Chapter 10

Mixed Realities as the New Reality in Tourism:
The Benefits of New Technologies for Visitors, Workers, and the Industry at Large

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes a comprehensive approach to understand not only how augmented reality and virtual reality operate within the tourism industry, but also how mixed reality can contribute to enhance the visitor experience and how tourism organizations can move beyond traditional communication and physical experiences into a new type of tourism approach that helps them stay relevant in the long term, as well as in the mid-term. Since the tourism industry is amongst the most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, changes are essential to ensure an adequate adaptation to the 'new normal'. Technology enables various tourist organizations to generate greater value creation and opens possibilities to be able to extend the visit beyond physical presence, to ensure the safety of workers and visitors, to improve processes, and to make them more competitive overall. If this is carried out in collaboration with all stakeholders, one destination can generate a solid network to promote itself and become competitive during travel restrictions and in preparation for a post-pandemic new normal.

INTRODUCTION

Tourism promotion organizations and destination management organizations (DMOs) who want to attract travelers to their destinations face harsher competition than ever. Therefore, if they want to improve their stakes of succeeding and stay relevant in the long term, they should not only update the methods they use to create value for visitors, but also the way they communicate and deliver that value. In today's attention economy, tourist destinations compete against one another to attract the interest of their audiences, as a preliminary step to transforming that interest into a visit (Casado-Claro, 2017), but they also must compete with a myriad of other actors that publicize their content online (natural and cultural attractions, resorts, influencers, etc.).

During the past decades, the increase of digitalization has been affecting humankind, daily lives, and especially leisure activities. In 2020, with the SARS-COV-2 pandemic affecting all countries around the world, this process saw an exponential increase as the many mobility restrictions called for a virtual replacement of all activities wherever it was possible. In this context, tourism was one of the most affected industries, as visitors could not travel due to their own fears and countries' travel restrictions.

However, this context inspired stakeholders in this sector to become even more creative and provide alternative solutions. To this end, new technologies have been incorporated to create experiences that would meet the requirements of consumers and the government's restrictions, such as virtual tour experiences. As some regions and countries eased their restrictions on travelling, as in the case of the Schengen Area (Europe) in the summer of 2020, digital elements became a key tool to reduce uncertainty. Technological elements provided more information in a highly interactive way, limiting contact with other individuals, or delivering updates in real time, among many other features.

Therefore, new technologies were able to contribute to reducing stress, in both visitors and workers. Through these novel methodologies it was possible to make the tourist experience at the destination more enjoyable. The inception of 5G networks and the constraints of travel in the times of COVID-19 have enhanced their application and added a new dimension to their use: it is not only about enjoying the travel experience, but also about making it safer.

The use of new technologies, such as Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR), in the travel, hospitality and tourism industries promotes happiness and subjective well-being, not only by reducing various stress factors such as the fear of getting lost in an unfamiliar place, or the discomfort of communicating in a foreign language, but also by generating added value for visitor attractions and tourism-related businesses (Williams and Slak.Valek, 2019; Correira-Loureiro,

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