

Condé Nast Traveller

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KASHMIR SPECIAL

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WITH LOVE FROM KASHMIR

The ultimate guide to paradise by locals who know it best



Go for the treks, stay for the tea in Kashmir's 'Golden Valley'

Why you need to go to Sonamarg now



Sonamarg. Photos: Athul Prasad

It is 6am and we're at the fag end of our drive from Srinagar to Sonamarg, lulled into silence by the soulful lyrics of the Kashmiri Sufi rock band, Alif. Sonamarg or 'golden meadow' derives its name from the yellow crocus flowers that cover its slopes during its cool summer months.



Try 'water-trekking' along the riverbanks in Sonamarg. Photo: Athul Prasad

Snowy peaks loom large above my balcony and a tributary of the Sindh gushes below, home to the trout that is served for lunch at The Villa Himalaya. Close enough to the centre of Sonamarg, yet away from its commercialism, this boutique hotel in Kullán is a base for four-day treks that follow shepherd trails through the Himalayas and alpine forests to high-altitude lakes like Vishansar and Krishansar, and gentle, picturesque hikes to Thajwas Glacier and Baltal-Thajwas Wildlife Sanctuary. Run by brothers Tahier and Ashfaq, the property also offers 'water-trekking' opportunities for those who want to go camping along riverbanks by night and trekking through the day. The Zoji La Pass that connects Kashmir to Ladakh is a half-day trip from Sonamarg while the Shiva temple complex of Naranag is located an hour away. The hotel's engagement with the local community includes village walks and visits to community initiatives like Aslam's Weaving Centre at Ganderbal—a women's collective for pashmina weaving.

We stop by at the Government Middle School where 110 students are packed into three small classrooms. In the older class—Class 5 to 7—the children are more reserved, and girls and boys sit separately—boys in the front rows, girls at the back. Encouraged by his teacher, a young boy named Aashiq volunteers to read from a textbook of his favourite subject: English. We are told that the children belong to migrant families from the Gurez Valley near the border and speak a language called Shina that is distinct from Gujar, the dialect of the majority Gujjar community. This poses a linguistic challenge to the teachers but the parents are keen for their children to learn. Most have moved here for access to better education and electricity, cultural similarities with the region and, possibly, the relative safety of Sonamarg. In the younger class, the children are more at ease, giggling and playful as they read together—their chorus of the Gujar alphabet echoing the gurgle of the stream outside.



I notice that its colour befits the location: gold. Photo: Athul Prasad

Following that, we stop for tea at a local home. The road we go down is lined with old houses marked by wooden balconies which are called daeb (literally translated as matchbox), traditionally meant to be a window to the outside world for housebound womenfolk. We are led into a dark room where light streams in through a small window and kahwa bubbles on the stove. The fragrant brew is poured into a cup of chopped almonds, saffron and cardamom and served with a variety of kulchas, distinct from the Punjabi variant familiar to those who've travelled in other parts of India. I inhale the saffron aroma of the tea before I take a sip, and notice that its colour befits the location: gold.

How to get to Sonamarg

Sonamarg is about 80km from Srinagar and can be reached by National Highway 1, also called the Srinagar-Ladakh Road.

Where to stay in Sonamarg

The Villa Himalaya

This 15-room boutique property is located in Kullan just before Sonamarg. Equipped with modern amenities, it has a multicuisine restaurant and offers various activities including treks, fishing (a permit needs to be applied for a week in advance) and village tours. The hotel is owned and run by brothers Tahir and Ashfaq, whose family has been in the travel business for generations. ([Website](#); doubles from Rs6,500)

