

THE FUTURE OF HOSPITALITY



Game on!

SEE FOR YOURSELF – LITERALLY – WHERE TOURISM IS HEADED

BY CAITLIN BURKE

Virtual reality may seem like a market dominated by tech geeks and video game enthusiasts, but its potential mainstream impact is becoming a powerful reality.

Consider that an estimated 78 million headsets will be in use worldwide by 2021, according to London-based research firm IHS Markit. Headsets run the gamut from pricey PC or console-based to more affordable smart phone-based options, some starting as low as \$15. And even without a headset, viewers can still get an immersive feel with the ability to control 360 degrees of content.

That potential has caught the eyes of the hospitality and tourism industries across the world. Half of travelers surveyed in a 2017 study by San Francisco-based Destination Analysts said they would be interested in using VR for travel inspiration.

That growing desire can present many opportunities, but also a few challenges for those charged with promoting local attractions. "As marketers we lose a little bit of control," said Patricia Washington, president and CEO of Visit Alexandria. "In a video, we're used to being the curators of the most beautiful shot. When you're using VR, each user has a different experience. They can look at all different directions, so they're going to see the beautiful and the imperfections, ... but that's what makes it so authentic."

Take a look at how local tourism agencies are preparing for the next generation of tech-savvy travelers.

THE PLAYERS

TOURISM GROUPS' NEW VIRTUAL REALITY

► DESTINATION D.C.

VR capabilities: 38 minute-long videos in 360, ranging from museums and monuments to scenic views and iconic neighborhoods available online. The District's marketing organization brings VR headsets to tourism and hospitality trade shows so people can experience the videos' full impact while promoting the region.

Available since: Summer 2017

The impact: In dynamic advertising units, the 360-videos have performed with higher engagement and lower bounce rates in comparison with static images, Destination D.C. reported. Further, the

organization's tracking from Aug. 1 to Dec. 31, 2017, showed visitors to washington.org are spending 52 percent longer on 360-pages. And on social, the Lincoln Memorial has been one of the highest performing videos on Facebook for the group, with more than 10,000 views.

Leveling up: In 2018, it's a matter of evaluating the early results of the VR initiative, said Destination D.C. President and CEO Elliott Ferguson, who added they'll be eyeing upcoming events and recently completed projects within the District for ways to promote with 360-technology.

How to play: washington.org/discover-dc-360



THE FUTURE OF HOSPITALITY



VR allows for a panoramic peek at Alexandria's waterfront.

COURTESY VISIT ALEXANDRIA



COURTESY VISIT FAIRFAX

Visit Fairfax uses virtual reality to spotlight its attractions.

► VISIT FAIRFAX

VR capabilities: A map embedded with 33 virtual tours of attractions, shopping, points of interest and Civil War sites throughout Fairfax County.

Available since: An early adopter of interactive technology, Fairfax implemented a virtual e-map that allowed potential visitors to navigate a tour of the county from a virtual driver's seat over a decade ago. The county revived the technology and relaunched the original e-map with updated VR technology in early 2018.

The results: Stay tuned! Visit Fairfax expects to promote this in social media and other marketing efforts.

Leveling up: The e-map is also mobile-friendly and available within the Visit Fairfax app if tourists want to check out nearby attractions in VR while on the move.

How to play: <http://www.fxva.com/360>

► EVENTS D.C.

VR capabilities: The city's convention and sports authority highlights numerous events and venue spaces in an immersive two-minute video with VR capabilities. Viewers can experience 360 degrees of events like the Washington Auto Show at the Washington Convention Center, ShamrockFest at RFK Stadium and boxing at D.C. Armory. Events D.C. has also produced a virtual bike tour of Washington, debuting it at South by Southwest in 2017 and the U.S. Travel Association's IPW.

Available since: 2016

The impact: Virtual reality is

poised to be a valuable sales tool for the purveyor of conventions, sports, entertainment and cultural events within the District, but its direct impact has been hard to capture so far, admitted Greg O'Dell, president and CEO of Events D.C. The technology is really used as a tool in direct client meetings or at industry tradeshows.

Leveling up: O'Dell said the next goal is to expand its current catalog of VR content in a way that will allow show organizers to use VR as a planning tool for future events.

How to play: eventsdcvr.com



COURTESY EVENTS D.C.

Events D.C. has used VR to showcase D.C. at trade shows.

► VISIT ALEXANDRIA

VR capabilities: A two-minute introductory video and 22 separate, narrated panoramic photos of historic sites and attractions that convey what it's like to be in Alexandria.

Available since: September 2017

The impact: The initial results of VR content performance has shown users are visiting 72 percent more Alexandria-based pages, have spent 61 percent more time on the site and are seven times more likely to request a visitor's guide – a major indication of intent to visit, according to Visit Alexandria.

Leveling up: Expect to find 10 new narrated panoramas, updates to iconic locations and new experiences like the public plaza coming to King Street Waterfront in 2018.

How to play: visitalexandriava.com/360/



VR headsets give a sense of visiting Alexandria's historic sites.

COURTESY M. ENRIQUEZ / VISIT ALEXANDRIA