

Kashmir as a Tourist Destination: A Critical Appraisal

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Abstract

Nestled in the northernmost region of the Indian subcontinent, Kashmir has long been revered for its breathtaking landscapes, rich cultural heritage, and historical significance. The region, often referred to as "Paradise on Earth," has been a subject of fascination for travellers, writers, and poets for centuries. However, the question that beckons in the present-day context is whether Kashmir remains a preferred tourist destination, given the complex tapestry of historical, political, and security factors that have shaped its image. Political disputes and security concerns have cast shadows over the valley, impacting its tourism industry. The journey of a potential tourist is marked not only by anticipation but also by uncertainty. This article ventures on a critical examination of the status of Kashmir as a tourist destination. It scrutinises the factors that contribute to its allure and the challenges that affect its reputation. Through a nuanced exploration of visitor experiences and a comparative analysis with other destinations, this article comprehensively responds to the question: Is Kashmir a preferred tourist destination today?

Keywords

Tourism, destination reputation, visitor perceptions, hospitality, Kashmir, socio-economic impact

Introduction

As often described in the words of the Indo-Persian Sufi poet Amīr Khusrau, Kashmir as "Jannat-e-Kashmir" or the "Paradise on Earth," has historically been a jewel in India's tourism crown (Kumar, 2016). Its breathtaking landscapes, diverse culture, and rich heritage have drawn tourists from across the globe. The region's significance within the Indian

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tourism industry is undeniable. Kashmir's association with tourism dates back to the late 19th century when British colonial officers and travellers began to explore its pristine beauty (Chari et al., 2011). The British established houseboats on Dal Lake, an enduring symbol of the region, and their accounts of its charisma further piqued interest in the area. Kashmir has unmatched natural beauty. The Himalayan landscape of Kashmir is nothing short of a masterpiece. Srinagar, the capital city of Kashmir, is epitomised by the renowned Dal Lake, which is always adorned with shikaras (traditional boats). The lake is set against a backdrop of snow-capped peaks in winter, while in summer, it is embraced by verdant mountains. Across different seasons, particularly in autumn, the landscape exhibits a diverse array of natural hues. These captivating scenes have consistently served as contemplative and emotive stimuli for numerous artists, inspiring expressions on canvas, in writing, and through various visual and auditory mediums.

Kashmir's cultural wealth is equally captivating. The region is known for its magnificent handicrafts, including Pashmina shawls, baroque carpets, and fragrant saffron (Manhas et al., 2022). Its cuisine, influenced by Persian, Central Asian, and North Indian flavours, tantalises the taste buds. Festivals like the Tulip Festival and the Amarnath Yatra pilgrimage are cultural events that attract visitors. As an essential part of the tourism sector, all these have played a vital role in the region's economy. It provides livelihoods to a significant portion of the local population. The revenue generated from tourism contributes to infrastructure development, education, and healthcare services. Despite its immense potential, Kashmir's tourism industry has faced challenges. Political conflicts and security concerns have led to fluctuations in tourist arrivals. Periods of unrest have deterred visitors, impacting the livelihoods of those dependent on tourism (Gulzar et al., 2019).

In this multifaceted narrative, the importance of the tourism industry in Kashmir cannot be overstated. It offers economic opportunities and a window into the region's culture, history, and natural beauty. However, it is in understanding the multifaceted nature of this industry and the challenges it faces that we can provide a more nuanced answer to the question of whether Kashmir remains a preferred tourist destination.

Natural Beauty of Kashmir

Kashmir is celebrated for its enchanting natural landscapes that have captivated wanderers throughout the ages. Its breathtaking beauty is attributed to the unparalleled charm of iconic destinations such as Dal Lake, Gulmarg, Sonamarg, and Pahalgam. Each of these places, snuggled

in the heart of the Himalayas, contributes to the divine allure that defines Kashmir's enchanting appeal.

