

HOUSE & GARDEN[®]

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Interior motives

THE SUPER LAYERED LOOK *versus* A PARED-BACK APPROACH



OLD SCHOOL DESIGN LESSONS FROM THE 1990S
RICE + SPICE WARM-HEARTED VEGETARIAN RECIPES

A photograph of a man in an orange robe sitting in a pink boat on a lake. The boat is filled with a large arrangement of colorful flowers, including orange marigolds and vibrant dahlias. The water is dark and reflects the surrounding greenery and the boat. The man is looking towards the right side of the frame.

FOOD & TRAVEL *India*

A *phool wallah* or flower seller on Dal Lake. His traditional wooden *shikara* is filled with colourful local blooms, including orange marigolds and vibrant dahlias

The land of lakes and mountains

COSMO BROCKWAY is entranced by Kashmir, the northernmost region of the Indian subcontinent, which has retained a unique character reflected in its crafts and traditions

PHOTOGRAPHS OMAR BAZAZ

The spring blossoms in Kashmir are like a rainbow woven into the ground,' wrote one traveller of this mountain-ringed valley, the very name of which conjures up a sense of indefinable emotion. Flying into Srinagar's tiny airport from the crush of Delhi is to be hit by the scent of pine wood and attar perfume. Centuries after this was the sylvan retreat of the Mughal princes, it retains the magic that moved them to build pavilions roofed with a blaze of irises to contemplate the views etched for ecstasy. The fractures of its recent history have brought a sense of trepidation, but Kashmir should be on the India lover's list for its potent culture, kept intact by its isolation.

Driving up to the buttercup-yellow, mountaintop villa Karan Mahal, the current summer home of the Kashmir royal family, I stood on the latticed veranda and drew a sharp breath at the panorama below me. The silvery slivers of Dal Lake glimmered in the dusk light framed by feathery poplar trees and reflected the soaring peaks of the Pir Panjal mountains. Lilliputian *shikara* boats drifted like floating chess pieces for the gods while, on the surrounding lawn, two kingfishers darted among the cosmos flowers.

Opened in 2021 as a hotel, Karan Mahal retains a sense of a house party, where the small dogs of the chiffon-sareed owner Yuvrani Chitrangada Raje greet guests and bedrooms are decorated with 1930s chintzes and framed family photographs. Here is the ceremony-cocooned life that has carried on unperturbed underneath the Lalique chandeliers – wafer-thin cucumber sandwiches on a silver tray and steaming pakoras at teatime. Is there anything more reassuring to stumble upon?

After almond-laced tea, we visit the papier-mâché artisans who are keeping alive the art of *naqashi* inherited from countless forefathers, a decoupage tradition that is being reinvigorated by Indian companies such as Good Earth, which is imbuing it with contemporary twists while still respecting its storied heritage. Our afternoon is spent with the charismatic lavender farmer Sakdai Kawos. Having left the city rat race, he joined his father's business and has set up a boutique, reminiscent of a Mughal apothecary, in Srinagar. 'We distil oils from lavender, rosemary, geranium and nargis flowers, most of which we grow in the nearby hills,' he tells me, as we inhale the scents of the various fragrant wares. 'People are returning to an understanding of the natural powers of these oils – both cosmetic and medicinal,' he adds with a proud smile, sharing his desire to support the local community through employment.

The scents lingered as the sky began to glow salmon pink and we climbed higher to soulful new opening Qayaam Gah. A retreat of stone villas clinging to a mountainside overlooking the city, it is the vision of hotelier Altaf Chapri.

He has achieved something of a paean to Sufi culture, interwoven in these parts like the prayer threads that are tied around marble jali screens at the waterside shrines. Bukhari wood-burning stoves warm the rooms built by craftsmen using time-honoured skills, the play of light and shadows enhancing the embrace of silence here, broken only by the bell of a passing mountain goat. Settling down on block-printed cushions on a granite-carved terrace overlooking the lakes, we listened to a trio of *qawwali* devotional Sufi musicians, thrumming tabla drums and transporting us with their reverent singing, crescendos and refrains dancing up to the night sky like the sparks of a fire.

The following day, I am taken by local architect Zoya Khan around Srinagar's old city, with its Persian-inspired mosque minarets and markets of pungent dried fruits. Having just collaborated with the Jaipur-based artist Shilo Shiv Suleman on a vast street mural based around empowering local women, Zoya, as elegant as a bird of prey pausing on a branch, is fearless in her pursuit of what she describes as 'reclaiming my place in the public spaces as a woman'. She is a deep wellspring of colloquial knowledge and geography, taking me on a delve through wood-lined lanes for the freshest *choot* flatbread for breakfast. We emerge from a dimly lit *kaander waan* (bakery) blinking, before entering the Byzantine-like multi-domed brick tomb of Badshah, the resting place of the mother of a 15th-century sultan, spare in its haunting beauty and built on the plinth of an ancient Buddhist temple.

From here, we weave through the streets, bargaining for carved silver hookah bases, and visit Zoya's favourite sanctuary, Khanqah-e-Moula. The 18th-century wooden Sufi shrine has ceilings 'embroidered' with papier-mâché panels in the swirling paisley patterns of Kashmiri shawls.

As we sit on the stone steps underneath the chinara trees, Zoya reflects, 'We have something here to offer to every traveller. There are four proper seasons – unlike much of South Asia – and rich craft traditions. Visitors seek to understand the lives of locals intimately now and we are the warmest people found anywhere.' An embrace awaits in the valley known as Kashmir for all who make the rewarding journey beyond the peaks □

WAYS AND MEANS Cosmo Brockway visited Kashmir as a guest of Karan Mahal (rooms from £330, B&B; karanmahal@srinagar.com), Qayaam Gah (rooms from £350, B&B; alchapriretreats.in) and Good Earth (goodearth.in). Several tour operators offer tailor-made and group itineraries in Kashmir, including Greaves India (greavesindia.co.uk), The Ultimate Travel Company (theultimatetravelcompany.co.uk) and Wild Frontiers (wildfrontierstravel.com), which offers a nine-day Classic Kashmir trip from £3,250 per person, full board, including transfers and entry fees. Visitors to Kashmir should be aware of the most up-to-date FCDO advice (gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice) and check travel insurance policies to see whether there are any restrictions related to the region.

TOP ROW FROM LEFT Tay-built 19th-century merchants' houses in old Srinagar. One of the city's copperware sellers. The distinctive brick domes of Badshah Tomb. MIDDLE ROW Traditional *sozni* embroidery being added to a shawl at the Kashmir Loom studio. Wooden houseboats on Dal Lake with the Zabarwan Range in the distance. Bowls featuring the decoupage art of *naqashi*. BOTTOM ROW A papier-mâché craftsman. Frescoes at Shalimar Bagh, the largest Mughal garden in the Kashmir valley. The veranda at Karan Mahal hotel



