

A view of the valley
from the hotel



[CHECK OUT]

VALE WATCHING

Looking for a cosy winter getaway? Head north to Kashmir's Rah Villas, says **Charty Dugdale**

It's all true. Everything anyone has ever told me about the beauty of Kashmir is true. And there can be few more comfortable places to enjoy that beauty than at Rah Villas in Kullam village, built recently on the banks of the aquamarine Sindh river, just a dozen or so kilometres below Sonamarg.

Dramatic floor-to-ceiling windows throughout give out on to lovely views of the willows and river, maize fields, walnut trees and pine-clad mountains. The entrance hall or lobby and restaurant on the ground floor are double height and so are their windows, doubling the impact. Interiors are a pleasing minimal-chic with sophisticated Kashmiri accents—an exquisite shawl framed above a neat arrangement of sofas and chairs in the lobby, an intricately engraved samovar as grand centrepiece in the coffee shop.

Luxuriating on the soft linen and pillows of my king-size bed, I gaze at the pines stretching up the mountain behind the hotel. The only blot on the landscape is a mobile phone mast, rather irritatingly situated; otherwise the picture-window view of fields with scattered livestock, trees and mountains hasn't changed for a hundred years. Here I can breathe. And bathe. In my jacuzzi bath or under a hot rain shower.

I hear the roar of the river and the outside beckons. To the west, dark mountains fold in on each other as the sun lowers behind them. Clouds and rain weave a silvery light. I turn right out of the hotel gate towards the eastern end of the village. A young boy, Tahir, is standing by the roadside bashing a small rock on what I take to be another small rock. It's actually a walnut, from one of the many trees in the village and he hands me the broken

pieces from inside, promising with a smile to bring me more tomorrow. The colours of the landscape are tonal like the pherans that envelop all the men I see. I walk through the village to the bridge over the Sindh, adults nod and smile in friendly greeting as I pass, children play their games and crows caw overhead. The force of the water has smoothed and shaped giant rocks in unusual and beautiful ways.

Dinner by the roaring fire in the Jamawar restaurant is a feast of classic Kashmiri cuisine—rogan josh, dum aloo, gobhi yakhni, haak, all served with pulao. The Nepali chef can produce other Indian dishes as well as Chinese standards (chilli chicken, chow mein) and Continental (tasty French fries and pasta and trout from the river). Dessert is a hearty halwa. There's nothing particularly innovative about the menu but the food



Clockwise from this image: the restaurant; a deluxe room; lounge seating



is good. And all the fresh air and outdoor activity made us hungry for it.

Nursing a cup of kehwa, I am sitting beneath a cerulean sky dotted with cumulus clouds, in amongst the colourful flowers and butterflies of the hotel's garden, when my husband and children drive up, just off the flight from Delhi. We fortify ourselves with a delicious river trout lunch and then wander out of the gate, left this time, to find a game of cricket underway by the river. The young batsman scores an impressive series of fours off his homemade bat and my son leaps up and down with delight.

We pass the tiny school (which the hotel plans to support next year) and find ourselves chasing chicks around the Nature Resort Campsite. My daughter wants to hold each one and the friendly campsite warden is happy to oblige. The following day we throw the kids onto

ponies and hike up behind the hotel to an alpine meadow and startlingly beautiful views of snow and rock mountain peaks rising from dark conifer forests.

This is definitely a place to be outdoors. Whether it's climbing to the Thajiwas glacier in breathtaking Sonamarg, enjoying a guided 'village walk' or hiking up from the hotel. The river offers trout and mahseer fishing and (unchallenging) rafting, though these must be organised in advance. And in the colder months—yes, the hotel has central heating and the road is cleared to a little way beyond Kullan so you can visit in winter—sledding and cross-country skiing. Rah Villas is owned and run by a Kashmiri family who have been organising treks and expeditions and holidays across the Himalayas for two decades—almost anything can be arranged.

The hotel only opened in June and it

still feels new. Some things (such as a telephone line and good filter coffee in the coffee shop) are yet to come. But they will. The rooms are seriously comfortable and the staff smiling and helpful and eager to get things right. Kullan village feels far from other tourists and the Indian security forces, both conspicuous in the more resort-like Sonamarg. Here you are far more likely to encounter a wandering chicken than a gun-toting soldier or tourist horde.

THE INFORMATION

LOCATION Rezan Kullan, Dist Kangan, Sonamarg; 66km/2hrs from Srinagar

ACCOMMODATION 22 deluxe rooms and 2 suites with separate living and dining area

TARIFF ₹6,500 (deluxe room); ₹11,500 (suite). Includes breakfast and taxes

CONTACT 0129-4117492, rah-villas-kashmir.com