VOL 1 · WINTER 2026–27 · ISSUE 01

Queen *of* Treasures

PLACES · PEOPLE · EXPERIENCES · PERSPECTIVES



THE WINTER EDIT

WHERE INDIA TURNS WHITE:
KASHMIR AND BEYOND

LADAKH

SUSTAINABLE AND LOCAL

KASHMIRI KITCHENS

ESCAPE FROM TEHRAN

A CONVERSATION WITH
DR NIZAM MISSAGHI
ON HIS MEMOIR

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OFFLINE/ONLINE, HUMOUR, CULTURE CAST,
DIPLOMAT'S CORNER, CREATIVE MAPPING

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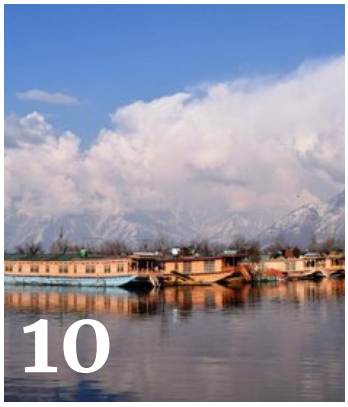

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A mountain retreat of meadows, heritage, gondola rides and Himalayan scenery.

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A SEASON OF BEGINNINGS

Long before calendars, there were seasons. They guided the rhythms of life, while the sun's passage shaped our daily routines. I understood the power of seasons late in life. When the first snowflakes brushed my jacket in Kashmir, I realised the extraordinary beauty each season holds, despite the chaos of those who lived in those seasons.

For the inaugural issue of *Queen of Treasures*, I have delved into my memory banks, both physical and digital, and returned to the time I saw snow for the first time in Kashmir. I even managed to get photographs of those moments.

It is also the region where I spent my childhood summer holidays, gorging on cherries, taking pony rides and watching filmstars on sets.

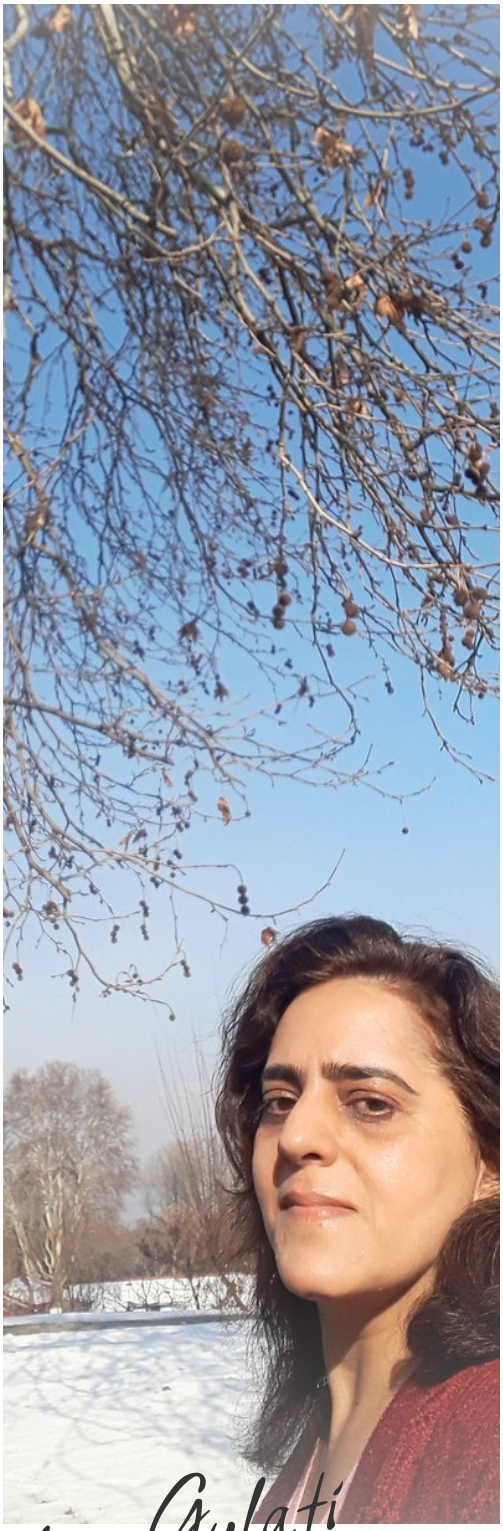
As I grew up, the valley changed. The headlines of stars and beauty disappeared to be replaced by bloodshed, exodus, pain. Not only did human life suffer, mountains have begun crumbling too under environmental pressure. But in my memory bank, there is a Kashmir full of laughter, beauty and embraced by Nature.

This winter is my ode to the seasons and the magazines I grew up reading, such as *Target*, *Reader's Digest* and *Champak*.

It is also an ode to the magazines that shaped me as a journalist, and to the experiences that taught me to look at life from different perspectives. My years in magazine journalism, including my work with *Life Positive* and *Swagat*, along with on-ground reporting and the making of books and coffee-table publications, have all contributed to the creation of this digital magazine.

Welcome to *Queen of Treasures*.

Come in for a cup of kahwa, some sheermal, a little healing and lots of snow.



Ambica Gulati

OFFLINE/ONLINE

SNAIL MAIL IS BACK

On Instagram, artists are posting artworks, letters, postcards and stickers to their subscribers' doors.



In an age of instant messages, a counter-trend is growing on Instagram: snail mail clubs. Artists, storytellers and creators send members handcrafted surprises by post, from fairy tales and handwritten letters to hand-painted postcards and stickers.

India has its own. Temen Tim Yanger, an artist from Nagaland who posts as **@timmy.orangeboy,** and mails calendars, postcards, stickers, bookmarks and more.

To find a club, search Instagram for "mail club" or "art snail mail" and look for artists and letter writing clubs.

WRITE A LETTER TO MOTHER EARTH

India Post's annual Dhai Akhar national letter-writing competition is open for 2026–27. The theme is "A Letter to Mother Earth: My Promise to Protect Nature," and the extended deadline is 31 December 2026. Visit **@indiapost_dop**.

Dhai Akhar means "two and a half letters," the phrase the poet Kabir used for love.

WELLNESS WATCH

COCOONING

To retreat into the comfort of a space, seeking calm, security and respite from the demands of the outside world. In a world forgetting to switch off, slowing down is essential for wellbeing. Think cosy corners, comforting rituals, slow mornings, mindful moments, books, music and the simple pleasure of being with yourself in a green sanctuary. Sometimes, stepping back is the best way to reconnect with the world.



Word of the Year 2026

Three major dictionaries offer a snapshot of the ideas and cultural shifts shaping our world.

COLLINS: *mogging*
Outshining someone

Collins Dictionary has named *mogging* its Word of the Year for 2026. It means outdoing or upstaging someone, whether in looks, confidence or status, and it is usually said with a smile. The word is believed to come from AMOG, short for "alpha male of the group," and began in bodybuilding circles around 2016. Collins says its use rose by 210% this year, driven largely by Gen Z and Gen Alpha.

The OXFORD SHORTLIST

- *doomerism*: extreme pessimism, serious harm to humanity from a threat like AI or climate change.
- *microdrama*: short drama episodes made for smartphones.
- *post-literate*: a society in which reading and the written word have lost their importance.
- *slopaganda*: low-quality propaganda made with generative AI and spread widely on social media.

Keep a lookout on our social media for the Oxford Word of the Year

CAMBRIDGE: *human*
Relating to people, as opposed to animals, machines or gods

Cambridge Dictionary has chosen human as its Word of the Year 2026, reflecting a renewed appreciation for human creativity, connection and authenticity in an AI-driven world. Its lexicographers recorded more use of the word in compounds such as human-made and human author.

