A Spectacle of Tradition: Experiencing the Kandy Esala Perahera

Posted on

As a German tourist with a deep fascination for cultural festivals, my journey to Sri Lanka would have been incomplete without witnessing the grandeur of the Kandy Esala Perahera. Held in the historic city of Kandy, this spectacular event is one of the oldest and most vibrant religious celebrations in Asia, attracting visitors from around the globe. The anticipation of seeing the parade of colorful elephants and traditional Sri Lankan dancers had me eagerly awaiting the first night of the festival.

Words Jennifer Johann Müller.

Photography BT Images.



Arrival in Kandy

Arriving in Kandy, I was immediately struck by the city’s charm. Nestled amidst lush hills and centered around the serene Kandy Lake, the city’s colonial architecture and bustling markets set the stage for an unforgettable experience. The streets were abuzz with excitement, locals and tourists alike preparing for the Esala Perahera, a festival that spans ten days, culminating in the grandest procession on the final night.

The Historical Significance

The Kandy Esala Perahera, which usually takes place in July or August, has deep roots in Sri Lankan history and Buddhist traditions. It is held in honor of the Sacred Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha, housed in the Temple of the Tooth (Sri Dalada Maligawa). The festival not only venerates the relic but also invokes blessings for bountiful rains and a prosperous harvest.

The Grand Procession

The festival is a sensory overload in the best possible way. As dusk fell, the streets were illuminated with rows of oil lamps and the vibrant glow of torches. The air was filled with the rhythmic beats of traditional drummers and the melodic sounds of flutes. The first night of the Perahera was mesmerizing, but the excitement only built as the festival progressed.

By the time the grand procession arrived, the streets were lined with thousands of spectators. I managed to secure a spot with a clear view of the route, eager to capture every moment. The procession was led by the whip-crackers, whose loud, cracking whips announced the start of the Perahera. Following them were the flag bearers, each carrying flags representing different regions of Sri Lanka.

The Majestic Elephants

One of the most anticipated aspects of the Perahera is the parade of elephants, adorned in elaborate and colorful costumes. These gentle giants, some of which are tuskers, carried themselves with grace and dignity. The most important elephant, the Maligawa Tusker, carried the golden casket containing the replica of the Sacred Tooth Relic. This sight was breathtaking, as the majestic elephant, illuminated by a canopy of lights, moved gracefully through the streets.



From the serene Kandy Lake, visitors can engulf in panoramic views of Kandy’s lush hills, colonial architecture, Temple of the Tooth’s exterior, golden roof and main entrance.



Kandy Lake – built under the patronage of King Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe, allows travellers to stroll by and immerse in the city’s charm.

Traditional Dancers and Drummers

Accompanying the elephants were groups of traditional dancers and drummers, each representing different Kandyan dance traditions. The Gajanayaka Nilame, or elephant guardians, walked alongside, ensuring the well-being of the elephants and maintaining the flow of the procession.

The dancers were a spectacle of their own. The Kandyan dancers, with their intricate costumes and elaborate headdresses, performed with energy and precision. Their movements were a blend of elegance and vigor, each step telling a story rooted in Sri Lankan mythology and history. The Ves dancers, in particular, with their distinctive white costumes and ornate headgear, were a highlight. Their synchronized movements and the sound of their anklet bells added to the festival’s

enchanting atmosphere.

A Cultural Immersion

What struck me most about the Kandy Esala Perahera was the deep sense of tradition and community. This was not just a festival for the locals; it was a spiritual and cultural immersion that welcomed visitors with open arms. The hospitality of the Sri Lankan people was evident in the way they shared their traditions, explaining the significance of various elements of the Perahera and ensuring that everyone felt included.



Signalling the start of the perahera are the whip-crackers, loud, cracking action.



Traditional drummers, focusing on their rhythmic performance.



A spectacular sight to watch the fire ball dancers twirl swiftly.



Melodic sounds of flutes.



Kandyan dancers perform with energy and grace, showcasing their intricate costumes and movements.

The Temple of the Tooth

No visit to the Kandy Esala Perahera would be complete without exploring the Temple of the Tooth. During the day, I took the opportunity to visit this sacred site. The temple complex, with its beautiful architecture and serene surroundings, offered a peaceful contrast to the vibrant festivities. I joined the throngs of devotees and tourists, making my way to the inner sanctum where the Sacred Tooth Relic is enshrined. The sense of reverence and spirituality was palpable, a testament to the deep-rooted faith of the Sri Lankan people.

The Final Night

The final night of the Perahera was the most spectacular. Known as the Randoli Perahera, it featured the largest number of elephants and the most elaborate performances. The entire city seemed to come alive in a celebration of faith, tradition, and community. The procession lasted well into the night, with each group striving to outdo the previous in a display of color, music, and dance.

