

# Meadow of Serenity

QUIET YOUSMARG OFFERS A TRANQUIL RETREAT FROM THE BUSTLE OF SRINAGAR

Text & Photographs by LAKSHMI SHARATH



*A popular hike and horseback trail from Yousmarg leads to Nilnag Lake four kilometres away.*

**S**now-clad mountains lined with alpine forests greet us and the road takes us towards fresh pastures. The conifers stand as sentinels watching over every tourist entering the valley. After feasting on pristine white snow at Sonmarg and Gulmarg, my eyes are getting used to the fifty shades of green spanned out in front of me.

I am in Yusmarg or Yousmarg, one of Kashmir's less frequented tourist spots, located barely a couple of hours from Srinagar in the Badgam District. The ponywallahs gather around me as soon as I reach this lush meadow, insisting that I ride a horse rather than hike in the forest as the terrain is slushy. It's been raining, so I give in to their persuasion. Soon my horse is trotting along the meadows led by his owner, who is my guide. The woods beyond

beckon us. A red-billed blue magpie flies past me. The rain washes the forest anew. I drink it all in. Some say the meadow gets its name from Jesus Christ who lived here for a while. Others claim the name was originally Roosmurg, the meadow of deer, which over time became Yousmarg. My guide shrugs nonchalantly when I ask for his opinion.

Soon we are joined by another group of tourists. We plan to head to Doodhganga, a tributary of the Jhelum, which flows through the forests here. But trees like giant pillars lie fallen on the path. The horse stops for a moment and we change course and proceed downhill instead. The silence is interrupted only by the rain's gentle pitter-patter and the occasional neighing; it's as if the horses are discussing the weather.

The guide tells me that on a bright sunny day, one could go to a frozen lake, about 10 km from Yousmarg. Another hiking route could take us to Tosa Maidan, a meadow surrounded by alpine forests. But for now, we have to be content with a four-kilometre ride to a little stream that snakes through the pine trees and feeds Nilnag Lake. As soon as we hear the sound of gushing water the horses trot faster. And we are there. Pine trees converge around us. The stream gurgles along. The horses head out to graze and refresh themselves. We sit down by the bank and absorb its tranquillity. When the rain picks up, we are prompted to return, refreshed by this serene spot, away from Srinagar's crowds.

*(Yousmarg is 50 km/2 hours southwest of Srinagar. Taxis charge ₹2,000 for a round trip) ■*