

- Hand in hand with Jaypore/Breakaway Journeys -

We flew directly into Srinagar from Bengaluru and checked into our charming, well appointed homestay in the city. Although it was directly in the path of the rampaging flood waters in 2014, the premises, located within a walled enclosure, was in excellent condition with a small flower garden and its own pear laden tree, under which we had breakfast every day. The staff were attentive, yet unobtrusive. The first evening we had an excellent Kashmiri meal in Dar-es-Salaam, a beautifully maintained property on the Nagin Lake.

Day 1, a visit to the exquisite Badam Wari, an old Mughal era garden full of almond trees set among green lawns and flower beds, overlooking the Nagin lake situated at the foot of a hill top Afghan fort. We were then joined by Gulzar Hussein, our personal guide and mentor who set the tone of our journey into the history and wonders of Kashmir; our meeting place was under the spreading shade five hundred giant Chinar trees, whose distinctive leaf is used as an iconic motif in all Kashmiri art and craft. A fine dining tasting menu experience for lunch followed, accompanied by conversation with Pashmina experts Imran Rashid and Gulzar on the Sukoon, a luxury houseboat. In the afternoon we visited Pari Mahal with its superb view of Srinagar and then the wondrous Mughal gardens overlooking the Dal.

Day 2, we were welcomed into the home of Jan Mohd., whose family have been custodians of the pashmina trade for generations, and witnessed the spinning of the fine fleece of the pashmina sheep into gossamer threads thinner than human hair, the yarn then dyed and spooled into a veritable rainbow of delicately coloured skeins; then on to the kani workers, who weave the yarn on their looms into the impossibly soft pashmina shawls and scarves that are sought after the world over, in a riot of pastel colours as well as in intricate floral designs.

Next a visit to the home of 75 year old Beigh sahib, a nationally recognised master of sozni, to observe him and his family create beautiful embroidery on pashmina. Sewing 1500 stitches a square inch is an intense work of mind and soul, as each shawl can only be worked on by one man, and it takes years to complete a single shawl. Their shawls carry a life time guarantee and indeed hanks of coloured threads hang on the walls dating back two or three hundred years - in case repairs are ever required, the original threads are still available. Beigh sahib's products are masterpieces fit to be displayed in museums, some with many subtle shades of the same colour, others comprised of a dozen different hues.

Afterwards we were transported into the magic world of papier mache with master artist Maqbool Jan, and his family. Their products are handmade objets de art, almost pieces of jewellery, Fine brush strokes, delicate patterns and vibrant colours their total dedication to their craft have made their products sought after globally. The work demands total concentration and finesse, as an errant brush stroke means the piece has to be destroyed !

In the afternoon we were taken on a walking tour of Zaina kadal in the old city, its many architectural wonders showcasing the entwined cultural history of the valley, with its buddhist, hindu and muslim influences entwined together, wood and stone, water and mountains, gardens and flowers, its people friendly welcoming strangers as valued guests. The magnificent Jamia Masjid, its roof supported by 378 stately deodar pillars, the historic Hazratbal, the Pattar masjid built in stone by Noor Jahan, the royal tomb complex on the Jhelum. In the evening we gathered for a superb Kashmiri wazwan dinner in Ahdoos, the food melting in our mouths.

Day 3, we drove to Pahalgam to meet the nomadic Gujjar and Bakarwal womenfolk in the Shepherds Project, an unique initiative supported by Ramneek Kaur, a long term resident of the valley. The women use their traditional embroidery, making items which are offered for sale in contemporary and attractive designs, which supplement their usual income. We met their children being taught in open classrooms on the hillsides near their homes and then visited Himalayan Products, which sources milk from the the same communities and markets natural artisan gouda made in the traditional method.

Day 4 we undertook a 22 km hike from Aru which is above Pahalgam to Lidderwat, the meeting of three of the most beautiful valleys in Kashmir, the grazing grounds of the Gujjar and Bakarwal nomads, a handsome friendly people with biblical features and bearing. When it started to rain, we were welcomed into their humble abode by a Gujjar family, and were given freshly made roti and tea.

Day 5, on our return to Srinagar we observed the acclaimed walnut carving of Srinagar. Small congested rooms on the banks of the Jhelum in the old city, full of wooden artefacts , furniture, screens and fabulous carving using simple tools to bring nature to life in wood.

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Day 6. On the final morning a visit to the floating market on the Dal lake at dawn was mesmerising, with the constant liquid movement of the boats with fresh vegetables and flowers, the men haggling and gesticulating and then dispersing to start another days commerce.

Jayapore and [Breakaway](#) offered us a chance to see glimpses of the fabled Kashmir valley, taste its cuisine, meet with its people on the street, visit a shepherds project in Pahalgam and to do a short trek in the Aru valley all in 6 days.

We now know at first hand why generations of travellers have fallen in love with Kashmir over the centuries - In the end our trip was all too short.

