

# Kataragama Pada Yatra: A Pilgrimage through Time and Faith

Posted on

Each step of the Kataragama Pada Yatra retraces an ancient legend, echoing devotion. This annual foot pilgrimage weaves together thousands in a timeless procession to Sri Lanka's most sacred shrine, honoring the island's revered guardian deity—Skanda, known to devotees as Kataragama Deviyo.

**Words** Jennifer Paldano Goonewardane.

**Photography** Yakaduru Yala.



Pada Yatra, or “journey by foot,” transcends mere physical traveling; it embodies a profound experience that touches both the spirit and the soul.

In god's country, spirituality is not just a belief but a way of life. Woven deeply into the island's cultural psyche, faith informs daily rituals, decisions, and dreams. For centuries, pilgrimages and foot journeys in honor of deities have served as expressions of devotion and acts of penance. The Kataragama Pada Yatra is a profound testament to unwavering belief and spiritual endurance.

Beginning in Jaffna in May, this sacred foot pilgrimage snakes along Sri Lanka's eastern coast, nearly four hundred kilometers, traversing ancient villages, dense wildlife reserves like Kumana and Yala, and sunbaked trails until it reaches Kataragama in time for the vibrant annual festival in July. Pilgrims—saffron-robed sadhus, local villagers, and seekers from afar—walk for months under open skies, sleeping in the wild, sustained only by faith and the generosity of strangers.

Kataragama is no ordinary destination. It is hallowed ground, a place sanctified by

centuries of belief in Skanda—also known as Kataragama Deviyo—the island's warrior deity and divine guardian. The legend of Skanda—his arrival in the southern jungles, his battles, love, and divine mission—imbues the forest shrine with a magnetic spiritual pull.

Pada Yatra, “journey by foot,” is more than just a physical trek. It is an act of surrender, a re-enactment of myth, and a search for redemption. It is believed that this pilgrimage predates the arrival of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity in Sri Lanka, rooted instead in the traditions of the island's indigenous Vedda people. It is a re-enactment of the Kataragama legend. What is the Kataragama legend?

Valli, the beloved of Skanda, was the reason the god of war forsook Mount Kailasa, the celestial abode of the gods, for the remote jungles of southeastern Sri Lanka. Born of a sacred union between a hermit sage and a doe, Valli was discovered as an infant nestled among yam creepers in the forest—hence her name, Valli Amma, “child of the wild creepers.” A Vedda chieftain chanced upon the girl during a hunt and, moved by her grace and the aura of her mystic parentage, brought her home. He and his wife, who were childless, raised her as their own.

As Valli blossomed into a maiden of extraordinary beauty and virtue, her presence drew the attention of celestial beings. Narada, the wandering sage and divine messenger, encountered her in the forests of Kataragama and was captivated by her radiance. Upon returning to Kailasa, he recounted the tale of the forest maiden to Skanda. Seized by a burning desire, Skanda descended from the heavens, searching for Valli.

Steeped in the rich symbolism of the Skanda legend, the Kataragama Pada Yatra is a sacred enactment of devotion. It begins at the island's northern tip—culminating just in time for the grand Kataragama festival.



Clad in vibrant saffron robes, devoted pilgrims embark on a transformative journey, ignited by faith and purpose.



After a series of divine adventures and trials—each reflecting the intensity of his love—Skanda won her heart and made her his consort. Together, they made their home on one of the sacred hills that cradle Kataragama.

Thus, steeped in the rich symbolism of the Skanda legend, the Kataragama Pada Yatra is a sacred enactment of devotion. It begins at the island's northern tip—culminating just in time for the grand Kataragama festival. As the first pilgrims set out, they are cheered on by onlookers, marking the beginning of a path that is as treacherous as sacred. The Pada Yatra moves along the eastern coastline. Every group of pilgrims carries the Vel, the lance of Kataragama Deviyo, a symbol of divine power.

The visual poetry of the Yatra is striking. Clad in brilliant saffron—the color of sacrifice and renunciation—swamis and sadhus lead the way. Some wear only a saffron cloth around their waists; others bear wild, matted hair and ash-smeared bodies. They march on with peacock feathers symbolizing the deity's mount, bundles of belongings, and the ever-present Vel. Ordinary devotees, too, may don a touch of saffron, joining the vibrant procession with reverence in their eyes.



Devotees of all ages walk for many days under open skies.



Through forest and faith, the path to Kataragama winds on.



At the end of a day's walk, pilgrims gather, bound by purpose and devotion.



They walk at least ten kilometers daily, pausing at sacred sites to rest, pray, and

enjoy the warmth of local villagers.

To walk the Pada Yatra is to embrace self-denial. Pilgrims carry only the bare essentials, embodying a life of renunciation—wandering recluses dependent on alms and the kindness of strangers. Along the route, entire villages await the pilgrims' arrival. They greet them as servants of Skanda, offering food and blessings and joining in the resonant chorus of Haro Hara—a cry of devotion that unites the giver and receiver in shared reverence.

In this ancient walk of faith, barefoot pilgrims endure blistering heat, torrential rain, thirst, hunger, illness, and the unpredictable perils of the wild. They rest beneath trees, in temples and roadside shrines, keeping close company with fellow seekers.

Traveling in groups by night, the route comes alive with the glow of flickering campfires, the buzz of shared meals, rhythmic chants of praise, and the elders' teachings – among them are poets and storytellers, singers and dancers, musicians and mystics—each contributing their gifts to the soul of the pilgrimage.

On foot, they walk at least ten kilometers a day, stopping at seventy-three traditional places of worship to rest, pray, and receive alms from villagers. The journey continues downward along the coast before turning inland, where the test begins—an arduous crossing of nearly a hundred kilometers of jungle. This final stretch leads through the wild heart of the island, where elephants, leopards, and other creatures roam free. Earlier days, this pilgrimage segment was shrouded in danger and myth—stories of pilgrims lost to illness, beasts, or the dense, unforgiving wilderness.

Like all things, the Pada Yatra has evolved with time. As villages modernize and roads become more accessible, today's route is better equipped. Volunteer groups line the path, offering support, and even vehicles now follow, distributing alms to pilgrims. While such changes mark a departure from the raw asceticism of tradition, they are still acts of reverence—tributes to a god who has captured the collective imagination of an island. His story pulses through this pilgrimage, through every chant of Haro Hara, every dust-covered step, and every offering placed in the hands

## Kataragama Pada Yatra: A Pilgrimage through Time and Faith

of a weary walker. The Pada Yatra remains a walk of wonder—where the sacred and the everyday merge in a journey that transforms those who dare to take it.

The Pada Yatra remains a walk of wonder—where the sacred and the everyday merge in a journey that transforms those who dare to take it.