Pada Yatra: Walking the Sacred Path

Posted on



At Linthuna, pilgrims gather, rest, and continue together.

Pada Yatra is a pilgrimage across Sri Lanka’s wild landscapes, where devotees journey to Kathirgamam in devotion to Lord Murugan. Through hardship, myth, and community, each step becomes a meditation on faith, resilience, and the deep connection between nature and spirit within this ancient living tradition.

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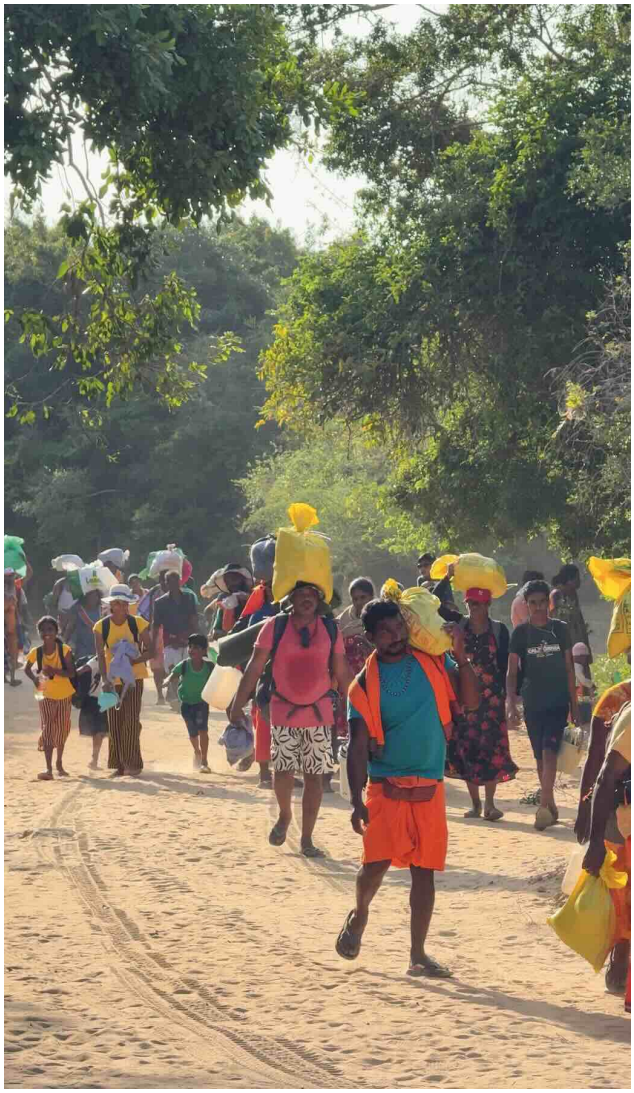
Photography: Trips Lanka Pada yatra travel group.

Every year, pilgrims in Sri Lanka, predominantly from the North and East of the country, undertake a demanding and deeply spiritual journey known as the ‘Pada Yatra’, a long walk of devotion to ‘Kathirgamam Temple’, one of the island’s most sacred shrines located in Hambantota, Sri Lanka.



From Okanda, the journey begins — carried by faith and community.

Pilgrims often describe the Pada Yatra as a test of endurance. Walking long distances through dense jungle and relentless coastal heat strips

away ordinary comforts… The walk becomes a confrontation with oneself – your thoughts, your limits, and your resilience.



At Okanda, belief is tied in every offering.

Devotees of ‘Lord Murugan’, worshipped locally in the south as ‘Kathirgamar or Kataragama Deviyo’, travel on foot across beaches, forests, and wilderness, retracing what many believe to be the path the god himself once walked. I never truly understood devotion until I took my first step on the Pada Yatra.



Days and months of walking, sustained by endurance.



Cracked earth beneath their feet.



Onward, across the dry lands.



Resting in the shade, a moment of quiet blessing.

For many pilgrims, the journey begins near Ukanthamalai Murugan Kovil (also known as Okanda Devalaya) in the Ampara District of Sri Lanka, passing through the forests around Kumana and Yala National Parks, and ending in the temple town of Kathirgamam.

