

NAWAM MAHA PERAHERA



The fire dancers in synchrony

The full moon day in the month of February marks Nawam Poya, signified by incidence of two events in Buddhist history; congregation of the first Buddhist council and the appointment of the first Chief Disciples. By way of paying homage the Nawam Maha Perahera—high pageantry of cultural and spiritual embodiment—is held each year by the Gangaramaya Temple. Since it first saw light in 1979, the Perahera has become an annual tradition and this year the procession will spill through the streets of Colombo on February 14 and 15, 2014 in its customary flair, fit to dazzle.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Indika De Silva, Menaka Aravinda and Damith Wickramasinghe

Drum beats rise and fall, the sound of conch shells swell and diminish, cane dancers weave patterns in the air, fire dancers paint flaming and fleeting images— their bodies a haze of movement, heavy masks—some glaring something fierce, others smiling toothily—bob to the rhythms, elephants and tuskiers draped

in fine livery plod along in sombre dignity... The air is alive with an intensity of all this and more. It is indeed a colossal display of culture, veneration and unity. The masses mob the sidelines completing the procession as it eases through the streets.

The Nawam Maha Perahera commences the day before Poya or the full moon day ending on the eve of the Poya day. Reviving artisans who were inspired to embrace their age-old traditions once more, the Perahera is symbolic of not only spiritual roots, but a rich and diverse culture captured across its length and breadth of performers, turned out in their finest. What began with a handful of artisans, gained strength in numbers as they flocked to an animate platform to showcase their skills and talents. Today a 5,000 strong procession comprises an amalgamation of traditional dances of Sinhala, Hindu and Muslim origin. The up country, low country and Sabaragamu dances, the peacock, kavadi and Hanuman performances, the lee keli dance bring out a diversity in the pageant. In addition flag bearers carrying the District and Provincial flags and the different colours of the Buddhist flag are interspersed along the procession.

Elephants are a key element of the Perahera and an obvious favourite amongst the spectators. These animals are transported from various temples across the Island, bringing the numbers of pachyderms to the hundreds. They move in unison, draped in the finest regalia, at times bearing insignia. Often times, the Nilame or Chieftans accompany the elephants, they too adorned in their heavy garb, completing the aura of majesty.

The religious significance of the Nawam Maha Perahera is emphatically brought to the fore with the entrance of Nawam Raja, the tusker of the Gangaramaya Temple, bearing the sacred relic of the Buddha. Adorned in the richest finery, its tusks garlanded as a mark of veneration, the Nawam Raja's presence marks a momentous chord in the procession. The relic casket is secured on the tusker's back as he proceeds amidst collective cries of 'sadu sadu sadu'. This troupe is led by the Chief Lay Custodian of the Sacred Relic among other officials and it can be said that this is the defining moment of the Perahera.

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THE WINNING ENTRY OF 'BEST PHOTO TAKEN ON A SMARTPHONE' CONTEST

The photo submitted by tourist, Zoe King taken of the Gangaramaya Temple was adjudged the winner of the 'Best Photo Taken on a Smartphone' contest held by Celebrity Cruises. The winning shot was selected by a judging panel comprising of world-renowned photographers, Stuart Franklin, Ian Berry, Art Wolfe and Massimo Vitali.