As I watched the final elephant pass by, its grand costume shimmering in the torchlight, I felt a profound sense of connection to the culture and history of Sri Lanka. The Kandy Esala Perahera is more than just a festival; it is a living tradition that has been passed down through generations, a testament to the resilience and

spirituality of the Sri Lankan people.

Reflections on the Experience

My visit to the Kandy Esala Perahera was an experience that will stay with me forever. It was a journey into the heart of Sri Lankan culture, a celebration of faith and tradition that transcends time. The vibrant colors, the rhythmic music, and the graceful elephants created a spectacle that was both awe-inspiring and deeply moving.

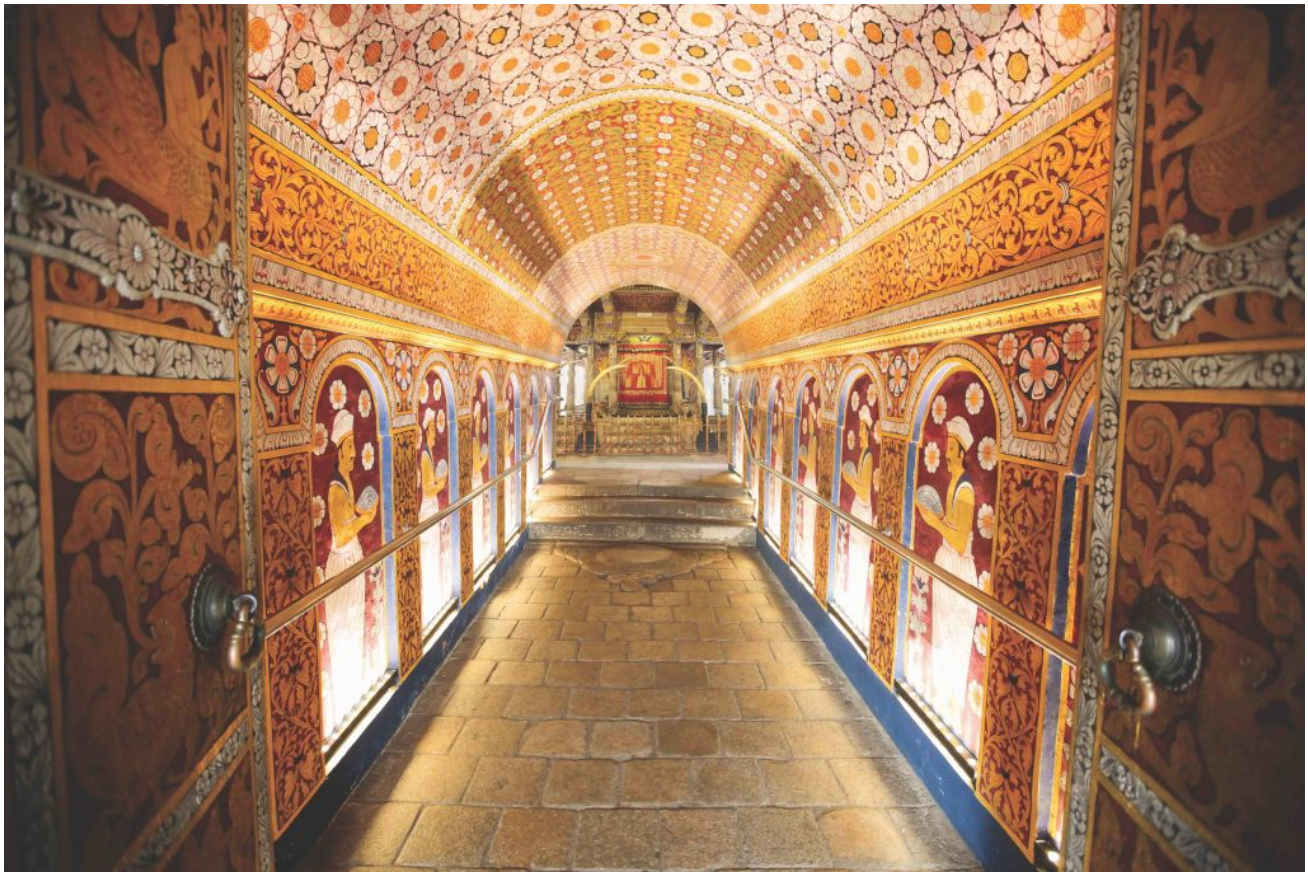
For anyone seeking to understand the soul of Sri Lanka, the Kandy Esala Perahera offers a glimpse into the island’s rich cultural tapestry. It is a reminder of the power of tradition to bring people together, to celebrate the past, and to inspire the future. As I left Kandy, I carried with me not just memories of a festival, but a deeper appreciation for the beauty and resilience of Sri Lankan culture.