The walk can take days, weeks, or even months, depending on the route. But the physical distance is only part of the pilgrimage. Along the way, stories transform the landscape into a living mythology – every tree, thorn, and animal carries meaning.



Gathering at Kuda Kebiliththa shrine.



A journey of faith and endurance through
Sri Lanka’s sacred wilderness.



Flamboyant flowers welcome pilgrims by the wayside.



A humble meal shared along the Pada Yatra.



L–R: Sameera Batagoda, Sharmini Shadagopan, Amila Alahakoon, Samitha Jayaratne, Thiviya Kandiah, Dilani Wickramanayake and Isuru Dinesh.

Since childhood, I had dreamed of taking this journey, but I was always told it was too treacherous for a girl to walk this path alone. Then, in 2025, when my friend mentioned that he and his friends were planning to explore the route, I jumped with joy. That moment marked the beginning of my own journey of self-exploration, walking the path of Murugan alongside more than 30,000 devotees.



Crossing Kumbukkan Oya from Kumana to Yala, pilgrims carry faith with them.

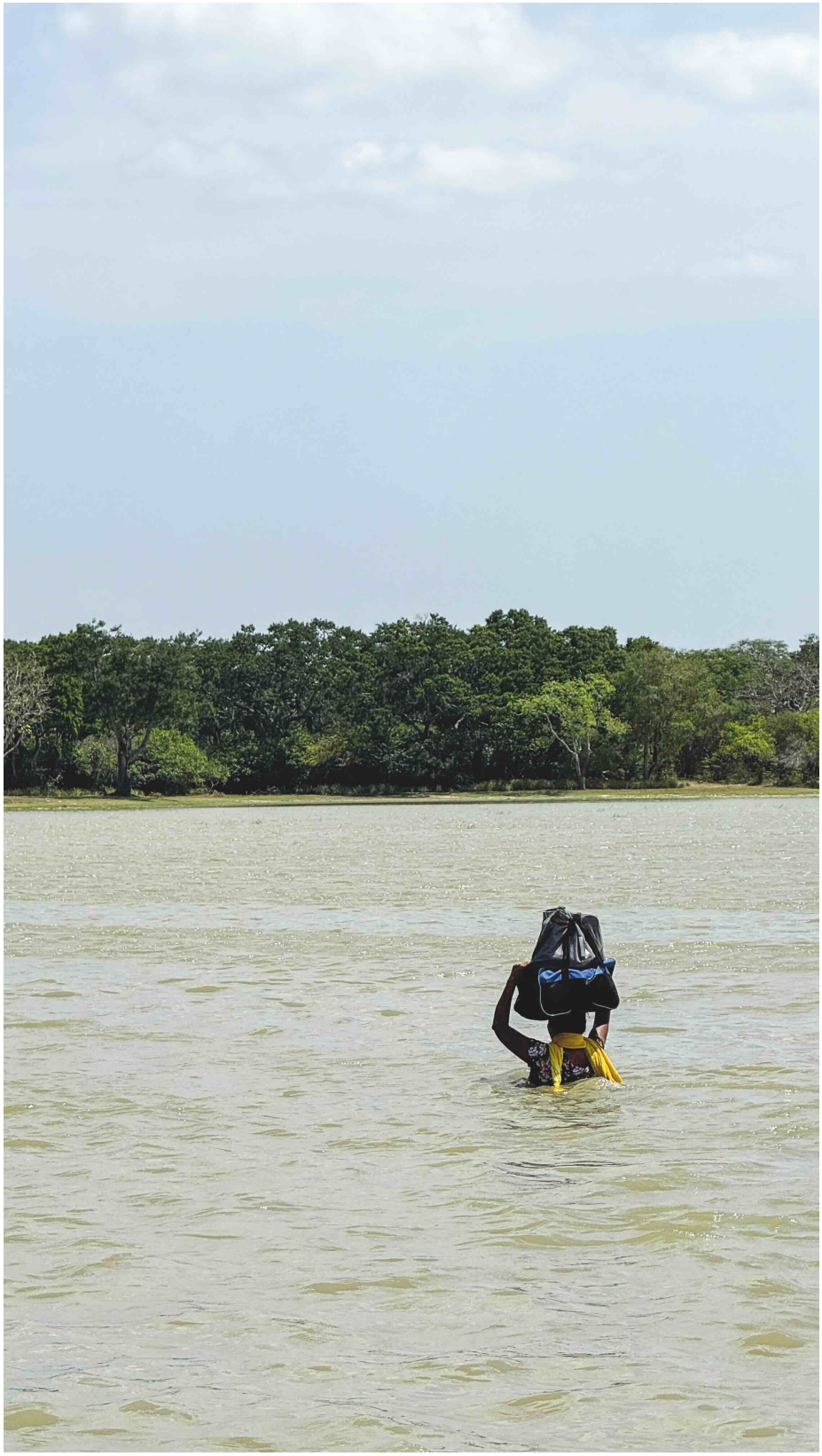
Pilgrims often describe the Pada Yatra as a test of endurance. Walking long distances through dense jungle and relentless coastal heat strips away ordinary comforts. There is no certainty of rest, no easy escape once the journey begins. For me, that hardship was part of the purpose.

