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Kandy Perahera

As the August moon waxes in the Buddhist month of Esala, a ten-day-long pageant takes over Kandy, Sri Lanka. Men fulfil vows to the Hindu god Skanda by walking "in harness" with spikes in their backs, accompanied by a fabulous procession.

In 2008 the Kandy Perahera, after many years of being in the months of June or July, was held in August. The change was due to new star configurations and it culminated this year on Sunday 17th August.

The procession, which has taken place every year since about 300 AD, includes fire-juggling acrobats, sumptuously-decorated elephants, traditional dancers, oboe-toting musicians, banners, palanquins, whip crackers, torch bearers and thousands of barefoot pilgrims and swordsmen.

The action is made even more mesmerising because it happens at night. The old cannon booms after dusk and the Perahera (paraders) take to the streets for ten nights, with the parades growing ever longer each night until the final night of pageantry, when the parade is at its finest.



The festival is a synthesis of Hindu and Buddhist beliefs and is dedicated not just to Skanda but also to Buddha. It is held to invoke the blessings of the gods for rain, fertility, successful crops and good health. Elephants feature heavily as they are symbols of abundance and fertility - the "clouds who walk the Earth", and are instrumental in attracting the vital rains for harvest time. Sid was there and describes this year's event:

"Well, this is believed to be the most colorful procession in Asia where beast and men walk hand in hand. The story has it that during the reign of last king of the Kandyan Kingdom, the annual exposure of the tooth relic (mailgawa is famed for amongst tourist and locals) in form of a procession took place to bestow blessing to the country and its people. This is a very elaborate affair involving thousands of men and

women (though not so many in number), elephants in regal costumes accompanied by tom tom beaters who parade the inner city streets for 10 days. The Perahara gathers momentum during its last five days with more additions. It last for about four hours of viewing and some 75 elephants and 1,500 men took part the night I was there.

The Perahara consist of five groups namely Maligawa (temple of tooth) which is the grandest, followed by 4 devales (temples surrounding Maligawa believed to be the seats of three gods and one goddess allied to Buddhism).....”

It undoubtedly is one of the foremost World Heritage events named by the UNESCO, attracting thousands of pilgrims and tourists to the hill city of Kandy every year, not only to pay homage to the Sacred Tooth Relic, but also to see Buddhist art, culture, the rituals of Thevava and the Kandyan dancing so unique to the Dalada Perahera.

Four hundred and ten years have passed since the Dalada or the Sacred Tooth Relic of Buddha came to Kandy. It considered as the most precious possession of Buddhists the world over and has emerged miraculously unscathed through many human-made catastrophes such as wars and foreign invasions including the bomb attack a few years ago, although its residency has passed through many temples such the ones found in Arattana, Yapahuwa, Polonnaruwa and Isurumuniya, to mention a few.

For residents of Kandy, Dalada Perahera is an annual event. Tour agents grab all rooms in hotels and guest houses well before the Perahera and even private homes keep a room in readiness for tourists. In the final Randoli stages of the Perahera, you will rarely find a vacant room in Kandy and the few available could charge as much as Rs. 7000 per night.

While the Perahera attracts a large number of international tourists, a regular feature is the traditional journey made by rural men, women and children. For them, this annual pilgrimage is a celebration looked forward to every year. They come days ahead and reserve their lakeside space by spreading a tarpaulin, waiting for the Perahera to begin.

In recognition of these rustic pilgrims, the Kandy local authorities have been restrained from erecting seats along the lake rounds, as they do in other parts of the Kandy city, the cost of which changes according to how good the view is. As in the last year, the on-going peace process is expected to bring in throngs of Northern and Eastern tourists to Kandy, uniting peoples from two ends of the country in common appreciation of a common culture, native to and shared by all who inhabit Sri Lanka, as a heritage of Sinhala, Tamil, Muslim, Burgher or every race living there.