A Perahera of History and Devotion

Posted on



The arrival of the ceremonial tusker, resplendent in royal regalia is the cynosure of the Perahera, carrying the Sacred Relic.

Kotte Rajamaha Viharaya’s annual procession brings centuries of history, sacred rituals, traditional dance, and pageantry to the streets of Kotte, where the tradition endures and remains part of the present day.

Words: Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane. Photography: Sujith Dias.



Before the commencement of the Perahera, the Sacred Relic is ceremonially placed in the casket carried by the caparisoned elephant.

As dusk settles over Kotte and the streets glow beneath rows of lamps, the sound of drums rises into the evening air. Dancers in elaborate costumes, torch-bearers, and elephants adorned with richly decorated garments move through the procession, recalling the grandeur of another age.

This is the annual Perahera of the Kotte Rajamaha Viharaya, a celebration steeped in history, ritual, and devotion. Held this year from September 3 to 13, 2026 with the grand Kotte Sri Dalada Maha Perahera on September 12, the procession carries forward a tradition linked to the former Kingdom of Kotte and a temple with more than six centuries of history, continuing its place in the present.



A majestic caparisoned elephant adds grandeur to the procession, initially known as the Kotte Sri Dalada Maha Perahera.

The story of the Kotte Rajamaha Viharaya is closely tied to the history of the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha.

The temple was built in 1415 during the reign of King Parakramabahu VI, one of the most powerful monarchs of the Kotte Kingdom. As guardian of the Buddha’s Sacred Relics, the king commissioned the temple to enshrine the Tooth Relic, giving it importance that extended far beyond its religious significance.

The Perahera is believed to have begun in 1415 and continued under Parakramabahu VI until his death in 1469. It became a powerful expression of royal patronage and popular devotion. That era eventually ended. With the arrival of the Portuguese and their attacks on Kotte, the temple was destroyed, and the Sacred Relic had to be moved to safety.

For centuries, the Kotte Rajamaha Viharaya lay largely in ruins. In 1818, Venerable Pilane Buddha Rakkitha undertook its restoration. Only fragments of its former glory remained, including sections of the ancient stupa, parts of the Kataragama Devalaya, and several stone pillars.

The procession was revived in 1901 by Venerable Embulgama Wimalatissa, restoring a tradition once central to the life of the Kotte Kingdom. Today, the temple is a protected archaeological site, formally recognized for its historical importance.

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Although the Kotte Rajamaha Viharaya is no longer the custodian of the Sacred Tooth Relic, its annual procession remains known as the Kotte Sri Dalada Maha Perahera, preserving the memory of the temple’s sacred past and its present identity.



An intrepid group of young men performing the fireball dance or the Pandampaliya.

This year marks the 126th Perahera since its revival. The magnificence of the ancient procession is difficult to imagine. At the height of the Kotte Kingdom, as many as 500 elephants were said to have formed part of the royal procession, which temple records say once traveled along the kingdom's ramparts.

The setting itself must have been extraordinary. With the Diyawanna Oya on one side and the royal palace on the other, the procession moved along the ramparts, its lamps reflecting in the still waters below and creating a spectacle of light, color, and movement.

The people of Kotte expressed their devotion with equal extravagance. Gold, precious stones, and pearls were offered to the Sacred Relic, reflecting the prosperity of a kingdom that, during the reign of Parakramabahu VI, was also renowned for its literary and cultural achievements. While the scale of the ancient Perahera has changed, its spirit remains.

Today, the streets surrounding the temple become the stage for a living expression of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage.

The roads are transformed with decorative arches, lights, and traditional embellishments. Against this carefully prepared backdrop, the procession takes on a visual splendor of its own.

There will be around 35 elephants in this year's Perahera, including the temple's elephant, which will carry the Sacred Relic. Around 3,500 performers – dancers, drummers, and torch bearers – are expected to participate. One of the most striking aspects of the Kotte Perahera is the way it brings together Sri Lanka's three major traditional dance forms: Upcountry, Low-Country, and Sabaragamuwa.

The Dalada Perahera itself features the Upcountry tradition, with its distinctive dancers and drummers creating the ceremonial rhythm of the sacred procession. The Devale processions that follow pay homage to four deities: Kataragama, Vishnu, Saman, and Vibhishana.

The Sabaragamuwa dances accompany the procession dedicated to Saman, while Low-Country traditions are performed in honor of Vibhishana. The Kataragama procession is distinguished by the energetic and colorful Kavadi dance.

Kavadi holds a particularly special place in the Kotte Perahera. Considered a sacred

ritual, it is performed by dancers from Kotte who regard participation as an honor. They perform with devotion rather than for payment, and around six Kavadi troupes are expected to take part this year.

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The performers themselves are closely connected to the community, with many coming from the numerous dance academies in Kotte. Some have participated in the Perahera for decades, with a few having performed for as long as 60 years, carrying the tradition into the present.

Among the traditions that distinguish the Kotte Perahera is the exclusive male status of its dancers.

