

MY GREAT LAKES OF KASHMIR TREK

*Shachi Rao,
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Kashmir

Awe struck Jehangir exclaimed, 'Gar Firdaus baru e zamin asto, hamin ast hamin ast hamin ast'

Kashmir is an immense canvas painted by God using prismatic palette, and the Great Lakes region, its focal point. Dotted with mysterious lakes surrounded in mist and seeped in mythological stories, the canvas gets spectacular. A sublime creation of God.



Enchanting trek has numerous passes, lakes, streams, meadows, lush and stark mountains, unparalleled and unique surroundings hidden from the modern world, pure bliss. It's glittering Himalayan, Alpine oligotrophic lakes surrounded by mountains, unique trees, nectar flowing in streams, take you by surprise. Every day is 360° panoramic view around you, and grandeur of the trek has scale of its own. One of the most alluring treks, validates Kashmir's mythical status as 'Heaven on Earth'.

The Sun and lakes play hide and seek, sunrays turn the waters viridescent here and

sparkling emerald there. Reflections of clouds, sierra surroundings and play of light and shadows on the lakes create an optical illusion, you submerge your parched souls in mesmerizing splendour. Number of lakes named after gods, narrate mythological stories. Snow patches add to magnificence of these lakes, lucky ones can see snow sliding off serrated mountains into the lakes. Babbling and burbling streams sound like airy, velvety whirl of startling flocks. Flirting with pebbles and rocks they dance all the way, while disapproving mountains silently frown upon them. I feel, streams and lakes are liquid souls of the mountains.

Sprawling rolling valleys and the Alpine grasslands, painted deep verdant green with golden yellow daises strewn on them, stretch all around you. Clusters of crimson, violet, golden yellow flowers, challenging each other to outshine, are simply astounding. Multicolour rocks complete the adornment.



Mountains have larger than life presence. Lofty proud mountains are lush green as you begin the trek, in higher altitudes landscape changes surrounding mountains barren with jagged rock faces, snowclad glaciers, and peaks wearing bracelets of snow pierce the sky. You gaze at rugose & rough-hewn mountains with a sense of awe, they remain mysteriously tranquil. The serrated mountains loom around, sunrays make some of them shimmer golden and others flour white.

Cocoon quiet nights in halcyon paradise lull you into a meditative state, vast endless darkness, and unknown universe beyond human eyes, invites to ponder about mysteries of the universe that are waiting to be discovered. Welcoming stars, moon and constellations look close enough ready to canoodle you. The surroundings give an opportunity to reflect on very question of existence, and presence of The Creator. The Artist, The Originator, The God is felt in mind's eye and by heightened senses.

With alluring azure skies, intimidating mountains, the vertigo causing steep paths, valleys seem life threatening. Adrenaline rush is expected.

It is a moderate to difficult, very high altitude, cross-country trek, which challenges your will power, lungs capacity, endurance, and leg strength. A demanding but rewarding one, it is level 4 trek on the Bikat Rating Scale. Takes you above the Greater Himalayas. Snow Line.



Approximately 80 Km walk in six long trekking days, spanning over seven to eight hours daily, steep ascents and descents having no exit points, certainly not for beginners. You cross seven valleys, six lakes, connected through three high passes. The altitude gained daily is 1,500 to 2,000 ft. [A mountain pass is a route through a mountain range that crosses over to neighboring valley].

Enchanted trekkers step into a magical and mystical world.

The trek is located above Sonamarg 'Meadows of The Gods', which lies on Srinagar–Leh highway just before Zozila Pass,

located in Ganderbal district in the Western Himalayas.

If you want to see astounding beauty of Kashmir, then visit the hidden valleys which can only be reached by foot. Here nature enliven everything, suffused with vigour, life, energy, and spirit. The vista of valleys leaves you breathless both figurative and actual. But you will surely collect a lifetime of memories. GLK is an IMAX 3D screen, thereafter all other treks look like B/W movie on a small screen.

Far from the maddening crowd, GLK trek does not offer you modern amenities like mobile network, electricity, or comfortable bed, yet snuggled in cradle of nature, you forget them all.