The walk becomes a confrontation with oneself – your thoughts, your limits, and your resilience. In the forest’s isolation, the journey becomes deeply internal.

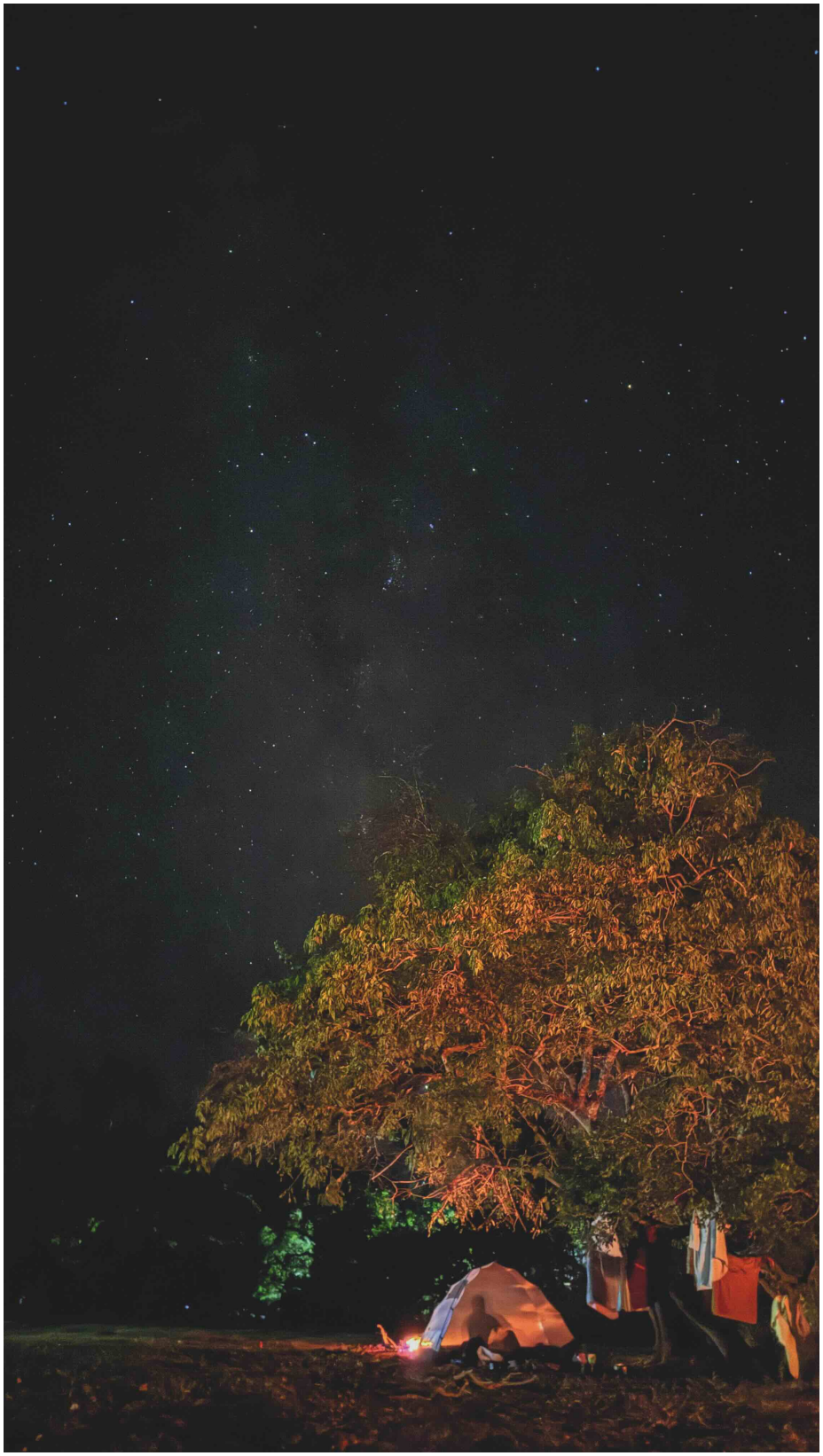
Without modern distractions, the mind becomes both companion and obstacle.

