

The Timeless Majesty of Kandy Esala Perahera

Posted on



The Esala Dalada Perahera, a dazzling festival by Sri Dalada Maligawa, is a vital part of Sri Lanka's cultural and religious calendar.



The golden casket of the Sacred Tooth Relic borne by a tusker.

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Photography Sri Dalada Maligawa.

The Esala Dalada Perahera (procession), held by the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, is a cornerstone of Sri Lanka's cultural and religious calendar. Winding through the streets of Kandy's city center, the procession's main attraction is the Sacred Relic, enshrined in an ornate casket and carried on the back of a majestic tusker. The event is a dazzling spectacle of the island's traditional dances and devotional expressions, with the streets lit and adorned in festive splendor.

Integral to the perahera are four devales close to the Tooth Relic Temple—shrines dedicated to the guardian deities Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama, and Pattini. They are prominently featured in the rituals. Beyond its spectacle, the festival holds deep meaning. Held in July-August, it marks gratitude for past harvests and invokes divine blessings for rain. The Tooth Relic is believed to have miraculous powers, including bringing rain. In 1815, when British colonial authorities halted the festival, a drought ensued. Public demand saw the rituals restored, and rains soon followed.

The Unsettling History of the Buddha's Relic

The Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha is Sri Lanka's most venerated object—an enduring symbol of heritage, sovereignty, and kingship. Its history is steeped in intrigue, wars, and ambition, coveted by local rulers and foreign invaders. The Relic arrived in the fourth century CE from the Kingdom of Kalinga in India, smuggled to safety by Princess Hemamala and Prince Dantha, hidden in her hair, as threats loomed over its survival.

Since its arrival during King Mahasena's reign, successive monarchs became guardians. The Tooth Relic came to represent the right to rule; protecting it became a sacred duty. Throughout the island's turbulent history, the Relic was moved from kingdom to kingdom—from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruwa, Dambadeniya, Yapahuwa, Kurunegala, Gampola, Kotte, and Sithawaka—often hidden or rescued in times of war, notably during Chola and Pandya invasions.

Its final resting place is the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, the last kingdom of Sri Lanka. King Wimaladharmasuriya I received it from its hiding place in Delgamuwa Raja Maha Viharaya, in Kuruwita Rathnapura, then part of the Sithawaka kingdom. The first shrine to the Tooth Relic was built in 1590 in Kandy. Though later destroyed by the Portuguese, it was rebuilt and expanded. The current structure, including the iconic octagon, is a legacy of kingship and devotion, completed under the last king, Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe.



Caparisoned elephants are the heart and soul of the perahera.

The Diyawadana Nilame

The Diyawadana Nilame is the highest-ranking lay official of the Temple of the Tooth Relic, a role steeped in history and tradition. Initially, the title referred to three royal officials responsible for water-related duties in the Kandyan court. One oversaw the king's bath, another attended to the royal household's water requirements, and the third was tasked with providing water for washing hands when the king worshipped the Sacred Relic.

By the time the British annexed the kingdom in 1815, only one Diyawadana Nilame

remained. He was of noble lineage and held office for life, charged with preserving rituals and managing temple lands. In 1853, official custodianship of the Sacred Relic was entrusted to the Diyawadana Nilame and the Chief Priests of Malwatta and Asgiriya Chapters. The Diyawadana Nilame, as lay custodian, was given one of the keys to the Relic's casket. Today, the position is an elected one, limited to two terms. Yet, it remains an immense responsibility. The Diyawadana Nilame upholds traditions, most notably by organizing the annual Esala Perahera. During the festival, he leads the proceedings, adorned in regal attire, symbolizing the unbroken legacy of reverence for the Sacred Relic.



Kumbal Perahera is an extraordinary spectacle of unmatched grandeur.

Planting of the Kapa

The Esala festival begins with the Kapa Situwima ritual in July, marking the ceremonial planting of a branch from a *lactiferous* tree, typically a tender, 60-centimetre male jackfruit stem. The *Kapa* carries multiple meanings: a sacred dedication and a representation of Lord Indra, the god of rain, symbolizing fertility, prosperity, and divine blessing.

