

# Moonlight Rhapsody

EXPERIENCE A FEAST FOR THE SENSES AT KANDY'S EYE-POPPING ESALA PERAHERA

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- 01. A mahout adjusts the accessories on an elephant's tusks.
- 02. Chanting dancers, accompanied by torchbearers carrying burning charcoal, dazzle the stage with energetic movements.
- 03. Groups of bare-footed dancers and musicians from all walks of life stream in one after another.
- 04. Young drummers in traditional celebratory Buddhist colours smile for the camera.



You would be forgiven for thinking you'd walked straight onto a movie set. With over a hundred massive tusked elephants dressed in lavish costumes marching alongside an army of chanting dancers, fire-juggling acrobats, torchbearers and musicians, the drama that is the Esala Perahera festival will leave you spellbound.

But beneath the fanfare of Sri Lanka's biggest annual ritual, where a replica of the casket holding Buddha's sacred tooth relic is paraded on the streets, lies a pure and simple motive: to pray for good rains for farmers to cultivate their crops.

This 10-day procession, which ends on a full-moon night in August, has been an annual event for many centuries since the reign of King Kirthi Sri Meghavanna in the fourth century. It is actually a combination of five separate processions, each originating from different holy complexes in Kandy.

The most impressive procession, which begins at the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic (also known as Sri Dalada Maligawa),

is what everyone goes to see. The temple, the most significant on the island, houses the country's most important Buddhist artifact: a tooth that is said to have been smuggled into Sri Lanka during the fourth century – in the hair of a princess. Taken from the flames of Buddha's funeral pyre, the tooth has witnessed much of the island's early turbulent history before eventually finding a permanent home in the temple.

During the festival period, Kandy is transformed from a quiet haven to a buzz of activity. While tourists flood the hill town and pay somewhat inflated hotel prices to witness this amazing spectacle, locals come in truckloads – with their entire village and clans – to take part in the procession or simply to be there.

### BACKSTAGE PREPARATION

Even though the procession begins around 8pm, it is common to see the early birds lay out their picnic mats in a good spot

along the fences around noon. Scarred by memories of a Tamil Tiger attack that damaged the front of the temple in 1998, the local government deploys police and military personnel by the thousands to ensure the night goes off smoothly.

As the harsh sun mellows to a golden light, mahouts shower their elephantine partners in a mini water-display on an open patch of dried grass. A couple of cheeky beasts begin spraying water at tourists who have dodged their way through piles of dung and are a little too close for comfort. Working in pairs, mahouts climb onto an elephant's back and drape it with a shiny blanket. They begin adjusting it with the speed and agility that can only come from years of experienced handling.

Across the temple grounds, the dancers, too, are getting busy with their outfits and instruments. The various groups, clad in striking uniforms, form a sea of colour. From topless spearmen who

resemble ninjas with red cloth covering their faces to eager boys practicing drumbeats in yellow and red traditional pants, the air is filled with a spirit of merriment and purpose.

### RHYTHM AND SHINE

As night descends, whip-crackers and acrobats on stilts clear the path with an agile play of fireballs. Buddhist flag bearers follow suit. By now, the crowd is buzzing with anticipation. Camera flashes light up the dark sky as the first elephant, ridden by a temple official and flanked by torchbearers carrying burning charcoal on long, wooden poles, makes its way through the crowd. Groups of dancers and musicians from all walks of life stream in one after another, mesmerising the crowds with the passion in every barefoot thump that can only come from the heart.

As neon-coloured light and smoke thicken the air with a golden intensity, more elephants, in rows of three, take their turn on the stage. Step by step, they sway to the beat and walk in unhurried steps while keeping to the path in front of them. The crowd is thrilled as it seems as though they are dancing merely an arm's length away. The excitement is turned up a notch as drumbeats pick up pace when the highlight of the party – the biggest elephant – appears. Known as the Maligawa Tusker, he is welcomed by a group of singers dressed in white.

On the final night, the Tusker is fitted with a huge canopy that carries a replica of the Sacred Tooth Relic and a white carpet is lined on the ground in front of the elephant to prevent it from stepping in dirt.

The people rise to their feet, hands clasped in prayer and bow their heads as it strides past. Although the sacred tooth never leaves the temple, the hope and goodness of Buddhism that it has come to symbolise has reached far beyond the island.



### KANDY

#### HOW TO GET THERE

Major airlines such as Qatar Airlines, Emirates and national carrier Sri Lankan Airlines fly to Colombo. If you're heading to Kandy straight from the airport, hire a taxi from the arrivals hall, saving you the hassle of going into the city. The journey takes around 3 hours. Chartered mini-vans can be prearranged with hotels and travel agents, and there are also air-conditioned buses and express trains that leave at regular intervals throughout the day.

#### WHEN TO GO

The procession takes place annually in the full-moon month of July or August and ends on the night with a full moon. This year,

it runs from July 27 to August 6. Things are relatively low-key on the first six nights; the celebration starts picking up on the seventh night and is at its most splendid on the last day. Parades begin at dusk and there are no tickets or charges.

#### ACCOMMODATION

The Queen's Hotel ([www.queenshotel.lk](http://www.queenshotel.lk)), an old colonial hotel near the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic and Royal Palace, is the perfect base for attending the festival and exploring Kandy town. Other reputable options include Sharon Inn ([www.hotelsharoninn.com](http://www.hotelsharoninn.com)) and Kandy Cottage ([www.kandycottage.com](http://www.kandycottage.com)).

#### ATTRACTIONS

The town is set around a lake surrounded by layers of lush green hills. An evening walk around the lake provides a glimpse into daily life. Although you don't actually get to see Buddha's tooth, visit the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic to find out why it is so important.

A trip to the government-run Pinnawela Elephant Orphanage just outside Kandy town will put you in close proximity with young elephants.

#### FOOD

Lyon Café on 27 Peradeniya Road is one of Kandy's most popular eateries and serves a range of Chinese and Sri Lankan food. For North Indian fare, try Paiva's Restaurant at 37 Yatinuwara Vidiya. Rams at 11 DS Senanayake Vidiya serves South Indian food and won't disappoint either.

#### INFORMATION

**SRI LANKA TOURISM**  
[www.srilankatourism.org](http://www.srilankatourism.org)  
**TEMPLE OF THE SACRED TOOTH RELIC**  
[www.daladamaligawa.org](http://www.daladamaligawa.org)

#### CURRENCY

The Sri Lankan rupee (Rs). As at May 2009, Rs 100 = US\$0.87 or €0.63.

