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Goa's Best Restaurants

**Where To
Go Next**

VOLUME 21
ISSUE 4

Mechuka, Arunachal Pradesh is all about unspoilt beauty

REDISCOVERING INDIA

The List
INDIA
UNLOCKED



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TAJ MAHAL HOTEL,
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BOOK OF THE MONTH
BELOW ZERO
FAHRENHEIT

IT'S NOT WHERE — IT'S HOW

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SAGG



NURTURING THE roots

↳ Pristine
environs of
Sagg Eco
Village



ASHISH KOTHARI
and
SHRISHTEE BAJPAI

*check into Sagg Eco Village near
Srinagar and come away smitten*

PHOTOGRAPHS: ASHISH KOTHARI

I

IT IS A COMPLETE ANTITHESIS

to the unfortunately predominant public image of Kashmir. An initiative at socially and ecologically harmonious living, it is a glimpse of what Kashmiris are capable of, if left to their own destiny.

Sagg—“to nurture like water nurtures the roots of plants”—is a small resort near Srinagar. Well, resort is a misnomer for its rather down-to-earth character. Conceptualised by the youth civil society group Mool, Sagg is an experiment in providing culturally rooted, environmentally responsible lifestyle examples and experiences to people, especially children and youth. For anyone willing to try something very different from the run-of-the-mill tourist and culinary experience that Kashmir offers in plenty, Sagg is well worth exploring.

Having been in touch with its founder, Fayaz Dar and facilitators Shaheena Parveen and Lubna Rafiqi, through the national Vikalp Sangam process, we were fortunate to be invited to spend a couple of nights at Sagg in the summer of 2019. Late June, and just the right temperature though a tad rainy (unusual for this time of the year; climate change?). We were plied with diverse (mostly Kashmiri) cuisine, and plenty of steaming hot cups of *kahwa* made just as it should be (not the insipid readymade powder variety one gets in the market). Not to mention the ubiquitous nun chai, salty tea, that is proffered to visitors anywhere one goes in Kashmir. Two spacious cottages with thatched roofs, mud walls, beautifully adorned in Kashmiri style, make for a calm, cosy stay. Over meals and beverages, and on a full tour of the campus, Fayaz gave us insights into the motivation behind Sagg and the various activities it hosts.

HOW IT
Began

Sagg started with a thought to integrate needs of self, family, and community by building relationships, and enabling collaborative learning amongst each other. The values underlying all the work that Sagg does are co-existence and collaboration, dignity and trust, freedom and responsibility, equality and justice, inclusiveness and self-sufficiency, sustainability and everyone's well being. The team mentioned above, and two other



↔ Fayaz Dar and Shaheena Parveen at the Sagg Eco Village



← Sagg Eco Village products

↑ Sagg Café's very Kashmiri interiors



facilitators Sajad Qadir and Mukhtar Sheikh, also organise collaborative, educational and recreational camps for school children and youth. The aim is to develop critical thinking, reflection, leadership, planning, decision-making and entrepreneurship abilities. They have consolidated their experience in a contextual educational and development methodology; this is being offered in their educational, counselling, consulting and coaching work through mouj bab sufficiency school and the village academy. Sagg also organises recreational activities like eco-therapy sessions, treks, and rides.

THE Experience

The stay at Sagg is therapy in itself! Located at the base of a hill range near Srinagar, Sagg is soaked in the silence of nature, yet so pleurably alive with sounds of birds and other creatures. There is a strong belief in reviving traditional recipes of Kashmir, as also trying new combinations. The idea stems from promoting an eco-friendly lifestyle that is based on integration of local resources, regenerating local livelihoods, and promoting old and new knowledges. There are a number of products that Sagg makes

and sells, like Kashmiri wuer (a traditional mix of herbs and spices that boosts immunity, especially useful in winters), wild honey, dried apples, lotus stem and other pickles, jams, etc. All of these products are hand-made with love, care and ecological sensitivity. We tasted some of these products and spent hours sipping a wide variety of herbal teas, which were simply delicious!

Shaheena Parveen tells us that Sagg has deliberated quite a lot on the pricing of their services and products, realising that most are too costly for the local people. But they try to resolve this by subsidising the vocational training for local students



and also charging 20 per cent less price on products for locals.

Using our visit as an occasion, Fayaz had also called a gathering of people associated with Sagg and Mool. It was a diverse crowd in various occupations, all interested in doing something about the ecological devastation and social disruption that the 'developmental' strategy and militarisation of the region had unleashed. There was a lively discussion on the politics of the mindless 'development' being promoted, such as mass tourism, with disastrous consequences for fragile ecosystems and local rural populations.

LAP OF Nature

In two short walks in the campus, we listed about 25 species of birds, very likely just a fraction of the diversity that must exist in and around Sagg. The slopes leading away from the campus towards mountainous meadows must in particular be rich in wildlife; Fayaz told us they take treks up for adventure, experiencing nature, and getting some great views of the landscape.

While we were there, Sagg inaugurated their Ecoclub 'tamah' of friends and associates for promoting multi-

dimensional lifestyles, taking up local issues and running public awareness campaigns on wetland destruction, water scarcity, sand mining and crushers.

Sagg is focused on envisioning a future that is ecologically sensitive and regenerative, socially integrative and equitable, economically self-sustaining and self-determined. It is a must visit for all those who wish to learn more about Kashmiri culture and lifestyle, to see how the region's youth is trying to re-imagine lives in a particularly challenging context. You can find more information about Sagg at www.saggecovillage.earth. 🌱