Dal Lake: The Dynamic Heart of Srinagar's Scenic Beauty

Situated in Srinagar, Dal Lake holds a central position in the scenic Kashmir region. Revered as the "Lake of Flowers," the "Jewel in the crown of Kashmir," and "Srinagar's Jewel," Dal Lake is not merely a picturesque attraction; it is a dynamic hub integral to the livelihoods and leisure of those who call it home. Beyond its aesthetic significance, Dal Lake plays a vital role in the local economy and tourism industry, supporting a range of commercial activities. From fishing and water plant harvesting to providing the backdrop for iconic Shikara rides and houseboat stays, Dal Lake encapsulates the natural beauty and cultural vibrancy of the region (Beautiful World, 2017).

Gulmarg: Where Nature's Poetic Masterpiece Unfolds

Gulmarg, known as the "Meadow of Flowers," is a poetic masterpiece of nature within the Pir Panjal range. Its rolling green meadows adorned with wildflowers seamlessly merge with snow-clad peaks that touch the clouds, creating an idyllic landscape. Transforming into a pristine white wonderland in winter, Gulmarg becomes a hub for winter adventure sports like snowboarding, heli-skiing, and off-piste skiing. The majestic Apharwat peak cradles Gulmarg, accessible via the world's second-highest cable car ride, the Gulmarg Gondola. With a rich history dating back to Sultan Yousuf Shah in 1579-1586 AD and favoured by Mughal emperor Jehangir, Gulmarg's cultural significance adds to its allure as a captivating destination (Incredible India, n.d.1).

Pahalgam and Lidder Valley: A Symphony of Natural Splendor

Situated within the jurisdiction of Pahalgam tehsil in the Anantnag district, the Lidder Valley stands as a picturesque expanse bordered by the Kashmir Valley to the west and the Sind Valley to the north. This enchanting valley, carved by the meandering Lidder River, is surrounded by the Pir Panjal Range to the south and southeast, the Sind Valley to the north, and the Zaskar Range to the northeast. It serves a vital role by providing freshwater to neighbouring districts and supporting agricultural irrigation. The Lidder River gracefully winds its way through the valley, gracing it with natural landmarks and tourist hotspots, including the charming towns of Aru, Pahalgam, Betab Valley, and Akad. Pahalgam, also known as the Valley of Shepherds, offers a blend of natural beauty and cultural richness, making it a must-visit destination

for those seeking an immersive experience in the enchanting landscapes of Jammu and Kashmir (Incredible India, n.d.2; n.d.3).

Sonmarg: Gateway to Ladakh's Serene Beauty

Perched at an impressive altitude of 2,740 meters, Sonmarg beckons nature enthusiasts seeking a serene escape amidst the hills. Aptly named the "Meadow of Gold," Sonmarg is a gateway to Ladakh, offering visitors a canvas of verdant valleys and snow-draped peaks. From the frozen spectacle of Vishansar Lake to the adventurous trails at Thajiwas Glacier, Sonmarg unfolds nature's beauty. As the starting point for the famed Amarnath Yatra, Sonmarg's accessibility is limited to the summer months, revealing a rich historical and geographical narrative. The Zoji La Pass, positioned about 15 km east, is one of the highest road transport passes, enriching the region's significance (Incredible India, n.d.4).

Cultural Heritage and Historical Significance

Kashmir's cultural richness and historical heritage add depth to its appeal as a tourist destination. The introduction of Mughal influence in Kashmir during the 16th century brought about significant changes, particularly in gardens (Bamzai, 1994). Before the Mughals arrived, Kashmir had seen various ruling dynasties. However, the Mughal emperors found themselves captivated by the region's sheer beauty and recognised its potential for their favourite pastime – the creation of pleasure gardens (UNESCO, n.d.).

Even during Babur's time, there were attempts to annex Kashmir, and later, under Akbar's reign, a war with the Chak ruler led to the region becoming a Mughal province. Emperor Akbar's three visits to Kashmir solidified the Mughal connection with the valley. Subsequent emperors, including Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb, made Kashmir their summer retreat (Ibid.).

