The Kelaniya Duruthu Perahera

Posted on



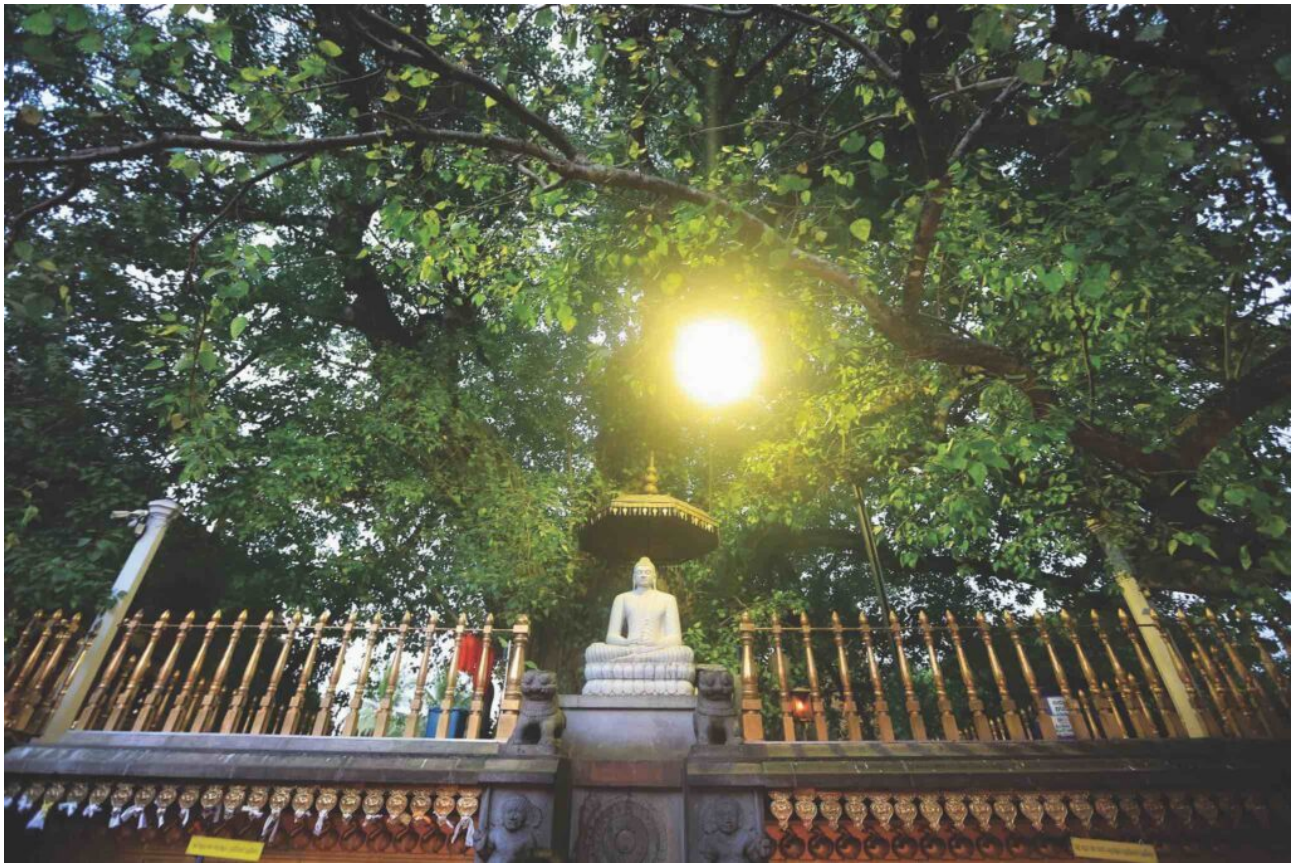
The intricately adorned casket atop the regal tusker elephant.

The Duruthu Perahera is one of the grandest Buddhist events in Sri Lanka, offering a magnificent display of spiritual devotion and cultural traditions. Its unique blend of religious observances and cultural performances reflects the deep-seated respect for Buddhism in the country and its rich historical legacy. Here's an even more detailed exploration of this mesmerizing festival:

The Historical Legacy of Duruthu Perahera

The origins of the Duruthu Perahera date back to the reign of King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe in the 18th century. It was during this period that many Peraheras (processions) were institutionalized to honor the Buddha and promote Buddhist traditions after decades of colonial influence.

The Kelaniya Temple's connection to the Buddha's third visit to Sri Lanka gives the Perahera its historical and spiritual foundation. According to ancient chronicles, Lord Buddha visited Kelaniya on the full moon day of Duruthu (January) to settle a dispute between two Naga kings. This visit is commemorated annually through this elaborate procession.



According to historical accounts, it is believed that the Lord Buddha visited Kelaniya on a full moon day during the month of Duruthu.



The illuminated Kelaniya Temple in the background as the vibrant procession unfolds in full swing.

The Symbolism of the Procession

The Duruthu Perahera is steeped in symbolism. The entire event is designed to honor the Buddha, promote peace and harmony, and remind devotees of Buddhist teachings. Every element of the procession holds a deeper meaning:

Kap Situweema: This ritual, performed on the first day, involves planting a sacred log or branch (‘Kap’) to signal the beginning of the Perahera. The act represents purification, a fresh start, and blessings for the community.

Sacred Relics: The central feature of the Maha Perahera is the carrying of a relic casket, symbolizing the presence of the Buddha. This act is believed to bestow blessings on the participants and spectators.