> The wilderness along the pilgrimage route is home to elephants, deer, and many other animals. Yet pilgrims often interpret encounters with wildlife through a spiritual lens.

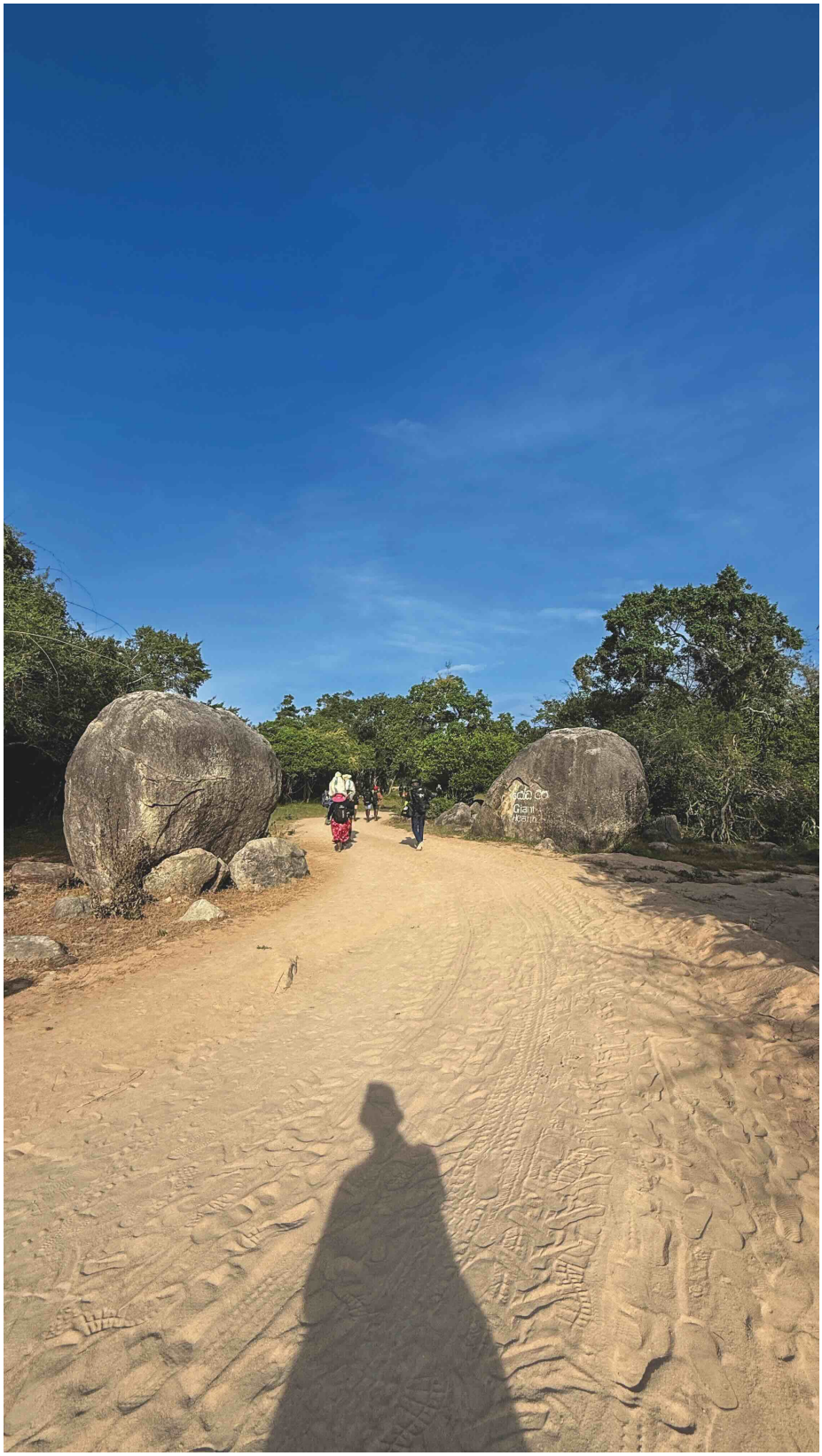
I began my journey from Okanda to Kathirgamam, crossing more than 90 kilometers in just four days. At the same time, the pilgrimage fosters an extraordinary sense of solidarity. Along the path, strangers share food, water, encouragement, and stories. A simple chant, “Arohara Sami! a devotional cry to Murugan, passes between walkers like a surge of energy, reminding everyone that they are not alone.



