

All within miles

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In Kallar Kahar you'll find what the ideal of a serene and beautiful picnic spot means

By Asim Mateen

It was off-limits for many, if not all, before the Lahore-Islamabad Motorway was constructed. But now it has become a household name for almost all who have plied this billion-dollar road.

Obviously, I am talking about Kallar Kahar, also called Kalah Kanar and Wadi-e-Taoos by the people who live here. Come to think of a green valley situated amidst the mountains of Salt Range complete with a freshwater lake all laden with daffodils and you will be able to realise what the idea of a serene and beautiful picnic spot means.

Courtesy the motorway, your trip can be as short as a few hours long. But this does not mean that the place has no facilities for those who would stay overnight.

Accessible through both the public and the private transport, Kallar Kahar is situated 150 km from Rawalpindi and 245 km from Lahore. But this is the case if you go there by the motorway. An alternate route — 310 km long — from Lahore first leads one to Jhelum and

Chakwal before ending up in this valley.

Kallar Kahar is 4,000 feet above the sea level and in its green environs there is an ample opportunity to pursue not only the material amusement through boating, fishing, game-watching and simply lying around but also to go for less tangible experiences like those to be had in the presence of great men of God.

One of the three attractions of the area is the shrine of Hazrat Hoo Bahoo, and a cave where famous saint Sultan Bahu had made a spiritual sojourn. The shrine is at a hilltop, and apart from attracting a lot of tourists, is the abode of a large number of peacocks whose ecstatic dances lend the whole place a magical colour of the exotic.

The lake, which has come to almost touch the motorway, is another attraction the area affords. And it is here that you will see most of the people come to visit Kallar Kahar. The lake and its surroundings are the main reasons why so many people visit the area.

The third main touristic attraction in the area is a beau-

tiful historical garden, built by Mughal Emperor Babar. Spread over an area of 112 kanals of land, the garden is full of fruit trees such as lokat, apricots, mulberry and pomegranate. Inside the garden, widely known as Bagh-e-Safa, a unique, historical structure called Takht-e-Babri is still present.

Historians say it is the place

where Babar, embalmed by the beauty of the area, delivered a highly motivating speech to his large army. It is also from here that you can have a full view of the whole valley.

A view from the garden, especially in the evening, is very colourful because sunsets here are a dazzling affair. At this time of the day, the brilliant, blue sky takes on shades of

lavender, pink and grey creating a magical skycap, enhancing the mystery and magic of Kallar Kahar.

In winters, another factor comes into play to add more colour to the area. In this season, the valley — due to its unique geographical location — becomes home to a whole lot of migratory birds from Russia, Central Asia, China and

Australia.

Most of these birds house in and around the lake which is also the place where daffodils and roses grow in millions. The roses, besides being a main tourist attraction, have a commercial value. Their essence (*arg*) is extracted out and the petals are used to make *gulqand* by mixing these with sugar. Both have a large utility,



Picnic spot: Lake in Kallar Kahar.

at least in the indigenous system of healthcare.

The presence of a tourism department motel in the area is a significant symbol of the importance of the place as a tourist resort. Another indication of the place being visited by so many people is that a large number of shops have sprung up in the area vending all types of eatables of a luxurious urban life — from pastries, pancakes and peanuts to bar-b-cue items and bottled water. Rates at the motel are reasonable and eating out amid the serene silence of the valley costs much less than what it costs to have a dinner in the crowded Food Street in Lahore.

All said, still the place has much more potential to grow as Pakistan's major tourist attraction, needing only a promotion campaign by those at the helm of tourism department.

Many places around Kallar Kahar also have the potential to develop as significant tourist attractions. These places (including the Ketas Temples of 10th Century), the Nandana Fort where Al-Beruni measured the circumference of the earth, the Khewra Salt Mines, the Shrine of Syed Syedan Sherazi at Choa Saidan Shah and Ban Amir Khatoon where pre-historic fossils have been discovered are only a few among many sites spread over not a very large area.

The major tourist sites near Kallar Kahar are:

Khewra Salt Mines: The main centre of mining is Khewra in the Salt Range where the world's largest salt mines are found. Khewra Salt Mines are 154 kms away from Rawalpindi. The route is Mandra-Dyal-Chakwal-Choa

Saidan Shah-Khewra. A longer route is through Kallar Kahar-Ketas. The salt mines are open to public on working days from 9 a.m to 4 p.m and are the main attraction of the town. A visit there is an experience in itself. One could go through the ritual of wearing safety devices including steel helmet and then climb up the mini trolleys. The tunnels is spread over an area of a couple of miles. All along the journey are situated the natural lakes, wells, dales and cisterns full of salt liquid, halls, salt engraved mosque and many other attraction.

Choa Saidan Shah: Just outside Khewra, the road starts to climb and within minutes you are making your way 2,000 feet above sea level on the side of precipitous gorge at the bottom of which Khewra looks like neatly laid out garrison town. Travelling 24 kms and passing through some enchanting scenery you enter the valley of Choa Saidan Shah, literally meaning "the spring of Saidan Shah." Its orchards, watered by the famous springs, keep a plentiful supply of fresh fruits at hand. The annual festival of Choa Saidan Shah is held in the first week of April. Along the main street shaded by the trees is the mausoleum of the ascetic Saidan Shah.

Nandana Fort: A place of historical interest is situated 20 kms west of Saidan Shah extensive ruins of a fort, a town temple are present. The two bastions of a large well in sandstone blocks still remain.

Temple of Ketas: The Temple of Shiva (10th century AD) is a valuable piece of architecture and history. It is situated 25 km east from Kallar Kahar.