FROM BRAIN ROT TO BRAINSTACKING

Brain rot, Oxford's Word of the Year for 2024, was about the toll of consuming too much low-quality online content. The antidote now trending is brainstacking: a TikTok idea about "stacking" analogue activities to support mental and brain health. People set aside specific time for activities such as reading or puzzles, in place of doomscrolling. What's your analogue habit?



SNOWSCAPES

From frozen rivers and snow-dusted meadows to high-altitude lakes and mountain villages, discover India's spectacular winter landscapes.



Zero Point at Zoji-la is a scenic, but hair raising, drive to Ladakh



Pahalgam wears a white blanket

SONAMARG, KASHMIR
Surrounded by snow-covered mountains, glaciers and alpine meadows, the meadow of gold, changes character when snow blankets the valley. The Thajiwas Glacier is among its best-known attractions, while the surrounding mountains offer opportunities for trekking and adventure.

PAHALGAM, KASHMIR
With pine forests, mountain streams and snow-covered slopes, the Lidder Valley offers scenic views, while nearby Aru Valley and Betaab Valley add to the region's appeal.

ZERO POINT, ZOJI LA, KASHMIR
Beyond Sonamarg, the road climbs towards the dramatic Zoji La Pass, leading to Zero Point, a high-altitude snow stop at approximately 3,500 metres. Surrounded by rugged mountain walls and vast stretches of snow, the journey itself is part of the experience, with spectacular views along the winding mountain road.

Good to know: Zero Point lies beyond Zoji La, towards Ladakh. Access is dependent on weather and traffic permissions.

PACK SMART. TRAVEL PREPARED.

Layer up:
Choose a thermal base layer, an insulating fleece or down jacket, and a waterproof outer shell.

Protect your feet:
Carry waterproof snow boots with good grip and warm woollen socks.



The snow-capped peaks of Ladakh

PACK SMART. TRAVEL PREPARED.

Shield your skin: Pack sunscreen, moisturiser, lip balm and UV-protective sunglasses.

Keep devices protected: Cold temperatures can drain batteries quickly. Carry a power bank and keep devices close to your body.

LADAKH

The celebrated Chadar Trek follows the frozen Zanskar River, traditionally undertaken during winter when conditions allow. This is a demanding high-altitude expedition requiring preparation, acclimatisation and experienced local guidance. It is not suitable for casual trekkers or beginners.

AULI, UTTARAKHAND

The snow-covered slopes of Auli attract beginners and experienced skiers, while the sweeping views of Nanda Devi and the surrounding Himalayan peaks are spectacular. The ropeway, mountain trails and nearby Joshimath make this an appealing winter escape.

MUNSIYARI, UTTARAKHAND

Set against the magnificent Panchachuli mountain range, Munsiyari is a picturesque mountain town and a gateway to the Johar Valley. Once part of an ancient trade route to Tibet, it is now popular with trekkers, mountaineers and nature lovers. Thamari Kund, Darkot village and the surrounding mountain trails offer plenty to explore.



In the frozen territory of Arunachal Pradesh

NARKANDA, HIMACHAL PRADESH
Away from the bustle of Shimla, Narkanda is situated at around 2,700 metres. It is known for its winter snowfall and skiing opportunities at the slopes of Hatu Peak. Take a scenic drive through pine forests, explore the surroundings of Hatu Temple, or simply soak in the crisp mountain air.

SIKKIM
Sikkim's high-altitude landscapes are particularly enchanting in winter. Tsomgo Lake, Nathu La and Yumthang Valley are among its most popular attractions. The frozen lake at Tsomgo and snow-covered mountain passes create striking winter scenery. Permits are required for several protected and border-area destinations.

TAWANG, ARUNACHAL PRADESH
Tawang offers a memorable combination of snow-clad mountains, Buddhist heritage and spectacular Himalayan scenery. The historic Tawang Monastery, Sela Pass and surrounding valleys are major attractions. Local travel permissions and current access arrangements should be checked before departure.

PACK SMART. TRAVEL PREPARED.

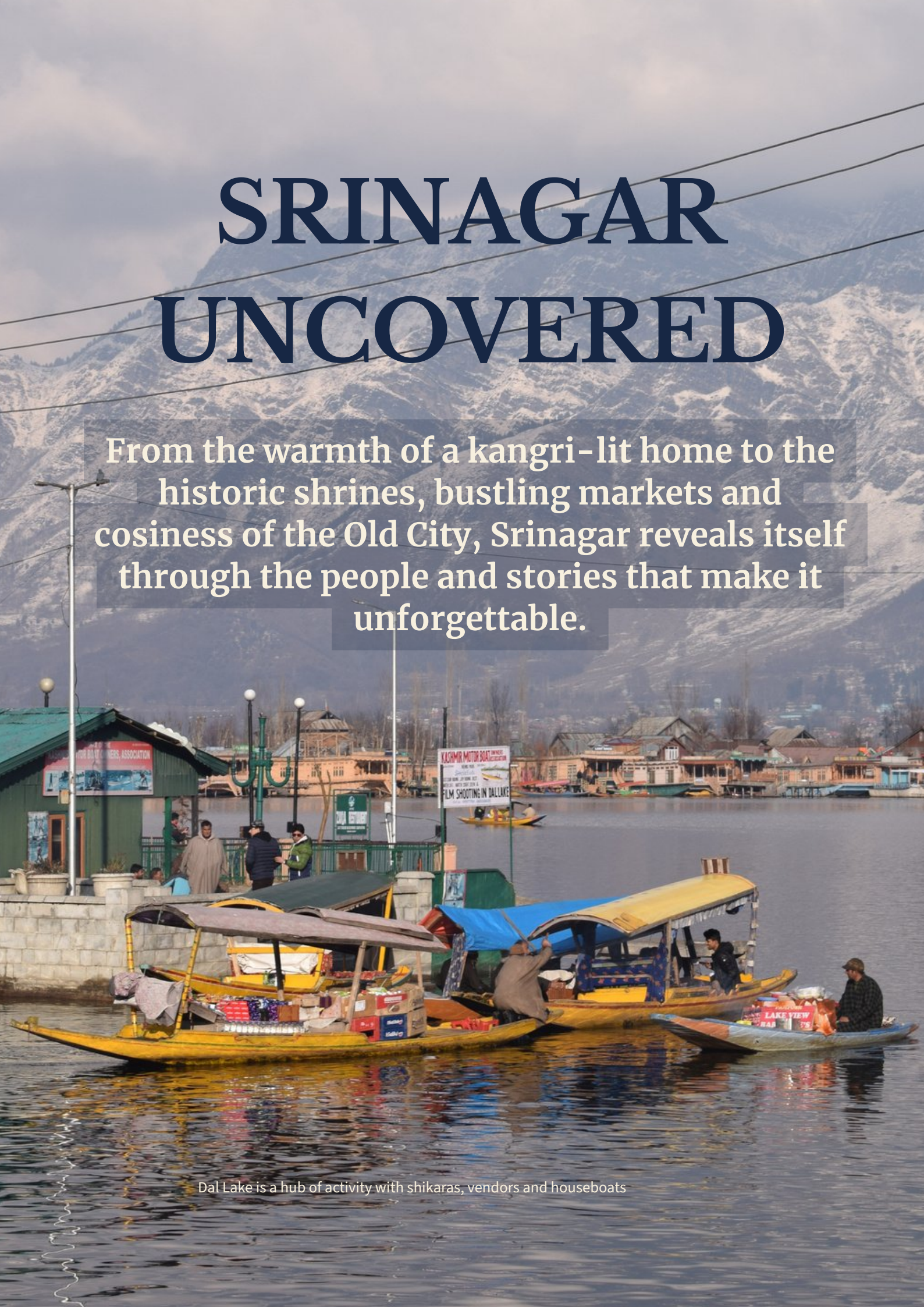
Stay hydrated: Carry a thermos and drink water regularly.

