



# Jammu & Kashmir

Welcome to three incredibly different worlds in one state. For most foreign travellers Jammu and Kashmir's great attraction is Ladakh, an unforgettable Himalayan land predominantly populated by disarmingly friendly Tibetan Buddhist people. A world away from anything else in India, Ladakh is a magical patchwork of monasteries, canyons and arid rocky mountainscapes. When the access roads are open (summer only), Ladakh's appealing little 'capital', Leh, is well set up for travellers' needs and ideal for finding trekking buddies or jeep sharers while you nibble on falafels, tandoori pizzas or *momos* (Tibetan dumplings). And if Leh starts to feel a bit too touristy, there's always the much less visited Ladakhi area of Zaskar, hemmed by dazzling snow-topped peaks soaring to over 7000m.

For Indian tourists, Jammu and Kashmir's top attractions are altogether different. Millions of Hindu pilgrims pour into Armanath and Vaishno Devi near Jammu. Other domestic visitors love Muslim Kashmir for its refreshingly cool summer air, its stunning Austrian-style scenery and the winter skiing at Gulmarg. Although long known as the 'Valley of Paradise', Kashmir's political volatility has put off most Western travellers since the late 1980s. Some do stop to glimpse Jammu's curious Hindu temples and to savour Srinagar's magical lakes from a classic houseboat. However, disputes over Kashmir have caused three wars between India and Pakistan, and intercommunal strife closed the Jammu–Srinagar road almost entirely during summer 2008, so it's essential to check the security situation before travelling to either Jammu or Srinagar. If the situation looks too dodgy, play safe and head to Ladakh by air or via the rough but utterly gorgeous Manali road.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Murmur meditative mantras in the mural-decked gompas (Tibetan Buddhist monasteries) of the **Indus Valley** (p326)
- Escape India's summer heat in entrancing **Leh** (p301), Ladakh's refreshingly human capital, a low-key traveller hub with dusty medieval backstreets, a Potala-style palace and a deep sense of ecological awareness
- Experience the stark magnificence of **Ladakh** (p315) or **Zaskar** (p298) on an unforgettable high-altitude trek
- Enjoy an amusingly caricatured Raj experience relaxing on a deluxe Dal Lake houseboat in **Srinagar** (p291)
- Gawp at the magnificent mountain-valley scenery backing surreally blue **Pangong Tso** (p328) or the splendid **Nubra Valley** (p323)



**FAST FACTS****Population** 10.1 million**Area** 222,236 sq km**Capitals** Srinagar (summer), Jammu (winter), Leh (Ladakh)**Main languages** Kashmiri, Urdu, Ladakhi, Hindi, Purig, Balti, Dogri, Punjabi and Pahari**When to go** May to October (Srinagar), July to early September (Ladakh), December to March (skiing at Gulmarg)

## JAMMU & THE KASHMIR VALLEY

Predominantly Hindu, Jammu swealters at the edge of the plains, north of which seemingly endless layers of Alpine peaks start unfolding. Hemmed deep within those mountains on the bed of what was once a vast lake, the Muslim Kashmir Valley is altogether different both visually and culturally. Here tin-roofed villages guard pretty, terraced ricefields delineated by orchards and pin-straight poplar trees. Proudly independent-minded Kashmiris mostly follow a Sufi-based Islamic faith. Many have distinctive green eyes and in winter keep warm by clutching a *kangri* (wicker fire-pot holder) beneath their flowing grey-brown *pheran* (woollen capes).

Once the very vision of tranquility, the Kashmir Valley has been scarred by violence ever since Indian Independence. Three wars with Pakistan have left greater Kashmir painfully divided. The crippled tourist industry had been significantly recovering until July 2008 when renewed Hindu-Muslim intercommunal disturbances exploded over a seemingly minor land issue. Many locals believe this was blown out of proportion for a variety of somewhat self-serving political reasons. Nonetheless events snowballed rapidly, with a prominent Kashmiri nationalist leader shot and the Jammu-Srinagar road blockaded for much of the summer. Although tempers had cooled by September 2008, the underlying problems remain and it would be foolish to visit Kashmir without triple-checking the political situation first (see boxed text, p283).

### History

Geologists and Hindu mystics agree that the 140km-long Kashmir Valley was once a

vast lake. Where they disagree is whether it was drained by a post-Ice Age earthquake or by Lord Vishnu and friends to kill a lake demon.

In the 3rd-century BC the Hindu kingdom of Kashmir was transformed into a major centre of Buddhist learning under Emperor Ashoka. For centuries Kashmir's Buddhist artists travelled across the Himalaya, creating fabulous monastery murals like those that still exist at Alchi (p321).

In the 13th- and 14th-centuries AD Islam arrived in Kashmir through the inspiration of peaceable Sufi mystics. Later some Muslim rulers, like the iconoclastic Sultan Sikander (1389-1413), set about the destruction of Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries. However, others like the great Zeinalab'din (ruled 1423-74) encouraged such religious and cultural tolerance that medieval visitors reported finding it hard to tell Kashmiri Hindus and Muslims apart. Relative open-mindedness continued under Mughal emperor Akbar (1556-1605), whose troops took Kashmir in 1586. The Mughals saw Kashmir as their Xanadu and developed a series of magnificent gardens around Srinagar that partially survive today.

When the British arrived in India, Jammu and Kashmir was a loose affiliation of independent kingdoms, nominally controlled by the Sikh rulers of Jammu. In 1846, after the British had defeated the Sikhs, they handed Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh in return for a yearly tribute of six shawls, 12 goats and a horse. Singh's autocratic Hindu-Dogra dynasty ruled on until Independence, showing an infamous disregard for the welfare of the Muslim majority. Many citizens were little better than slaves and subject to the *begar* system in which serfs were liable for service as unpaid porters or labourers at the whim of local pandit landowners.

As Partition approached in 1947, Kashmir was in an odd situation. Although Jammu and Kashmir's population was majority Muslim, the (jailed) popular leader of the predominantly Islamic opposition favoured joining India. The autocratic Hindu Maharaja Hari Singh favoured Kashmiri independence but proved unable to make a definitive decision. Months passed. Finally, to force the issue, Pashtun tribesmen, backed by the new government in Pakistan, attempted to simply grab the state by force. They almost suc-