



Technology and the Future of Travel

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The future of travel and tourism is being driven by a complex set of converging forces and these are driving new thinking about how technology can reshape the travel experience. For example, declining real incomes in the developed world coupled with rising affluence in the emerging nations are reshaping the visitor profile and driving a shift in emphasis which markets should be targeting. At the same time, concerns over the environmental impacts tourism, and greenhouse gas emissions from transport in particular, are encouraging travellers to think more carefully about their ecological footprint. For tourism destinations, environmental factors are forcing a rethink of how many tourists to allow in, what to charge and who to target.

Social trends are putting increasing pressure on our available leisure time and driving the desire for personalisation of the experience. On the one hand we want constant connectivity, yet on the other we are looking for stories to tell our friends about the remote new 'unspoilt' destinations we've discovered! Political upheavals and security concerns are also leading some travellers to rethink the desirability of visiting certain locations. Finally, innovation is reshaping the travel experience by - for example - enabling shorter flying times. Technology is also providing us with augmented reality digital overlays of information on real world objects to enhance our experience. Hence, I can now look at the Brandenburg Gate in Germany and with my phone scan around to see what the Berlin Wall would actually have looked like before it came down.

So, technology now offers the ability to enhance, personalise and deepen the physical travel experience. However, increasingly, it is also offering the potential to address the needs of those who want to experience a destination but without the time, cost or environmental impact of physical travel. Already through virtual worlds, augmented reality, 3D virtual reality and other immersive technologies I can get a feel for a destination and travel experiences through the eyes of other visitors. For example, in soccer, the UK's Premier League is aiming to launch a 3D television service within the next five years that will give fans the experience of sitting in any part of the stadium they choose and watching the game as it would be experienced by those physically in attendance. Developments such as super wide photography and 3D graphical representations will be combined to recreate the live experience.

Advances in science and technology will continue to extend the potential of virtual experiences. For example, the cognitive sciences are constantly breaking new ground, teaching us more about the functioning of the brain and the electrical impulses that are triggered by each of our senses. Once these electrical patterns have been decoded, we will be in a position to go beyond sharing the audio-visual experience of being in the Galapagos Islands. The next stage in immersivity and augmented experiences will be to recreate electronically the smells, tactile experiences and taste sensations as if we were there for real. Such developments are only a matter of 5-10 years away.

The more immersive the experience becomes, the closer we will be able to mimic the live experience through virtual channels. The Maldives could recreate itself in a virtual world down to the last detail and using multi-sensory virtual reality, enabling virtual tourists to experience something close to the real one. Populating this virtual world with locals, hotels, restaurants, service staff and other visitors will help enhance the experience. New employment opportunities could be created to act as a hotel concierge or tour guide in the virtual world. The virtual holiday can also become a year round 'any time any place' experience. Quiet Sunday afternoons, boring daily commutes on public transport and long train rides can all be transformed through immersive technology. Virtual travel on demand will allow us to dip in and out of a travel experience at will. How different might your daily life become if you could tour the Taj Mahal on your way to work, stroll down the banks of the Ganges on your way home and join in the Mumbai Diwali celebrations after dinner?

With the developments described so far, the virtual traveller or 'user' will still be able to distinguish between those vacations which they have experienced physically and those which they have only consumed electronically. However, there is the potential to extend the experience to 'full memory transfer' – where it will be much harder to distinguish real from virtual. As we deepen our understanding of how we process information and encode our memories, so we are learning how to transfer electronic information directly to the brain. Experiments have already been undertaken where individuals have transmitted numbers, colours and basic images to each other wirelessly. The ultimate goal here is what inventor and futurist Ray Kurzweil terms 'the singularity' – the point at which we can all connect to each other share information and deepen our 'collective intelligence' via the internet or its successor.

Long before the singularity arrives, we should be in a position to capture every aspect of the experiences of a physical tourist, encode them and then enable others to download those experiences directly to their memories. At that point it really isn't clear whether we'll still be able to distinguish these new downloaded memories from those based on our own physical experiences. The potential then emerges to offer differently priced categories of experience from backpacker to billionaire or celebrity. Imagine the scene, you walk into the office on Monday morning and begin to recount the amazing week you've spent in Venice with Megan Fox or Brad Pitt. To your horror and confusion, you discover that two other workmates are claiming to have had exactly the same experience down to the magical kiss in the gondola and fantastic spaghetti marinara in that tiny restaurant just off St Mark's Square!

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