Respect the altitude: Acclimatise properly and seek medical advice before high-altitude travel.

A final word: *Check local advisories, permits and transport arrangements before setting out.*

SRINAGAR UNCOVERED

From the warmth of a kangri-lit home to the historic shrines, bustling markets and cosiness of the Old City, Srinagar reveals itself through the people and stories that make it unforgettable.



Dal Lake is a hub of activity with shikaras, vendors and houseboats





People even carry kangri on the streets; Maharaja Hari Singh's opulent palace is a grand hotel

It was one of those unforgettable happy experiences. Bashir Ahmed, his wife and mother were all smiles.

I was tucked into a blanket, sitting on a carpeted floor, a kangri between my legs and a cup of noon chai in my hands. This was a typical Kashmiri household, where everyone sat on the floor. Dipping a piece of fresh tandoori roti into my hot cuppa, I asked whether they gave a kangri to every visitor. Three heads nodded in unison. "Ten visitors, then ten kangris."

A kangri is a handmade wicker basket containing an earthen pot filled with simmering charcoal. That is how Kashmir embraces winter. Even on the streets, people carry their kangris, while at home and in cafés they savour cups of kahwa. Noon chai, made with salt and baking soda, is quite different from kahwa, a fragrant brew of spices and saffron.

Bashir, my chauffeur and guide, worked with The Lalit Grand Palace Srinagar, Maharaja Hari Singh's palace converted into a hotel. I had also interviewed his heir Dr Karan Singh a few years ago.

Kashmir embraces winter with kangri. And every visitor to a household gets his or her own kangri.



The chinar where Mahatma Gandhi and Maharaja Hari Singh discussed the stance with India; The house boats at Dal Lake are picturesque stays.



Dal Lake is the tourist hub of Srinagar, and The Lalit Grand Palace offered a beautiful view of the water and the snow-covered Himalayas.

This heritage hotel was once the winter residence of Maharaja Hari Singh, the last ruler of Kashmir. Built in 1910 by his uncle, Maharaja Pratap Singh, the palace has hosted an impressive roster of visitors. Lord Mountbatten is said to have walked its corridors, while Bollywood actor Shammi Kapoor was among its guests.

Scenes from the film *Kabhi Kabhie* (1976) were also shot here.

Yet, for me, the most remarkable feature of the property was a chinar tree in its grounds. It is associated with a meeting between Mahatma Gandhi and Maharaja Hari Singh in June 1947, when the future of Kashmir was under discussion. So much of Kashmir lives in this palatial hotel, where the past and present hold keys to the future.

Each corner speaks of Kashmir's inheritance and legacy, a culture that has survived centuries of disruptions.

Every corner of the palace offers a glimpse of Kashmiri craftsmanship and aesthetics: handmade artefacts, carved walnut furniture, Persian-inspired ceilings and handcrafted copper samovars.

The hotel served global cuisine, but I was drawn to the regional flavours, the cuisine that natives relish.

Winters in the valley can be harsh, and preserving food is part of the seasonal routine.

Srinagar is a city best explored with someone who knows it well. We drove to the historic Jamia Masjid, built in 1394 by Sultan Sikandar Shah Kashmiri Miri. Its vast courtyard and distinctive wooden architecture were striking.

I gazed in awe at the magnificent deodar pillars, 378 in all. The prayer halls are said to accommodate up to 33,333 people. The mosque has suffered repeated damage from fires and undergone several phases of restoration over the centuries.

It is also the site for many major protests that mark Srinagar's history in the past three decades.

Snow from the previous few days rested in the courtyard and around the fountains. We walked through the surrounding market, where the city revealed another side of itself. Winters in the valley can be harsh, and preserving food is part of the seasonal routine. Dried vegetables and fish are stored for colder months.

Traditional clothing shops displayed pherans, hijabs and burqas, some beautifully hand-embroidered. We stopped to look at handcrafted copper utensils. My guide said that copperware is deeply valued in Kashmiri homes. People bargained for their copperware as we walked by the shops.



The dry vegetables that make winter easy; Jamia Masjid has seen protests and prayers



Persian artistic influences mark the architecture.

Located on the right bank of the Jhelum, between the Fateh Kadal and Zaina Kadal bridges, Khanqah-e-Moula is one of Srinagar's most distinctive historic religious structures.

The original building dates to the late fourteenth century and is associated with Mir Sayyid Ali Hamadani, the Persian Sufi saint who came to Kashmir in the fourteenth century and left a lasting influence on its religious and cultural traditions. It is believed to be the mosque where the first azan was held.

The building's wooden architecture and richly decorated interiors reveal Persian artistic influences. Natural motifs and colours catch the sunlight, lending the space a quiet beauty. I didn't step inside, perhaps I wasn't sure whether I would be allowed or not.

At the back, we saw an orange stone associated with an older Kali shrine. The stone continues to be revered by Hindus and Kashmiri Pandits. It is a reminder of the many layers of history that coexist in this city.

Our final stop in the Old City was the tomb of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin's mother. The ruler of the Shah Mir dynasty, he governed the Kashmir Sultanate from 1420 to 1470. The red-brick structure, crowned with five domes, stands in a cemetery. I feel privileged to be among the few who have seen it.



Khanqah-e-Moula is where the first azaan was held; tomb of Sultan Zain-ul-Abidin's mother





Evening at Hazratbal Shrine

We headed towards another part of the city to visit All Saints' Church, which dates to 1896. It was a beautiful, sunlit day, and I was fortunate to find the church open. And much to my surprise, it was a peaceful place, perhaps because it was surrounded by the Army patrols from all sides.

The Protestant church falls under the Diocese of Amritsar. Its congregation is small, with around 15 to 20 members, and services are held on Sundays.

The church has been burnt twice since its establishment, but its beauty remains. The cross, made from ceramic pieces by artist Jyoti Sahay, was distinctive. The old wall paintings, featuring verses from the Bible in Urdu, had their own story. They were restored by INTACH and later retouched by a Jewish artist from the United States in 1967.

HOW TO REACH

Srinagar is connected by regular flights from major Indian cities, including Delhi.

Travel note: Check current travel advisories, access conditions and local opening arrangements before planning your visit.