The Journey



As a twist of fate, I embarked on this journey, but what made me take this expedition is a fascinating anecdote. Relatively a rookie, with only a few previous trekking experiences in the Aravali mountain range on Sundays. During pandemic we had shifted to Gurugram with Charu, our elder daughter. We adopted, handsome and adorable Tobi, a Shih-tzu pup, and he became my baby. Taking him out for walks was not only an outing possible, but also a pleasure. During these walks, having conversations with neighbors, keeping appropriate distance, was the only way. During

one such walks I came to know about the Aravali trekkers group and promptly joined them. Trekking on Sundays was an exhilarating experience. Prabhat our avid trek leader was planning a trek to GLT- 'Great Lakes of Kashmir' and asked me to join. I was in a quandary, as to go or not to go. Was I fit enough? My loving family - husband Arun, daughters Charu and Shweta even grandchildren Shriya and Arush

encouraged me. The die was cast, and I took the plunge. Hence Tobi was the catalyst, and my family the anchor.

Our group, 'The Dirty Dozen' had eight women and four men. A motley crowd, average age being fifty, Devshree being the youngest and I the oldest. I had asked my friends Renu and Shilpa to join, they agreed. Our group had no dropouts, although many of us were inexperienced. Proud to mention that about twelve trekkers from other groups went back within a day or two.

With song in our hearts, firm belief, and steely willpower these formidable mountains were scaled, passing through six peerless Alpine lakes deep in Himalayas.

The Trek

Day 1: *THE START*

DELHI→SRINAGAR

SRINAGAR→SONAMARG the *MEADOWS OF GODS*

~90 km / 2,337m.

We travelled from Delhi to Srinagar by air and further to Sonamarg by road. Majestic mountains surrounded us during the drive, soon we were chasing snow-capped summits, getting a flavour of more to come. It was intoxicating. We drove through the picturesque Sindh valley, where River Sindh hopped over pebbles merrily.



Enroute our vehicle got lost, a boon in disguise, because we passed some enchanting villages flanked by apple and walnut orchards, kaleidoscopic houses embellished them. The driver was in a foul mood, after blaming everyone and everything, he found the route to Sonamarg. We were reunited with others at Raja Dhaba, where we enjoyed a hearty meal of rajma- chaval, Kashmiri dumaloo and naan.

Sonamarg, is the last big town of Kashmir on the way to Ladakh. It is also known as the 'Meadow Of Gold', where mesmerizing aquamarine valleys roll, snow covered mountains spear spectacular cerulean sky, clumps of Maple, Pine, white Birch, Sycamore trees and Alpine flowers ramble on the grasslands.

We finally reached our campsite, after brief refreshments

took-off towards River Sindh, walking barefoot in the river was therapeutic. We gathered driftwood for a bonfire. It was now time for merrymaking.

Day 2: THE TABLETOP

SONAMARG → SHEKDUR TABLE-TOP → NICHNAI VALLEY 13 Km / 3620 M

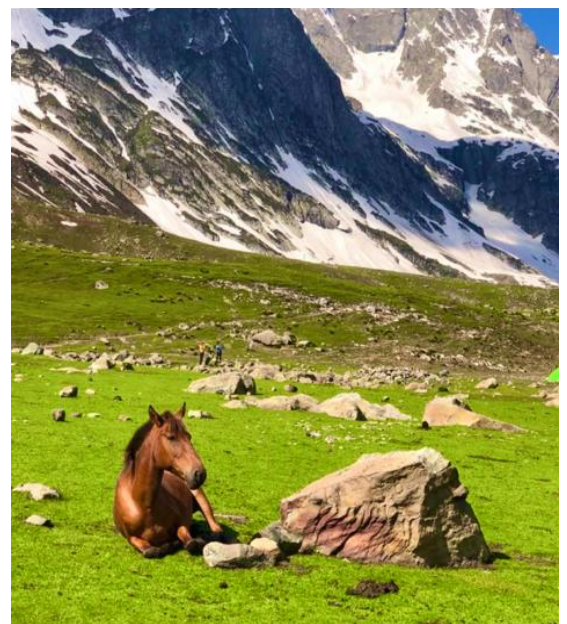
We began our hike on a flat terrain, a steep ascent took us to Shutkdai Tabletop, a great vantage point for a picturesque view of Sindh Valley and Sonamarg / Thajwas glacier. We met Indian army jawans and thanked them for guarding the nation. Took pictures of sheep grazing, bearing most exquisite wool, and an ancient shepherd, with twinkling eyes and deep wrinkles running deep on his face. We continued the steep hike to Shekdour Tabletop, the trail took us through meadows, dense forests with Maple, Pine and Himalayan Birch trees. The view was phenomenal, on one side was stunning Sonamarg valley and on the right hanging glaciers lazing on top of the mountains.



