



Stay: The Villa Himalaya, Jammu & Kashmir

At this boutique resort, the only signal you'll receive is the call of the mountains waiting to be explored.

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Guests at Villa Himalaya are lulled to sleep by the rhythmic roar of the Sind River. Photo courtesy The Villa Himalaya

There are two kinds of silence: the absence of noise and the presence of something so powerful, it mutes out even the most niggling thoughts. Such was the roar of the Sind River, swirling and eddying a few steps from my room at The Villa Himalaya; the more I focused on the thrashing body of water, the calmer I felt. The sun beamed benevolently on the Sind's icy grey waters and through the curtains of mist hanging above pine-draped mountains. On the far bank, mustard fields simmered in the breeze.

The Villa Himalaya makes the most of its riverside location. The boutique resort in the Kashmiri village of Kullán has rooms with large, unblemished glass windows that afford stilling views of Sonamarg Valley. Until May, the mountain vistas are more white than green, but by the time we visited in the end of July, there were only crescents of snow clinging to the upper reaches of the craggy peaks. Days were cool, cloudy, and intermittently sunny, just the sort of light-sweater weather plain-dwellers like me yearn for. I spent most of my time reading under the walnut tree on the lawn dotted with wild blooms. On one side was a staircase that led to the river: A perfect spot for morning mediation or

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a bracing ankle dip. The water was far too ferocious and cold for a swim, coming as it was from more treacherous heights in the Himalayas.

Kullan gets no phone or internet signal, presenting the perfect opportunity for a digital detox. Days can be leisurely or packed with activity. A walk along Old Sonamarg Road, where the hotel is located, was a rejuvenating way to work up an appetite for dinner. The mud road is lined with mustard and maize fields and modest wooden homes with laundry flapping in the yard. We spent a wonderful evening picking dandelions, collecting smooth pebbles from a small glacial stream bed, and sniffing drops of viscous, amber-coloured resin that clung to the barks of pine trees. Outside most houses, horses chomped on fresh mountain grass, their glossy tails swishing about happily. These, we learned, were vacationing guide horses that accompany travellers on the famous Great Lakes trek, which starts a short distance from Kullan.

The folks behind The Villa Himalaya are passionate trekkers happy to organise short and longer guided hikes into the mountains, and excursions to picturesque villages nearby. The highlight of our trip was the picnic lunch by an ice-blue glacial stream. We kicked off our shoes, and tucked into a scrumptious meal, with our feet dabbling in the water. The hotel also has mountain bikes guests can use at no cost. I tried riding the geared bikes, but found they take some getting used to, so it's best to practice on Old Sonamarg Road before exploring paths less travelled.

That evening, we sat bundled in our shawls by the campfire—there is one almost every day—under the starry night sky while Keshav Thapa, the smiling chef, cooked up a hearty, delicious dinner. The large but homely spread began with rich tomato soup, and included saag paneer, chicken curry, mixed sabzi, yellow dal, and crisp tandoori rotis glistening with butter. Thapa is an enthusiastic cook who dishes up guilty pleasures like egg fried rice and chicken chilli as well as light, flavourful meals of grilled Himalayan trout with garlic butter. Food and sport enthusiasts can try catching their own trout between April and September when the hotel organises angling trips.



A glacial stream near the resort. Photo: Vahishta Mistry



The Sind River is a rich source of Himalayan trout, and the fish sometimes makes its way to dinner spreads. Photo courtesy The Villa Himalaya

The Villa Himalaya checks all the boxes of a mountain getaway: Spectacular location, friendly but discreet service, and rooms that steer clear of the kitschy Kashmiri aesthetic that many hotels in the state favour. Mine had pinewood flooring, a flat-screen television, and the sort of heavy wooden desk that would make a writer sigh with longing. There were traditional touches—a runner with Kashmiri embroidery, a papier mâché lamp by the bedside, and a small, richly patterned carpet—but they didn't overpower the space. The star in The Villa Himalaya's rooms is clearly the view. Every corner (even the shower) has mountain vistas. I fell asleep counting pine tree silhouettes on a moonlit rocky ridge, and thanks to the soothing sound of the Sind, enjoyed a deep, restful sleep.

Appeared in the September 2015 issue as "Offline Adventures".



Soak in the mountain views from your room. Photo courtesy The Villa Himalaya

THE GUIDE

Accommodation The Villa Himalaya has 15 rooms: 3 attic rooms, 7 deluxe rooms, and 3 deluxe rooms with a balcony. It's worth splurging on the last category, to wake up to the roar of the Sind River. Rooms are well-appointed and bathrooms are reasonably posh, with glass shower cabinets, blow-driers, and bottles of aromatic moisturiser. (www.thevillahimalaya.com; open 1 April to 15 November; doubles from ₹8,500 including all meals and walks).

Getting there The Villa Himalaya is in Kullán village, 12 km/20 min from the hill station of Sonamarg, and 60 km/1.5 hr from Srinagar, the capital of Jammu and Kashmir. Buses ply between Srinagar and Sonamarg, but the quickest way to Kullán is by taxi. Buses are the first to be stopped in the event of a road block, which happens occasionally. The number of direct flights to Srinagar are relatively few, except from Delhi.

Neha Sumitran loves exploring food markets or better still, foraging for new kitchen ingredients. She hopes to have a farm near the mountains someday. She tweets and instagrams as @nehasumitran.

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