

Kandy: Past and Present in the Last Kingdom

Posted on

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If the road to Kandy is full of promise, arrival there is promise come true. After the commercial capital, Colombo, which is also the main port of entry, Kandy is the best-known city in Sri Lanka. After Colombo, it is also the most visited by travellers.

Kandy, the name, derives from a Western corruption of its old name “Kande-uda-pas-rata” – the five regions in the hills. The British who were the last Western colonizers of Sri Lanka found the name too hard to pronounce and settled for the Anglicized Kandy “. The name spread the world over with good reason, not the least of which is the Kandy Esala Perehera, the famous Buddhist pageant held there each year.

Driving up from Colombo, which is the most popular way of reaching Kandy 72 miles away, it takes about sixty minutes of driving to leave the plain and reach the foothills of the evergreen Central Province, the boundaries of the old Kandyan kingdom. From then on one discovers the flavour of the Kandyan region in the winding hilly roads, beautiful vistas of valley below, the alluring scent of spices and fresh flowers, elephants jostling for space among automobiles, fresh fruits on trees and with roadside vendors, the Buddhist monks, village temples and some tea-covered slopes until you reach Kandy itself.

The City of Kandy often referred to as the Hill Capital of Sri Lanka nestles alongside its beautiful lake, a picture-postcard setting if ever there was one. It is the city of temples and monasteries of quiet shaded walks just a few minutes away from busy, sweating bazaars. It is the place of the arts, the crafts, of drums and temple bells of the haunting notes of the oboe in a Buddhist temple, the “ chanai ” from a Hindu shrine or the pipe-organ from a Christian church.

Kandy is rightly known as the repository of Sri Lankan culture. As the last kingdom

of the Sinhalese, which ceded to the British in 1815, Kandy resisted foreign domination for more than three centuries. When the maritime regions of the country came under the successive sway of the Portuguese, Dutch and British from 1505 onwards, Kandy remained independent, a kingdom protected by the mountains around it and the free spirit of its people.

It was this independence which adds to that special pride the Lankans, especially the majority Sinhalese, often betray when they speak of Kandy and its many, many attractions to the visitor. The pride of it all is the Dalada Maligawa – the Temple of the Tooth Relic. Enshrined here in a special chamber full of offerings of gold, gems and other treasures is a single tooth of the Buddha, the most sacred relic of Buddhism, which makes the Dalada Maligawa Buddhism's most sacred shrine. The Tooth Relic has for nearly two thousand years also been the palladium of the Sinhalese kings. It was always enshrined in a temple close to the royal palace, the king its acknowledged protector. Until the rise of commercialism with the arrival of the Western colonizers, the capital of the Sinhalese Kingdom was where the Tooth Relic was enshrined. The Maligawa is a place of constant pilgrimage and devotion. Situated picturesquely beside the lovely Kandy Lake, it is where all roads in Kandy lead to. Its octagonal pavilion, the well-tended gardens in front of it and, when lit-up at night, the entire temple complex have an air of dreamland about them.

The best time to visit the Maligawa is when the three daily offerings or "poojas" take place at dawn, pre-noon and evening. These are times when one can be enthralled with a feast of Kandyan drumming, reverberating among the columns and old walls of the inner temple. The time when hundreds gather with their trays of fresh flowers to offer to the Buddha. When little clay lamps burning coconut oil are lit in row upon row, and the scent of incense sticks mingle with those of flowers and burning coconut oil. Here cotton sarees of Kandyan peasant women set off the more expensive silk sarees of richer devotees from the city and the Western attire of visitors from London, Hamburg, Oslo, New York or Tokyo. Of other temples and shrines, there are many in and around Kandy. It has two of the largest Buddhist monasteries in the island-Malwatte and Asgiriya which gives Kandy the largest population of Buddhist monks anywhere in Sri Lanka. There are the shrines of the four guardian deities of the Temple of the Tooth, within the city itself. They are the "devalas" or shrines of Vishnu of the Hindu pantheon who is regarded as the guardian deity of Buddhism; Skanda, the Hindu god of War and Victory; Pattini, the Goddess of Virtue and Chastity; and Natha, the tutelary deity of Kandy. Each of these has a role to play in the rites and rituals of the Temple of the Tooth, which

signifies the constant interaction and interrelation between Buddhism and Hinduism in aspects of daily worship.

