

Elephant Race Festival, Dak Lak

Written by Nava Nahi

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If you have a chance to Dak Lak Province in springtime, you should not miss the Elephant Race Festival, normally celebrated in the third lunar month. Attending the festival, you will be lived in the boisterous atmosphere of the echo of gongs and the spectacular performances of the elephants from the Central Highlands forest.



The Elephant Race Festival is usually held in Don Village or in forests near the Sevepoi River. In preparation for the festive day, people take their elephants to places where they can eat their fill. Apart from grass their food also includes bananas, papayas, sugar canes, corns, sweet potatoes. The elephants are free from hard work to preserve their strength. On the big day, elephants from different villages gather at Don Village. The race track is on even ground, preferably wide enough for ten elephants to stand simultaneously in a line with a length of one to two kilometres. People from near and far in their best and colourful costumes flock to the festival.

With the signal of of tu va (horns made into musical instruments), the mahouts command their elephants to go to the race track, standing in a row at the starting point. The leading elephant stands in front, whirling his trunk and nodding his head in greeting the spectators. Atop each elephant there are two handlers in traditional costumes for generals. The tu va signals the start of the race and the elephants rush ahead, excited by the sound of the drums, gongs, and cheering from the spectators. Upon seeing the first elephant dashing to the destination, the spectators shout boisterously amidst the echoing sound of drums and gongs. At the end of the race, the winning elephants lift their trunks above their heads to wave to the viewers, walk deliberately flapping their ears gently, gazing through half-closed eyes to receive sugarcane from their viewers.

The winning elephant is given a laurel wreath. Like its owner, the elephant expresses its happiness and enjoy the sugar canes and bananas from the festival-goers. After this race, the elephants participate in the competition of swimming across the Serepok River, of tug-of-wars, or throwing balls and playing football. When the race comes to an end, the competing elephants bring back the atmosphere of the festival to their villages. Upon returning to their village, they receive warm welcome from the villagers. Very often, the elephants from Don Village win the prizes as the village has a tradition of training and tending elephants.

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The elephant race is the biggest festival in the Central Highlands. Coming here, you will not only feel the martial spirit of the M'nong ethnic people, who are very famous for their bravery and skill in hunting wild elephants, but also the magnificent landscape of the Central Highlands which further stresses the grandiose characters of this traditional festival.

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