

DAL LAKE: FLOATING HOTELS AND GARDENS DESERTED BY TRAVELERS?



Dal Lake in Indian Kashmir is a very precious tourist article of India. It used to be one of the most sought after attractions with the famous Houseboats and Floating Gardens, though for many years, the tourist traffic has dangerously calmed down.

Kashmir has always been very proud of its Dal Lake. No wonder, as it is so beautiful many feel like they are in paradise. Especially July and August are perfect months for a visit as the lotuses on the floating gardens are in full bloom.

For generations, visitors would come swarming in and fighting over local infamous floating hotels – the houseboats. These, in fact, used to serve as homes to the British, who were prohibited from building on Kashmir land. **After the British left, the houseboats were claimed by locals and transformed into hotels.** Today, there are about 500 of such floating homes.

Visitors who venture in these parts for day-trips only rejoice over the luxurious Shikaras. These resemble the gondolas of Venice, except on a much smaller scale. The Shikaras offer all the soft comfort one needs to cross the lake and channels and enjoy the charming scenery without having to move one finger.

It is a must to admire the Mughal gardens on the lake shores. Originally, there may have been as many as 500 gardens created centuries ago, though today, only a few survive. The floating gardens feature some fascinating examples of cucumbers, tomatoes or even melons.

The Dal Lake stretches over an area of about 18 square km and its waters are wondrously clear. While visitors are often advised not to swim in the waters, many still do so in the deeper part, where there are less houseboats to avoid.

While the lake and its charming natural setting is simply a marvelous attraction, for several decades, tourism has been dying out here. Houseboat owners struggle to pay for keeping up the floating hotels which remain deserted for most of the year. Luckily, it still earns money thanks to its very rich fish population, though everyone here is praying for the tourists to start coming back soon.

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