

Dazzling light show provided a real lift in challenging times

The rain trickled down from the sky as the first guests filed into The Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh for the annual festive light show.

The air had a definite winter chill and all entrants were well wrapped up. Brollies were at the ready, but the weather failed to put a damper on this dazzling event.

Over one million light bulbs have been switched on for this, the fourth staging of the seasonal light show which runs until after Christmas.

Garden officials stressed that months of planning have gone into this now popular outdoor event which should be one of the highlights of this Christmas in the Capital.

Social distancing measures are in place and extra staff engaged to ensure that the public stay safe and these were in evidence when we made our way around to an eclectic mix of music including Christmas classics.

Michael Buble, Bing Crosby and George Michael can be heard above the excited chatter as entrants view bouncing lines of light and giant luminescent sculptures rising high into the sky.

Giant baubles and snowflakes are a feature as well as the fire garden which is aglow with hundreds of flickering flames.

A tribute to the NHS for their prodigious efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic is included in the mix of light shows which had the opening night audience reaching for their mobile phones and cameras.

The Chinese lantern section was among the most striking, as were two special light shows. One was centred around one of the ten greenhouses at the popular park whose mission is to explore, conserve and explain the world of plants for a better future.

For more than two minutes audiences stood spellbound at the display, searchlights piercing the night sky as an array of coloured light lit up the iconic building which houses some rare plants from around the globe. They broke out in spontaneous applause as the lights dimmed.

I was particularly intrigued at the light show which used one of the man houses on site as the backdrop with images of Edinburgh, including the Castle, and the surrounding area – the Forth Rail Bridge sticks out in my memory – projected onto the brickwork.

Elsewhere, there were illuminated fountains, trees and water exhibits and it has taken three weeks to build the exhibits after planning began in March. Of course, things have changed as the pandemic has gripped the nation.

Officials admit that this year has been the most challenging to date, having to adapt their plans to suit, but they have responded.

Now they hope the residents of Edinburgh reward their efforts by visiting in big numbers. Tickets, we hear, are selling fast and It takes around an hour to stroll around the well-marshalled, light show in the 70-acre park .

Mulled wine and hot chocolate are available from kiosks and Santa is there to bring a smile to the face of the children.

His grotto is one of the final exhibits and he wishes all guests a Merry Christmas as they make their way to the exit.

By day, this is one of the world's leading botanic gardens, housing 100,000 plants, where visitors can discover a history dating back 350 years.

By night, the park is an oasis of light which certainly gave us a lift during these challenging times.

Simon Milne, Regius Keeper of the Royal Botanic Garden, Edinburgh, said: "By coming to the trail not only will visitors enjoy a wonderful festive experience but also help us and our work enormously.

"Profits help finance our important and innovative plant research and conservation programmes in Scotland and around the world. Never has our work been more crucial as we face the interrelated challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, biodiversity loss and climate change."

The 2019 trail welcomed 76,000 visitors during its five-week run and due to COVID-19 **ALL** tickets must be pre-booked for the trail in advance online.

For ticket information, pricing and timings, visit the website and follow @mychristmastrails #ChristmasAtTheBotanics <https://christmasatthebotanics.seetickets.com/timeslots/christmas-at-the-botanics/>