Caparisoned tuskers are majestically adorned in elaborate and colorful costumes and parade the streets during the perahera.



The illuminated Temple of the Tooth has retained its sacred aura and continues to be a focal point of Buddhist worship.



The interior of the temple is adorned with beautiful murals depicting scenes from Buddhist mythology and ancient temple art.

The Temple of the Tooth: A Sacred Abode

The Temple of the Tooth, also known as Sri Dalada Maligawa, is the spiritual epicenter of Kandy and one of the most revered sites in Buddhism. The temple houses the Sacred Tooth Relic of Lord Buddha, a venerated object of immense historical and spiritual significance. Visiting the Temple of the Tooth was an essential part of my journey to understand the deeper cultural and religious context of the Kandy Esala Perahera.

Historical Significance

The history of the Temple of the Tooth is intertwined with the history of Sri Lanka itself. According to legend, the Sacred Tooth Relic was brought to Sri Lanka in the 4th century CE by Prince Danta and Princess Hemamali from the Kalinga kingdom in

India. The relic became a symbol of sovereignty and was fiercely protected by successive Sinhalese kings, who believed that whoever possessed the relic had the divine right to rule the land.

The current temple complex in Kandy was built in the late 17th century by King Vimaladharmasuriya I. It has undergone several renovations and expansions over the centuries, reflecting the architectural styles and influences of various periods. Despite these changes, the temple has retained its sacred aura and continues to be a focal point of Buddhist worship.

Architectural Marvel

The Temple of the Tooth is an architectural masterpiece, showcasing traditional Kandyan architecture with its distinctive features such as intricate wood carvings, golden canopy, and majestic moonstone steps. As I approached the temple, I was struck by the ornate golden roof, which gleamed in the sunlight, symbolizing the temple's sacred status.

The main entrance, known as the Mahawahalkada, is adorned with beautiful carvings and murals depicting scenes from Buddhist mythology. The octagonal Patthirippuwa, an iconic feature of the temple, was originally used by the king to address his subjects and now houses ancient manuscripts.

The Sacred Tooth Relic

The Sacred Tooth Relic is enshrined in the inner sanctum of the temple, known as the Sanctum Sanctorum. Access to the relic itself is restricted, with only the temple monks allowed to enter the innermost chamber. Visitors can view the golden casket containing the relic from a distance during special ceremonies. The relic is encased in a series of nested gold caskets. During the daily puja (worship) ceremonies, the outermost casket is displayed to the public. These ceremonies are accompanied by traditional drumming and chanting, creating an atmosphere of reverence and devotion.

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The Kandy Esala Perahera Festival 2024		
Event	**Date**	**Time**
First Kumbal Perahera	August 10, 2024	6.06pm
Second Kumbal Perahera	August 11, 2024	7.27pm
Third Kumbal Perahera	August 12, 2024	7.22pm
Fourth Kumbal Perahera	August 13, 2024	7.20pm
Fifth Kumbal Perahera	August 14, 2024	7.15pm
First Randoli Perahera	August 15, 2024	6.45pm
Second Randoli Perahera	August 16, 2024	7.08pm
Third Randoli Perahera	August 17, 2024	6.51pm
Fourth Randoli Perahera	August 18, 2024	6.40pm
Final Randoli Perahera (The Grand Randoli Procession)	August 19, 2024	6.57pm
Diya Kapeema (The Water Cutting Ceremony)	August 20, 2024	4.30am
Dahawal Perahera (The Day Procession)	August 20, 2024	2.11pm

Rituals and Festivals

The Temple of the Tooth is a hub of religious activity throughout the year, with numerous rituals and festivals taking place within its sacred precincts. The daily puja ceremonies, held three times a day, are a focal point for worshippers who come to pay their respects and seek blessings.

One of the most significant festivals associated with the Temple of the Tooth is the Kandy Esala Perahera.