We reached Shekdour Tabletop, with our hearts pounding and jagged breathing. The first day is the hardest, one is not prepared for such a vertical climb. The tabletop was dotted with many splendid trees, most prominent being the Himalayan Birch / Betula tree, its barks provided Bhoj Patra to write in ancient times. These trees are also known as, 'Grassy-Wood Ghosts', because their silvery white barks shimmer in night and dark leaves produce ghost like appearances. A shepherd hut served us, steaming masala Maggi, sizzling omelet but insipid kahawa. After the Tabletop it was a gradual climb through the Silver Birch trees, at end of Birch Forest the river valley of Nichanai was visible. Soon, the trail flattened, the path became a gentle descent, where meadows rolled off to the valley. The undulating path, with moderate ascents and descents took us toward a wide valley,

where horses run and sheep graze. I averted a mishap, while hiking on a very narrow path I heard someone shouting 'ponies', looking back I saw a caravan of ponies behind me, no place to go, I flattened against the mountains and hugged the rocks, the ponies crossed me jumping over my legs, later our tour leader appreciated my presence of mind, if I had remained standing on the path these ponies would have hurled me down into the valley.

We followed Nichnai stream and moved towards Nichnai valley where we had our packed lunch. Some more hiking took us to Nichnai Camp, which was surrounded by rocky trails and icy water rivulets flowing around. We enjoyed hot snacks and tea. Dinner was served in the dining tent, time



to sleep. We snuggled in our sleeping bags inside our tiny tents. Weary body was soon in slumberland, telling me after all tomorrow is another day.

DAY 3: THE FIRST PASS

NICHNAI VALLEY→NICHNAI PASS, VISHNASAR AND KRISHNASAR LAKES 15 Km / 4,100m

The first pass on the trek surely feels the toughest, also the height gained in last two days was nearly 2,500m. We had to tackle the formidable Nichnai pass today. We began our trek with a walk on flat terrain, hopping on rocks, crossed an icy cold glacial stream towards right side of the mountain, luckily the flow and level were low, we were saved from walking in freezing water. On the way, I spied shrubs of wild



strawberries, which bear luscious fruits in season, a dose of Vitamin C for weary travellers. Walking along the stream, with serrated mountains looming around us, we tried to capture the incredible beauty of the terrain in our cameras and hearts.

Soon the laborious steep uphill ascent began. Climb to Nichnai pass was 40° climb, panting we didn't forget to admire the snow-clad peaks, gigantic mountain slopes, and awesome landscape. We reached the top of the mountain, a level rocky ground, marked by streams. It took us some time to cross the terrain, a gradual climb and we found ourselves on top of Nichnai Pass.

We were awestruck by the glacier on our left, it was not one but three of them, one after another and in between we could see sharp edged isosceles triangle shaped mountain peaks.



We descended to a level ground, reached a unique place with grassy open meadows, the valley an extravaganza of colours with sparkling streams seeping and snaking past all hurdles. There wildflowers grew in wild abandon, scarlet, fuchsia, amber, golden flowers vied for attention, and complimented the striking green foliage. In this paradise, the rocks were multihued, some cyan others mint green, most striking ones were sprinkled with iridescent mauve and fluorescent green speckles. A fairy land or God's own nursery! I was captivated by the irresistible pulchritude of the place. Rooted to the ground, acutely aware of surroundings, I extolled the splendour of nature.

As we left this paradise, we saw a huge waterfall, a distant thrumming sound emanated from it, like steady rumble of drum roll, glittering brightly, it fed the streams.

After the hard climb, famished, we came upon a wide welcoming stream, our lunch venue. The stream invited us, and we walked into it, jumping on boulders we reached mid-stream, dipped our aching legs in

chilled waters, the instant relief was gratifying. An interesting intervention had us in splits, Ajay tossed his tiffin towards Renu for a wash, but it fell into the stream, kicking-off a crazy chase to retrieve it, but the tiffin like a proud majestic ship sailed on. After the failed venture, walk to our camp commenced, along the stream, Ajay and Prabhat peering down for adrift tiffin. We crossed over, few more streams to finally reach our camp.



