

Sri Lanka Tourist Attractions



SRI LANKA

Festivals



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Sri Lanka
A land like no other

Excitement All Year Long

The massive elephant, almost entirely covered with richly embroidered cloth, leads the spectacular procession at a stately pace, proudly bearing an illuminated howdah containing a gilded casket. Within sits a replica of the sacred relic, the Tooth of Lord Buddha, a focal point of Kandy's stunning ten-day pageant, the Esala Perahera.

This is one of Asia's most remarkable spectacles, held but once a year. However, thanks to its diversity of religions, Sri Lanka offers at least one festival each month as Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims celebrate both religious and national occasions.



Every month, the day of the full moon or poya is a national holiday. Tiny oil lamps symbolising Lord Buddha's enlightenment flicker as worshippers flock to temples to pray and offer flowers.

Buddhist temples throughout the country celebrate their pageant or perahera at different times of the year, parading a sacred object or relic through the streets. The colour and excitement are almost palpable as drummers, musicians, dancers and acrobats join men bearing flaming torches and officials robed in sumptuous medieval costumes.

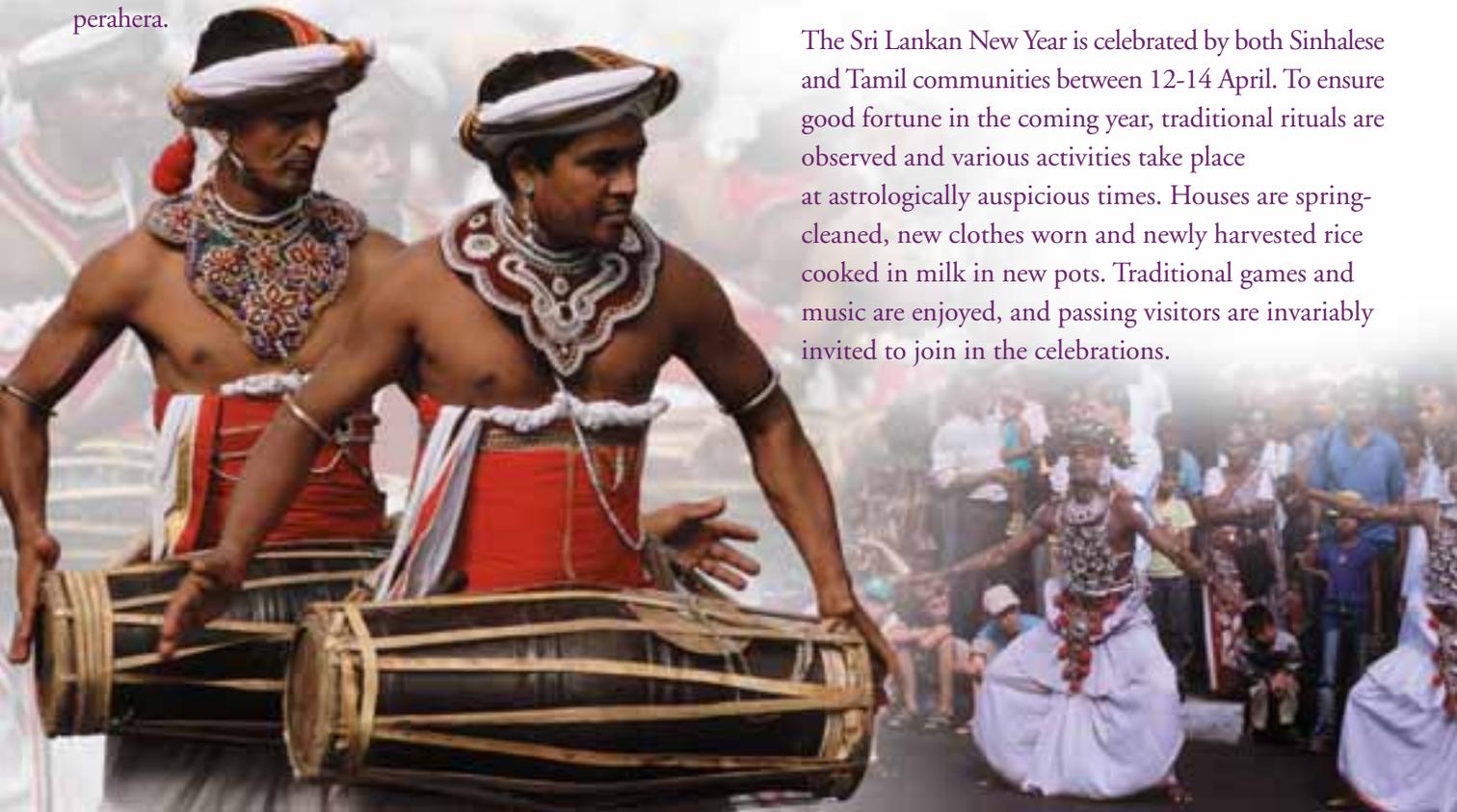
The full-moon festival of Duruthu, normally held in January, commemorates the visit of Lord Buddha to Kelaniya. The temple at Kelaniya, nine km from the heart of Colombo, commemorates the event with a grand perahera.