Wading through the waters, moving forward with quiet faith and resilience.



Under a starlit sky, resting beneath ancient trees.



Passing Yoda Lipa in Kumana.



A humble shrine at Linthuna.



At Linthuna, a pause to refresh and continue.

There is a strong sense of community: someone will take care of you, yet the journey is still yours to take. Being just 4’9”, my small feet could not move very fast, so I was often the last person trailing behind the group. Yet no devotee who passed by ever left me alone. Someone would always From Okanda, the journey begins — carried by faith and community. say, “The jungle is dangerous. I will walk beside you until another person comes along.” The silence during those moments was powerful. My thoughts were loud, yet peaceful. All I could hear were our blistered feet dragging across the earth, birds chirping overhead, and sunlight breaking through the canopy of what felt like a million-year-old forest.



In their own unique way, families carry children and strength forward.



One path, many steps, shared together.



At Warahana, a simple place of worship.



Where the wild endures, stories remain.



Mobile shrines at Warahana, where pilgrims offer prayers along the sacred path.



Palu – nature’s nourishment along the way.

The mythology surrounding the pilgrimage centers on the marriage between Lord Murugan and a tribal woman named Valli. Some myths say that Valli was born from a doe when a sage accidentally broke his meditation and cast his gaze upon the animal. She grew up as a huntress, protecting her people and driving birds away from the millet fields. Her name, “Valli,” refers to a creeping plant, tying her identity deeply to the forest itself. Murugan, captivated by her beauty and spirit, descended from the divine realm to find her. Disguising himself in different forms – sometimes a hunter, sometimes an old ascetic – he followed her through the forests until she finally recognized him. Their union symbolized the meeting of divine power and the wild natural world.

The Pada Yatra is believed to trace the path of this mythic pursuit and union. As we walked, the jungle itself reminded us of Murugan and Valli’s story. Passersby sang folk songs and shared tales of their divine love. One story that stayed with me was that of “Valli mullu,” a thorny plant that grows along parts of the route.