Tired as we were but we couldn't resist the temptation to climb ahead and visit Vishnasar or Vishnusar lake. The lake was glimmering gold in the callow light of dusk, hemmed in by precipitous mountains. I could imagine, great heaps of argent silver pouring in from snowfields. We were spellbound by its surreal allurements, blessed to see the magnificent elegance and pristine surroundings. The lake was surrounded by jagged mountain peaks, glowing gold, on three sides, their ridges dramatically came all the way down to embrace the shore.

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We saw mountain gorges filled with small glaciers, and lush meadows dotted with flowers. Evening sunrays were caressing the turquoise blue waters, and the lake happily embraced the mountains, the sky, clouds, and surroundings. The sky peered down into the lake as if arranging its vestments of feathery, chromatic clouds.

Vishnasar is a large, high altitude, Alpine-lake, named after ' Lord Vishnu', is about 1 km. across. The lake gets water from snowfields on these mountains and Krishnasr Lake above.



The crystal clear, shimmering water does not support any life form like algae, only lifeform they support are brown trout.

This region has twin lakes, Vishnasar and Krishanasar, interconnected, each rivalling other for sheer beauty. Krishnasar is at higher ground than Vishnasar, that is a distinctive feature, because one usually does not get to see one huge lake above another huge lake. Krishnasar gets water from snowfields on surrounding mountains, which goes to Vishnasar below, then further down, forming River Neelum, to Pakistan and eventually joins river Sutlej.

DAY 4: TALLEST AND TOUGHEST PASS

VISHNASAR – GADSAR PASS – GADSAR LAKE - GADSAR MEADOWS

16 Km / 4,200m

We wished Devshree on her birthday, the camp wore a festive air.

Today was the most challenging day, we experienced the might of Himalayas, surely not for the faint hearted, extremely strenuous, and steep ascents and descents. Then you are rewarded by the 'Valley of Flowers' and thereafter a gentle walk-through enchanting meadow. This pass stands tall and erect above Krishnasar Lake.



We began our trek with a gentle climb to Vishnasar, morning light had magical effect on the lake. We embarked on a grueling trek from here, and soon reached Krishnasar lake, having an adjoining small island. We had to walk on a narrow trail hugging the mountains, all the way to the pass. We saw unique and stately 'Krishnasar Summit' the only dome shaped peak in the whole trek, it looked like a monolithic rock.

Undoubtedly, day four was most dangerous, longest zigzag, sheer almost vertical climbs. We were climbing over this monster, with average gradient of 30° to 70°, having a narrow rocky trail, one misstep, and one could go all the way down. As we climbed, we looked back to admire both the lakes, capering sunlight created magical and mesmerizing effect. Interplay of rays played tricks of tints on the lakes, changing their tone from

aquamarine to azure with deep dark shadows lurking in the corners.

While we were climbing, I took a wrong trail, which became very narrow, slippery, and almost vertical, while trying to negotiate one corner I almost slipped down towards the valley, I took hold of an adjacent rocks to save my dear life and crawled on all fours to reach the correct trail, while this drama was unfolding our guide just sat on a rock watching me placidly.

Climbing further, we saw a stream which forms Krishnasar lake. When we reached close to Gadsar Pass we turned around to enjoy a panoramic view, both the lakes looked as if they were side by side.



After scaling the hardest ascent of the entire trek, we reached Gadsar Pass. The view on the other side of Gadsar Pass was electrifying, to the left we could see rocky mountains covered with snow patches and to the right dry brown craggy mountains, studded in between were meadows, rivulets, and valleys. As we descended towards the meadows, we detected number of streams formed by the melting snow. We sauntered on the meadow for a while, after which climb down was almost vertical. We sipped water and filled our bottles, from a babbling brook. The water tasted like sweet nectar of gods, a potion for the spirit.