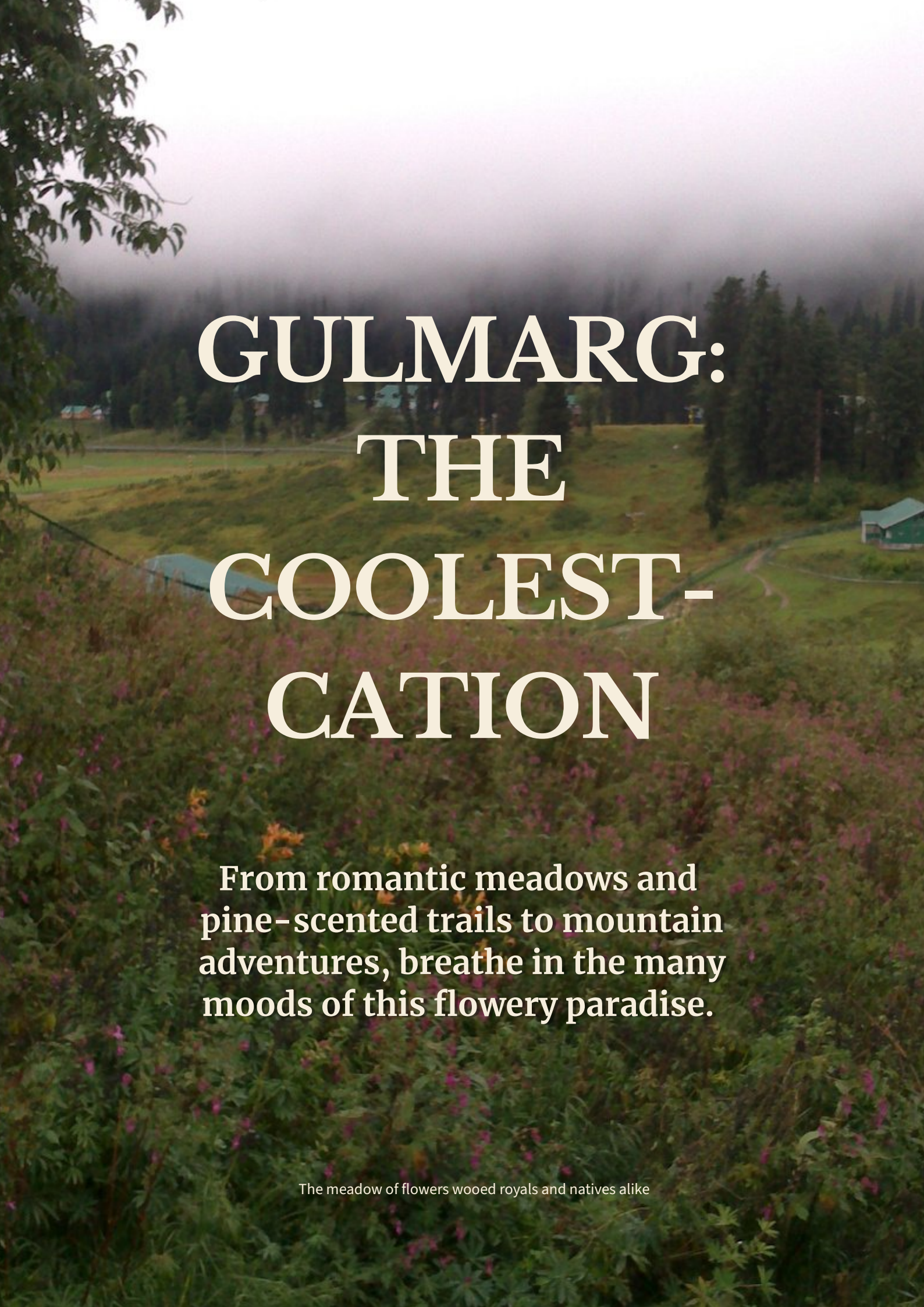
Only one room remained operational, warmed by a traditional hamam: an ingenious system in which wood and coal are burnt beneath the floor to heat the room above.

Electricity was unreliable during the winter. Through the dark, we drove to Chai Jaai, a popular café. Here, Srinagar forgets its past.

In the beautiful interiors, I sipped kahwa. It arrived in the handcrafted copper samovar. Sweetening it with gulkand was a fitting end to my Srinagar sojourn.

MORE TO EXPLORE

- **Nishat Bagh and Shalimar Bagh**: Srinagar's celebrated Mughal gardens.
- **Hazratbal Shrine**: A religious landmark on the banks of Dal Lake.
- **Pari Mahal:** Enjoy its historic terraces and views over the city.
- **Shaw Art Palace, Cheshmashahi**: Explore traditional silk carpets and, if available, watch a demonstration of carpet weaving.
- **Zero Bridge:** Explore the area and its food offerings.
- **Beyond Srinagar**: Plan excursions towards Pahalgam, Pampore, ancient temple remains at Avantipur and Martand.



GULMARG: THE COOLEST-CATION

From romantic meadows and pine-scented trails to mountain adventures, breathe in the many moods of this flowery paradise.

The meadow of flowers wooed royals and natives alike

Walk in the meadow with a cup of kahwa and breathe in the scent of the Himalayas.

Loved by romantics, adventurers and filmmakers, Gulmarg has seen its share of blood. But Nature survived the onslaughts. Once known as Gauri Marg or the path of goddess Gauri, it was renamed Gulmarg by Kashmir's ruler Yousuf Shah Chak, who visited the valley with his queen, Habba Khatoon.

Situated at approximately 2,650 metres in the Pir Panjal range of the western Himalayas, Gulmarg is surrounded by pine and fir forests and sweeping mountain slopes. It also lies within the Gulmarg Wildlife Sanctuary, home to diverse Himalayan flora and fauna, including musk deer, leopard, Himalayan black bear and red fox. I wish I get an opportunity to explore the region's natural world on another visit.

The Mughal emperor Jahangir was reportedly so enchanted by the region's wildflowers that he collected varieties to plant in his gardens. Centuries later, the British made Gulmarg a summer retreat, establishing golf courses and a ski club. The legacy of winter sports continues today, with skiing, snowboarding and other snow activities drawing visitors to the valley.

My last visit was during the unforgiving rains of 2014. We explored less, and stayed inside the Khyber Resort & Spa, wishing for better days.



Kashmiri embroidery; Khyber Resort & Spa







St Mary's Church, the layered Colonial past; Hotel Highlands Park, a fairy world

With not a soul in sight, we climbed a little hillock for a better view of the Himalayas. A gentle drizzle accompanied us as we searched for strawberries, wildflowers and potatoes.

Little huts dotted the distance, tall trees reached towards the sky and tiny yellow flowers struggled to hold their own against the rain. Frogs hopped through puddles, while a little stream gurgled nearby.

We enjoyed our kahwa and sandwiches inside the car. And then headed off to see the *Bobby Suite* at Hotel Highlands Park. With its old-world charm, sprawling mountain views and cosy cottages, this is where the 1973 romantic song *Hum Tum Ek Kamre Mein Band Ho* was filmed.

It was the holiday den of India's Who's Who. And the wooden cottages were such a delight, like a fairy world coming to life.

On the way, we stopped to admire St Mary's Church. This was a peek into Gulmarg's colonial past and its layered cultural history. Built around the turn of the 20th century, the church boasted grey stone exterior, green roof and beautifully decorated wooden interiors and stained glass panels.

Where royals wooed, filmmakers flocked, and Who's Who retreated, the meadow has seen it all.



The Gondola rush, Photo by Arup1981, Wikipedia

PLAN YOUR TRIP

Best time to visit: Gulmarg is a year-round destination. December to March is popular for snow and winter sports, while spring and summer bring green meadows and pleasant mountain weather. Conditions vary each year.

How to reach: Gulmarg is in the Baramulla district of Jammu and Kashmir, approximately 49 km from Srinagar. Srinagar is the nearest airport, from where taxis and other local transport can be arranged.

The church had remained closed for several years before reopening in 2003, when the first Christmas service was held after its restoration. The church falls under the Diocese of Amritsar, Church of North India.

At the time of my visit, a Muslim caretaker looked after the property. He told us that a priest travelled from Srinagar to conduct services on selected Sundays and special occasions.

The church also offered lovely views of the golf course.

No visit to Gulmarg is complete without experiencing its celebrated Gondola. The cable car system connects Gulmarg with the higher reaches of the Apharwat mountain area, offering spectacular views of the surrounding landscape. And it is quite a favourite with skiers.

Its two stages take visitors from Gulmarg to Kongdoori and onwards towards the higher slopes.