Jahangir, in particular, considered Kashmir a paradise, fulfilling the prophecies of priests and the verses of poets. Over a century and a half, these emperors brought the splendour of the Indian court to the tranquillity of Kashmir's summers. The Mughal imprint on Kashmir goes beyond mere political influence. Their legacy endures in the form of gardens, arts, and crafts. The Mughal gardens in Kashmir, shaped significantly by Emperor Jahangir and his son Shah Jahan, are a testament to their profound love for the region (Ibid.).

Mughal Gardens of Kashmir

Amidst the beautiful landscapes of Kashmir, the Mughal gardens stand as timeless examples of artistic and engineering brilliance. Each garden,

including Nishat Bagh, Shalimar Bagh, Achabal Bagh, Chashma Shahi, Pari Mahal, and Verinag, tells a unique story of Mughal ingenuity. Built during the height of the Mughal dynasty, these gardens connect nature and architecture, offering a sensory journey through terraced designs, cascading waters, and lush greenery. Their historical significance and ecological richness make them not just horticultural masterpieces but also valuable glimpses into the cultural fabric of the Mughal era.

Nishat Bagh

Constructed in 1634 by Mirza Abul Hasan, Nishat Bagh is one of the most remarkable Mughal gardens. Located along the Dal Lake, it spans approximately 116.70 acres. The garden boasts twelve terraces, symbolising the zodiac signs, and its trapezoidal layout aligns with the char bagh (four gardens) concept. Nishat Bagh's key feature lies in its compound terraced design, offering breathtaking views of Dal Lake and the Zabarwan mountain range (Ibid.).

The Mughals introduced the char bagh style to India. The char bagh design draws inspiration from the four paradisiacal gardens mentioned in the Quran, symbolising the progression of the soul within Islamic mysticism (Cornell, 2007):

1. Garden of the Soul
2. Garden of the Heart
3. Garden of the Spirit
4. Garden of the Essence

Shalimar Bagh

With origins dating back to the 6th century, Shalimar Bagh gained prominence during Emperor Jahangir's reign. Expanded by Shah Jahan, this garden covers approximately 594 x 250 m. Divided into Diwan-i-Aam and Diwan-i-Khas, it showcases architectural splendours like the Pink and Black Pavilion. Shalimar Bagh uniquely blends landscape and architecture, reflecting the grandeur of Mughal aesthetics (UNESCO, n.d.).

Achabal Bagh

Empress Nur Jahan enhanced the existing garden at Achabal, creating a trapezoidal masterpiece spread over 9.7 acres. The spring at Achabal, with its Chinar trees and cascading water channels, epitomises Mughal landscape genius. Despite its modest scale, Achabal Bagh's remote location and natural setting distinguish it from Kashmir's Mughal gardens (Ibid.).

Chashma Shahi

Commissioned by Emperor Shah Jahan in 1632, Chashma Shahi is characterised by high terraces, cascades, and a Mughal-style gateway. Situated on three ascending terraces, the garden's unique feature lies in its narrow rills and singular fountains. Chashma Shahi's enduring appeal is best experienced during late afternoons and evenings (Ibid.).

Pari Mahal

Built around 1650 by Prince Dara Shukoh, Pari Mahal occupies the slopes of the Zabarwan mountains. Initially a Buddhist Monastery, it was transformed into gardens for astronomical observations. Pari Mahal's domed ceilings, six terraces, and pavilions reflect a blend of Mughal and Kashmiri influences (Ibid.).

Verinag

Constructed in 1619-20, Verinag's octagonal pavilion surrounds a spring considered as the source of the Jehlum River. Mirza Haider, under Emperor Jahangir's orders, designed this geometric marvel, showcasing the fusion of formal geometry with Kashmir's natural landscape (Ibid.).

These Mughal gardens exemplify the pinnacle of Mughal Garden evolution, representing exceptional beauty and offering invaluable insights into garden history during the Mughal era. Their engineering brilliance in adapting to challenging topography and utilising abundant water resources showcases the Mughals' mastery in garden creation.

Furthermore, the gardens' ecological richness, transforming with each season, enhances the sensory experience for visitors. The distinct mountainous settings of these Kashmiri gardens set them apart from other Mughal gardens in India.

