Chapter VIII

Virtual Reality Mapping Revisited: IT Tools for the Divide Between Knowledge and Action in Tourism

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Abstract

This chapter provides a brief overview of the available technologies and opportunities for the use of virtual reality in tourism marketing. It acknowledges that in almost all formulations of the tourism marketing model to date however, much has been made of the notion that tourism is unique because production and consumption occur not only at the same time but in the same place, and therefore that location or proximity is often a critical determinant of the take-up of tourism opportunities. The chapter then goes on to posit the question: what if the place variable could be removed from this equation through the further development of virtual reality techniques? The impacts of this might include: less requirement for travel per se (perhaps); better and more real information about the physical actuality of a destination for the potential consumer (likely); price and service quality information very much simplified and improved (definitely), and changed tourism promotion strategies would change (undoubtedly). At the barest minimum, the uncertainties involved in relying on unverified initial information for tourism travel decision-making could be considerably reduced.
Introduction

As consumers become more committed “Web surfers,” their processes of decision making based on the information found there will become more sophisticated, particularly when purchasing products and services (Buhalis, 1998; Sheldon, 1997). In the early days of mass use of the Internet to contact potential clients, anyone with anything to sell or provide information on could develop a Web site to advertise their intention to trade; a process that was really nothing more than transferring print or television/cinema-based static visual information to the new medium (Buhalis, 1998).

With respect to tourism and hospitality such users ranged from the major airlines and hotel/resort chains to the family with a holiday villa for rent in Europe, or to a bed and breakfast operator in Australia, or to an Onsen proprietor in Japan. By assisting the promotion of tourism services in this way the early e-commerce boom certainly dramatically extended the marketing reach of tourist operators (Buhalis, 1998). With maturity however, markets generally become more sophisticated and demanding, and require higher standards of interaction, particularly at the more expensive end of product cost (Weiermair & Mathies, 2004). As a result, the variety and scale of information the purchaser of tourism product now has in terms of making informed buying decisions, and the increasing sophistication of both consumers and tourism marketing organizations is leading to more creative applications of the Web as a channel to reach consumers in this industry (Sitepal, 2005).

Nevertheless, much of the information currently provided to tourism consumers remains 2-dimensional; if it is visual then it is at best generally only composed of good photographs with associated text, unless video capture is used. However, very high processor and memory demands on the destination computer make the latter less attractive to the average Internet user. So, in practice, consumer processing power constraints mean that operations on current tourism Web sites remain heavily dependent on text for their message delivery, with software robots used “behind the scenes” to retrieve text-based information for consumers (Ishida, 2002). Obviously this search and retrieve metaphor works well, even on a global basis, but if the Internet is to be used for real personal interaction with the tourism environment an immersive image-based geographical interface is ultimately going to be needed.

One way to provide this is to construct a 3-D virtual image of a destination or travel route for the potential consumer; however there has to date only been limited adoption of virtual reality (VR) technology in the sales pitch of tourism organizations and businesses large and small, so despite the widespread availability of appropriate receiving media this form of message representation has not really entered the mainstream as yet (however, see Google Earth, http://earth.google.com/tour/).
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