The Gondola is particularly popular during winter, when skiers and snowboarders head towards the snow-covered slopes. In summer, the journey offers a different spectacle: green valleys, mountain ridges and expansive Himalayan views.

I haven't experienced it as yet, though. During both my visits to Kashmir, the weather didn't permit a ride. But there's always a next time because who can miss the snow.

MORE TO EXPLORE

Alpather Lake, Baba Reshi Shrine, Shiv Temple (Maharani Temple), Gulmarg Golf Course

FROM KASHMIRI KITCHENS



Vegetables are dried for the winter and sold in the old market near Jamia Masjid

Beyond the familiar Wazwan, discover Noon chai, freshly baked breads, street-side snacks and more

Like most of India, Kashmir too has its culinary diversity. The best part of exploring the region with a native was that I discovered a traditional palate that went well beyond the better-known dishes: from breads fresh out of the tandoor to street-side snacks and elaborate celebratory meals.

Kashmir has wooed, shocked and frequently made headlines for reasons that have little to do with my touristy version of this beautiful Himalayan region. The Kashmir of yesteryears, before the 1990s, has a permanent place in my heart. But when it comes to food, it is the Kashmir of 2019 that comes to the fore.

I had expected meaty preparations, curd-based curries and perhaps a cup of kahwa, among the Valley's best-known culinary offerings. What I hadn't expected was the variety of freshly baked breads that Kashmiris relish with noon chai, a distinctive salty pink tea.

BREAKFAST, THE KASHMIRI WAY
The round, crisp baqerkhani comes straight from the tandoor and is topped with sesame seeds.





Warm buns called *tsot*, breads *tsochvoru* with *noon chai,* and kahwa with sheermal, honey and gulkand

There are also smaller, bun-like breads called *tsot* and *tsochvoru*, topped with poppy or sesame seeds. Add a little butter, dip a piece into your *noon chai* and you have a satisfying breakfast.

Noon chai is also known as *gulabi chai* or *sheer chai*. Made with green tea leaves, salt and baking soda, it acquires its characteristic pink hue through the preparation process. Its unusual colour and savoury taste make it quite unlike the teas we are accustomed to.

The breads accompanying main meals are equally varied. Alongside rice, which is commonly eaten with vegetables and fish, you will find *sheermal, lavas, kulcha* and *girdas*. Some are slightly sweet, while others are more savoury, offering a range of textures and flavours.

THE COMFORT OF KAHWA

If noon chai is the companion to breakfast breads, kahwa is a delightful partner for sheermal. This famous Kashmiri green tea is infused with saffron, almonds and spices. Some preparations include milk on special occasions. Honey is a traditional sweetener, while gulkand is also used.

Straight from the tandoor, I relished some warm breads with noon chai on the streets of Srinagar.





Vendors selling *Kruhun Masale* and *Masale Tzhot*

Traditionally, kahwa is prepared and served in a samovar, an ornate copper vessel that is as much a part of the experience as the tea itself. Kashmiris have a longstanding affinity for copper utensils, many of which are beautifully handcrafted.

STREET-SIDE DISCOVERIES

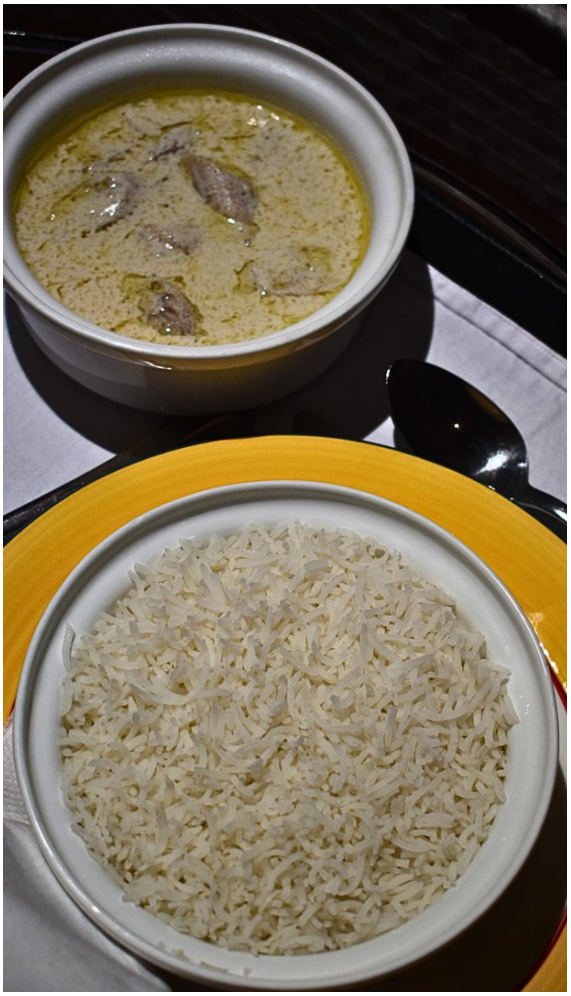
The locals enjoy many streetside snacks. One discovery was *Kruhun Masale*, boiled chickpeas wrapped in a thin, white-flour roti and dipped in tomato chutney. It is usually served on a sheet of newspaper.

Another newspaper-wrapped delight was *Masale Tzhot*. Delhiites might find it reminiscent of dal moth, although the Kashmiri version is darker and more heavily spiced.

The Valley's distinctive flavours also owe much to its spices. Saffron from Pampore, *shahi zeera*, *Koshur Marchwagan* (Kashmiri red chilli) and *zereshk*, mildly tangy berries, are among the ingredients that lend character to its cuisine.

Dried ginger, or *sonth*, and *baedyn*, roasted and ground fennel seeds, also find their way into many preparations.

Walk slowly, relish streetside snacks, for they are the yummiest treats.



Nadru Yakhni with boiled rice, Kashmiri Pulao with saffron and nuts



THE GRANDEUR OF WAZWAN

Wazwan is an elaborate traditional feast, served primarily at celebrations and weddings. The number of preparations varies, with 36 often cited as the traditional count. Its dishes are prepared by specialised cooks known as Wazas.

Eating Wazwan is an experience governed by its own rituals. A *tash-t-nari*, a jug and basin, is passed around to wash the hands before the meal. The centrepiece is a large communal platter called a *trami,* traditionally shared by four people. It is laden with rice and an assortment of meat preparations. These can include *seekh kebabs, meth maaz, tabak maaz,* barbecued ribs, *safed kokur* and *zafrani kokur*. The feast is accompanied by yoghurt garnished with saffron, salads, pickles and dips.

THE VEGETARIAN DELIGHTS

Although meat features prominently in Kashmiri cuisine, there's a treat for vegetarians as well.

Nadru Yakhni, made with lotus stem cooked in a flavoursome yoghurt-based curry, is one such favourite. The Kashmiri pulao, generously loaded with nuts, is another must-try.

And then there are the seasonal fruits. Dates and cherries add their own sweetness to the Valley's generous culinary landscape.

I returned with a list of favourites: the comforting lotus stem curry, the nut-laden pulao, the fragrant kahwa and, above all, those wonderful round breads eaten with *noon chai.*

Kashmir introduced me to a food culture rich in tradition, variety and little discoveries that I have not forgotten.



The Healing Power of Sound

An immersive sound bath with Tibetan singing bowls and gongs helps in reconnecting with oneself.

I drifted between reality and relaxation, allowing knots of stress to fade away. The gentle sound of singing bowls reverberated across the room, their vibrations mingled with the calming fragrance of camphor. Except for an occasional chirp and snore, nothing disturbed the stillness.

The session was led by Deepti Lalwani and Amandeep Chaudhary, the healer couple behind Soul Setu Foundation. Both practitioners bring years of experience in meditation and complementary healing practices.