As with all auspicious beginnings in Sri Lanka, this ritual seeks the blessings of the deities for a successful festival. The branch is carefully cut by the Kapurala (officiating priest) of the Aluthnuwara Dedimunda Devalaya near Mawanella. Wrapped in white cloth and carried in procession atop an elephant, it is first brought to the Vishnu Devalaya before being distributed to Natha, Kataragama, and Pattini shrines. The planting occurs at precisely chosen auspicious times, setting the spiritual tone for the following days.

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Dancers create a hypnotic symphony of movement.

Devale Perahera

The first phase of the Esala festival begins with the Devale Perahera—the processions of the four shrines dedicated to Natha, Vishnu, Kataragama, and Pattini. These processions commence following planting the Kapa within each shrine's premises, marking the formal start of the festivities. For the next four days, at auspicious times each evening, the four shrines conduct a short procession within the shrine premises known as the Abhyanthara Perahera or the internal procession. Each deity is honored through a reverent procession led by the Kapurala, carrying sacred insignia in an ornately adorned palanquin. Though confined within the temple grounds, these early processions are rich in symbolism, devotion, and ceremonial splendor, laying the spiritual groundwork for the grand pageantry yet to come.

The Kumbal Perahera

The second stage of the Esala festivities is the Kumbal Perahera, which runs until August 3. The name Kumbal is thought to derive either from the circular path a *Kumbala* (potter wasp) takes to build its nest, echoing the procession's route around the Temple of the Tooth Relic, or from an old tradition where a Kumbal Karaya (potter) led the procession bearing new clay vessels as offerings.

Today, the Kumbal Perahera is the most modest of the processions. It features fewer dancers, drummers, and elephants, and is marked by subdued lighting and minimal pageantry. The Diyawadana Nilame and Basnayake Nilames dress in simple white Mul Anduma attire, the ancient court costumes. Traditionally lavish, these outfits are deliberately pared down for this phase. Notably, the Diyawadana Nilame walks at the head of the procession only on the first day, with the Basnayake Nilames of the four shrines leading on the remaining nights—a recent change introduced under the current custodian.

Randoli Perahera

The Randoli Perahera marks the majestic final phase of the Esala festival. It parades through the streets of Kandy city from August 4 to 7, culminating in the Grand Randoli Perahera on Nikini Poya August 9. Each evening, the procession begins at a precisely chosen auspicious time.

The term Randoli refers to the palanquins once used by royal consorts—today, symbolically borne in honor of the four guardian deities, carrying their sacred insignia. The order of the procession is deeply symbolic. Leading is the Dalada Perahera, the grand procession of the Sacred Tooth Relic, followed by those of the devales: Natha (believed to be a past life of the Buddha), Vishnu (protector of the island and Buddhism), Kataragama (Skanda), and finally Pattini, the only female deity, whose procession features the only women performers—an inclusion introduced in the 1970s. Until then, men dressed up as women to perform in the Pattini Perahera.

The Randoli Perahera is a spectacle of unmatched grandeur. Chieftains, dancers, and drummers are lavishly attired in gold-threaded finery. On the final night, the Grand Randoli Perahera is a living pageant of Sri Lanka's sacred traditions—rhythmic, resplendent, and unforgettable. Elephants, adorned in elaborate regalia, sway under the glow of hundreds of torches. Over 2,000 performers and nearly 70 elephants participate, showcasing the rich heritage of Kandyan dance and ritual. It is a dazzling cavalcade of culture, tradition, and heritage in motion. Bare-bodied men, others draped in cascading layers of cloth, dancers spinning wheels and somersaulting to the thunder of drums and the haunting call of Horanewa flutes—each element adds to the rhythmic magic. Elephants, cloaked in luminous, jewel-toned regalia, sway gracefully to the music as they march. Every detail radiates opulence, with no effort spared to elevate the festival to the grandeur it so richly deserves.



Drummers – The heartbeat of the perahera.



Flag bearers proudly carry the Buddhist flags.



The planting of the *Kapa* – the ritual in progress.

