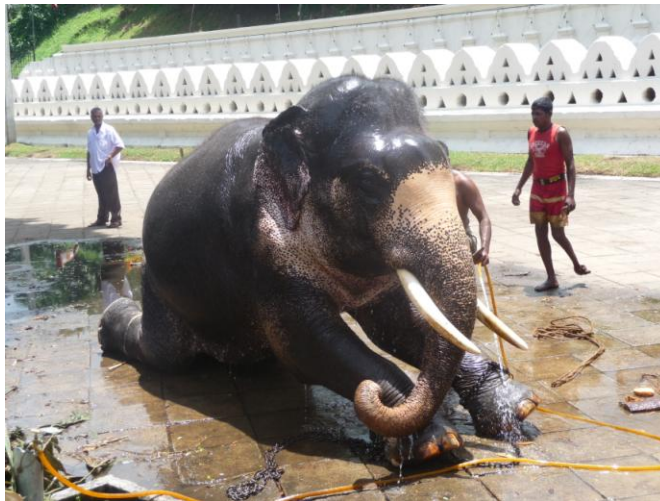


The Kandy Perahara 2009



The ten day long Perahara is always a magnificent spectacle but this year, even more so because it was the first peacetime Perahara after twenty six years of civil war - and the Kandy organisers really pulled the stops out! One of the country's most important festivals, it is held over 10 days in late July and early August. This year, we were there to see it.

The Perahara dates back to the third century BC but the modern event began in the mid 18th century when the Kandyan king decreed that that once a year, the scared tooth of Buddha, which is kept at the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, should be displayed in a procession for the people to venerate.



In August this year many thousands of people came to Kandy for this ten day festival where at night the streets are closed five hours before the festival starts. As we made our way to pre-booked seats opposite a Methodist church, we ran the gauntlet of intense security - body and bag searches, demands to see papers, tickets and to know where we were going and where we had come from. But Sid said this was not as bad as last year when a real threat had been made and even babies and older people were subject to the most intensive and intrusive searches including examinations of their mouths and teeth!

Once seated, tightly squashed together with little knee room and kids pushing and playing around our ears in the row behind we, together with many thousands of people, settled to wait. Alongside was a throng of Japanese visitors, inexplicably wearing surgical masks despite the fact that Sri Lanka has very few Swine Flu cases compared to the rest of the world.....

The wait was broken by little scenes - an old lady had to be carried out of the crowd when the evening heat became too much for her and taken away in a mini bus type ambulance. Street hawkers passed through the crowd selling torches, toys for children, things to eat and drink. The military carved their way through the crowd again in advance of the procession, cutting a swathe through the people seated on the pavement who had been waiting all day in their favoured spots, and, unusually, the soldiers searched foreigners with the same zest as everyone else! We were told the President of Sri Lanka was attending the Perahara that night, hence the increased security.



At last a great explosive bang announced the start of the Perahara further up the route but it was still nearly nine before it reached us, preceded, of course, by adverts. This was the official state message about keeping Kandy clean, displayed on a huge plasma screen on the back of a pickup truck and featured both the government and the leading local politician.



The Perahara proper began with the stately and impressive sight of the Maligawa Tusker (elephant) on whose back is a gold casket containing the Tooth relic. It was followed by three hours of fire dancers, elephants decorated with magnificent coloured lights, gold costumed men carrying heraldic banners, and men carrying flaming torches high in the sky.

Drums, wind instruments, the crack of many whips and chanting reverberated the air for hours, hypnotic and addictive. Stilt walkers, acrobats - many of whom are small boys - performed en route, juggling rings of fire, hurling them skywards making impossible catches.

It is a stunning experience for all the senses and when it passes the clash of silence is astounding.

