

A Century of the Duruthu Perahera

Posted on

With a history spanning more than two thousand years, the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya, revered as a site blessed by the Buddha's presence, will celebrate the centenary of its Duruthu Perahera in January 2027. For the first time, 400 reserved seats will be made available to international visitors.

Words: Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.



Venerable Kollupitiye Mahinda Sangharakkhitha, Chief Priest of Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya, addresses the gathering at the launch of the tourist enclosure for the 2027 Duruthu

Perahera.

Just seven miles from Colombo, the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya is one of Sri Lanka's sixteen hallowed places of worship, with a history believed to date back to the third century BCE. In January 2027, the temple will mark the hundredth staging of its annual Duruthu Perahera, a procession inaugurated in 1927 to commemorate the Buddha's visit to Kelaniya many millennia ago. The temple's sanctity is thus believed to have been consecrated for eternity by the Buddha's presence.

Thus the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya continues to hold a special place in Sri Lanka's religious and cultural heritage, not least for its association with the Buddha. Its annual street procession heralds the island's calendar of temple pageants, making it the first Perahera of the new year. The celebrations unfold over three days, culminating in the grand procession.

According to the Chief Priest, Venerable Kollupitiye Mahinda Sangharakkhitha, the Kelaniya Duruthu Perahera has retained a consistent structure throughout its hundred-year history, much like the Esala Perahera of the Temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy. When the hundredth procession takes to the streets in January 2027, it will honor not only the tradition itself but also the generations who recognized the temple's enduring significance. The Perahera was inaugurated by Don Walter Wijewardene, son of Buddhist philanthropist Helena Wijewardena, who sponsored the restoration of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya in the 19th century. As the temple's first Basnayake Nilame (lay chief custodian of the temple), he joined a long lineage of individuals whose contributions helped restore Kelaniya to its rightful place in Sri Lanka's religious life. The origins of the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya date back thousands of years to when the Kingdom of Kelaniya flourished. Its history is chronicled in the Mahavamsa, yet the temple's journey through the centuries has been marked by both revival and decline. It fell into disrepair under various rulers, only to be restored by successive kings. Foreign invasions brought further devastation, first at the hands of Kalinga Magha of South India in the 13th century and later through Portuguese destruction in the 16th century. Yet Kelaniya endured, refusing to fade into oblivion.

Whenever the temple faced the threat of being forgotten, there were those who sought to restore its former glory. Despite repeated devastation, it continued to receive royal patronage, a testament to its enduring place in Sri Lanka's history and Buddhist tradition.

Believed to be the very ground upon which the Buddha set foot and preached during his third and final visit to the island, Kelaniya held deep significance for kings and commoners alike, inspiring successive generations to preserve its sanctity. Following the destruction wrought by the Portuguese, the temple was restored in 1767 under the patronage of King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe, the reigning monarch of Kandy.



The festive season at the Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya begins in January, the month of Duruthu in the Buddhist calendar. The Duruthu Perahera unfolds over three days and is preceded by two months of preparations. Daily Dhamma sermons are held each evening for 72 days, culminating in seven days of continuous Pirith chanting to invoke blessings for the forthcoming Perahera.

The first of the processions, the Deva Dutha Perahera, is a modest street procession intended to invite the deities to descend upon the temple grounds and receive the blessings of the Pirith ceremony. This is followed by the Udamaluwa Perahera, which begins on the temple's upper terrace with a ritual handover of the Sacred Relic casket. A round of cannon fire signals the start of the procession, after which the Chief Basnayake Nilame carries the casket, placed on a cushion, around the

upper terrace three times. Dancers, drummers, and a few elephants accompany this procession.

The following day, the Pahalamaluwa Perahera takes place around the temple's outer terrace. More elaborate than its predecessor, it features a greater variety of performances and a more impressive display of caparisoned elephants. As the procession makes its way around the lower temple square, it is joined by processions from the three shrines dedicated to the deities Vishnu, Vibhishana, and Kataragama.

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The celebrations reach their climax with the Randoli Perahera, also known as the Maha Perahera, the grandest of the three processions. Held on the day before Duruthu Poya, the procession will take place on January 21, 2027, commencing at 7.30pm. A vibrant showcase of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage, the Perahera brings together the spectacle of richly adorned elephants, dancers representing the Kandyan, Low Country, and Sabaragamuwa traditions, drummers, whip crackers, torchbearers, and acrobats. Bringing up the rear is a large gathering of devotees dressed in white, adding a solemn and devotional note to the night's celebrations.



The historic stupa of Kelaniya Raja Maha Viharaya stands amid the sacred temple grounds, where preparations begin for the landmark 100th Duruthu Perahera in 2027.

As the Duruthu Perahera reaches its hundredth staging in 2027, the temple has

introduced a special tourist enclosure for the first time, inviting travel agents, tour operators, hoteliers, and members of the media to familiarize themselves with the new initiative. The enclosure offers international visitors the opportunity to reserve seats with an uninterrupted, front-facing view of the procession. Each ticket includes live commentary on the Perahera, complimentary Ceylon tea, coffee, and bottled water, dedicated parking, and priority access. The seating has also been arranged to provide clear views for photography and filming. The organizers expect to welcome 400 visitors from Germany, the United Kingdom, France, India, and other markets. Sri Lankans can also reserve seats in this exclusive enclosure.

For the temple, the January 2027 Duruthu Perahera is a landmark occasion that its priests and benefactors hope to celebrate fittingly. The decision to introduce a dedicated tourist enclosure reflects a desire to share the temple's rich history and the festival's significance with a wider international audience. As one of the first major Buddhist festivals of the new year, the Duruthu Perahera offers visitors an opportunity to experience first-hand the grandeur, pageantry, and deep religious fervor that define Sri Lanka's age-old traditions, while opening a new avenue to attract more international visitors to the island.



The majestic tusker Kandula.

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Date: January 21, 2027; Time: 7.30pm