



# DA Travelography

*A girl with her camera*





# A warm welcome in the meadow of gold

📅 January 28, 2019 ✍️ Deepti Asthana 💖 Kashmir



I was humming all the Kashmiri Bollywood songs that I could remember, trying to synchronize with the rhythm of the gushing Sindh river running close to me. The sound of the river was so overpowering that I was sure that my voice wouldn't be heard by the hotel staff. In the dim light of sky, tender mutton kebabs were served on the table. The warmth of the huge firewood was assuring me that I had arrived at the right place. With the intentions of exploring the much talked about Kashmiri hospitality, specially in the tiny hamlets of Kashmir, I placed myself in a sleepy village called Kullen in the outskirts of Sonamarg. Munching on those hot kebabs, I scribbled a few things to do around here as suggested by my host Tahir Rah at [The Villa Himalaya](#).





A lazy stroll around Kullen village picking pine tree flowers, I started my day on the right note. However, all the plans were held back by the untimely rains and I decided to spend the day in my cozy room which was laced with subtle Kashmiri aesthetics. Sitting on the porch sipping numerous cups of Kahwa, my eyes kept staring at the floating clouds over the rocky ridge of the mountains. After a sumptuous meal with a variety of local delicacies, I rolled myself in the soft linen. Next day, thankfully, the sky was clear and my pine-wood room was gleaming with the soft sunlight. I was ready to put my best foot out in the valley of Kashmir.



## The last village of Kashmir

After a short drive from the hotel, I reached Sarbal, a village straight out from the fairy-tales. The old wooden houses perched in green meadow, surrounded by the wall of high mountains, and numerous water streams. The only way to enter the village is an old rickety and shaky wooden bridge over the emerald Sindh river flowing under it in all its might. I decided to take a picture of this beautiful memory, but my picture perfect moment was interrupted by a convoy. I saw a few families crossing the bridge and carrying trunk, wooden boxes, animals, sacks of rice and chickens. I asked Nazir, my guide and friend, if this bridge was reliable enough to endure such weight. By that time, he had already leaped over the bridge and was helping a woman carry a heavy wooden log. I followed them with my baby steps carefully placed on the bridge. I finally managed to ask him what this was all about. Nazir replied "They are coming back home".



Sarbal is said to be the last village of Kashmir valley before one enters the frozen Zoji La pass on the National Highway 1 that connects the valley to Ladakh. Due to high altitude, Sonamarg and her neighboring region get sealed in winters due to excessive snow-fall and frequent avalanches. The villagers then have no option but to leave their homes and settle in the relatively lower regions of the



state. Around the months of April- May the snow starts melting and the hidden carpet of grass returns back on these snow-peaked mountains, and this indicates that it is time to go back home. The barren fields need to be reaped and sowed. The animals need to be fed with fresh grass. Summer is not just the time to work hard but also to welcome this warmth and fresh food.



Nazir, who hails from the same village took me to one of the families who had also arrived the same morning. Soon, the carpets were dusted off, the fresh coal was stuffed in *bukhari* and the *namkeen chai* was served to drink with the Kashmiri bread. The Sarpanch of the village came to meet us after knowing that a guest has arrived in their neighborhood. He talked at length about Sarbal while smoking his hookah and blowing smoke rings. He said that this yearly migration is the only way to sustain and thrive, until the tunnel (the 6.5kmm Z-Morh tunnel which is under construction and in Ganderbal district close to this village) is ready and the wooden bridge is replaced by a more robust concrete bridge.





Khatija Begum, an elderly lady gave me *pheran* (a long coat or cloak made of wool or tweed) to keep me warm and comfortable. While we spoke, the traditional silver-ware were cleaned and the *chullah* was lit to prepare for lunch. She insisted we had lunch with them as she was cooking mutton *rista* (a Kashmiri delicacy made of meat balls) for her son and his young family who were arriving soon. The musty smell of the wooden house was now taken over by the aroma of Kashmiri spices. It was an invitation too tempting to decline. I experienced the famous Kashmiri hospitality in one of the unlikeliest places and time. Gradually the village became alive as more and more families reached their homes, and I did make a few more visits to Sarbal.



## A hike to heaven

There are numerous lakes in Kashmir which are known for their splendid beauty and the 'adventure activities' around them. However, there are still a few pristine lakes which are untouched. Nazir told me that last year, he along with a team of experts found a trusted way to trek to Durinar lake, but they kept on trekking to discover two more consecutive lakes which are known as Durinar Lake 2 and 3. My excitement reached its zenith knowing that Sarbal is the starting point for these treks.

However as recommended by Nazir, month of May was too early for this trek. So, instead, we planned for a short hike.

The beautiful trail already had wild flowers blooming. Nazir mentioned that in the month of July, the meadows look like a rainbow. As we hiked for a few more minutes, we could see the thick sheet of snow from the recent avalanches was still intact on the mountains. Hundreds of wooden logs were scattered all over it from the trees which were probably uprooted in these avalanches. Those logs helped us to cross a roaring water stream. With stunning views of the Sonamarg valley, we hiked up until Pal-Pathri, which had an excellent vintage point. I carved my name on the big slab of snow in the naïve hope to be back here next year to see the lakes and my name here.



## The grand glacier

The one thing which is probably the most famous landmark in the area is Thajjwas glacier. Since I didn't want to miss this out, I decided to try a pony ride to explore this splendid beauty. To allay my fear of ponies, Nazir arranged an experienced porter Mr Ubdul Rashik Nayak, who has been working here for the last twenty years. The pony made his moves in the slowly melting snow and I kept on talking with Mr. Ubdul to distract myself. He mentioned that tourism in Kashmir has been deeply affected in recent times, otherwise Sonamarg, literally 'Meadows of Gold' was one of the most popular destinations since the British Raj. Mr. Ubdul has also served with the Indian Army for a couple of years, and listening to his stories of war and peace, the whole journey became so interesting. Riding in the middle of nothing but just the snow and his stories, the journey was worth all the time and risk.

### Guide:

### Orientation:

Sonamarg, which is the main town in Ganderbal district is 87 km Northeast of Srinagar and can be reached within 3 hours by taxi. There are also shared taxi which run from Srinagar to the small town of Kangan and then another one from Kangan to Sonamarg . These run at a very high frequency and cost around 100/- each.

Sarbal is 8 kilometers further up from Sonamarg and can be reached by a personal taxi which charges around 200/- rupees for the drop.

**Season:** Sonamarg remain closed in winters, July is the best time to visit if one wants to see the green vistas of meadows. If you like shades of fall, plan a trip in October.



**Stay:**

## **The Villa Himalayas**



The Villa Himalayas is a luxurious boutique property with river facing comfortable rooms. Their in-house restaurant specializes in Kashmiri food, but also serves continental. It is a great mix of comfort, luxury, stunning location and most suited for the laid-back travelers.

(Starting from 8,500 for double including all meals)

<https://www.thevillahimalaya.com>

### **Tourism bungalow**

(Starting from 2,000/- for doubles)



## Information on treks

**Durinar Lake trek** is relatively a newer trek, and few organizations have the expertise and knowhow of the correct route. Alpine Adventures is one of the reliable companies which arranges a variety of treks including Durinar Lake trek.

**Thajiwas Glacier Trek** is a famous trek and one can do it on your own. Being the most popular trek, it also attracts lots of tourists. Please check the government provided rates for negotiating for taxi or pony.