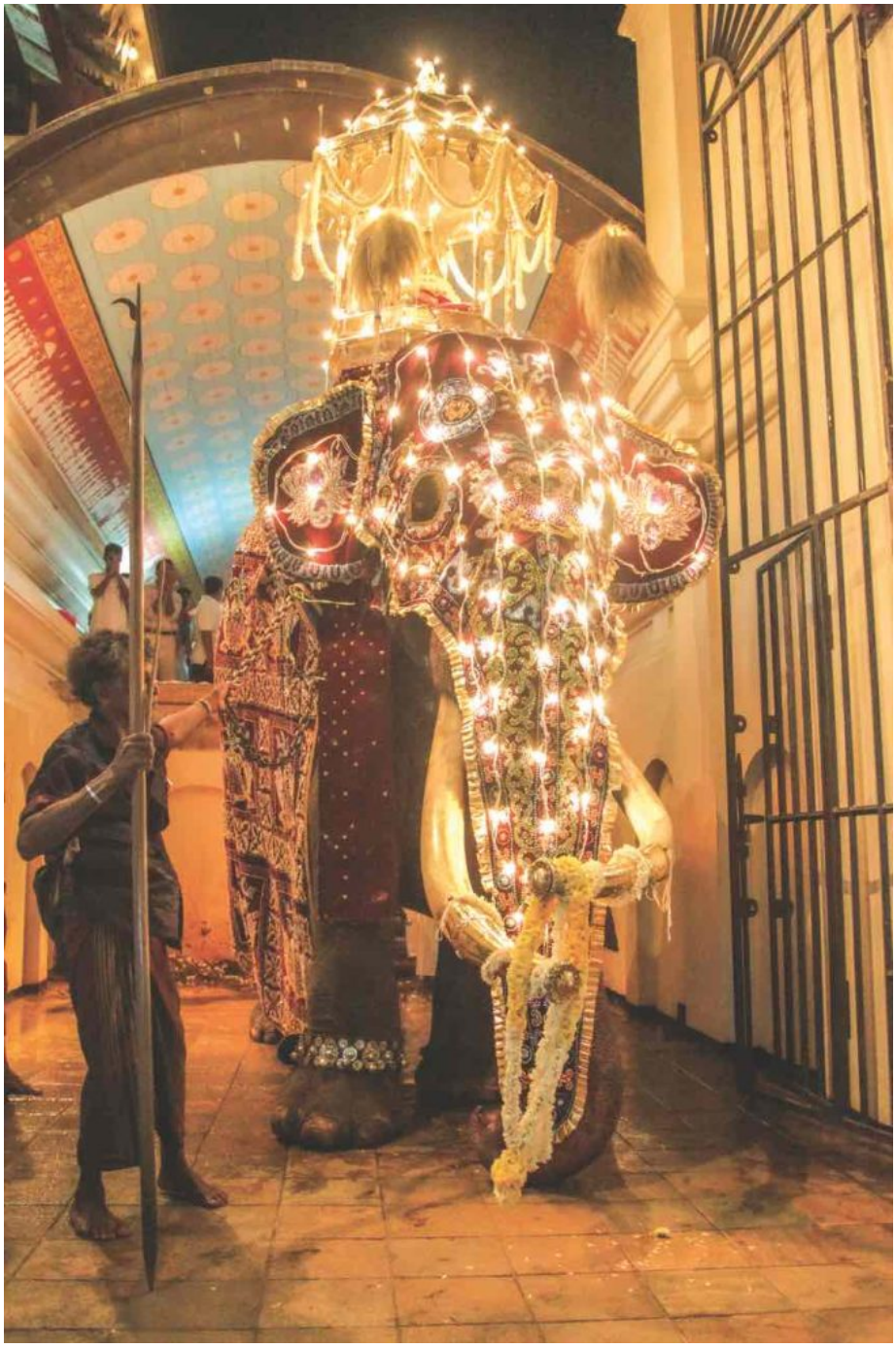
During this festival, the relic is paraded through the streets of Kandy in a grand procession, allowing devotees and visitors to partake in this deeply spiritual experience.

In addition to the Esala Perahera, the temple hosts various other festivals such as the Aluth Sahal Mangallaya (New Rice Festival) and the Duruthu Perahera, each marking important events in the Buddhist calendar.

Spiritual Atmosphere

Walking through the Sri Dalada Maligawa complex, I was enveloped in a serene and contemplative atmosphere. The scent of incense filled the air, mingling with the soft chanting of monks and the gentle rustle of worshippers' robes. Devotees, both young and old, moved gracefully through the temple, offering flowers and lighting oil lamps as acts of devotion.

The temple's sacred Bodhi tree, grown from a sapling of the original Bodhi tree under which Lord Buddha attained enlightenment, added to the spiritual ambiance.



The majestic Maligawa Tusker, carrying the golden casket with the replica of the Sacred Tooth Relic.



The Sacred Tooth Relic is enshrined in the inner sanctum of the temple.



The Kandy Esala Perahera is a spiritual and cultural immersion. it is a living tradition that has been passed down through generations, a testament to the resilience and spirituality of the Sri Lankan people.