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Reeling in a trout from the
Sind River in Kashmir



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Features

FLY FISHING IN SONAMARG

Adding to a list of things-to-do in Kashmir is trout fishing--get your fishing rods and fly ready for a holiday by the Sind River

Venky Vembu (<http://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/authors/venky-vembu/>)

June 29, 2015

With a wistful shake of his head, Bashir Ahmad Sheikh, the fisheries guard at Kullam Sonamarg village in Kashmir, delivered his downbeat prognosis. "The river is too turbid," he said. "You'll need a whole lot of luck if you're going fishing today. And even then...." His voice trailed off into empty nothingness, punctuating the pessimism that was seeping into me like the cold glacial winds from the upper Himalaya.

Even to my untrained eye, the validity of that assessment seemed blindingly obvious. The Sind River, a tributary of the Jhelum, which was roaring past The Villa Himalaya, where Vaibhav and I were camped, bore a sickly brown hue, not the translucent blue as in the photographs that we'd seen of it. Unseasonal rains upriver in the previous few days, and the melting of the glaciers, had swelled the Sind and whipped up the first flush of mud and minerals. The current was fairly swift, and when I dipped my feet in the water for a few fleeting seconds, I very nearly cramped up from the numbing cold.

Not exactly the most propitious setting for 'fly fishing' for trout, which is what I'd come to do, in early May. The peak season for trout fishing in the bounteous rivers and lakes of Kashmir begins only in July, so in any case the odds were heavily weighted against me. I had a one-day permit, which meant that my window of opportunity was also temporally constrained. Overall, the chances of my reeling in anything piscine seemed fairly slim. By way of pre-emptive consolation,

I remembered the philosophical ruminations of an angler friend in Hong Kong, after a fruitless day out on a lake: “It’s not about catching fish, it’s about fishing!” The pursuit, he reasoned, is its own reward.



The 17th century English writer Izaak Walton called fly fishing “The Contemplative Man’s Recreation.” Sheikh, the Kashmiri fisheries guard, put it in more earthy terms, terming it a “magnificent addiction.” This method of angling, in which an artificial ‘fly’ (or a lure that resembles an insect) is used to catch fish, has a recorded history that dates back to the 2nd century CE. The weightless ‘fly’, of which there are several varieties, is hand-tied to a hook and a weighted line, and cast afar in a sweeping, arc-tracing motion that is graceful to watch when done with skill.

Mastery is also tested in other ways: how gently the fly lands on the water, for instance. Too extravagant a splash, and the fish will see the fly for the fake that it is. Fly fishing regulations, of which there are plenty for conservation reasons, also test the fisherman’s mettle. My ‘Anglers Permit’, issued by the Jammu and Kashmir Department of Fisheries, forbade the use of live or dead bait, or even a spinning rod or a spinning reel. (There was also a bag limit of fish catch—six fish at the most—which, however, seemed a cruel joke, given the improbability of my snaring even just the one!)

Unmindful of the odds, and determined to make a day of it, we set out one morning, accompanied by Sheikh, and Tahir Rah, who oversees (and enriches) travellers' experiences at The Villa Himalaya. Sheikh first checked my permit for validity, and inspected our fishing gear clinically for transgressions. Satisfied, he thawed a bit and as we walked downriver, to a spot where the water flowed a trifle less swiftly, he plied me with trout-fishing tips.

With fly fishing, it sometimes helps to cast upstream, and let the fly then float downstream. That's because trout often swim upstream to feed on river insects, and are more likely to be deceived by a lure floating towards them. And contrary to popular perception, trout under water cannot really 'hear' us onshore, although fly fishing, being a meditative sport, is best practised in quietude.



The spot we picked had the advantage of a less forceful river flow, but it also came with some inconveniences. Since I was unable to wade into the water—the current was still more swift than I could manage—I had to cast either from the shore or from a couple of offshore rocks. But there were a line of trees all along the shore, which meant that I couldn't trace a graceful arc while casting away without getting my line ensnared in the branches.

