



KASHMIR a heaven on earth



Ashiful Islam is a marketing professional who tries not to miss an opportunity to travel.



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ASHIFUL ISLAM

After passing the passports and tickets to an immigration officer at Dhaka airport, I was lost in thoughts reflecting on the last couple of years. Though the worst days of the Covid-19 pandemic were over, the stagnant, restricted life was still vivid in my memory.

How we all yearned for a pandemic-free world of unrestricted travelling!

A benign cough from the immigration officer brought me back to the present. "Hello, Covid vaccine certificate please," he asked, reminding me of the post-pandemic "new normal" rules.

During the pandemic, like many, I too had planned many trips in my mind. An opportunity came during the long Eid-ul-Fitr vacation and, my wife and I took it. We were at the airport for a three-day trip to Kashmir.

We reached Delhi after a two and half hour's flight. We grabbed a quick meal utilising the 2 hours before our next flight to Srinagar.

Delhi to Srinagar was a 1.45-hour flight and an hour into it, Kashmir started to reveal its glamour and grandeur through the window. The views of the majestic Pir Panjal Range of the Himalayas from above

were superb.

At the parking lot of the airport, Ferdous Bhai, our tour guide and driver, was waiting for us with a smile on his face. To our surprise, he could speak little Bengali.

The beauty of the spring season in Kashmir kept our tired eyes open throughout our two-hour journey to Pahalgam, where stayed for the night.

Located about 100 kilometres from Srinagar, Pahalgam, the jewel of the picturesque Lidder Valley located in the high Himalayas, is famous for its scenic beauty. By the time we reached there, it was already



Our next destination was Betaab Valley, another popular location among tourists and even Kashmiris, previously known as Hagan Valley. The renaming of the valley happened after the shooting of a hit Bollywood film called Betaab there.

The entire setting was very scenic with the Lidder River flowing right next to it. With crystal-clear turquoise water, the beauty of this fast-moving river is hard to describe.

Unfortunately, we were not permitted to approach Chandanwari, a tourist spot 8 km further away from Betaab Valley, as landslides, a common incident

gateway of the ancient Silk Road that connects Kashmir with China, became a pleasure trip as Ferdous Bhai from his driving seat recalled all the famous movies which were shot on this road.

After reaching Sonamarg, situated at an altitude of 2730m with huge Himalayan Mountains in the backdrop, we decided to trek towards Thajiwai Glacier.

It took us almost three hours to trek to the glacier site, enjoying a few moments there and coming back. In the evening, we returned to Srinagar and spent some time at the night market nearby our hotel to collect souvenirs.

On the next morning, we started for Gulmarg which means "Meadow of Flowers". Gulmarg crowns the world's highest golf course and is also a popular destination for skiing.

We hired a local guide and rented ponies to get to Snow Point, where we enjoyed a sledge ride. While returning, we stopped at factory outlets to see how famous Kashmiri pashmina shawls were made.

We returned to Srinagar that night.

Our stay in a houseboat at the Dal Lake in Srinagar was the tour's highlight. With a touch of luxury, we loved our stay at the floating house. We experienced a tranquil, surreal sunrise at Dal Lake.

Later in the morning, we hired a Shikara (boat) to explore the lake. We also embarked on a sightseeing tour in and around Srinagar and enjoyed some Kashmiri cuisines like Wazwan, Kashmiri Biryani – which were distinct in taste and colour due to the presence of indigenous spices.

On the final leg of the trip, we did some quick shopping and then started for the Srinagar airport.

Soon, a sense of gloom engulfed us. Many call Kashmir heaven on earth for a reason.

How to go there: One can go to Delhi by bus, train or air given that you have an Indian visa.

Expenditures: The three-day trip of two cost us around 150,000 BDT.



dark. After dinner, we had a walk in the near-empty local market.

The next morning, on ponies, we set out for Aru Valley. 12 kilometres from Pahalgam, many consider this place the most beautiful of all the tourist spots in the area.

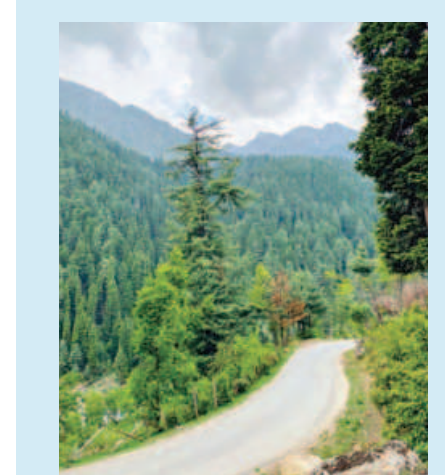
We enjoyed the pony ride on lush meadows surrounded by mountains with snow-capped peaks and pine forests.