THE LANGUAGE OF VIBRATIONS

Sound healing draws upon ancient traditions to relax the mind. Tibetan singing bowls and gongs produce resonant tones that create an immersive listening experience. The intention is to quieten the mind and encourage a deeply relaxed state.

The practitioners explain that sound baths can help slow down, become aware of emotions and release accumulated stress.

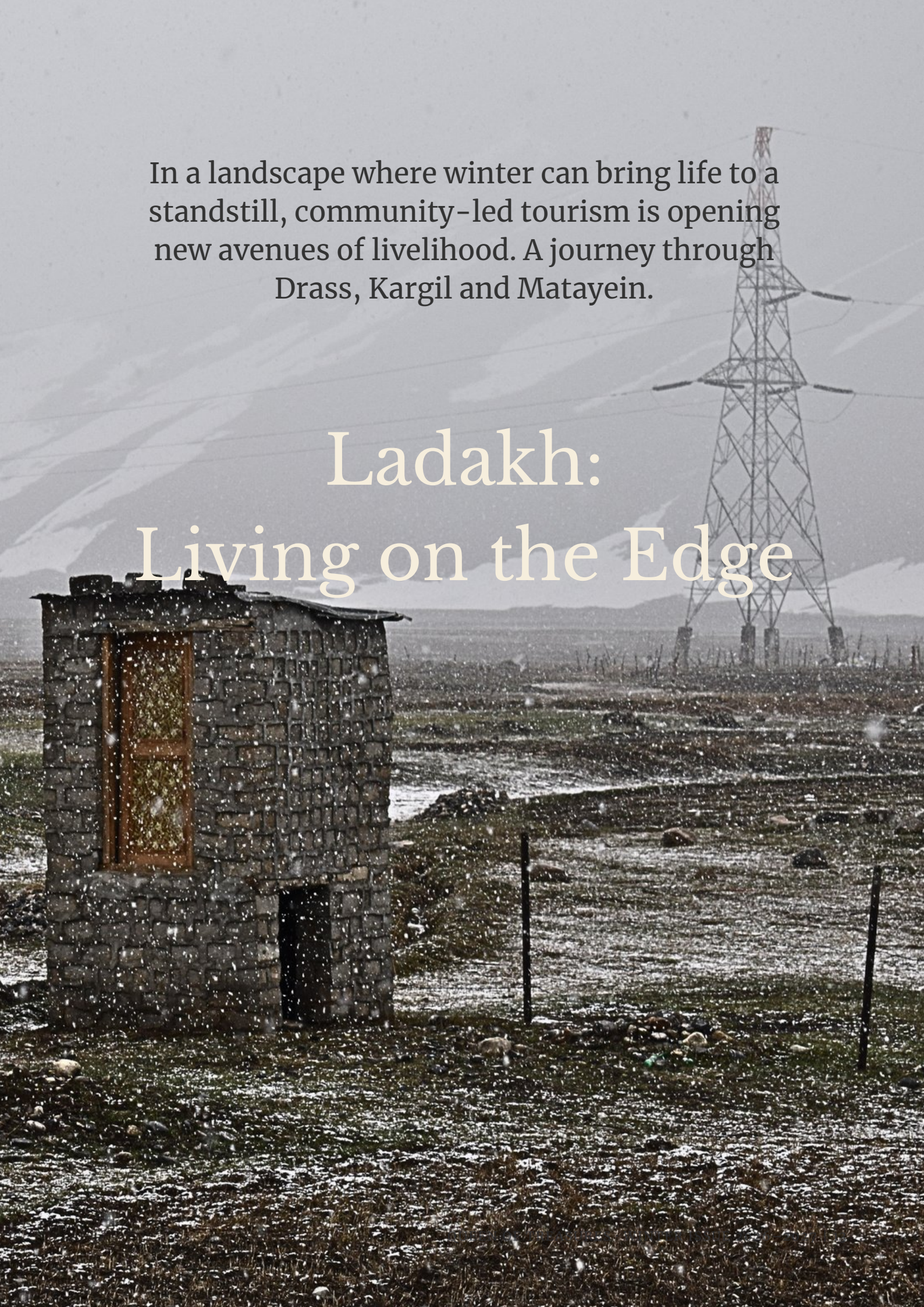
Research into music, sound and relaxation continues to explore the effects on the nervous system, mood and sleep. However, sound healing should be seen as a complementary wellness practice rather than a medical treatment.

A JOURNEY INWARDS

A session is best experienced lying down comfortably, away from phones and other distractions.

I went for a day-long immersion session, and then later a night-long one. The sessions moved through invocations, singing bowls, chakra meditation and a gong bath. Hawaiian prayer, Tai Chi, gratitude meditation for ancestors, Native American flutes and drumming added to the experience. The sessions concluded with a celebratory dance.

I came back with a quieter mind and a renewed appreciation of the sounds around me. The universe has its own rhythm; sometimes, all we need to do is pause long enough to hear it.



In a landscape where winter can bring life to a standstill, community-led tourism is opening new avenues of livelihood. A journey through Drass, Kargil and Matayein.

Ladakh: Living on the Edge



When flakes fall relentlessly, bringing life on hold

Among India's most striking landscapes, Ladakh is a place of extraordinary contrasts. Its stark mountains, cold desert and blue-green rivers are breathtaking, but life here is far from easy. For the people who call this fragile Himalayan region home, surviving the long winters, coping with limited resources and adapting to changing weather are part of everyday life.

I was in Ladakh on assignment to document homestays and eco-cafés supported by a world-renowned NGO. The initiative aimed to strengthen livelihoods among marginalised communities. It recognised an important truth: the people who live closest to nature are also its custodians.

I would come to understand this more fully on the journey back, when the weather brought us to a standstill.

WHEN THE MOUNTAINS SAY STOP

The sun allows movement; snow can bring it to a halt. Snowflakes swirled around the bends of Zojila Pass, piling onto the road and making it increasingly difficult to drive. One wrong move on the slippery stretch could send a vehicle skidding towards the deep valley below. Our driver, Aashiq, was calm though.

We were caught in a snowstorm in April 2022. A vehicle ahead of us edged past the snow-covered stretch, barely leaving any room for error. The taxi drivers helped clear the snow and pushed vehicles over slippery patches. It was a community effort on a road where help from the authorities could not arrive immediately.

Aashiq's initial reserve had gradually given way to easy conversation and stories about his travels across India. He spoke fondly of Kargil, known only for the war that took place in 1999. Eventually, we made it safely to the Kashmir Valley.

A HOME IN THE HEART OF DRASS

Our base for documenting the sustainable tourism initiative was Drass, said to be the second coldest place on the planet. The village is about an hour's drive from Kargil and lies amid a rugged landscape where settlements are scattered across the hills.

We were welcomed with traditional *sattu*, made from powdered grain, at the home of Nargis Bano, her husband Ahmed Ali and their four children.

Their stone-and-mud house had withstood years of harsh weather. The kitchen, which doubled as the family dining space, was the heart of the home.



A lunch prepared by Nargis Bano and her children

Water was precious. The family collected it from an outdoor source, and hot water was heated using a traditional system. There was no geyser or elaborate bathroom facility. I learnt to manage with half a bucket of water.

Ahmed had once been the family's sole breadwinner, working as a daily wager. Nargis explained that for almost six months, winter made it difficult to go out and earn. They stored grain, grew vegetables on their small patch of land and depended on the milk from their cow. Whatever they earned during the tourist season was rarely enough to save for the long winter ahead.

The homestay initiative had given the family another source of income.