Inscription on the UNESCO List of World Heritage Sites would not only bring international recognition but also clarify the responsibilities of current stakeholders in managing and preserving these historically significant gardens.

Religious and Spiritual Reflection through Monuments

Historically adorned with a richness of religious diversity, Kashmir boasts numerous historical monuments that testify to its cultural and spiritual heritage (The Dispatch, n.d.). The Hazratbal Shrine, ensconced on the left bank of Dal Lake, is revered for preserving the sacred hair of Prophet Mohammad. Its evolution over the centuries, marked by additions like Sadiq Khan's garden and Ishrat Mahal in 1623, reflects the region's deep-rooted religious significance.

Perched at 1100ft on Shankaracharya Hill, the Shankaracharya Temple, dating back to 371 BC, serves as a Hindu pilgrimage site and holds archaeological importance. Maharaja Gulab Singh's stone stairs and the temple's electrification in 1925 add layers to its historical narrative (Ibid.). Khanqah-e-Moulla, situated on the banks of the Jhelum, stands as one of the oldest Muslim shrines in Kashmir, reflecting the city's spiritual essence. Jamia Masjid, a colossal mosque laid by Sultan Sikander in 1398 AD, not only stands as an architectural marvel but also accommodates thousands in its vast expanse.

The BadshuhnunDumat, a splendid Shahmiri structure, honours Sultan Zain-Ul-Abideen's mother. Meanwhile, the Hari Parbat Fort, constructed by Afghan Governor Atta Mohammad Khan, proudly graces the Koh-e-Maraan hill, echoing Central Asian architectural influences (Ibid.).

The Khir Bhawani Temple in Tullamula, Ganderbal, associated with the Hindu goddess Ragnya Devi, has been added to the religious mosaic. Martand, an archaeological site, preserves a rectangular building surrounded by a colonnade, offering a glimpse into the region's glorious past (Ibid.).

Juxtaposed with these, the Amarnath cave, situated 48 KMs from Pahalgam, is a revered shrine attracting devotees worldwide. Bandipore, Gurez, and Pattan contribute to the cultural canvas, each with unique charm and historical significance.

In Budgam district, the Tomb of Sheikh Noor-ud-din-Noorani, Imambara Budgam, and Ziarat Alamdar-E-Kashmir serve as religious and architectural landmarks. Additionally, the tomb of Sham Ded in Poshker village, along with shrines dedicated to Baba Latif-ud-Din, Syed Mohd. Samri, Hazrat Ganga Baba Rishi, and Zia-ud-Din Bukhari showcase the spiritual diversity of the region (Ibid.).

Further towards the north, Kupwara hosts Muqam-e-Shahwali, Ziarat-e-Baba Abdullah Gazi, Shrine of Prakash Akhoun, and Kheer Bhawani Asthapan, each contributing to the religious mosaic. The Avantishwar Temple at Jawbrari, the Payer Temple in Pulwama, Asar Sharief Pintoora, the Shrine of Shah Hamdan in Tral, and Jama Masjid Shopian round out the diverse tapestry of Kashmir's historical monuments, showcasing the region's rich cultural and religious heritage (Ibid.).

Kashmiri Cuisine

It is celebrated for its aromatic spices and rich flavours, reflecting the diverse cultural influences that have shaped the region over centuries. Kashmir has developed a culinary tradition that is both unique and enticing. One of the defining features of Kashmiri cuisine is its vibrant use of spices, with saffron, fennel, and dry ginger being key players.

These aromatic ingredients infuse dishes with a distinct, heavenly aroma and contribute to the region's culinary identity. The cuisine is also characterised by its bold use of yoghurt, which adds a creamy texture to many preparations (Ganju, 2012).

A signature dish that embodies the essence of Kashmiri cuisine is "Wazwan," a multi-course meal that includes a variety of meat-based delicacies. Wazwan is not just a meal but a cultural extravaganza, often served during weddings and other special occasions. From the iconic Rogan Josh, a flavorful and aromatic red curry, to the succulent Yakhni, a yoghurt-based mutton curry, Wazwan showcases Kashmir's culinary expertise and heritage (Ibid.).

