

Kandy Central Market: The epitome of local ambiance

The flurry of activity was just starting. A marketplace was slowly gathering steam to reach a surreal crescendo of activity. The arena was ready to roll with a blast as feet boomed in without much fanfare, fixed visages resolved to their business as if there was no time for pleasantries. The Kandy Central Market was ready to explode with excitement.



The Kandy Central Market spanning across two floors is a treasure trove.

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From the five doors at the entrance, people scurried in different directions. The Kandy Central Market looked more like the Grand Central Station with a façade that belies the furor inside. The best thing about the Kandy Central Market is that it's a treasure trove waiting to be discovered. It has shops that sell almost anything under the sun. A foodie's paradise for fresh veg and fruits, meats and fish, fresh bread, cakes, and sweet treats from foody stalls, spice stands, wellness,

handicrafts, tea, tobacco, and pretty much anything else. There's a busy post office too. Kandy's cynosure for many decades, the new market was inaugurated in 1956 and opened to the public in 1959. The market carries the emblematic Kandyan roof, a cherished design element seen to this day in Kandy.

At six o'clock in the morning, the front doors of the market open for business officially. The lobby-style waiting area is the first point of entry to the market.

The present building's site has a history traceable to the 19th century. It was precisely where Kandy had its old market beginning in 1874. It was probably a crowded thoroughfare in the heart of town frequented by the locals. Vital market history is chiseled on a panel inside. It proclaimed that many minds were responsible for bringing this grand project to fruition to give a rudimentary local fair a new lease of life. The present building is a result of the untiring efforts of the Kandy Municipal Council over several years to provide a modern market for the people of Kandy and petition its citizenry thus.

One could stroll through the market's corridors to descend into the theatrics of a daily routine, a lifestyle for many, and feel its throbbing.

"This is now the property of the people of Kandy to whom the Council appeals to help in maintaining it worthily for the benefit of posterity." No wonder 12 laborers are assigned to clean the place from morning till evening, with eight laborers running the morning and daytime busy shifts and four in the evening. One can imagine the hive of activity and volume of goods entering the building when daily three tractor loads of rubbish are discarded from the market.

The Kandy Central Market is open every day from six to nine in the evening. There was order to the chaos, at least in the shops' arrangements and cleanliness. The ground floor is for groceries, food, fresh vegs and fruits, fish and meats, and more. In contrast, the second floor is more touristy, with stores dedicated to handicrafts, batik, leather goods, footwear, handbags, ethnic apparel, wall hangings, masks, souvenirs, and art décor items. Also on the second floor are two regional financial institutions focusing on development beneficial to the market's traders.

The busyness begins at four o'clock in the morning at the fish market. Vehicles

carrying fresh fish begin unloading, avoiding the morning traffic rush before the market could open for business later.

The marketplace is where the drama of daily living unfolds, with it being a must-visit itinerary for tourists.

At six o'clock in the morning, the front doors of the market open for business officially. The lobby-style waiting area is the first point of entry to the market. The first thing noticeable is its airiness, allowing people to mingle and meet, and a well-tended courtyard at the center. But the real action is around the square, where the ubiquitous trading floor of shops stumps you with a large spread of goods. Wherever your eyes are drawn, it's a seamless canvass of fresh fruits and vegs and a colorful universe of varieties, brands, and forms. At the same time, there are loud trading conversations of bargaining and arguing and exchanges and orders being placed. And the market is home to expert butchers and fishmongers. It's multicultural, too, with women and men from different religions and races competing yet harmoniously commingling, which has helped this place stand the test of time. The inside has an energetic vibe, an amalgam of the present with the archaic. The traders mostly stand outside their shops, canvassing for business and beckoning passersby.

To say the least, the 269 shops were like a pop-style remix with a soaring lineup of goods. You name it, they got it all. Naturally, with so much to sell and be immersed in, the connecting corridors were not a highway of briskness.

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With bulging shop racks and people stopping now and then, there was no option but to take it slow. People were wending their way like a slow-slow train, and the traders' PR machine was constantly in motion to woo customers to their spaces.

