens, which are listed as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO. You can visit these attractions in one several-hour tour to have a glimpse into these "earthly heavens" carpeted with a panorama of flowers, grass, centuries-old trees and fountains. On the hills that embrace the city from every direction, there are ancient temples and mediaval mosques that stand as reminders of the glorious past of the region, the great Hindu kings and the Mughal era.

Exquisite shopping

Either in Srinagar or in the marketplaces of the mountain resorts, shopping is a memorable experience. The low prices for uniquely Kashmiri products are stunning. Regardless of your budget, you can find things to bring back home including saffron and other spices, the Kashmiri white honey and nuts. You can buy hand-painted souvenirs made of recycled paper for peanuts. However, relatively expensive precious items are Kashmir's signature gifts. Pashmina shawls, which are made of the anterior neck wool of a special breed of goat indigenous to high altitudes of the Himalayas, are a key choice. You can take home the best pashmina shawl for around \$150, which is relatively cheap due to the uniqueness and the quality of the item.

The markets of the area also offer a variety of refined crafts that are the source of pride for the people of Kashmir, especially silk and wool handwoven carpets, woodwork and copperware.

Anees also gives advice about shopping to his clients. He and fellow Kashmiris know that giving a good impression about their state means more tourists to the "paradise on earth", which, in turn, means that the new generations there will have a better life, more quality education and a prosperous future.