Legend says that while Murugan and Valli were walking together, a gust of wind loosened her saree. To help her, Murugan created a thorny plant, plucked one of its thorns, and used it to fasten the cloth. Ever since, the thorn bushes along the path are believed to mark that moment of tenderness. Many pilgrims treat them with quiet respect, seeing even the thorns as sacred. Large trees along the trail carry their own symbolism as well. Massive banyans and ancient forest trees often become informal shrines where walkers pause to rest or offer silent prayers.

Some stories say Murugan once waited beneath such trees while disguised as a wandering hunter, watching Valli guard her fields. The path itself is lined with flamboyant flowers, blooming brilliantly during the pilgrimage season – said by some to symbolize the celebration of nature, the marriage of Murugan and Valli. Through these stories, the forest ceases to be mere wilderness.

Instead, it becomes a landscape filled with memory and meaning. The wilderness along the pilgrimage route is home to elephants, deer, and many other animals. Yet pilgrims often interpret encounters with wildlife through a spiritual lens. Deer hold particular significance because of the folklore linking Valli’s birth to a sacred deer in the forest. Seeing one along the path is often regarded as a blessing, a reminder of her origin and her connection to nature. Shrines dedicated to Valli appear along the way, and any antlers found on the path are traditionally returned to these shrines,

as she is believed to be the guardian of the forest and its deer.



Mobile shrines at Warahana, where pilgrims offer prayers along the sacred path.



Palu – nature’s nourishment along the way.


Where the wild endures, stories remain.

Along the journey, we crossed rivers, some reaching our knees, others rising above our heads. We shared our burdens by carrying one another’s bags, constantly reminding each other to pack light. In truth, by the end of the journey, all you need is a piece of cloth to shield you from the sun and something to cover you at night. The lesson is simple: nothing is needed except the experience of the journey itself. As the days scorched our skin and blisters formed on our feet, we waited for the moon to rise, offering us relief from the heat.

Under the trees, we watched the Milky Way stretch across the sky. The forest also reminded us of its dangers. At one point, we encountered a leopard, an unmistakable reminder that something in the wild could end your life while you

sleep. Moments like that remind you that any breath could be your last. Yet since it isn’t, you learn to cherish the journey rather than chase the destination. Such encounters reinforce the belief that Murugan watches over the pilgrimage.

In this worldview, the forest and its animals are not obstacles but participants in the sacred walk. By the time pilgrims reach the Menik Ganga and prepare to enter the temple, the journey has become something far greater than a physical accomplishment.

The stories shared along the way, Murugan’s love for Valli, the thorn bushes marking their path, the ancient trees, and the watchful animals transform the route into a mythic landscape. The Pada Yatra becomes a living narrative where faith, folklore, and the natural world merge. Each step repeats an ancient story, reminding pilgrims that the ground beneath their feet is believed to be the same earth once walked by gods, lovers, and the spirits of the forest.

During the journey, I often told myself I would never do this again – once is enough. But the four days spent sitting with my own thoughts, realizing that no matter how difficult life becomes, someone will always walk beside you – now call me back. I feel the pull to walk the Pada Yatra again this year.



Crossing the waters of Yala, step by step along the Pada Yatra.

If there is one thing I would gently share with you, dear reader, it is this: the Pada Yatra is a sacred journey deeply held by all Sri Lankan communities across the country. While Tamils predominantly take part, the pilgrimage has long welcomed people of all ethnicities and faiths, drawn by its cultural and spiritual significance. It does not divide by religion or race, but opens itself to all who wish to walk with sincerity, even those who come from beyond Sri Lanka, to join the journey and its rituals. If you choose to walk this path, you are stepping into a space of devotion and living tradition. Move with care. Respect the journey, the silence, the faith that breathes through the forest, and the customs that shape it. And in doing so, allow yourself to also receive what the path offers, its wilderness, its quiet beauty, and the profound comfort of never truly walking alone. Respect the journey. Respect the silence. Respect the faith that lives in the forest – Respect the norms and tradition – yet enjoy the nature, wilderness, and sense of community of never being left behind.



Crossing the waters of Yala, step by step along the Pada Yatra.

The Pada Yatra begins around mid-May, culminating in the Kataragama Perahera in mid-July 2026.