



# Freeze FRAME

Snow-covered peaks and meadows, bone-chilling winds, frozen streams and skiing are just a few facets of yet another magnificent season in Kashmir. **BY PALLAVI PASRICHA**



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PALLAVI PASRICHA/WWW.INDIATODAYIMAGES.COM



CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW *Kashmiri cuisine;* snowmen at the Kashmir Snow Festival add to the charm; snow cycling is a popular activity at the festival; Dal Lake at Srinagar looks even more stunning at sunset



LOVE BEGINNINGS, whether it is a book, movie or a trip. They are so full of promise, and so much more fun than endings. My trip to Kashmir also begins on a wonderful note, but this time I love the ending too. But let's leave that for later.

People back home advise me to reach the airport early to take the window seat, for what I would see would be a view to remember. I'm glad I listened to them. Just a few minutes after leaving Delhi I spot a line of white in the horizon. Confusing the Pir Panjal range with clouds I go on to read my book. But a stray glance outside, and I realise we are already over the grand snow-covered mountains. From top the snow seems absolutely clear, clean and whiter than froth. I'm not going to forget this spectacular sight for a lifetime.

This isn't my first visit to Kashmir, but this time I'm looking forward to spending a White Christmas in Gulmarg. Before I know it we are whizzing across the highway that would take us to our destination. At first it is strange to see that the winter has robbed the tall pines of all their clothes. The bare branches seem as if they are waiting for someone to come and dress them up and make them look appealing. This is not the kind of Kashmir I had visited a decade ago. Yet it has a stark beauty. It seems nothing can ever take away its charm.

Barely ten minutes after the hill drive I catch a glimpse of the snow and soon all I can see around me are white mountains. I'm as excited as a child on seeing his favourite toy. Gulmarg makes the prettiest of all pictures with all the meadows covered with a two-feet thick blanket of snow. Getting used to the cold is a tough task, but the hot saffron-flavoured *kahwa* served at the Royal Park Hotel helps me warm up slightly.

That night is my tryst with the bone-chilling winds of Gulmarg. I'm at the ice skating rink for the inauguration of the Kashmir Snow Festival. The line-up for the evening is, quite obviously, skating and night skiing. I watch in awe as

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skaters glide effortlessly on ice while I can't even think of standing straight without wondering if I'm getting frostbite. I dig deeper into my pockets, searching for warmth. The skaters, boys of all age groups, sway to wonderful songs. The only thing that keeps me going, besides the *kahwa* of course, is thinking about my cosy room back at the hotel.

Before heading back, however, I have one more thing to do—go and watch skiers slide down the slope. Night skiing has been introduced recently in Gulmarg—the only place in the country to do so. The sight of people skiing gracefully down white slopes under the light of a few lampposts is splendid. For a city bird like me, skiing is a challenging task in the day itself, so I could only imagine how tough it would be at night. These thrilling events make my Christmas Eve memorable.

Christmas mornings are always special, but this one is more so. It's my first White Christmas and I'm in one of the most stunning places in the country. The sun is out in all its glory as I make my way to Gulmarg Golf Club, the highest in the country, where the official launch of the snow festival is to take place.

The day is packed with sweet surprises. As soon as I reach there I spot three snowmen. This is the first time I'm seeing one, and I rush to take pictures. No matter what age you are, a snowman will always delight you. I make my way to a group huddled around a sculpture, and when I reach there I just stop and stare in amazement. It is a snow sculpture of Santa Claus. What more can I ask for on Christmas?

Plenty, it seems. Instead of Santa's sledge there is a snow scooter and I hop on for a ride—a ride to remember. It's not the easiest thing to do, but I clutch onto the driver and we zoom ahead climbing the slope to reach the top. Getting up is no big deal but getting down seems like a deadly task. As we come down, gaining speed every second I scream at the thought that I may fall down. But then I calm myself and close my eyes, letting the driver do his task. As the ice cold wind kisses my cheek, I feel the speed and adrenalin rush even though I'm a pillion rider. Being ahead would have an altogether different experience.

But this isn't the most thrilling part of the festival. I watch as people play unique games like snow baseball and rugby. The snow cycling competition, with special mountain cycles, is equally enthralling.

At lunch my craving of tucking into Kashmiri cuisine is fulfilled and I relish the mouth-watering *gushtaba* and *rista*. *Gushtaba* is pounded meat balls dipped in subtly flavoured yogurt. *Rista* is small lamb balls in a spicy sauce. Both the dishes are so soft that they just melt in the mouth.