Elephants in the Procession: Elephants have a revered place in Sri Lankan culture, and their inclusion in the Perahera represents strength, wisdom, and dignity. The lead elephant, which carries the relic casket, is treated with the utmost

respect and adorned with elaborate regalia.

Traditional Dances and Performances:

Each dance form and cultural performance in the procession carries religious significance. For instance, the fire dancers signify the burning away of impurities, while whip-crackers announce the approach of the sacred relics.

Stages of the Duruthu Perahera

The procession unfolds over three days, each marked by increasing grandeur:

The Uda Perahera (First Night): This initial parade is smaller in scale but rich in rituals. The focus is on setting the spiritual tone for the upcoming festivities.

The Randoli Perahera (Second Night):

The Randoli Perahera expands on the first night with a more elaborate lineup of dancers, drummers, and elephants. The inclusion of the 'Randoli' (palanquins) signifies blessings for fertility and prosperity.

The Maha Perahera (Final Night): The grand finale, the Maha Perahera, is a spectacle of lights, music, and devotion. Thousands of spectators gather to witness the sacred relic casket being paraded through the streets amidst the rhythmic beats of traditional drums and chants of blessings.

The Role of the Kelaniya Community

The Duruthu Perahera is not just an event for the temple; it is a community- driven celebration. Local villagers and devotees actively participate in organizing the event, from preparing costumes to training dancers. Their collective efforts ensure that the Perahera remains a grand and seamless event each year.



Wewal dancers in vibrant costumes, showcasing their artistry.

> For centuries, this event has acted as a platform for showcasing Sri Lanka’s artistic and cultural heritage. It brings together traditional craftspeople, performers, and artists, creating an atmosphere of unity and pride.

Cultural Significance Beyond Religion

While the Duruthu Perahera is rooted in Buddhist traditions, it has a broader cultural appeal. For centuries, this event has acted as a platform for showcasing Sri Lanka’s artistic and cultural heritage. It brings together traditional craftspeople, performers, and artists, creating an atmosphere of unity and pride.

Traditional Costumes

The costumes worn by performers are masterpieces of Sri Lankan craftsmanship, featuring intricate designs and vibrant colors. These outfits are often handed down through generations, reflecting the island’s textile heritage.

Music and Rhythms

The drummers and flutists play age-old melodies, some of which have been passed down orally for centuries. The music enhances the spiritual ambiance, creating a sense of awe among onlookers.

Unity in Diversity

Although the Perahera is a Buddhist festival, it attracts people of all religions and backgrounds, showcasing Sri Lanka’s spirit of coexistence and mutual respect.

The Duruthu Perahera: A Tourist Attraction

The Perahera has become a significant tourist attraction, drawing visitors from around the globe. For many, it is an opportunity to witness the living traditions of Sri Lanka and experience the island’s spirituality firsthand.

Photography Opportunities

The vibrant colors, dazzling lights, and intricate details of the procession make it a photographer’s dream. Many travel photographers and filmmakers consider it a must-see event.



Kandyan drummers and dancers in traditional attires.

Authentic Experiences

Tourists often pair their visit to the Duruthu Perahera with explorations of the Kelaniya Temple, nearby local markets, and Colombo’s cultural landmarks, gaining a well-rounded understanding of Sri Lankan heritage.

Preservation of the Perahera Tradition

In recent years, efforts have been made to preserve the authenticity of the Duruthu Perahera while accommodating modern needs. For instance:

Eco-Friendly Practices: Organizers have begun implementing sustainable practices, such as minimizing the use of plastic and promoting eco-friendly materials in costumes and decorations.

Safety and Accessibility: Measures are taken to ensure the safety of participants, elephants and the spectators. Accessibility for differently-abled individuals has also improved.

Why you should experience the Duruthu Perahera

Attending the Perahera is not just about witnessing a cultural spectacle; it is about immersing yourself in a centuries-old tradition that celebrates peace, compassion, and spiritual enlightenment.

For Devotees: The Perahera provides a chance to earn blessings and deepen one’s faith.

For Tourists: It offers a unique cultural experience that is both awe-inspiring and educational.

Tips for Visitors

If you plan to attend the Perahera, here are a few tips:

Arrive Early: The best viewing spots fill up quickly, so arriving a few hours early is essential.

Dress Appropriately: Wear modest clothing that covers your shoulders and knees, as a sign of respect for the temple and its customs.

Respect Local Customs: Maintain silence during the procession and avoid obstructing the performers or elephants.

Capture Memories: Bring a camera, but remember to use it respectfully, when capturing images of devotees and monks. Please refrain from shining any flash lights directly on the elephants, as this can cause them stress and disorientation. The Perahera is an unforgettable journey through Sri Lanka's religious and cultural heritage. It encapsulates the spirit of Buddhism and celebrates the island's artistic traditions. Whether you are a devout Buddhist or a curious traveler, this grand event offers a once-in-a-lifetime experience of beauty, spirituality, and cultural unity.

Mark your calendar for January and make your way to Kelaniya to witness this spectacular fusion of devotion and artistry. It is a celebration that leaves a lasting impression on all who attend, reminding them of the timeless values of peace, harmony, and compassion.

December 31, 2024 – January 12, 2025 (Maha Perahera on January 12th at 8.30pm)



Wadiga Patuna dancers perform during the perahera.