I clambered onto a riverine rock and, after a couple of false starts, when the hook got entangled in submarine weeds, cast off with a majestic flourish. The fly landed on the water without a splash and settled on the surface with sneaky surreptitiousness. A hush descended over all of us, and I

could sense the collective attention of our party—and that of a few onlookers, who had by then gathered—focussed keenly on the fly. But even minutes later, there wasn't the faintest hint that the lure was working. Clearly, this was going to be a long day.

“The Trout Fisher casts patiently all day,” reads a document prepared by British naval intelligence during World War II, which points to lessons from fly fishing for enemy deception in war. “He frequently changes his venue and his lures. If he has frightened a fish he may ‘give the water a rest for half-an-hour,’ but his main endeavour, viz. to attract fish by something he sends out.... is incessant.”

I was nothing if not incessant that morning. The sun was by then shining brightly overhead, and I was getting sunburnt to a crisp—ruddy evidence of which I bear to this day—but there I stood on the rock, like Patience on a monument, casting repeatedly away. “One great thing about fly fishing,” wrote Norman Maclean, in his evocative semiautobiographical novel *A River Runs Through It*, “is that after a while nothing exists of the world but thoughts about fly fishing.” I knew just what he meant. After a while, I ceased to be aware of anything around me: there was just me, the roaring Sind, and the trout I felt sure would yield herself to me. In a metaphysical sense, I was ‘in the zone’, much like the young archer Arjuna in the famed ‘fish-eye’ story from the Mahabharata.

The crowd of curious onlookers appeared to have melted away; evidently, my singular lack of success didn't make for great spectator sport. Perhaps out of sympathy for me, Sheikh gently suggested that I cross over to the other bank and try my luck. I was beginning to think that it might be inevitable when, quite dramatically, I felt ‘the tug’.

The first intimation that a fisherman receives of a ‘strike’—that the fish has bitten at the lure—is a faint tug on the line. You feel it straightaway in the palm of your hand that is holding the rod. The trick then is not to yank back on the rod right away, which might afford the fish a chance to slip away if the hook hasn't sunk in properly, but to give it a five-count pause and then lift the rod gently. An English angler once told me that to time it right, he says ‘God Save the Queen’ when he feels the strike, and then pulls back. Sheikh, who seemed philosophically more attuned to the universe, put it more soulfully: “Wait for the fish's tug to reach your heart.”



My catch was by then well and truly tugging away at my heartstrings, pleading to be set free. As I lifted her gingerly out of the raging water, she thrashed around wildly as her primal instinct for survival kicked in. “It’s a brown trout,” Sheikh observed, “common in these waters.” She was about a foot long, and would have weighed about a pound. I brought her ashore, where she continued to wage the good fight for a long while, even nipping Sheikh’s finger as he unhooked her and trussed her up with some broken tree branches, the better to preserve her freshness.

The drama of the moment, and the sheer mechanics of the catch, hadn’t afforded me the luxury of feeling exhilarated at my stroke of good luck. But at Sheikh’s suggestion, we postponed the celebrations for later: his instinct told him there was more fish to be reeled in on the other side of the river. We dutifully trooped over to the other side, where, unbelievably within minutes, I snared another beauty, also a brown trout, slightly smaller than the first one.



The temptation to milk the good fortune of the moment was, of course, hard to resist, but we were all quite exhausted from the morning’s exertions. Additionally, in my case, the fish had also extracted a blood price: I’d gashed my toe on the rocks, and needed first-aid attention. Hunger pangs had also set in, knowing that Keshav Thapa, the resident chef at The Villa Himalaya, would

be laying out a royal repast, centred around the two trouts we had caught; we sent word up ahead asking that they be grilled with butter, garlic pods, herbs and potatoes, and Vaibhav was salivating from just the anticipation of gastronomic pleasures to come.

On my walk back to the hotel, I encountered a couple of weary early-season anglers. I enquired of them if they'd had any luck, and they shook their head cheerlessly. Luckily for them, I had a bit of fisherman's pop philosophy to offer. "It isn't about catching fish," I said. "It's about fishing."

