

## A Travelogue : Holiday on a Floating Hotel

---

SANJAY SINGH BADNOR

---

"The sheer loveliness of it was so overpowering that I felt faint", said India's first Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru when he visited the region in his youth. I couldn't have agreed more, for the Vale of Kashmir undoubtedly remains my 'Numero Uno' holiday destination! No other getaway can rival its simplicity, serenity and the awesome scenic splendour that this 'Paradise on Earth' has to offer. Infact the very name 'Kashmir' invokes a romantic response more than any other part of India. Moreover, if you are getting an opportunity to spend a weekend on a delightful 'floating hotel', better known as a houseboat, then the 'Land of Guns and Roses' certainly looks more inviting. We were driven from the airport straight to the edge of the Nagin Lake where the cheerful Shikhara man, Farukh, was waiting to transport us onto the Gurkha houseboat moored across the lake. The Shikara or the water taxi is the Kashmiri counterpart of the Venetian Gondola and one of the quickest ways to access all the various water-bodies of Srinagar. For the next 3 days Farukh was to be our friend, philosopher and guide and his Shikara, aptly named 'The Prince of Wales' our means of transport.



Meanwhile Rashid Bhai the caretaker was waiting to welcome us at the front steps and after serving a hot cuppa tea took us on an inspection of the houseboat, which was to be our living quarters during our Srinagar Sojourn. Houseboats at Kashmir can be rather an ostentatious affair! Though the heavily carved walnut wood ornamentation and furniture, carpeted living areas and typically embroidered furnishings and draperies add immense ambience. Our Gurkha houseboat had a charming front balcony followed by the living room and then the dining area. Adjacent to the dining area was the pantry and another exit led to the Lake embankment. There were 4 spacious bed and baths located towards the rear and moreover we were at liberty to choose from any of them. Zeroing on one with a queen size four-poster bed we unpacked our belongings and after a quick bite embarked on our first Shikara expedition to the holy shrine of Hazratbal. It was a bright, clear afternoon as Farukh expertly maneuvered 'Prince of Wales' through dense weeds and we leisurely traversed the lake, bypassing island hamlets, fishing villages, and dodging persistent hawkers on Shikaras' to reach one of Srinagar's landmark buildings – the stark white edifice known as Hazrat Bal, located on the NorthWest shores of Dal lake close to the Kashmir University. Although Hazratbal, dates back to the reign of Shah Jahan and was built in 1623 by Sadiq Khan, the emperor's Subedar, even today it is regarded as a spiritual centre for Kashmiri Muslims. Also known as Madinat-

us-saini or second Medina, it is especially revered because a relic of the Prophet Mohammad in the form of a hair is preserved here.

We were up at the crack of dawn the next morning for yet another Sikhara adventure. Farukh had promised me it would be a photo opportunity not to be missed. But as we set off over the dark waters of the Dal with only stars and a half moon to guide us I grew uneasy and hoped that the expedition wouldn't turn into a misadventure. However, soon the darkness gave way to light as the sun's first rays touched the earth, by then we had arrived at our destination – the morning wholesale vegetable market on Shikara's on the Dal lake which indeed was an interesting and visually appealing experience. After photographing the floating market we decided to circumnavigate part of the Dal Lake. Devoid of tourist shikara's, Dal looked enchanting and placid. An odd fisherman, few women collecting lotus leaves for fodder and a couple of farmers dredging the lake's rich loam for use in farmland were the only people who were up at this early hour. On our way back Farukh took us via the old town with its distinctive brick buildings that lined the banks on either sides and under the medieval bridges or Kadals. Srinagar by now was stirring to life and one was able to observe people going about doing their daily chores. We were absolutely famished by the time we reached the houseboat and greedily devoured the hot breakfast that Rashid Bhai had whipped up for us including the oven fresh Kashmiri bread such as Tsot, Lavas and Baqerkhani procured from local bakeries especially for us. It had been a long morning so we decided to give Farukh a much-deserved break and hired a Tata Sumo instead for the rest of the day and visited the numerous Mughal gardens dotting Srinagar. But first we stopped to pay obeisance to the great saint, Pir Dastgir Saheb at his dargah at Khanyar and then proceeded to the royal spring and the garden of Chashmashahi whose waters are so famed for their medicinal qualities that even the Mughal Emperors would have them brought all the way down to Delhi to quench the royal thirst. And indeed they actually were rather invigorating and surpassed any bottled mineral water. Pari Mahal gardens ensconced above the hill overlooking Srinagar were our next stop followed by the twin Mughal gardens of Nishat and Shalimar built in the 17th century.

The last day at Srinagar was spent simply relaxing on the houseboat. We had done no shopping so far and this was the day to indulge oneself what with all the mobile shops on Shikara's coming to the houseboat steps. Beginning with the flower seller, one after the other they all began to arrive on their individual Shikara's with their assorted wares. Papier-mâché objects, Pashmina and Shahtoosh shawls, wood-carved curios, dry fruits, herbs and spices and so on for the entire day. In between we also managed time to sample some Wazwan delicacies that Rashid Bhai had prepared for us. Soon it was time for us to depart.



The day was as dull, grey and dreary as our souls and in no way did it console us. With a heavy heart we left the houseboat for the airport to catch the flight, clinging on to the intimacy of our Pashmina for moral support and onto the memories of this enchanting vale of paradise, which we were leaving behind Welcome Heritage Gurkha Houseboats, Srinagar.