There are no female performers in the procession, a practice said to have its origins in an old legend. According to tradition, when the wife of King Parakramabahu VI fell ill, a hermit summoned to treat her advised the king to commission only male dancers for the procession to avoid the possibility of ritual impurity associated with women.

Whether viewed as legend or tradition, the practice has endured and remains one of the distinctive characteristics of the Kotte Perahera.

The temple also holds another unusual distinction: it is the only place known to have a dedicated space for sewing ceremonial clothing for elephants participating in processions.

The temple produces and hires out elephant costumes for other religious processions, continuing an artisanal tradition that is rarely seen elsewhere. This year, four new elephant costumes are being stitched for the Perahera, underscoring the tradition's present-day practice.

The grandeur of the Perahera is upheld by a series of rituals that unfold over several days. The proceedings begin on September 3 with the chanting of Pirith throughout the night, followed by the offering of alms to the clergy on September 4. On

September 5, the ceremonial planting of the Kapa takes place.

The Kapa, a branch of a male jackfruit tree, represents the staff of Indra, the rain god. Its planting symbolizes the hope for rain, fertility, and a plentiful harvest, while also marking the laying of a foundation for an important undertaking. At Kotte, it is accompanied by prayers seeking the blessings of the four deities for the successful completion of the Perahera.

Before the Kapa is planted, the temple conducts a special Pooja for Lord Ganesh, a ritual particular to the Kotte Rajamaha Viharaya and intended to invoke blessings for the proceedings. The first procession is the Kumbal Perahera on September 6. Considered the opening phase of the Kotte Sri Dalada Maha Perahera, it marks the public commencement of the festival.

The name Kumbal refers to a pot. As part of the ritual, a member of the traditional pottery-making community draws the first water from a newly dug well, places it in a pot, and covers it with a clean cloth. The vessel is then brought ceremonially to the temple, accompanied by devotees and the custodians of the four shrines.

The water is sprinkled throughout the temple grounds – at the Bo Tree, shrine room, stupa, and repository before finally reaching the four devales. In this way, the temple is ritually cleansed and prepared for the days ahead.

The Kumbal Perahera is followed by the Mal Perahera on September 7, 8, and 9. The word Mal means flowers, and this procession is particularly associated with children and young people. While moving within the temple premises, the participants visit various shrines to pay homage, accompanied by the temple’s elephant.

The procession then moves toward its grander stages.

On September 10, the Pavada Perahera takes place. Pavada refers to the clean, sacred white cloth, or carpet laid upon the ground. In this instance, the procession bearing the Sacred Relic begins at the temple and walks along the cloth laid on the ground. The Sacred Relic is brought out and placed in a new chamber for veneration before its ceremonial journey.

The Randoli Perahera follows on September 11, circling the temple in anticipation of the final and most magnificent event.

Then, on September 12, the streets of Kotte come alive for the Sri Dalada Maha

Perahera. As night falls, the procession becomes a moving tapestry of Sri Lanka’s cultural heritage. The deep, rich beat of the drums sets the pace. Dancers move with precision and grace, their costumes catching the light as they perform the traditions handed down through generations. Torch bearers add another layer of movement and illumination, while the elephants advance with quiet majesty.



The Kandyan Ves dancers’ movements and magnificent attire create a spectacle of timeless beauty.



Honoring the traditional craft of rattan weaving, the Wewel Viyanno dance has performers using long rattan sticks that bend and interlock.



The Sacred Relic of the Buddha, a radiant symbol of devotion at the heart of the Perahera’s enduring tradition.



The rituals continue even after the grand procession has passed.

On September 13, the water-cutting ceremony takes place at the Diyawanna Oya. The young jackfruit branch planted as the Kapa is floated into the water, completing another important ritual of the Perahera.

Later that afternoon, the Ge Wadina Perahera marks the final stage of the celebrations. Everything returns to the temple, including the sacred objects, which are restored to their permanent resting places, bringing the year’s rituals to a close.

And with that, the streets fall quiet once more.

Yet the Kotte Perahera leaves behind something more enduring than the spectacle of one night. It is a living connection to a kingdom that flourished more than six centuries ago, to a temple that survived destruction and rebirth, and to generations of dancers, drummers, artisans, devotees, and communities who have kept its traditions alive.

September 3 to 13, 2026

Kotte Sri Rajamaha Viharaya

Sri Jayawardenapura Kotte

+94 11 281 1111

kotterajamahaviharaya.lk

The majestic tusker moves with grace and dignity, carrying the Sacred Relic in solemn splendor.



The majestic elephant stands adorned in magnificent Perahera finery.



The Monara Natuma – mimicking the graceful movements of the peacock.



The rhythmic beat of traditional drums brings energy and grandeur to the Perahera.



Raban Dance, performed by young acrobatic artists who balance small drums on vertical sticks.



The annual Perahera is a vibrant celebration, transforming the Temple into a spectacular display illuminated by a multitude of lights.