Going on the gondola is next in line. This is the main attraction for tourists

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Nishat Bagh in Srinagar is an all-season favourite; Hazratbal Mosque; gondola ride in Gulmarg is a must; snow-covered huts near Kongdoor



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RAJEEV SACHDEVA

coming to Gulmarg and for obvious reasons—it is one of the highest gondola rides in the world. The gondola terrain is divided into two sections. The first one is till Kongdoor, but the second section till Apharwat peak, which opened last year, takes you to the dizzying height of 13,800 ft. Luckily it is a clear day and I can see right up to the mighty Pir Panjal range, with the imposing Nanga Parwat standing grandly in front.

Getting off at Apharwat, it seems as if the world has lost all colours besides the blue of the sky and the white on the peaks. The clear, crisp, chilly air makes me shiver. But it is a sight to behold. With the sky almost within touching distance, the peaks in the backdrop and nothing but whiteness all around I truly believe that I'm in paradise. Many skiers come up till Apharwat and sashay down the slopes all the way to Gulmarg, and on my way down I spot a couple of them joyfully on their way.

Early mornings in Gulmarg are a sight to behold, and since it is my last morning I decide to take a walk till the local market. At 8.30a.m. the shops are just opening and the locals are busy keeping themselves warm by sipping piping hot tea and munching on bread. None of them take their hands out of the long phirans. One of them is after me to go for sledging, promising a good rate, but I escape saying I have to head back.

I make my way to Prince Vaishno Dhaba yearning for my morning cuppa. While the shop owner is preparing the tea I get talking to him and he shares his tales of woe and wonder. The conversation ranges from terrorism to tourism. As I sip ginger tea I realise how much the people value their land. I'm about to pay him, but he refuses to take money for it, saying "*friendship mein chai pila di madam.*" I feel goosebumpy with this experience.

On the way back to the hotel, I hear music on the road. Some Kashmiri folk singers break out in random dancing on the street and ask me to join in, but I refuse. I stand there and stare at them and then became a little envious. Envious of the fact that they stay here, and envious because they are carefree (at least they seemed to be). But shaking off these negative emotions, I bid farewell to this glorious place and head to Srinagar.

After a typical day of sightseeing in Srinagar—Nishat Bagh, Jama Masjid and Hazratbal shrine—it is time for a shikara ride on Dal Lake. The sun is about to retire for the day, but does its usual play with colours before going. The shikaras and the lake look gorgeous bathed in the orange glow. To me Srinagar has never looked prettier than it does on my last evening there.

They say everything ends but there are always new beginnings, and I truly believe that. My trip to Kashmir is ending, but it leaves me with a desire and determination of coming back soon to experience another fascinating season in paradise, when the mountains will turn a lush green. I'm returning home with a million memories, and the hope of a new beginning. ●

**F.Y.I**

#### SWINGING AWAY

For golfers Kashmir is nothing short of paradise. The stunning golf courses in Srinagar—Royal Spring Golf Course and Kashmir Golf Club—and Gulmarg are counted as among the best in the country. Jammu & Kashmir has been promoting golf in a big way and it is one of the most popular sports in the State. In fact the Gulmarg Golf Club, located at the height of 2,650 m, is the highest golf resort in India and draws thousands of tourists every year. So when you are in Gulmarg don't forget to try your hands at a round of golf.

## FACTFILE

### GETTING THERE

Most domestic carriers—JetLite, Air India, SpiceJet, Kingfisher Red, GoAir—operate daily flights from New Delhi to Srinagar. Fare: Rs. 9,000 approx. Gulmarg is two hours away by road.

### WHEN TO GO

Throughout the year, but to experience the winter season visit between November and January.

### PLUS SAYS

#### STAY

►Heaven Resorts: Gupt Ganga Nishat, Srinagar; tel: (0194) 250 0525; [www.ahadhotelsandresorts.com](http://www.ahadhotelsandresorts.com)  
 ►Royal Park Hotel: Gulmarg; tel: (01954) 254 561; [www.hotelroyalpark.net](http://www.hotelroyalpark.net)

#### EAT

Try Kashmiri dishes such as *rista*, *gushtaba* and *yakhni*.

#### SHOP

Saffron and *kahwa* tea leaves from shops at Lal Chowk in Srinagar.

#### SEE

The gondola ride in Gulmarg should not be missed. In Srinagar, take a shikara ride on the Dal Lake at sunset.