

Impressions of Kashmir – 2023

Look beyond First Impressions

Had Amir Khusro or Emperor Jehangir flown in from HYD to SXR the following quote would most likely have been immortalized:

*'Gar frudgah e jahannum ast
Hamin ast O Hamin ast O Hamin ast*

*If there is an airport in Hell
This is it This is it This is it*

Back to my experience: There are bus stations in India that appear more organized than what is billed as an “International Airport” in Srinagar. Believe it or not it also wears a second hat in parallel as an IAF facility! As soon as you land in the most beautiful place on earth, the first words you hear are admonishments that photography is STRICTLY PROHIBITED as this is a Defence area and the place is oozing with gun toting military men! Next we were told our baggage would be on belt 1, a minute later it was re-announced as belt 2; no big deal – right?

We got off the aircraft and proceeded towards the baggage claim area downstairs. We noticed a rickety escalator partially blocked by three people squatting and hunched over it at the top trying to fix something while the escalator was still running. The elevator nearby had an “Out of Order – Use Escalator” sign taped on the door. So back to the escalator we went and gingerly stepped past the one person struggling with a screwdriver and the other two busy supervising the progress of his work.

We finally reached belt 2 to find a few bags on it and while some passengers were lucky to get part of their luggage an electrical blackout brought everything to a dead stop. Minutes later the power came on but, alas, belt 2 did not wake up. There was no airport official anywhere in the milling airport to help resuscitate it. Passengers like us who were still waiting for bags stood around it for a while praying for it to somehow start, and then muttering loudly what did not sound like prayers for the departed soul of belt 2 moved to belt 1 which had miraculously started moving with new bags on it. Praying does work in unexpected ways, it seems. After getting giddy watching belt 1 spin around for a good thirty minutes we realized that our calling had yet to come and then belt 1 threw in the towel. And yet there was no official in sight, just gun-toting security personnel guarding doors.

Meanwhile an exodus of waiting passengers had been triggered because of a whisper that some intrepid passenger discovered three more belts in an adjacent hall. By the time we reached the new promised land we saw two belts moving and officially carrying bags from planes that had come from Delhi and Chennai; whereas we flew in from Hyderabad. Such inconsequential minor details did not prevent us as we jostled for position in the crowd that was already five-deep around both belts. We stationed ourselves strategically to monitor both belts through tiny gaps between individuals in the crowd and managed to somehow retrieve our luggage from either the Chennai or Delhi belt a mere hour and a half after entering the baggage claim area.

Would I ever fly into this airport again?

OF COURSE! Neither Khusro nor Jehangir said reaching *Firdaus bar Ruh e zameen* (the essence of heaven on earth) was going to be easy. They actually traversed over dusty plains, dense jungles, rushing rivers and steep mountains before they could behold the heavenly sights that awaited them. They were not spoilt, entitled or wimpy as this modern day traveller is.