Soon an astonishing vista of 'Valley Of Flowers' opened, with profusion of wild violet flowers standing erect, sometimes swaying in gentle breeze. The panorama of Gadsar Lake, flanked by flowers and glaciers, surrounded by waterfalls flowing down angular mountains was stunning. A span of Tuscany blue sky was slashed above, while dancing puffy white clouds, checked their image in the lake. It certainly was a Celestial Amphitheatre.

Gadsar Lake, shaped like a fish, is also known as, 'Lake Of Fishes' has plenty of trout and other fish. This is only lake having icebergs floating, known as 'ice-foes'. We had lunch in this heavenly abode. After lunch I sat with eyes closed enjoying the solitude, and tranquillity in desolate place.

Another name of Gadsar Lake is 'Yamsar Lake', the lake of God of Death – Yama. Gadsar Lake is surrounded by myths. Gujjars believe demons, and monsters live in the lake, who drag animals and humans into deep waters. Local people shun its water for bathing, drinking, and fishing, although it holds plenty of fish. The shepherds, never allow their flocks to graze near the lake, and circumvent past it.

The trek a was gradual descent along the contour, parallel to a stream, few miles later, after crossing a stream, we reached our camp. Our camp was next to an army camp, and close to the 'Line Of Control' these are known infiltration routes, especially towards Satsar. Army personals took a roll call and checked

our Aadhaar Cards. These Jawans guarding our borders live in some stunningly beautiful but utterly stark places, with no connection to outside world.

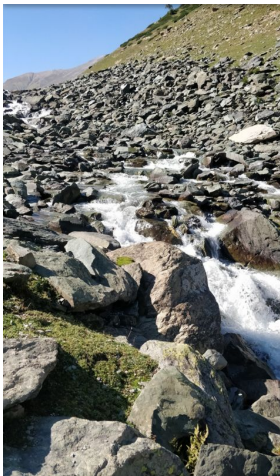
Back in the camp, Devshree's birthday was celebrated with great panache.

Day 5: *NANGA PARBAT*

GADSAR – SATSAR 12KM / 3,578M

The trek began with crossing a slippery ice bridge, negotiating which needed extreme caution. To reach Satsar Valley we had to walk besides the hems of a chains of mountains in a roundabout way and traverse all day. The lush green meadows had both ascents and descents. We crossed number of streams on the way.

It was a clear and crisp day, after a long climb, we saw the sprawling range of 'Nanga Parbat', the heaven touching apex of the mountain was drenched in brilliant light, normally shrouded in clouds, it obliged us with a clear view. The range stands erect towards western end of Karakoram mountains. One of the world's tallest mountains, 8,126 m, having highest mountain face, is in POK now. It is called, 'Diamer', 'the king of the mountains', by the locals. This is a stark terrain, not much grows, but a lone tree with golden canopy stood in front of the range like a sentinel guarding our boundaries.



We moved on, crossed a stream, and ascended towards an army post, close to the 'Line of Control' army men welcomed us and served salted almonds, delicious. They won our hearts by their hospitality and conversation. I offered them nuts and dry-fruits trail, which they accepted after initial hesitation. I am gleefully reporting that the three of us – Shikha, Devshree and I were only trekkers to be served with such a fare. We thanked and saluted them for their hospitality and keeping the nation safe.

Ahead the grassy plains of Satsar looked almost manicured, with twinkling streams gliding through them, seven lakes region, beckoned and enticed us. Enchanted we descended, crossed streams to meet them. Lake waters had

slightly peaty texture, not usual blue, but the pools of molten gold were shimmering in the light, at the bottom smooth-edged stones glowed amber.

Satsar is a collection of seven interconnected lakes scattered around this isolated valley, most appealing and mysterious lakes, with mist floating above, having a theatrical air. We saw the first lake, like a seductress opening her arms calling me, captivated, I negotiate boulders to reach her, then settled on a rock in the lake, to soak in her charms.

To continue we had to hop over boulders, cross streams and walk along five more interconnected lakes. We were close to our campsite, to reach it we had to cross a glacial stream.



Satsar campsite was surrounded by mountains with waterfalls flowing down. The seventh lake was located above our camp, to reach it, one has to climb a steep path. The lake is nestled in a mountain bowl. It is known as 'Doobta Pani', or 'Satsar Sarovar', it is said that its crystal-clear blue waters disappear here and emerge in Neelum lake [P.O.K], most likely the waters go underground to feed other Satsar lakes. It was a sunny day which turned cloudy, our guide fervently hoped for clouds to disperse as rain could meant snow fall.