However, by the time we reached there, the weather turned gloomy and soon, it started raining. This apparent setback was a blessing in disguise. We enjoyed the rain with cups of warm tea. It was wonderful.

during the early spring season, triggered by rain blocked the road.

That day, we left Pahalgam and reached Srinagar, where we stayed for the night. Our next spot was Sonamarg, which is approximately 80km away from the summer capital of Kashmir.

The presence of the Indian military was noticeable in Sonamarg as it was near the Kargil, a focal point of the 1999 conflict between India and Pakistan. However, other than facing a few regular security checkpoints on the way, we didn't face any adverse situations. The journey to Sonamarg, a



Nilgiri: the land of clouds



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WASI IBRAHIM RAID

It was a chilly Thursday night in Dhaka. We, my mom and I, were waiting to board our bus, and I was panicking. My uncle, aunt, grandma, grandpa, and a younger cousin were running late for the 11:15 pm bus. And it was already 11:05 pm.

I was relieved when I noticed them on the other side of the street. I frantically waved my hands at them, hoping they would see me.

Luckily, they did. At last, we all boarded the bus to Bandarban, where we would stay two nights at the Nilgiri Hill Resort.

I slept for most of the 6 hours



journey. When I woke up, it was morning.

After arriving in Bandarban, we went to a restaurant for breakfast. I would be honest here; I didn't enjoy it. The parathas were too cold. After that, we took a car ride to reach the resort.

The three-hour journey was spectacular. As our car moved along the scenic road, the different shapes of mountains and clouds were a treat to my eyes.

We reached the resort around 11:00 am and went to our respective rooms. After unpacking my bag, I went to my uncle's room and was astonished by the view from his verandah.

The surrounding green hills, the meandering Sangu River at the bottom and the moving clouds were a spectacle to behold.

Soon after, we had lunch. The menu was chicken salad, bamboo chicken, lentil soup and rice. I went for bamboo chicken and rice. My tongue got blistered eating that tasty but excessively spicy food.

We all spent the evening sitting on the verandah enjoying the views. My mom and aunt served us snacks and tea. We ate freshly collected bananas too.

However, at dinner, I hardly could eat. The welcoming aroma of the local

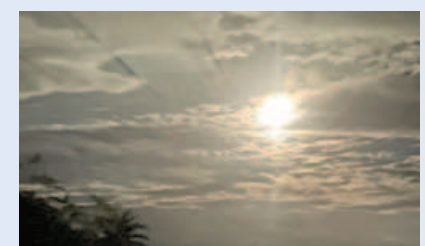
cuisine was mouth-watering, but my blisters prevented me from tasting the delicacies.

After dinner, we had a memorable walk around the resort. The soft moonlight lit everything around us, including the clouds surrounding us. It was, as if, we were walking inside the clouds!

It was cold outside, but the touch of the wet clouds was soothing.

And the clouds were moving fast. In one moment, they were encircling us; the next moment, they were far gone to another mountain.

The rest of the night went pretty well despite my encounter with a giant spider. But that's a different story.



On the second day, we went to the helipad. The greenery, the white clouds over the valley, the crisp air – all made that sunny day magical.

From the Nilgiri hilltop, I could even see lighthouses and ships in the far Bay of Bengal using my uncle's monocular.

We spent the rest of the day exploring the resort and taking pictures. It was so windy that the thought of wind turbines came to my mind. Surely, the turbines, if installed there, would produce enough electricity to power the resort or, at least, part of it.

The wind was stronger during the night. I had to wear a blanket to even go to the verandah. There, I saw two gigantic lizards just outside my room. I confess I was not a fan of the bugs in this place. Every insect there was ginormous!

Apart from a few incidents with the bugs and insects, I enjoyed the rest of the trip. The views there would stay with me for a long time. It was one of the best experiences I ever had. And this could be your next family vacation place too.

How to go there: You can go to Bandarban by your own car or by bus. From there to Nilgiri, you can hire a jeep. You can also go to Chattogram by air then take a bus or hire a car to Bandarban.

About Nilgiri Hill Resort: If you want to touch the clouds, Nilgiri is the place to visit. The resort, on the Nilgiri Hills, is maintained by the Bangladesh Army. It is about 45 kilometres away from Bandarban district headquarters. My uncle and aunt had access to it as they served in the army. You must book at least a month before to get a room in this coveted resort.

