

# VIRTUAL TECHNOLOGY - A HYPE OR THE FUTURE OF TRAVEL?

Digital museum tours, holograms on city tours - the latest virtual technology has long since arrived in the travel sector - fueled by Covid. Is this just a hype or the future of travel?

Climbing Mount Everest from your sofa, visiting a museum in New York or diving through a coral reef in the ocean: Virtual experiences have received an enormous boost from the corona pandemic. This has not gone unnoticed by the travel and leisure industry. **It is no longer using technology just for marketing, but as an event product.** Will the hype stay? And if so, where is the journey heading? Two researchers look into the future for us.

## The New World

The "virtual reality" experience requires a "computer-generated, virtual, three-dimensional environment that you perceive with VR glasses," explains Armin Brysch, researcher at Kempten University of Applied Sciences. Shielding by means of VR goggles, or cave, a room fully equipped with monitors, is necessary to be completely surrounded by the virtual world. "When you no longer have a reference point in the real world because of the 360-degree environment, your brain realizes very quickly that it has to find its way in the new world," Brysch explains. You feel like you are part of the journey.

"The deeper the traveler is immersed in the world given to him or her, the more realistic the artificial experience," says the researcher. Experts like him call this "immersion." This requires high-resolution images and an exciting narrative.

## Virtual Journey through Time

Even though some tourism experts still describe virtual reality as a niche, something is changing. With the provider Timeride, for example, visitors can go on virtual time travels and immerse themselves in the life of earlier eras - the service is available in many cities.

Amusement parks also make use of technology. They have created entire fantasy worlds and enabled journeys through the universe. Europa-Park in Rust, for example, is a pioneer here. The roller coaster rides can be spiced up with VR glasses, and with the Yullbe there is an entire "VR experience center," as Europa-Park calls it.

"Many large art museums are also using VR applications," Armin Brysch has observed. He expects the offerings to stay. "While we now have a desire for social experiences, the technology will keep its place."

## One Fifth Expects Travel in the Metaverse

Does that have a future? If you believe a recent survey by Bitkom Research, it seems so. According to the survey, one-fifth (21 percent) of respondents aged 16 and older expect to explore foreign places in the metaverse or with virtual reality glasses in 2030 instead of traveling there in the traditional way - the proportion is higher among younger people. But even among the over-64s, 15 percent still hold this view. The metaverse? That's a virtual space that expands today's Internet and in which people move and interact as avatars, i.e., through a digital model of themselves, Bitkom explains.

## Just a Covid Hype?

The pandemic has fueled virtual travel offers. When travel was not possible in times of strict restrictions, many wanted to escape everyday life, at least digitally, to exotic places. The Covid era, at the latest, has increased the trust in digital products, says Armin Brysch. People have learned to manage their everyday lives well with digital solutions.

Experts believe that VR offerings, as they were during the pandemic, are no longer used to the extent they were. That was due to hype and a lack of alternatives.

We live in a digital world, but we are analog people. That's why you can't move everything into the digital realm. Especially not things that are already perfect in the real world. A visit to a museum is not just the visual consumption of works of art, but a total experience. Even digital concerts can't reproduce what makes up the analog, for example, coincidence.

## Virtual Reality Vacation

It will stay where it makes sense, for example, that is travel advice. By looking at a couple of places with VR glasses and then deciding on one, that can work.

By viewing 360-degree experiences in a hotel, in a city, at the seaside or other tourist environments, it can awaken longings to travel there. If the destination is already set, a VR experience like this helps people better prepare for the tour.

## Real Travel Remains

The question remains whether virtual travel can replace real travel. Experts are quite certain. Just because we can look at the destination in 3D, we won't give up going there. But for some target groups, there may be trade-offs, the researcher says: for people who can't travel everywhere because of physical limitations. Or for people for whom travel is too expensive, stressful or dangerous. Or even for people who want to forgo certain trips in favor of climate protection. That's where VR can create a substitute experience.

For extended experiences at the vacation destination, the softer variant can also be used, "augmented reality" (AR). Here, a computer-generated image is added to the real world. So there is a physical distance between the user and the app, over which previous buildings, for example, are displayed in real-time as soon as you approach their location. One example is "Pokémon Go".

## What's Next?

The highest form of virtuality is the metaverse. **The first forms are already replacing business travel.** There's no longer just the zoom call, but you meet in virtual spaces as a partial avatar.

Especially where teams have to develop and design things together, this can be an advantage. The metaverse is even more about social interaction. You can seamlessly go through different areas of life and interact with other people. In the near future people will be able to lie on a beach there with friends or visit a reef.

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