Kashmiri cuisine also boasts a delectable array of vegetarian dishes. The classic Dum Aloo, where potatoes are cooked in a rich, spiced gravy, and the unique Nadru Yakhni, featuring lotus stems in a yoghurt-based broth, are beloved by locals and visitors alike.

The region's geography and climate contribute to the abundance of fresh produce, reflected in the emphasis on using locally sourced ingredients. Kashmiri bread, including the renowned "Sheermal" and "Baquerkhani," complements the rich curries and adds a delightful element to the dining experience (Ibid.).

In addition to its traditional dishes, Kashmiri cuisine has evolved over time, adapting to changing tastes and incorporating global influences. The culinary landscape continues to thrive, with local chefs and home cooks preserving the authenticity of age-old recipes while experimenting with innovative twists (Razdan, 2020).

Exploring Kashmiri cuisine is not just a gustatory experience, it is a journey through the cultural history of a region that has artfully blended tradition and innovation on its culinary canvas.

Challenges and Concerns

Renowned for its natural beauty and cultural richness, Kashmir is confronted and still struggling with several challenges within the realm of tourism, primarily rooted in political instability and security issues. These hurdles have significantly impacted the region's tourism industry:

1. Political Instability: Kashmir has long been embroiled in political conflict, marked by territorial disputes between India and Pakistan. This protracted discord has fostered an atmosphere of uncertainty and fear, dissuading potential tourists from visiting the region (Schofield, 2000).

2. Security Concerns and Communication Disruptions: The presence of armed forces and the ongoing conflict have elevated security concerns for tourists. The looming risk of violence and unrest in certain areas has led to a decline in tourism. Frequent restrictions (used to be strikes and

curfews in the past) further disrupt the travel plans of tourists (Ibid.). Periodic internet shutdowns and communication disruptions, implemented as security measures, challenge tourists' ability to stay connected and access information during their travels, acting as a deterrent (Hussain, 2023).

3. Media Coverage: The international media's negative portrayal of Kashmir often focuses on political conflicts and unrest. This unfavourable coverage reinforces the perception of Kashmir as an unsafe destination, discouraging potential tourists (Sultan, 2000).

4. Inaccessibility and Seasonal Variability: Limited availability of direct flights and the necessity of navigating challenging terrain by road can deter some tourists. Inadequate infrastructure and transportation contribute to logistical challenges. While changing seasons serve as a tourist attraction, they also pose challenges. Harsh winters with heavy snowfall can render some areas inaccessible, limiting the tourist season. Sudden weather changes can disrupt travel plans.

5. Lack of Consistency and Limited International Visitors: Inconsistent government policies and regulations related to tourism create challenges for tourists and tour operators. Changes in travel advisories and permits contribute to confusion. Foreign tourists encounter additional challenges due to visa restrictions and safety concerns, limiting the diversity of tourists visiting Kashmir.

6. Infrastructure Development: There is much potential; still, Kashmir requires continued investment in infrastructure development and tourism. Upgrading transportation, accommodations, and other facilities is crucial to meeting the needs and expectations of modern travellers.

Despite the prevailing challenges, Kashmir's immense potential as a tourist destination continues to attract visitors willing to explore the region. The ongoing efforts to promote tourism and enhance the situation are evident. Additionally, diplomatic endeavours to address political issues may contribute to a more stable and secure future tourism environment. It is crucial to stress that after the COVID-19 pandemic, tourists have rushed to Kashmir and had incredible experiences. The region's natural beauty, cultural richness, and warm hospitality make it a unique and rewarding destination for well-prepared and informed people. The data presented by the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India (2023) throw a positive light on the revenue generated by Tourism in the Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir from 2019 to 2022.