Close to Kandy are several other Buddhist temples deserving attention. They include the Degaldoruwa, a rock temple with the best of temple frescoes of the Kandyan period of the 17th Century; the I.ankatilleke, a rare example of Buddhist architecture dominating the surrounding acres of paddy from its hilltop location; Gadaladeniya, almost a transplant of a granite Hindu temple from South India, instead of a Buddhist temple in the dominant South Indian style of the 16th to 17th Centuries; and the temple at Medawela, another repository of beautiful Buddhist paintings. Not to be missed is the Embekke Devala, a shrine to a Hindu deity, done all in wood, with the most intricate of carvings adorning the many pillars in the forecourt. The villagers of Embekke still continue the tradition of wcxxiwork and turn out a range of statuary and ornaments in wood. You can see them at work, in many of the homes near the shrine. Similar to Embekke, there are also many other villages around Kandy where the traditional arts and crafts of the Kandyan regions are still practised.

There are the mat weavers of Dumbara and the silver craftsmen of Danture. If time does not permit such detailed exploration one could not do better than visit the Kandyan Arts and Crafts Association, situated near the lake. It is a treasure-house of the arts and crafts of the entire Kandyan region. From the most exquisite silver filigree work to ornamental brassware, wcxxiwork, rush and reed work, flags and traditional wall hangings and ceiling cloths known as " somana ", the several types of Kandyan drums and a range of other items which evidence the authentic skills of Kandyan craftsmen, all are on display and sale here. There are also several craftsmen who will demonstrate to you their skills in working in silver, brass, copper and wood.



A walk on the lake bund.



A view of Kandy town from across the lake.



The neatly laid out borders along the paths at Peradeniya Botanical Gardens.
(Suresh de Silva)

'While the Kandy Lake, built by the last king, Sri Wickrema Rajasinghe, is an inviting place for a morning or evening walk in the cool shade of large trees, there is also a boat service which will take you for a ride on the lake for a different view of Kandy town and the surrounding hills. But if it is the excitement of a tropical bazaar that one is looking for, one is bound to find it all in the many streets of the city. The shops open out to the street, some spilling over on to the sidewalk and traders invite you to be tempted with anything from batik sarongs to wall hangings, wooden Buddha images, wall plates in brass, chintzes and sarees, spices, tea and coffee beans, Chinese rice cookers or English pop-toasters.

Nearby at Peradeniya is another of those prize attractions of Kandy, the Royal Botanical Gardens. Part of this was originally the pleasure garden of the Kandyan queen. There are some remains of the queen's palace here. Among its other reasons for fame is that these gardens were also the headquarters of Lord Mountbatten, from where he directed the Allied troops in South East Asia, after the fall of Singapore in the Second World War.

But Peradeniya is best known for flowers and its abundance of tropical and temperate flora. Its long walks, its many arbours, the great lawns and several of the smaller lawns, the large banyan trees, the bamboo groves, the spice garden laden with the aroma of cinnamon and cloves, the ferns, petunias, poinsettias, begonias, roses, lotus ponds all promise more than a day of enjoyment for those who are lured by the quiet and peace of the well-tended garden.

Among the many boasts of the Peradeniya Gardens is its Orchid House, acknowledged by many to be the best of its kind in Asia. Its collection of the many orchids of Sri Lanka, with flowers as colorful and diverse as the Kandyan Dancer, Scorpion, and Foxtail orchid to the many hundred hybrids and exotics from other climes, brings together under one roof one of the largest assortments of orchids to be seen anywhere.

Kandy lives not only in its special attractions. Its spice is in its day-to-day life, in the lives of rural people who tend their rice-paddies and sing ancient songs as they drive a buffalo drawing a plough in the Kandyan homes in the city where tea and cakes will be served on an evening, together with the many sweetmeats of the Sinhalese. Kandy is the huge tusked elephant walking on busy King's Street, past

lawyers' little digs, carrying its daily fodder of " kitul " leaves, or stopping on its way near a tea kiosk to pluck a few plantains hung up for sale, and walk away with the pleased smile of the kiosk owner.

Kandy is the spices that grow in abundance in almost every garden-cloves, nutmeg and cinnamon; m coffee beans freshly dried and roasted for a stimulating drink. It is in the chunky old jewellery of Kandyan women and in the anklets, waist chains and bangles of young women. And Kandy is known the world over for the Kandy Esala Perehera-an unmatched spectacle of sight and sound held during the nights and days of the waxing August moon. But that is another story. Kandy can also be reached from Colombo by train. The Sri Lankan Government Railway has a daily intercity train service to Kandy and back. The train leaves Colombo Fort at 6.55 a.m. and 3.35 p.m. and returns from Kandy at 6.30 p.m. and 3 p.m. There are also other trains to Kandy from Colombo at 5.55 a.m., 10.15 a.m., 1.25 p.m. and 4.20 p.m. The train journey to Kandy takes one through scenery even more picturesque than that seen when travelling by road. There is a regular bus service between Colombo and Kandy as well. The route is served both by State-owned and private bus services. The point of departure from Colombo is the Central Bus Stand at the Pettah for State-owned buses, and the stand opposite the Fort Railway Station for private buses.