The visitors took it slow, checking the myriad of wares arranged on stands. Comparing prices, looking for the low priced, as low as possible, before deciding to strike the hammer and close the deal. Amid the scurry of feet along the market's passages could be heard the constant refrain, a beckoning to "come, come, come." "What are you looking for" or "come and look, miss" and "come sir"

were continuous vendor phrases. “Come, it’s cheap,” they said, although that sounded like the most incredible understatement of our times. Joining the chaotic chorus inside was the unceasing sound of honking horns from the street. Everything and everyone seemed to be short of time, but the show went on, attuned to the noises that may have become music to their ears.

To make it look more touristy, some traders put up eye-catching displays of their goods. The herbs, oils, creams, tea, and spices, with other wellness products, were packed in tube shapes for fuss-free carrying for foreigners. In fact, they were practical options, trim and attractive. Adding the Ayurveda tag to the product range helped, and one couldn’t resist a glance at the array of goods hung out like decorations making for easy picking.

One could stroll through the market’s corridors to descend into the theatrics of a daily routine, a lifestyle for many, and feel its throbbing. Everything comes with practice and with no extra effort. Take, for instance, the lottery agent’s booth. It was one hive of activity. The woman at the entrance was rhythmically stamping the seal at full throttle on reams of lotteries, never missing one, while speaking in between and flashing a smile to passersby. She seemed to ace it as a regular on the job, which was fascinating considering the incessant workout to the hands. Although many shop ownerships have changed over the years, some remain in the hands of one family. One of them is the Midland Hotel, the omnipresent corner cafe that retains its enduring allure among countless. The hotel was always a busy and crowded hangout serving freshly baked bread, buns, cakes, tea, and lunch. It continues to be a well-loved eatery run by the second generation of the Ekanayake family.

But generally, many of the vendors have been there for decades. They know their bearings and more than just the ABCs of their trade and are happy to chat and help customers.

The fish vendors shouted, “Good fish. Fresh fish, cheaper than Colombo”. That drew people’s attention, but there was much work to cajole the visitors into making a purchase. So intense is the competition because everyone’s selling good stuff that it’s a game of thrones to persuade and sway the decision in one’s favor, each trying to outdo the other. The fish was cheaper than in Colombo because they bought straight off the boats on the shore. In true Marie Antoinette’s style, the vendors advised “eat fish” because vegetables are expensive. The action

stations were in the fish and meat stalls, where knives were out with a noisy show of cutting and chopping amid the ceaseless chatter.

Pavement-like traders who had been peddling their wares for a long time have been given space outside the main building. They are 280, bunched under a large roof, making their own little spots, a veritable den of floor spaces shackled together. Absolutely berserk to navigate. The array of vegs and fruits was extensive. It diverts visitors from the main building to make a beeline to the outdoor fair.

The Kandy Central Market has at least 600 people walking inside in an hour. There's a lot to explore, and the place is accessible from 24 points spread around the building. The marketplace is where the drama of daily living unfolds, with it being a must-visit itinerary for tourists. There's daytime drama, too, with people falling ill and needing attention, while the worst has also happened many times. The chief administrator and the three assistant administrators have a lot on their hands to ensure it's business as usual, even in a crisis. At the end of the day, the keys to the market are kept at the Kandy Police station. At half past three the following day, an assigned assistant administrator picks the keys back from the Police station, a ritual that continues even today.

Even after six decades since opening and a changing landscape of vibrant options, the supermarkets being the most prolific competitors, the Kandy Central Market continues to be one of the city's most popular. It's a pulsating place with the best of everything. It has something for everyone. A day at this market is always a day well spent. It's one of the best ways to see, hear, and taste the local culture.



The vendors have their local spice products uniquely packed on display for convenience.





Loads of fresh fruits brimming in bright colors will grab your attention.



Get your week's shopping done from the ground-floor vegetable stalls.



From leafy greens to fresh veggies – you can find almost everything and bargain for the best prices.



It's a vibrant and energetic atmosphere walking through finding your daily pick, and adding to the scenes are a variety of curry leaves.



The market is a hive of activity in the morning hours as passersby explore around, picking the best.



You name it and they have it all - even tobacco and betels for the locals.



The Midland Hotel retains its enduring allure attracting crowds to stop for a quick snack.



Bustling through the market, purchase clean and plump fish for reasonable prices.