There is a mythological story of a demon who lived in these waters, and terrorised people, Parvati on request of God Shiva killed dreadful demon and rescued this area, since then Parvati lives here in the form of water.

DAY 6: BIRTHDAY

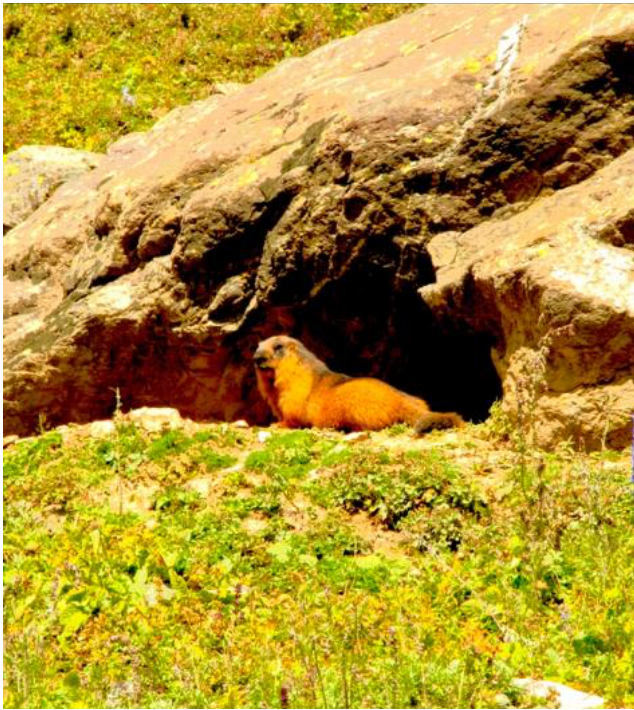
SATSAR→ZAJ PASS→GANGABAL and NANDKOL

9km / 3,587m

Today was an arduous trek, [someone, please, tell me which day wasn't], throwing brand new challenges. 3 km. trek to Zaj pass began with leaping and bouncing on boulders, placed by glaciers innumerable years ago, then a steep rocky climb, followed by strenuous, very steep almost vertical, tedious, and prolonged descent, looking down towards the valley was spine-chilling.

[Today's chronicle is tard longwinded and self-centred, please endure the narrative with me. I am too excited to omit anything.]

As I awoke in the tent listening to utter silence, I wondered why no one was up and about. I crawled out of the tent and was greeted by friends with hugs, kisses and birthday wishes, Rama gifted me a beautiful copper tumbler.



It was my 67th birthday!!!

Later, after having special birthday breakfast prepared by the chef, we took off. After a short hike, we reached the dreaded boulders site. We began this arduous journey by hopping from one boulder to another, at times getting on all fours to maintain balance, very tricky. Although after getting a hang of navigating boulders, it was kind of fun. As we looked up, we saw a top which sadly turned out to be a false summit.

Somehow story of my birthday had spread, and I was greeted by trekkers from other camps, which made me feel very special. A steep hike took us to a level ground, surrounded by pyramid like spiked

rocks, offering panoramic view of valley below. We climbed on these rocks, feeling like Superman to get photographed.

Trekkers from other camps arrived, everyone sang the birthday song while I was balancing on one of pyramid like rocks. More climb and we reached a meadow, where all my friends danced around me singing and enjoying. The pass was visible from here.



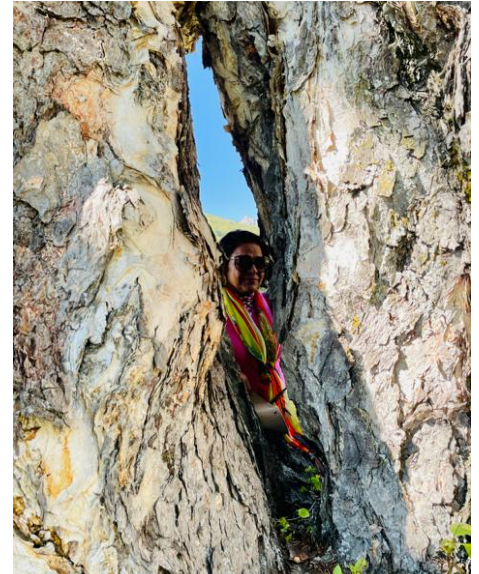
We continued our climb towards Zaj Pass, we traversed the rocky patches, placed by glaciers. On reaching Zaj Pass, we saw Hamruk summit playing peekaboo with clouds on one side, and twin lakes hugging each under the mountain ranges. Magnificent view nourished our souls, rejuvenated our bodies. All of a sudden Harmukh obliged us with its magnificent view, we bowed all heads in reverence Who has created, such