Their training covered hospitality, cooking, housekeeping, cleanliness, waste management, bookings, payments and kitchen gardening. The programme helped them to improve basic facilities, providing essential furniture, bedding, kitchen equipment and other required amenities. What they needed was marketing.

Homestay owners were encouraged to become local guides, storytellers and naturalists, sharing their knowledge of the landscape and its history with visitors.

Ahmed also led eco-trails for photographers and wildlife enthusiasts hoping to spot the famous Himalayan brown bear. These experiences created additional earning opportunities and gave visitors a reason to spend time in the village and understand the culture.

The additional income meant he could save for winter and provide better educational opportunities for his children. The family was now part of a tourism experience that allowed visitors to understand local life rather than simply pass through the region.

The view from their home was unforgettable. I spent time stargazing and watched the full moon bathe the mountains in an indigo glow. It was a reminder that a homestay can offer something no conventional hotel can replicate: a glimpse into the rhythms of another way of life.



The only stop for tea, samosa, momos at Matayein, near the Kashmir border

A CUP OF TEA AND A NEW BEGINNING

On the way home, we stopped at Matayein, a village about half an hour from Drass. Here, another Bashir Ahmed ran an eco-café built with stone and mud, blending into the rocky surroundings. Earlier, he had operated a modest tea stall. With training and support, it had developed into a more functional café, serving tea, biscuits, namkeen, momos, samosas and other simple fare. The menu reflected a blend of Ladakhi and Kashmiri influences.

The café had been equipped with basic furniture, a cooking counter, a water filter and traditional floor seating. Bashir ran it with his two sons, with help from other villagers when needed. Given the scarcity of water in the region, even the provision of a dry toilet was an important consideration.

A cup of hot tea and a plate of momos made for a welcome stop in the cold. More importantly, the café represented a small but meaningful opportunity for local enterprise. We also had some samosas and carried namkeen with us.

RESPONSIBLE TOURISM

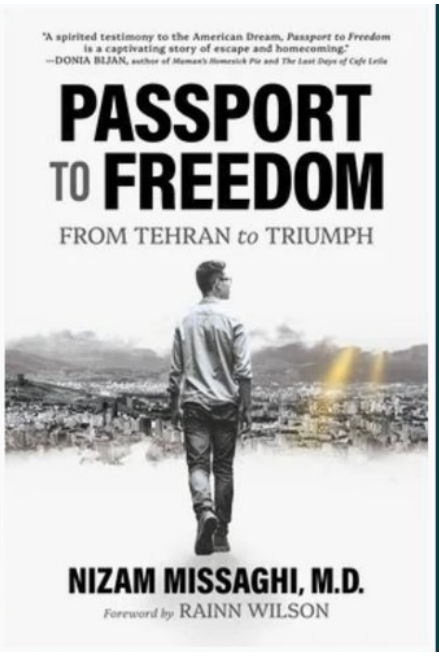
Four days were hardly enough to understand the many challenges faced by communities spread across Ladakh's remote mountain villages. Yet the experience offered a glimpse of what sustainable tourism can achieve when local people are involved in shaping it.

The initiative was also about building skills, strengthening confidence and helping families develop livelihoods that could continue across generations. It also offered visitors a more intimate and culturally rooted experience.

The landscape is fragile, and tourism must recognise that. Waste management, respect for local customs, responsible wildlife viewing and sensitivity towards scarce natural resources are essential if the region is to benefit without being overwhelmed.

Even in a short span, the lessons remained for a lifetime. In Ladakh, the most memorable discovery was not just the landscape. It was the strength of the communities who call it home.





Beyond the missiles lies a generation's struggle for identity. Dr Nizam Missaghi recounts his escape from theocratic Iran to freedom, and reflects on the homeland he left behind.

From Missiles to Memoir

The headlines are dominated by missile and drone attacks. The volatile conflict between Iran, Israel and the USA doesn't seem to have a rapid solution in sight. But beneath the geopolitics lies a much older story: of ideology, power, religious control and the struggle for individual freedoms.

A glimpse into these troubling roots comes through Dr Nizam Missaghi's memoir, *Passport to Freedom: From Tehran to Triumph*, which takes us back to the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The overthrow of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Iran's last monarch, and the rise of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini ushered in a theocratic regime that progressively curtailed civil liberties, particularly for religious minorities.

Dr Missaghi's family followed the Baha'i faith, guided by principles of oneness and peace. That, however, was not acceptable to the Ayatollah regime, which curtailed their access to education, livelihood, and basic civil rights.

The only silver lining was that his parents had been educated in the USA. Both he and his sister were born there. During the Shah's regime, Iran and America shared a good relationship. That American passport would eventually become his passage to a free life, albeit after much peril.

Can we ever fall out of love with our motherland, even when survival is threatened?
When we leave our nation, we take a part of it with us. We romanticise the possibility of returning one day to serve our country and its people. We long to see our nation prosper, even if we no longer live there.

Our nation is far more ancient than the ideology that has plagued it for nearly half a century. Persian literature and mythology tell stories of tyranny and dark times, but they also speak of people reclaiming their land and heritage. The hope that light will prevail over darkness keeps us alive and connected.

"The people of Iran deserve a life of dignity, joy and prosperity, like the people of any other nation. They long for their country to reclaim its rightful place in the international community."

You experienced the Iran-Iraq War firsthand. Does that fear still remain?
When windows in our home shattered because a missile had landed nearby, I remember telling my parents that I did not have the privilege of a life in double digits, as they had. I feared I might not survive.

Even today, the sound of thunder makes my heart race and activates my sympathetic nervous system. When I see images of war emerging from my homeland, I think of the children and their worried parents embracing them.

Did your family ever consider giving up the Baha'i faith for an easier life?
This was never a consideration. Recantation of one's faith is very rare among Baha'is in Iran. The community has made enormous sacrifices. Within every family, there are relatives who have paid the ultimate price to preserve their faith and serve their community. To abandon it could be seen as a betrayal of that shared history.

How do young Iranians view the Islamic Republic today?
The Islamic Republic has not moderated during its 47-year history. If anything, it has hardened its stance in the face of a young population that wants nothing to do with it.

Iran's youth are highly connected to the rest of the world and Western culture. The chasm between the Islamic Republic and the Iranian people, most of whom were born after the Revolution, could hardly be greater.

We watch the current conflict with mixed emotions, suspended between hope and terror. We hope for political change and an opportunity for people to have their voices heard through a nationwide referendum. Above all, we hope future generations will not have to live through war, instability and economic devastation.

You have mentioned teachers, mentors who helped you. What does your freedom mean to them?
I have had teachers and mentors in both Iran and the USA who opened doors for me. They became proverbial passports, allowing me to move from one stage of life to another.

Those with whom I have stayed in touch have always been elated to hear that, against all odds, I made it out of Iran. I achieved my dream of becoming a physician and experienced freedom. It is nothing short of a miracle that I get to live the life I once dreamed of.

What would you like the world to understand about Iran and its people?
I wish to emphasise that the Iranian people are not their government. The majority do not agree with the bellicose policies of the Islamic Republic or the havoc it has caused in the region.

Many Iranians feel held hostage by their own government, with fundamental freedoms restricted and their potential curtailed.

The people long for a prosperous, dignified life with civil liberties.



My Midnight Bookshelf

What happens when books summon a council?

Winter has arrived. Lamps are switched on early to ward off the unsettling grey. I seem to be suffering from borderline hypersomnia. Perhaps I should stop mixing chocolate and coffee.

A book slips onto my chest. Music filters through my phone as I snuggle deeper into the quilt, oblivious to the world. Then I hear whispers. A mosquito, perhaps? But the voices grow louder, followed by a thud.