The Hindu community also celebrates in January, during the harvest festival of Thai Pongal. Homes are cleaned and decorated, farm animals bathed and sometimes adorned, and special dishes prepared.

The full moon of Navam (usually in February), is the occasion of yet another glittering Buddhist perahera, held at the beautiful Gangaramaya temple beside a lake in the centre of Colombo.

Also in February, National Day commemorates Sri Lanka's gaining independence from British rule on 4 February 1948, with military parades, pageants and religious services.

The Sri Lankan New Year is celebrated by both Sinhalese and Tamil communities between 12-14 April. To ensure good fortune in the coming year, traditional rituals are observed and various activities take place at astrologically auspicious times. Houses are spring-cleaned, new clothes worn and newly harvested rice cooked in milk in new pots. Traditional games and music are enjoyed, and passing visitors are invariably invited to join in the celebrations.





The festival to mark the birth, enlightenment and passing away of Lord Buddha, is celebrated with unique splendour on the full moon of Vesak (usually in May). The festival mingles devotion and alms-giving with spectacular displays and entertainment. For visitors, the week-long celebration offers an exceptional opportunity to experience Sri Lanka's religious and cultural traditions, as the holy occasion is celebrated with great joy and colour.

Huge bamboo-framed paintings or pandals pulsate with coloured lights, dramatically retelling the stories of Buddha's life. Stages are set up in the villages and suburbs of every town, with choral groups, folk singers, drummers and clowns entertaining the crowds. Beautifully crafted lanterns known as koodus transform private homes, commercial and public buildings, hotels and places of worship into a fairyland of lights and colours.



When the full-moon festival of Poson falls in June, the arrival of Buddhism in the 3rd century BC is celebrated with great fervour, particularly in Mihintale, where the King was converted by the monk Mahinda, and also at the ancient capital of Anuradhapura.



While the Kandy perahera at this time is the most dramatic of all, the Esala full moon (in July or August), commemorating the first sermon of Lord Buddha, sees celebrations in Buddhist temples throughout the island. Convenient temples for visitors include several near Colombo (at Bellanwila, Kotte and Nawagamuwa), and at Hanguranketa, Gadaladeniya, Embekke, Lankatilleke, Badulla and Mahiyangana in the Hill Country. The celebration at Mahiyangana, east of Kandy – where locks of Lord Buddha's hair are believed to be enshrined in a dagoba – is unique for the participation of the aboriginal Veddah tribes people.

One of the most remarkable festivals of the year takes place during Esala at Kataragama in the remote southeast, near Yala National Park. This ancient pilgrimage site is revered by Hindus (who come to honour the powerful war god, Skanda), as well as by Buddhists, Muslims and Christians. During the two-week festival, thousands of Hindu devotees bear chariots, pierce their flesh with hooks, walk on beds of red-hot coals and commit other acts of penitence, generally in repayment of vows.

Also during July or August, the Hindu festival of Vel takes place in Colombo. A spectacular gilded chariot is pulled between one of the capital's most impressive Hindu temples in Sea Street, and temples at Bambalapitiya and at Kathiresan. All along the route, which is decorated with banana trees and palm fronds, stalls sell sugar cane, fruit, handicrafts and souvenirs.

Other Hindu festivals are held near Chilaw, on the northwest coast, at the Munneswaram temple and at the sea-side shrine of Udappuwa. Near Jaffna, an important Hindu shrine at Nallur holds a remarkably



colourful three-week festival, also during July/August. The shrine of the Hindu god Vishnu at Dondra (the southernmost point of the country), is the focal point of a spectacular procession with many low-country folk dances, traditional rituals and a lively handicraft fair.

One of the loveliest Hindu festivals of the year is Deepavali, the Festival of Light, generally celebrated in November to celebrate the triumph of good over evil.

Thousands of oil lamps are lit to decorate temples, homes and gardens, while special foods (including sweetmeats), and new clothing are enjoyed.



Muslim festivals involve prayers in mosques, distribution of alms and family-oriented celebrations with special food. The end of the fasting month, Ramadan (or Ramazan), is celebrated roughly every 11 months. The Prophet Mohammed's birth is celebrated with the Milad-un-Nabi, while the Haj or pilgrimage to Mecca is also commemorated.

December marks the start of the pilgrimage season to Sri Pada or Adam's Peak. Until April, thousands of devout Buddhists, Hindus, Christians and Muslims scale this 2,234 metre mountain, where a large footprint at the summit is believed by Buddhists to have been left by Lord Buddha. For the Hindus, it is the footprint of the god Shiva, while Muslims and Christians believe it was left by Adam.

Christians celebrate *Christmas* with carol singing, Christmas trees, decorations, cards and gifts, with midnight services held on Christmas Eve. Christmas Day and New Year's Eve are celebrated in traditional style at tourist hotels throughout the country.

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