
Sri Lanka's celebration of God

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The Travel Junkie by Julia Dimon Scenes from the Kataragama Festival, a two week-long event in Sri Lanka that sees a huge influx of some 100,000 pilgrims. The air smells of kerosene and jasmine flower. Young men crack whips as thick as cobras, while others skillfully twirl fire, leaving circular trails of light. There is rhythmic drumming and tribal dancing. It's what I imagine Burning Man Festival to be, except drugs and drinking are replaced by devotion to deities.

This is Kataragama Festival, a two week-long holy event that sees the arrival of some 100,000 Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim pilgrims. Devotees, many of whom have travelled for weeks to get to this auspicious city, have come to worship and perform acts of penance and self-mortification. Some swing from hooks piercing their bodies while others walk on fire to show their devotion to God.

The festival entrance has a carnival-type atmosphere, with vendors selling stuffed animals, fruit offerings, plastic trinkets and sweets. Walking through the fairgrounds, I'm happy to see that security is heightened with checkpoints and police searching baggage — as the civil war between the separatist Tamils and the Sri Lankan government continues, you can't be too careful.

Past the checkpoints, people have gathered, eagerly watching the procession of elephants down a path illuminated by beads of light. Dressed in a red rhinestone cloak, one elephant looks like a Mexican luchador wrestler.

This holy shrine and popular pilgrim centre is humanity at its finest. On the fringes of the main action, I see the bodies of passed out pilgrims strewn all over the ground. Some are cooking their dinner by small smouldering fire (a scene that's becoming increasingly more common with the rise in gas prices) while others are gently rocking their babies to sleep.

Trying to find a spot to watch the parade, I make my way through the maze. Every step is carefully calculated and I'm wary of stepping on little hands and feet. Though many have been waiting for hours for their spots, all are welcoming as I cozy my way up to the front.

Seated on the sandy floor, a woman offers me a piece of her tarp to sit on. Here, people are very generous to foreigners. I'm offered oranges, water and lots of smiles.

I can feel all eyes on me. Here, I'm partly a movie star and partly a sideshow freak. Mothers holding infants point at me, raising their voices and eyebrows as if to say, "Look at that. Isn't that girl amusing?"

While some might feel self-conscious, I sort of like being "the other." I get off on being the outsider. In a crowd of thousands, I feel strangely satisfied that there are only a handful of foreigners.

This is how a travel writer knows she's in the right spot — when the tourists are gone, there are no fanny-pack wearers from Florida and not a McDonald's in sight.

— Julia Dimon is co-host of Word Travels, airing on OLN, and editor of www.thetraveljunkie.ca. (Courtesy : Metro News)