Tourists' Positive Overview

The firsthand accounts of visitors provide valuable insights into the diverse and rich experiences that Kashmir offers. Analysing these experiences can offer a subtle understanding of the region's strengths, challenges, and opportunities in the tourism sector. Some of those accounts have been summarised in the following table:

Opportunities	Experiences
Houseboat Stays	One of the unique experiences in Kashmir is staying on traditional houseboats on Dal Lake and Nigeen Lake. These charming floating accommodations provide a serene and romantic atmosphere, and they are adorned with specific Kashmiri woodwork and luxurious furnishings. Staying on these traditional houseboats provides visitors with a distinctive and immersive experience, allowing them to appreciate the tranquillity of the lakes and the surrounding landscapes.
Adventure Activities	Kashmir offers various adventure activities, making it a magnet for thrill-seekers. Tourists can enjoy trekking, camping, river rafting in the Lidder and Sindh rivers, and skiing in places like Gulmarg. The region's topography is ideal for outdoor adventures.
Rich Cultural Heritage	Kashmir has a rich cultural history influenced by various civilisations. The blend of Kashmiri, Persian, and Mughal cultures is evident in its art, music, handicrafts, and cuisine. Tourists can explore ancient shrines, mosques, and historic sites that provide a glimpse into the region's cultural depth.
Cuisine	Kashmiri cuisine is a treat for the taste buds. Tourists can savour delectable dishes like Rogan Josh, Dum Aloo, and the famous <i>Wazwan</i> feast, which is a multi-course meal that showcases the culinary excellence of the region. The aromatic flavours and use of local spices make Kashmiri cuisine a unique gastronomic experience.
Warm Hospitality	The people of Kashmir are known for their warmth and hospitality. Tourists often mention the friendliness of the locals, who are more than willing to share their culture and traditions with visitors. Visitors often appreciate the welcoming nature of the locals, whether it is during a stay in a houseboat,

	interactions in markets, or cultural events. The hospitality contributes to the overall positive experience for tourists.
Arts and Handicrafts	Kashmir is famous for its distinct handicrafts, including Pashmina shawls, handwoven carpets, papier-mâché products, and exquisite woodwork. Tourists can shop for these unique souvenirs in local markets. They contribute to the economic and cultural vibrancy of the region.
Scenic Drives	Kashmir offers some of the most picturesque road journeys, including the iconic Srinagar-Leh Highway and the Gulmarg-Srinagar Highway. These drives offer breathtaking views of the mountains, valleys, and meadows. Drives through the lush valleys and alongside the rivers and mountains provide tourists with breathtaking views and an opportunity to appreciate Kashmir's natural beauty.
Seasonal Diversity	Kashmir's beauty changes with the seasons, giving tourists a reason to visit throughout the year. Spring brings colourful blossoms, summer offers pleasant weather, autumn showcases the golden hue of Chinar trees, and winter turns the region into a snow lover's paradise.

These are just a few of the many aspects that make Kashmir a popular tourist destination. Its combination of natural beauty, cultural richness, adventure opportunities, and culinary delights makes it an enchanting place for travellers to explore. In essence, these elements collectively contribute to the multifaceted and rich tourism experience that Kashmir offers to visitors. They showcase the cultural, natural, and hospitality aspects that make Kashmir a unique and sought-after destination.

Conclusion

This article looked into the multifaceted landscape of Kashmir, unravelling its natural allure, cultural treasures, and the challenges posed by political instability and security concerns. Despite these hurdles, Kashmir exhibits resilience through ongoing initiatives to boost tourism and enhance infrastructure. The diverse offerings of historical monuments, spiritual landmarks, and the rich cultural heritage of Kashmiri cuisine contribute to the narrative of this contested yet

captivating region. As diplomatic efforts persist for stability, there is optimism for Kashmir to evolve into a global tourism hub.

In terms of future research, this field offers significant opportunities. Scholars can focus on areas such as the socio-economic repercussions of tourism, strategies for sustainable development, and the influence of international perceptions on shaping the tourist landscape of Kashmir. There is a vast scope for in-depth exploration and analysis in these areas, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of Kashmir's potential as a resilient and flourishing tourist destination. We can contribute to a deeper understanding of Kashmir's potential as a thriving and resilient tourist destination by continuing to investigate these aspects.

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