The Water-Cutting Ceremony

After the grand procession concludes at midnight, the Sacred Tooth Relic casket is taken to the Asgiri Gedige Viharaya for the night—a historical tradition. When the Relic was smuggled out of Portuguese reach and hidden at Delgamuwa Raja Maha Viharaya during the Sithawaka era, it spent a night at Asgiri Gedige before arriving in Kandy. Today's ritual commemorates that moment. This place is also known as the Adahana Maluwa – the royal crematorium of yore.

While the Relic rests, the processions of the four devales continue to the Getambe jetty for the Diya Kapeema, or water-cutting ceremony, held this year at 1.18 am on August 9. The officiating priests of the four shrines board a boat, sail to a designated spot on the Mahaweli River, and ceremonially release the previous year's water and kapa branches, collecting fresh water in their place to be preserved for the year ahead.

Following the rite, the devale processions proceed to the Pillayar Kovil in Katukelle, where the deity palanquins are respectfully placed until the start of the Dahawala Perahera – the day procession.

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The Day Procession

The Dahawala Perahera, or day procession, takes place on August 9, beginning at 2.16 pm from the Asgiri Gedige Viharaya, where the Sacred Tooth Relic rested overnight. Earlier that day, the shrine processions stationed at the Pillayar Kovil in Katukelle set out at an auspicious time to join the main procession as it winds its way through the streets of Kandy toward the Temple of the Tooth Relic.

Upon reaching the Dalada Maligawa, the procession goes around the temple square three times in a final act of reverence. As the procession concludes, each party returns to its respective shrine. The Diyawadana Nilame formally hands the Relic back to the monks, who resume the daily worship rituals.

In a gesture steeped in tradition, the Diyawadana Nilame and other temple officials then meet the President of Sri Lanka to present a scroll announcing the successful completion of the Esala Perahera. This practice is a derivation from the past, when the chieftains reported to the king.

Waliyak Netuma

Following the day procession, the Waliyak Netuma ritual is performed at the Vishnu Devalaya—a Shanthi Karma meant to dispel any malevolent influences affecting all who took part in the Esala Perahera, including elephants, drummers, dancers, and officials. This sacred ceremony lasts seven days, yet interestingly, the performers do not participate.

The ritual is traditionally conducted by two families from Aluthnuwara Dedimunda Devalaya near Mawanella, a practice passed down through generations. This connection traces back to when the Vishnu Devalaya was initially located in Aluthnuwara before being moved to Kandy by King Keerthi Sri Rajasinghe, fleeing Portuguese invasions that ravaged and looted the original site.

The Esala festival is the island's most revered religious and cultural celebration. From venerating the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha to invoking its ancient power as a provider of rain, the festival is a living testament to faith, tradition, and devotion.

Auspicious Times and Rituals

Every aspect of the Esala festival unfolds according to carefully chosen auspicious times, guided by expert astrologers. Each day, three cannon shots mark the rhythm of the celebrations: the first calls all participants—including officials and performers—to prepare and don their elaborate costumes; the Diyawadana Nilame and his deputies take nearly 45 minutes to dress in their ceremonial robes and

regalia. The second cannon signals the procession's start, and the third marks its conclusion. After each day's parade, the Sacred Relic and the deities' insignias are respectfully returned to their shrines. This ritual rhythm of cannon fire concludes with the Day Perahera.

Thus, the Esala festival is the island's most revered religious and cultural celebration. From venerating the Sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha to invoking its ancient power as a provider of rain, the festival is a living testament to faith, tradition, and devotion. At its heart, it remains a tribute to a sacred object that Sri Lankans hold miraculous, a symbol of unity and spiritual continuity across generations.

August 1: 3rd Kumbal Perahera

August 2: 4th Kumbal Perahera

August 3: 5th Kumbal Perahera

August 4: 1st Randoli Perahera

August 5: 2nd Randoli Perahera

August 6: 3rd Randoli Perahera

August 7: 4th Randoli Perahera

August 8: Final Randoli Perahera

(The Grand Randoli Procession)

August 9: Diya Kapeema

(The water cutting ceremony) and

Dahawal Perahera (Day procession)



Screenshot

The tusker bearing the Sacred Tooth Relic embarks on the Dahawala Perahera/Day Procession.



Screenshot

Pradeep Nilanga Dela, the Diyawadana Nilame in ceremonial attire.