wonders was it the God, the Nature, or the Ultimate Energy. Himalayas make you spiritual, no wonder sages for centuries climbed them to find the answers about our existence and the God.

Then reality hit us, and we started the descent, on a long, very steep, and treacherous path, stones and pebbles making it slippery. Any misstep would have plunged us in the valley below, the descent was an ultimate test of courage, our legs and hard on knees.

Every dark cloud has a silver lining, towards the end were verdant meadows, sprinkled with yellow daises, springs slithering, a sight for sore eyes and respite for aching legs, after crossing many steams, we flopped on the carpet of meadows and grabbed our lunch.

A gentle climb, Gangabal Lake, surrounded by mountains on two sides, appeared as if by magic, as we crested the ridge. It was silvery with a hint of blue, the visage of the lake was veneer – clear and tranquil, yogi still. No sound rang from shimmering emptiness of space around it, as if unruffled by winds or rains, the lake always remained vault still and restful.



Piercing sunlight added to enchantment. Standing up, we could see water change colours, which left me wondering, how much more spectacular can anything be? Was this the Elysian Field?

We moved towards its twin lake Nandkol, On reaching my eyes refused to believe what they saw, chords of soft light spread down from above, bathing its Cerulean surface in gold and silver, it was glittering like thousand diamonds blessed by inner fire, trout leaping and thumping on the surface, stones glowing, and damp grass smelled utopian, certainly Shangri-la.

Look who is there, saw an elusive Himalayan marmot perched on a boulder like a haughty king on his throne, bathing in heaven leaking light, which added a golden tint on him and his throne. Ferns growing around the boulders stood erect like his sentinels guarding him.

Alas camera cannot capture what eyes see and senses feel.



On the way to the camp, I met Nirakh it was his 18th birthday, fate can be quirky, youngest, and oldest of all trekkers celebrated birthday on 30th September. Our group celebrated two birthdays – while Devshree was the youngest and I the oldest.

We crossed a rickety log-bridge over a broad stream, which trembled violently under our feet.



Festive air hung over the camp, we gathered in the dining tent where friends sang songs, recited poems, shared jokes, and Ajay delivered a rap, composed by him based on me. Shilpa had even managed to sneak in a forbidden drink for the toast.

While birthday revelries were in progress, our guide removed the lantern plunging us in pitch dark, leaving us clueless. Soon a ray of light sneaked its way into the tent, hold your breath, the flap opened and there were all our Kashmiri boys standing with a cake lit by candles singing happy birthday. Dumbstruck into hushed silence we sat still, then a loud cheer and sounds of clapping shattered the silence, I was overwhelmed. I cut the cake [chef must have been a magician to bake the cake and ice it with my name correctly spelt, in this wilderness], my eyes moist, so much love from strangers. Kashmiri boys entertained us, singing songs in Koshur, the local language, on the beats of metal plates and spoons.

Words fail me, suffice to say, it was a birthday par excellence, incomparable, enduring, and unforgettable.

I stepped outside, looked heavenward, billions of twinkling stars reached out to me as if whispering their blessings.

HARMUKH SUMMIT 5,225m

Harmukh peak is believed to be Lord Shiva's abode, according to locals no human feet can ever touch it, has calming effect and renders poisonous snakes ineffective in the places from which Mount Harmukh is visible. Locals believe that Mount Harmukh holds treasures, jewels, and rubies. The mount is named Harmukh because from all- sides, it looks the same. The peak holds religious importance to Kashmiri Hindus. You can hear lots of stories told by locals of sages and hermit, also of unfortunate travellers who dared to climb it.

Myths apart, technically it is the most challenging mountains to climb in Kashmir.

