

THE WORLD OF AVATAR

The lush greenery of the movie's alien planet comes to life at Gardens by the Bay



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In another sculpture installation, a family of the fictional Na'vi race is greeted by Pandora's flora and fauna while climbing through trees.

Alien flora and fauna have invaded the Cloud Forest at Gardens by the Bay.

Acid-dripping plants and assorted creatures from director James Cameron's 2009 blockbuster film *Avatar* have sprouted amid the lush greenery.

They are part of an immersive installation created with the Cloud Forest in mind.

Avatar: The Experience, which is on till March 31 and organised by Cityneon Holdings, Disney Location-Based Experiences and Lightstorm Entertainment, comes in time to build the hype for the movie's sequel. *Avatar: The Way of Water* opens here on Dec 15 and visitors can get a sneak peek at a new creature called an *Ilu* at the exhibition.

Scattered through the Cloud Forest's more than 72,000 plants are realistically detailed sculptures of the Na'vi, the bipedal humanoid inhabitants of Pandora; interactive stops where visitors can play with light and create their own Na'vi avatars; and what the creators say is the most sophisticated animatronic creature in the world.

The animatronic mountain banshee, with a wingspan of 10m and weighing about 2 tonnes, had to fit through a lift door measuring just 1.2m by 2.1m.

Cityneon's chief technical officer Michael Mattox, 47, solved the puzzle by building it like a Lego structure. The four sections, he says, each fit into the lift with barely an inch to spare.

The idea for the show was seeded in 2017 when Cityneon's group chief creative officer Welby Altidor first visited the Gardens and walked into the Cloud Forest dome.

The 49-year-old says: "The doors opened, I saw this waterfall and I said, 'This is *Avatar*.'"

It took years of discussions with Disney and Lightstorm, as well as 18 months of planning, before the seed bore fruit.

There were unusual design and installation challenges for the Cityneon team. Mr Mattox says: "This is a living environment. There are unique parameters for what you can do and what you can't do."

The veteran who has worked with San Diego Seaworld and Cirque du Soleil adds: "Usually for an exhibition, it's in a black box. There are no visitors and you don't have to worry about lighting and sound."

Here, the team had to work overnight for two months, shivering in the damp cold as temperatures dipped to 18 deg C, to install the show as the dome remained open to visitors throughout the day.

The glass dome means sound waves would bounce, so audio had to be carefully calibrated. Mr Mattox also had to worry about damp affecting the electronic equipment, as light and music are integral to the show.

Another challenge was that the works had to be designed to be viewed in the day as well as at night.

Mr Altidor resolved this by reaching for old-fashioned inspiration. He says: "I connected to the tradition of sculpture gardens, where you have a great garden, then you bring in sculptures or attractions."



A recreation of a Scorpion Thistle plant from the *Avatar* movie at the Cloud Forest Dome. ST PHOTOS: DESMOND FOO

7 wonders of Avatar's Pandora

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The Straits Times picks seven must-see stops for Avatar: The Experience at Gardens by the Bay.

1. MOUNTAIN BANSHEE AND BABY BANSHEE

Get up close to a roaring mountain banshee with a wingspan

of 10m. And stay for the show, which takes place three times every hour.

Watch how a baby banshee changes the mountain banshee's (both right) behaviour.

The animatronic adult banshee is equipped with cameras and microphones so it can "see" and "hear", and it will be able to track objects. This gives it a life-like demeanour as it moves and "looks" around.



2. VIPERWOLF DEN AND BABY VIPERWOLF

Do not miss this discreet corner display (above) where

bushes will twitch and rustle to reveal a baby viperwolf.

Approach quietly to observe it interacting with the other viperwolf in the den.



3. WATERFALL LIGHT SHOW

Get that Instagram shot at this first stop at the entrance to the Cloud Forest, where a snarling juvenile mountain banshee stands in front of the waterfall. The feature (above) will be lit dramatically at night for extra oomph.



4. ENCOUNTER WITH EYWA

Fans of Japanese collective teamlab's interactive displays will love this immersive room (left) where visitors will be enveloped in Eywa.

Worshipped on the jungle moon of Pandora, she is equivalent to Earth's Gaia, an encompassing planetary consciousness that keeps the world in balance and harmony.



5. SACRED SPACE

"Play" with heart-shaped leaves at this interactive display (left) of light and sound which climbs up the multi-storey plant wall.



6. AVATARISE YOURSELF

Step into a photo booth (left) and create your own avatar on Pandora. There will be a QR code for you to download your Na'vi self-portrait.

7. FIREPOD

Listen to Na'vi folk tales around a fire (right) and interact with shadows on the wall.



ST PHOTOS: DESMOND FOO



The exhibition offers a sneak peek at the Ilu, a creature from the Avatar sequel. ST PHOTOS: DESMOND FOO

AVATAR: THE EXPERIENCE

WHERE Cloud Forest, Gardens by the Bay, 18, Marina Gardens Drive

WHEN Till March 31

ADMISSION From \$23

INFO str.sg/wjor

'Bizarre yet beautiful' journey

While indoor attractions can rely on darkness and lighting to hide imperfections, the Cloud Forest's daytime brightness meant that the sculptures had to be designed and made to exacting standards to withstand close scrutiny.

Mr Mattox is particularly pleased with the Unidelta tree, one of the first works to be installed when works began two months ago. He says with a chuckle: "No one realised it was fake."

The deception is complemented by the landscaping design. Mr Jeffrey Alan Courtney, 47, the Gardens' senior director (conservatory operations), says an additional 5,700 plants were brought in for the show. These comprise more than 160 different species and varieties, including 20 that have not been displayed in the Gardens before.

He adds: "We selected plants that looked like they could have come from an alien planet, with bizarre yet beautiful forms, colours, leaf patterns, or flowers."

"To match the blue and purple tones in Avatar: The Experience, we chose plants with blue-hued inflorescences or silvery leaf patterns or colours, so they would reflect light and complement the display from day to night."

Look out for the Aechmea 'Blue Tango', an eye-catching bromeliad with electric-blue flowers and contrasting hot-pink flower stalks, and the iridescent Blue Oil Fern (Microsorium thailandicum).

There are also plants that mirror Pandora's life forms, such as the Colocasia 'Pharaoh's Mask', whose leaves have exaggerated deep-purple veins that bulge, giving it a ribcage-like appearance.

All the plants, Mr Courtney says, will remain in the Cloud Forest's

living collection after the show ends.

Mr Altidor says the Cloud Forest presents a great baseline because "I already have an incredible garden walk experience".

This provided the foundation for the Avatar experience, which he designed to take into consideration logistics as well as visitor experience.

The dome is divided into five zones, offering a journey for visitors. Mr Altidor says: "It's like when you write a piece of music. There are crescendos and diminuendos, peaks and valleys."

The first zone eases visitors in with a photo opportunity in the form of a strategically positioned statue of a juvenile mountain banshee, before a light show at the waterfall draws them further in. This was planned so that visitors would flow through smoothly without clogging the pathways.



Mr Welby Altidor (above left), group chief creative officer of Cityneon, and Mr Michael Mattox, chief technical officer, designed and built Avatar: The Experience.

The interactive stations scattered throughout are designed to be as intuitive as possible. The Sacred Space stop, for example, has large "leaves" which visitors can touch to spark sound and light. But there are no text instructions. Instead, the "leaf" lights up, drawing the attention of visitors and enticing them to interact with it.

While the show is meant to en-

ertain, Mr Altidor says Pandora's story and the healing vibe of the Gardens combine to offer visitors a message. "We are not here to preach. But just going through this experience is a beautiful metaphor for how important it is to care for our world."

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