I reluctantly leave my cosy cocoon for some warm water. The living room light is on. The bookshelf door is open. And inside, a secret council is in session!

The *Da Vinci Code* is having a heated exchange with *Origin*. "You and Jeffrey Archer have been stacked over me for 365 days! We share the same father, Dan Brown, but I refuse to carry your weight along with those four Archers," it fumes.

First Among Equals screams. "I was her favourite. She read me as a teenager. Look at her now, all grey hair, slow brain, leaving me with these newbies!"

The Fourth Estate, *Sons of Fortune* and *False Impression* protest in unison: "Are we just trophies or eye candy?"

Sapiens looks down its nose at the squabbling lot. "She might discover a few truths about her species if she finally realises what a treasure I hold."

The Perfumist of Paris interrupts, smugly. "She dreams of Europe and learning the art of perfumery. I am clearly the sophisticated choice. I arrived with two bottles of perfume, courtesy of a giveaway!"

"Europe, you say?" *Four Seasons in Rome* chuckles. "I've been here since 2017. Perhaps she is waiting for the right season to read me!"

The Argumentative Indian remains unruffled. "Silence over speech. She will come when she is ready."

The Little Prince delivers a punchy verdict. "Tsundoku! Tsundoku! Free us or read us, you literary hoarder!"

THE CULTURE CAST

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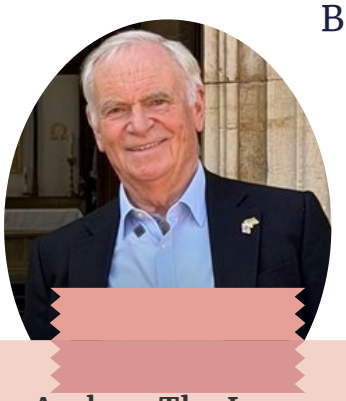
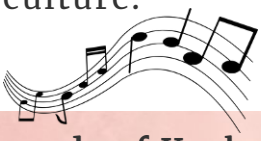


Photo: somersetleveller.co.uk

Jeffrey Archer: The Legacy
Legendary novelist Jeffrey Archer passed away in October 2026, just a day before the launch of his final book, *Adam & Eve*. My first Archer read was *Kane & Abel*, I picked up *The Fourth Estate* last year, and I can read his books anytime. After all, stories have no expiry date, and who knew that better than Archer? He had the largest reader base in India.



Grand Tamasha
Grand Tamasha, hosted by Milan Vaishnav, brings together guests from across the globe to unpack the latest developments in Indian politics, economics, foreign policy, society and culture.



Sounds of Kashmir: Asaan Gindaan
For Kashmiri musician Saffudin, music emerges from a landscape shaped by uncertainty, memory and conflict. His music video, *Asaan Gindaan*, offers another window into this world of lived experiences and artistic expression.

When AI Shook Up a Coimbatore Library
The newly opened Periyar Arivulagam library in Coimbatore is at the heart of an AI scandal. The controversy began when novelist Perumal Murugan flagged nearly 1,800 Tamil titles that reportedly came from a single, little-known publisher. Questions were raised about unfamiliar authors, unusually high prices, questionable ISBNs and factual inaccuracies. The Directorate of Vigilance and Anti-Corruption has registered a case and arrested the publisher, R. Mohan. The investigation into the alleged irregularities is ongoing.



The Pelican is Alive
John Grisham's *The Pelican Brief* was the first book I read by the author. I recently watched its film adaptation, and was struck by how relevant the story remains. The conspiracies it explores, the pursuit of wealth and control over natural resources can come at an enormous cost to humans and Nature.

The Diplomat's Corner

When heritage, history and diplomacy cross borders.



Photo: @DDNewslive

Kashmir's Craftsmanship Goes Global

A Kashmiri silk carpet made its way into the diplomatic spotlight when Prime Minister Narendra Modi presented one to Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. during his November 2026 Manila visit. A Pashmina shawl was also gifted to First Lady Liza Araneta-Marcos.

Beyond their value as diplomatic presents, these handcrafted treasures carried a piece of Kashmir's artistic heritage across borders. PM Modi participated in the 23rd ASEAN-India Summit, the 21st East Asia Summit and the Quad Leaders' Meeting during his visit.

The Prime Minister gifted exquisite Indian crafts, ranging from Rajasthani Pichwai paintings to Gujarat's Rogan art and Karnataka's Bidriware, to the participating leaders as well.



Photo:aol.com

Earthshot Prize's India Debut

Prince William and Catherine, Princess of Wales, visited Mumbai in November 2026, for the sixth annual Earthshot Prize awards. Five winners, including Indian electric mobility company Mahindra Last Mile Mobility, received £1 million each to scale up solutions to environmental challenges.

Kashmir's History Finds a Place in UNESCO's Memory Register

UNESCO has inscribed three important Indian documentary heritage works, the *Mahabharata*, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*, on its Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Regional Register.

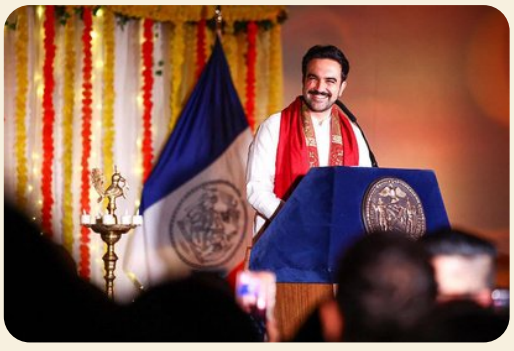


Photo: livehindustan.com

When Mamdani Turned to India's Great Epics

At a Diwali celebration in New York, Mayor Zohran Mamdani drew upon the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* to reflect on family, relationships, duty and moral choices. Born to a Punjabi Hindu mother and Gujarati Ugandan Muslim father, he appreciates the link between faith and humanity.



The Art of Doing Nothing

When 'The Hustle' needs to be tamed into nothingness—known as *Niksen* in Dutch or *Dolce Far Niente* in Italian—because doing nothing is the recovery period for the muscle of intuition, where creativity takes root.

THE MONK & THE ELF

Under a vast fig tree, a monk in an ochre-and-orange robe rested while a curious green-capped elf watched from the shrubs. Hoping to provoke a reaction, the elf tugged at the monk's robe and slipped decayed seeds into his bag. Each time, the monk woke in peace, thanked the earth, and gently placed the seeds in the soil.

Day after day, until the elf's mischief gave way to wonder. One day, the elf lay beside the calm monk, and within a week fell asleep on the cool grass.

On the eighth day, when the elf spread seeds across the sleeping spot and demanded to know what the monk was doing, the monk smiled, "Nothing."

"By doing nothing, I am doing everything," the monk said. "I just replenished the soil with the nutrients from the decayed seeds."

Reacting with anger or impatience would have wasted energy, or discarded gifts the earth could turn into nourishment. Time, surrender and stillness turned a trickster into a friend.

PAUSE · REFLECT · RENAVIGATE

A small exercise to inculcate clarity.

1. Where in your life do you react immediately out of habit, annoyance, or urgency instead of pausing?

2. Take five minutes to sit quietly. Simply notice what is around you. Listen to your breath, watch the trees, or absorb the colours around you.
   - What situations or people disturb my peace?
   - Do I react immediately, or give myself time to pause?
   - Could I look at a recent frustration differently?

3. Think of a delay, interruption, or quiet stretch you usually label as lost time. How could that space nourish your intuition, patience, or clarity instead?

Complete these sentences:

- Something I need to let go of is_____.
- A different perspective I could embrace is _____.
- I find peace when _____.

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