Harmukh the 5th largest peak in the valley, it is set with a picturesque foreground of magnificent Gangabal Peak, known as 'Eiger of Kashmir'. Karakoram Ranges border it on the North and Kashmir Valley on the South

GANGABAL LAKE AND NANDKOL LAKE.



Gangabal, is the largest Alpine Lake in Kashmir, 2 km. across, fed by glaciers has lightest blue colour. Named after the Ganges, this lake is the most sacred to Kashmiri Pandits. A site of Harmukh-Ganga pilgrimage, it is considered 'Haridwar of Kashmir', 'The Ganges of Shaivism'. In past Kashmiri Pandits immersed the ashes of their ancestors in it. It feeds Nandkol lake, smaller of two. Nandkol lake feeds Wangath Nallah, which joins river Sindh. Nandkol is nestled against intimidating



DAY 7: HOME

GANGABAL → NARANG VILLEGE → SRINAGAR 13km / 2,271m

The last day dawned upon me with a sense of loss, it was the day to return to our world, leaving behind transcendental creation of God. I yearned to stay longer, not to see but to understand.

The trail to Narang started with a gradual ascent and a hike through luxuriant meadows. We reached final Army Post of the trek, inviting aroma of brewing tea drew us, but tea was not served. We chatted with army personnel, who took our roll call and copies of Aadhaar card, clicked our photographs for official purpose, a precaution against infiltration by enemies.

The final leg of our journey began with crossing of streams, soon we were almost skidding on a sheer, rocks-strewn unsteady path, which resembled a vertical dried up stream bed. I didn't carry a hiking pole, somehow managed to dawdle along. It was 6th day of non-stop, heavy-duty hiking, also a perilous one the day before. Sunil found a fallen stick for me, which proved to be mighty useful, it helped me negotiate the relentless descent. All of sudden Sunil's mobile beeped, we were connected to the world, I spoke to my husband [my mobile was silent as 'VI' doesn't work here]. On the way we encountered mild showers and hail stones, wore raincoats, and trudged along, fervently wishing the descent to end.

View of quaint Narang village, opened before us, we could hear murmurs of gurgling steams, and spied charming houses with multicolour rooftops. Alas, the places on hills seem much nearer than they actually are, we ambled along.

We had left Gangabal at 7:30 am. and managed to roll down to Narang after 4 pm., without a lunch break. exhausted, parched and famished we entered a dhaba, and flopped on the chairs, ordered everything on the menu, enjoyed delicious lassi and flavour some Kashmiri fare.



Trekkers from other camps started pouring in and soon the dhaba ran out of many food items. One final picture of whole group with Muzaffar our Trek Leader and his boys, we offered them our genuine thanks, they had looked after all our needs during the past seven days.

Narang is an ancient Hindu pilgrimage site, well-known for its ancient but pillaged Shiva temple ruins.

Our journey back to Srinagar began, we reached Hotel Nadis, an endearing boutique hotel on outskirts of Srinagar, flanked by gorgeous flowers. It had spacious and appealing rooms, personalized service, and sumptuous food. Upon reaching the room, I jumped into the welcoming hot shower, had long luxurious bath, and was rejuvenated. All of us dressed in our Sunday best, enjoyed splendid Wazwan cuisine, some

gup-shup time in the lawns and retired for the night. Next day I got up to a lazy morning, [we were to leave for the airport at 12 pm] chatted with Aditya, the hotel manager. He was kind enough to arrange walnuts, rajma, and dried berries for me and Shilpa. Some of us squeezed in Pashmina shopping from a shop suggested by Aditya.

Bidding Au Revoir to Kashmir, taking back armloads of memories for a lifetime, we flew back home.

The GLK region is the Nature's tapestry where everything comes alive, colours glow,



fragrances spread, rivers and streams dance, giggle and sing, mysterious mountains peer down quietly, days spread golden glow and nights enfold them all in starry splendour.

Back home I wondered, was it an illusion, a dream or reality.

The Great Lakes of Kashmir–GLT, surpasses in beauty all your warmest imagination can anticipate.

PS: I was saddened by observing, litter left by successive camps. Are we humans not going to leave any corner of the earth unsullied? Ponder over!

This trek was organized by Gurgaon based OFFBEAT.TRAVEL and the arrangements exceeded our expectations.

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