

Travel industry embraces virtual reality as marketing tool

December 16 2015, by Beth J. Harpaz



In this Sept. 19, 2014, file photo, Anan Bishara, left, and Denise Burrell, right, both from New York, check out a virtual reality display that lets visitors explore the Pike Place Market and other attractions atop the Space Needle in Seattle. The high-tech attractions are part of an explosion of virtual reality in the travel industry. (AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, File)

From roller coasters to cruises to destinations, virtual reality is exploding as a way to market travel.

You can parasail and paddle-board using [virtual reality](#) content produced by Florida's Visit St. Pete/Clearwater Tourism Board. You can land a jet on Hamilton Island in Queensland, Australia, then go swimming with tropical fish in the Great Barrier Reef. You can watch the opening song "Circle of Life," recorded at a live Broadway performance of "The Lion King," and peer around the theater at everything from the aisles and audience, to the performers and props, to the conductor and backstage. And even if you can't afford Dubai's luxury Burj Al Arab Jumeirah hotel, you can take a 3-D online tour of a royal suite, lobby, helipad, bar, spa, restaurants, marble staircase with cheetah-print carpet and rotating canopy bed.

"VR is taking the world by storm, similar to what mobile did seven years ago," said Abi Mandelbaum, CEO of YouVisit, which has created over 300 VR experiences for destinations, from Vatican City to Mexico's Grand Velas Riviera Maya. "Virtual reality is the most realistic experience you can have of a place without being there. It's powerful. It gets people excited and engaged and interested in having that experience in real life."

Virtual reality offers immersive, 3-D [experiences](#) via videos and images with 360-degree perspectives, using a \$100 headset from Samsung or a virtually free cardboard contraption designed by Google. You need your own smartphone, and the \$100 headset works only with certain Samsung models. You can also watch VR videos online with a 360-degree view, though they're not as immersive as using a headset because you're not shutting out your surroundings.



This undated rendering provided by Dollywood theme park shows the Lightning Rod wooden roller coaster, in Pigeon Forge, Tenn., scheduled to open in March. Dollywood has created a virtual reality experience to show off what the ride will be like and to help build buzz among consumers. Virtual reality has exploded in the last year or two as a marketing tool for destinations, attractions and other travel entities. (Dollywood via AP)

Whichever your method, by moving the device or cursor in different directions, you can see the sky, the floor, down a hallway or around a corner. Mandelbaum said the average user spends 10 minutes on a VR

experience, "an eternity" in the digital world.

Dolly Parton's theme park, Dollywood, in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, created a VR experience to introduce a new ride, Lightning Rod, billed as the "world's fastest wooden coaster."

"You can take your phone and spin it up and down, look behind you, to the left or right, to get an idea of what this ride is like," said Dollywood spokesman Wes Ramey, comparing the VR experience to looking at photos or reviews before booking a trip. "The ride will not open until March, but this builds buzz around it. It gives people an opportunity to ride it virtually before it's completed."

Mall of America in Minnesota is launching its first VR videos this month, showing its onsite aquarium, Nickelodeon Universe theme park, Santa exhibit, a shopping wing and a choral performance. Carnival Corp.'s new Fathom brand, which plans voluntourism cruises to the Dominican Republic and Cuba, is working on VR content that shows participants in onshore activities like planting seedlings in a reforestation program, reciting English with school children, dancing to Latin music and sharing a meal with locals. And in January, the Dali Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, will launch an "Inside Dali's Mind" VR experience that lets users walk around Dali's imagined structures and meet the characters he painted.



This Sept. 24, 2015 file photo shows the Samsung Gear VR on display during the Oculus 2 conference in Los Angeles. Thursday, Sept. 24, 2015. Samsung hopes the new model headset for viewing virtual reality experiences will help push virtual reality into the mainstream. Virtual reality has exploded as a marketing tool in the travel industry in the last year or two. (AP Photo/Nick Ut, File)

Because so few consumers own viewing devices, some VR producers set up at trade shows, shopping malls, pop-up stores and even on the street where they can provide the headsets. The Miami-based Newlink public relations firm created a VR experience for the Dominican Republic that can be seen on YouTube in a simple 360-degree version, but the company also showed it at trade shows, supplying VR headsets so viewers could get the full effect. As a marketing technique, said Newlink spokeswoman Lourdes Perez, "it is the next big thing."

Is there a risk that viewers will be so satisfied by the VR experience that they won't need to see the real thing? Visitors to Seattle's Space Needle

observatory sometimes focus less on real views of the city out the windows because they're so mesmerized by virtual views on the observatory's walls, screens and videos.

But Mandelbaum's not worried. When YouVisit set up tents in Manhattan where more than 1,000 visitors used VR headsets to experience a Carnival cruise, "the reactions were incredible. They would say, 'I didn't know I could do all that on a cruise.' Once they see what it's like, they're more inclined to book."

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