



# In Photos | Sonmarg: Kashmir's Edge of Paradise

Breaking bread and ice with locals in Kashmir's last village gives an insight into Sonmarg beyond its touristy slopes.

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PHOTO STORIES

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Monikered “Meadow of Gold,” Sonmarg’s canopies of sycamore and silver birch, glacial lakes and bursts of alpine blooms only scratch the surface of its wealth. Real magic is encountered in its tiny hamlets. It is at Sarbal—the last village of Kashmir before the frozen Zoji La—that a photographer chanced upon old wooden houses dotting meadows, and in those houses, the warmth of families that opened their rooms and hearts to a stranger. In neighbouring villages, she snacked on Kashmiri bread over stories of annual migrations. Thick and fast, like the snow that’d cover her summer haunt come November, she fell in love with Sonmarg’s rural riches.



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Sonmarg, about 80 kilometres off the Srinagar-Leh highway, wields many charms including its vast repository of snow sports. The prospect of sledging down argentine slopes, or snow biking, hiking, skiing and horse riding across vales, passes and frozen lakes draws adventure-buffs from across the world to this haunt.

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In summer, Sarbal is a page out of a fairy-tale book. Arms of white-caked land shed ice under the sun, revealing streaks of green.

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Families that had left its imposing elevation of 9,186 feet return to their houses, crossing a rickety wooden bridge that links the village with a motorable road. In the wake of homecoming, Sarbal's air is redolent with life, and the scent of *namkeen chai*.

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As a basecamp to her excursions, the photographer parked herself in a boutique hotel called The Villa Himalaya in Kullen village on the outskirts of Sonmarg. With the interiors mirroring Kashmiri aesthetics of woodwork and nature motifs, and stunning views of the Sindh river outside, the place was perfect for drawing up plans for six months of village-hopping.

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Nazir Raina, the photographer's guide from Sarbal, took her to meet a family that had returned to the village. In between conversations, joined in by the village sarpanch, windows and carpets were dusted.

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Coal was stuffed into the bukhari and fresh bread baked, for a meal that would go down in the photographer's memory.

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School-aged children, especially girls, don't always have access to routine education due to poor infrastructure and connectivity, and the annual migration. Many spend the summer months reaping the fields or helping with household chores.

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The photographer met Ubdul Rashik Nayak who has been working as a porter for the last twenty years in Sonmarg. Nayak served in the Indian Army for a couple of years, and lended perspective on Sonmarg's tourism in times of both turmoil and peace.

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