That night, Tahir lit a bonfire on the riverside lawn of his hotel, and as we sat around it with a few of his other guests, watched by snow-bound Himalayan peaks, I felt enveloped by a curious sense of calm. There is something elemental about fly fishing, and when you're in its throes, all existence seems to fade away, and it feels like you're holding eternity in the palm of your hand. And to have been able to travel to so beautiful a land, and to interact with such kindly folks, seemed in itself a blessing.



I slept that night with the French windows to my first-floor balcony open. The ceaseless roar of the Sind was my lullaby; the cool, glacial breeze was my blanket. Eventually, as Maclean wrote, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. That river now runs through the caverns of my mind, and it has trouts swimming upstream to greet me.

The information

Getting there: There are several daily flights to Srinagar from major cities. We flew Indigo from Delhi, which offers round-trip seats for Rs 8,500 up. From Srinagar, Sonamarg is around 80 km by road. Taxis charge about Rs 2,500 for the two-hour journey that takes you, for the most part, along the Sind River.



Where to stay: We stayed at the The Villa Himalaya, a spanking-new, boutique property situated, somewhat uniquely, right on a bank of the Sind. The 15-room property offers deluxe balcony rooms and attic rooms at Rs 7,000, and deluxe rooms at Rs 6,500; all the rooms are artfully done up in crewel embroidery furnishings and walnut wood wall decorations, and offer comfortable amenities; tariff includes morning bed tea and breakfast, plus an enchanting campfire experience by the riverside, beneath a star-lit sky, with the Himalayan peaks glimmering in the near horizon. Rates are inclusive of taxes; a 10% service charge is levied. 0124-4378037, +91-9873782099, www.thevillahimalaya.com (<http://www.thevillahimalaya.com>)

What to see & do:

FLY FISHING

Kashmir's rivers and lakes are rich in fish species, but fishing is highly regulated for conservation reasons. The Sind River, where I fly fished, is abundant in trout and a few native species; the peak season for fly fishing is from July to October. There are an estimated 1,800 beats (stretches of

land where fishing is permitted) in all of Kashmir; I secured a permit to fly fish in the Razen beat, a 3-km stretch near The Villa Himalaya. A one-day permit costs Rs 1,000; apply to the Director of Fisheries, J&K Government (0194-2312046, kmfisheries@yahoo.co.in) (mailto:kmfisheries@yahoo.co.in). At Kullan Sonamarg, the local fisheries guard, Bashir Ahmad Sheikh (+91-7298599703), is a knowledgeable resource person for all matters related to fly fishing—and he keeps a keen eye out to ensure you stay on the right side of the rules! Anglers typically bring their own gear, but you can also rent everything you need to fish from M.D. Munawar Shah & Sons in Srinagar (0194-2472793), established in 1880! Fishing rods, reel, line and landing net can be hired at Rs 500-1,200 a day.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

The Villa Himalaya is a good base for trekking trips to the high-altitude lakes of Vishansar, Krishansar and Gangabal. It also organises trips to the Thajiwas Glacier in Sonamarg (Rs 3,500); the ancient Naranag Temple (Rs 6,000 for two, includes picnic lunch); and a village walk in Kullan Sonamarg (Rs 1,000 for two). The hotel also has 12 Firefox bicycles that guests can use for free.



What to eat & drink: The Villa Himalaya's resident chef, Keshav Thapa, whips up soulful repasts; ask for the signature gourmet trout meal, served with chips and green salad along with kahwa tea (Rs 750 per person), or the elaborate Kashmiri wazwan meal (Rs 2,200 per person); the

hotel also curates a breakfast-by-the-riverside experience, with the Kashmiri chochow bread and kahwa (Rs 650 per person). Sample the Kashmiri nun chai (salted tea), made with milk, salt, dried fruits and prepared in a copper samovar (tea vessel); a pinch of baking soda imparts a characteristic pink hue.

fly fishing (<https://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/tag/fly-fishing/>)

Sind River(<https://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/tag/sind-river/>)

Sonamarg(<https://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/tag/sonamarg/>)

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