

Paradise Regained? Kashmir Hopes So

Year 2012 has been one of the best tourist seasons for the state. Srinagar hopes this will be the new norm

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The signs are good. Tourists are thronging Lal Chowk, houseboats are booked out and a host of countries are easing travel advisories. Tourism officials are ecstatic and say the Year 2012 has been the best in recent years in the number of visitors the state has welcomed with open arms. So, can we say that Kashmir is well on its way to normalcy after almost two decades of turmoil? Well, that depends.

December first week was a picture postcard moment. More than 160 cyclists, mostly foreigners, were seen peddling furiously along Srinagar Boulevard cheered on by school children lined along the road. For the media, the cycling race was just another event, but for the planners in the state government, it was a celebration coinciding with the conclusion of a highly-successful tourist year.

As compared to the recent past, 2012 has been one of the best tourist seasons for a state that leads others in terms of sheer natural beauty. By the end of December, the overall arrivals might touch 11 million. Though pilgrim tourists to Vaishno Devi make up most of these numbers, those travelling to Kashmir and Ladakh are substantial and are not just backpackers. By October, Kashmir had hosted 27,596 foreigners, 10,42,431 domestic and 6,21,104 Amarnath *yatris* as 1,40,288 tourists visited the Ladakh region. The number of pilgrims visiting Vaishno Devi shrine in Jammu was 76,88,291.

BOLLYWOOD IS BACK

The Valley, once the toast of filmmakers, missed out in almost the two decades of the separatist turbulence. But now with the tourists, Bollywood movie crews are back in action.

First off the block was Karan Johar. Along with Aamir Khan and Farah Khan, they shot *Student of the Year* in freezing temperature in Gulmarg, last winter. Then came Saroj Khan followed by a long line of others. Yash Chopra shot the last film of his career *Jab Tak Hai Jaan* here shortly before he passed away in October.

This winter, Ranbir Kapoor is flying in



People cheering riders at the start line during the second leg of the Tour de India cycling race in Srinagar on December 4. Some 80 participants from 54 countries competed in the second leg of the race for \$35,000 prize money.

with Deepika Padukone to shoot Ayan Mukherjee's film *Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani* in Kashmir. Kapoor spent part of last year in Kashmir filming *Rockstar*. Tourism ministry officials say they are in touch with a number of filmmakers from south India who are keen to shoot in Kashmir winter.

THE YEARS OF STRIFE

In the years of strife, Kashmir had lost most of the bridges and the culverts and nearly one-third of all school buildings. There is no clear data available about the cost of the turmoil, but the resultant infrastructure deficit is estimated at more than 200 basis points compared to the neighbouring states. Most of the peripheral health infrastructure collapsed as health professionals deserted and

more alarmingly the female ratio in school-going children fell drastically.

During that time, days were darker than nights. Markets would start at 10 am and would close at 4 pm, almost keeping time with the officials operating from civil secretariat. Kashmir remained on strike for more than 1,600 days between 1990 and 2010. In 1990, Kashmir remained under curfew or strike for 198 days, in 1991 for 207 days, in 1992 for 148 days, in 1993 for 139 days.

GARRISONS ARE OUT

For the last twenty years or so, Kashmir made news for all the wrong reasons. Separatism and the face-off between Pakistan and India over this 'paradise on earth' saw Kashmiri pandits migrate to Jammu and other

safe places along with thousands of Muslims while a huge population living on this side of the LoC crossed over to the other side. While the situation is gradually improving, Kashmir migrants living as refugees on both sides of the divide are yet to return. And then there was the violence. There were daily incidents of stone throwing, police firing and deaths. The Army moved in and any image of the state showed helmeted, booted and khaki clad face of authority facing a hostile mob.

"We managed a successful tourist year despite insufficient infrastructure," Director Tourism Kashmir Talat Parvez said. "But we are on it. So far, we have been able to vacate almost 60% of hotels that were under the occupation of the security agencies."

He said already 14 lakh tourists (not pilgrims) visited Kashmir. J&K government bagged a series of awards for reviving the sector effectively.

NEW HOTELS CHECKING IN

The huge number of tourists has seen good investment in the hospitality sector. "At least half-a-dozen new hotels started operations this year," said Abdul Hamid Punjabi, president, Kashmir Chamber of Commerce and Industries. "Then there are scores of houses in commercial areas that were converted into guest houses to accommodate the arrivals lacking shelter." Tourism ministry officials said a number of people have availed of the scheme and are housing tourists. Once a person converts his house into a guest house, he is eligible for certain benefits under a central-sponsored scheme.

But the major investment is a five-star deluxe hotel in Gulmarg. Promoted by Khyber Group of Industries, the Khyber Mountain Resort will have 90 rooms, a world-class spa and an indoor swimming pool. Slated to open this Christmas, this ₹120 crore property will be the high-end address in Gulmarg, Kashmir's evergreen spot barely an hour-long drive from Srinagar.

Films have been indirectly promoting spots. In Pahalgam, almost every tourist is desperate to go to Betaab Valley, simply because some romantic scenes from the film with the same name were shot there. This has led to the creation of a satellite spot already. Then in Pahalgam, there is a famous hut that is known as Bobby Hut, where some shots of the film *Bobby* were shot. Repaired a few years back, visitors are ready to pay anything to live there.

Meanwhile, in Srinagar, at the end of the 168-km racing event, when UAE racer Almansoorian Ahmad, Sarmochi Sarva of Thailand and Naveen Thomas were declared the winners, officials cheering from the sidelines appeared more excited than the winners. "They are not only the winners in the race, they will now be ambassadors of brand Kashmir," one senior official said at the valedictory function. "All these participants were awed by the beauty that we call Kashmir."