

The next frontier of travel for the super rich

The latest virtual reality technology will allow the wealthy to turn their holiday memories into something they can return to time and again

By Emma Featherstone

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Emma as she swooped over the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh

I was swooping over the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, above a burnished temple, a giant dam, and then a holiday resort. I gripped my glider tightly, my weight occasionally shifting left or right with the currents. I glanced down to see a pair of legs dangling below.

This view, usually only accessible to members of the Bangladeshi military, had opened up on the top floor of a Norwich townhouse.

I was visiting Immersive Studios, which uses VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality) to create projects such as this. The installation, when complete, will feature at the Banggabandhu Military Museum in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

Covid-19, and the subsequent international shutdown, prompted increased interest in VR and – that now dreaded term – the metaverse. Many, when travel consisted of a walk to the local park, or the nearest supermarket, tried virtual tours of, say, Petra, or the Louvre.

Some delved a little further into these new realms, investing in VR headsets – in January, Currys PC World said sales for these had jumped by 350 per cent. Furthermore, Google searches for the word “metaverse” – a space where physical and virtual worlds mesh – increased tenfold between 2020 and 2021. And that was ahead of Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg’s awkward video explaining how and why the social media company would be rebranding itself “Meta”.

Now that Covid restrictions have been eased and international travel restarted, the VR possibilities haven’t shrunk – they’ve bloomed. VR converts have sought out fresh and creative ways in which to employ the technology to enhance, or even relive, their real holidays.

Philippe Brown, founder of bespoke travel company Brown and Hudson, has direct access to the very consumer that has both the means and imagination to push the potential of VR. Unsurprisingly, Silicon Valley chief executives are among his clients most interested in this evolving medium. Among the most ambitious requests he’s working to achieve is creating a new form of holiday album, realised through VR. He consulted the team at Immersive Studios in his effort to realise the project. A rough timeline has been drawn up, and it should begin in May 2022.

It will likely involve a videographer, clutching a 360-degree camera, trailing a family on their travels, capturing memories that they can later return to in virtual form. The cost to send a videographer with a client, then create such a project, would be significant. Niky Ellison, from Immersive, puts the figure at around £250,000 – a hefty price tag for holiday snaps, albeit a version that could transport you back to fading memories as you age.

Yet VR, and the so-called metaverse that it might enable, still have some way to go to replace the experience of real travel.

“While the tech is phenomenal, it’s not a fix-all – you can’t take everything and put it on a VR headset and it’s immediately better,” says Ellison. “The idea does need to be built around this immersive technology.”

Indeed, while my experiences at Immersive – I also enjoyed a recreation of an Eighties concert, a tour of a Maldives resort, and a drive through the Italian Alps – were intriguing, I didn’t entirely lose myself in any of these worlds. I was, rather – as a novice VR user – impressed by the skill that could create something so close to reality (even if it still felt too far from it to veer into the uncanny).

Matthew Martin, Immersive’s managing director, says VR “still has a little way to go to achieve absolute realism.”

An extra layer of technology could change this. Both he and Brown point to what’s known as haptic feedback. This is the use of vibrations, motions and forces to communicate with the user – you’ll likely have experienced it when using a smartphone or a gaming controller. TESLASUIT and bHaptics are among the companies creating garments that allow their customers to feel this feedback across larger parts of the body

In a travel context, for example, you could potentially enter a VR version of the Niagara Falls and feel the spray landing on your skin. Heat, air and scent are among the other effects available. That stepping-off-the-plane wave of hot air feeling may soon not require you to take a flight at all.

Some advanced VR experiences are accessible without an unlimited budget. Take JUMP, a wingsuit simulation that claims to let customers “perform one of the world’s most dangerous and technically difficult stunts with little to no training, no parachuting experience, no cost for equipment and setup, and no risk of death trying to pull it off”.

Its users pull on a wind suit and, together with a VR headset, wind effects and a body harness, they can experience the thrill of skydiving, with none of the potential peril. Martin at Immersive singles it out as the use of virtual technology he’s most excited to try. Users begin on a cliff edge, and then can change the course of their flight as they go.

“The content creation alone to achieve this is hugely ambitious,” says Martin. “On top of that, they’ve created a completely unique hardware and software stack to make the experience believable.” JUMP, which is based in Utah and New Jersey, is selling passes for as little as \$99 (£74).

Another evolving thread of VR mimics time travel. The concert Immersive has recreated is one example of this. Brown, meanwhile, has a client who is keen to create an experience of London in the 1980s. The average consumer will be priced out of such custom-made experiences for the time being, however. Brown estimates that the cost will be around £175,000 per setting.

“So ultimately [it will cost] well over £1 million for an experience with depth and durability. When you consider the cost of a yacht or jet charter – mere logistical components of a physical travel experience – your never-ending virtual experience is pretty good value,” he says.

Considering how use of both these forms of luxury travel spiked during the pandemic – even as commercial services returned to normal – private jet providers Flexjet and PrivateFly saw services increase by 53 per cent in September, compared to August.

“In fact, our flight volumes in both October and already at this stage in November are also higher than July or August,” says Marine Eugène, european managing director of Flexjet and PrivateFly.

“This is a very unusual seasonal pattern – November is often one of the quietest months of the year for private jet travel in Europe.”

If those with the resources to invest in a regular private jet rental (a group might charter one four-person aircraft from the UK to the South of France for £8,000, for example) might consider investing a quarter of a million pounds in a virtual memory bank that they could, potentially, return to for years to come.

Brown is keen to highlight how it could be used to supplement travel. Those who can no longer board a plane, or venture into mountainous regions, for example, could gain virtual access to destinations around the world. Stressed workers could put on a headset and escape to a paradise-like island during their lunch hour. War-torn regions that hold ancient treasures or beautiful landscapes could be explored without danger.

The custom-made VR holiday album might be out of reach for all but the super-wealthy for now, but this technology evolves quickly. Ellison estimates a VR platform focused on taking its users on holiday will be in place by the end of 2022. After my brief wander into meta worlds, I’m eager to return.