

Virtual Experiences We Think You'll Love

When COVID-19 first hit, closures and lockdowns made virtual resources the only way to see certain sites—drawing in viewers to virtual zoo tours and the like. A Forbes article reported that the number of searches for the term “virtual tour” soared from 1,300 in February 2020 to nearly 10,000 the following month, when cities and countries began locking down.

But even though many more places and businesses are now open to the public in some form or another, it seems that virtual experiences may have staying power.

Example: In one survey, 64 percent of people said they will continue to watch or participate in online experiences even after the reopening of attractions. Nearly half (48 percent) said they will continue to watch or participate in at least one of the listed online activities in preference to going out after lockdowns are lifted.

With that in mind, we've compiled some of our favorite online events, tours and other experiences to help you live a richer and fuller virtual best life!

Nature

There are loads of live camera sites that will immediately transport you to a specific spot in the natural world to see ... whatever is going on there at the moment!

One example: Explore.org (explore.org/livecams) has cameras stationed in natural habitats far and wide—which as of this writing include a busy osprey nest in Montana, Brooks Falls in Katmai National Park in Alaska (where hungry black bears chase after a fish dinner) and Olifants West Game Reserve in South Africa, home to wild lions, tigers and elephants.

If you don't want to chance it that you won't see something interesting on a live cam, you can head north for 360-degree videos of activities in and around Fairbanks, Alaska—including a stunning Northern Lights display and a sled-dog ride that puts you right in the action (explorefairbanks.com/explore-the-area/360).

Travel

That trip to Europe on hold? You can still see plenty of the old continent from your couch.

The Palace of Versailles. This virtual look of the Sun King's jaw-dropping home and grounds is among the more comprehensive tours we found. There are video tours, VR-based experiences to have using a virtual reality headset, 360-degree walk-throughs of the Hall of Mirrors and other rooms, stunning 3D views of priceless art and artifacts, and more (artsandculture.google.com/project/versailles).

The Paris catacombs. Since you're already near Paris, check out one of the City of Light's most macabre tourist destinations. The famous catacombs are a network of subterranean tunnels that house the remains of more than six million people. The virtual tour practically makes you feel like you're there (catacombes.paris.fr/visite-virtuelle).

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Food, Art and More

Cuisine

Getting to our favorite restaurants has proven challenging, and occasionally impossible. But that doesn't mean you can't have gourmet experiences. Foodies and oenophiles can consider whetting their appetites with options like:

Interactive wine tastings. As of this writing, several wineries and wine makers—such as California's Frog's Leap (frogsleap.com) and St. Supery (stsupery.com)—are running online tasting sessions during which they talk about various featured bottles. Just purchase the specific wines in advance and sign up to get schooled by the very people responsible for the juice in your glass. Some wineries will even put together private online tasting sessions for you and a small group of friends, so you get extra attention.

Cooking classes. Restaurants have struggled mightily during the pandemic, prompting some to go online and share their chefs' secrets and techniques with the rest of us. One example that got our attention: virtual cooking classes held by Mei Mei—two-time winner of Boston's best dumplings (www.meimeiboston.com). And if you're an American Express card member, you can access exclusive "curated digital dining experiences" with top chefs from around the world—such as three-Michelin starred Chef Massimo Bottura (resy.com/cities/ny/american-express-global-dining-collection-virtual-cooking-experiences).

Art

Google has partnered with more than 2,500 museums and galleries to offer virtual tours of their artwork (<https://artsandculture.google.com/>). Two we really enjoyed:

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York City). You can view more than 200,000 individual items from the Met's collection along with 26 online exhibits—including behind-the-scenes looks at how the Met does what it does so well. You can even explore individual rooms of the museum, which gives you a sense of being in the building itself (artsandculture.google.com/partner/the-metropolitan-museum-of-art).

The Uffizi Gallery (Firenze, Italy). Wander the halls of this famed museum that is home to some of the most important and revered Italian Renaissance art ever created—including Botticelli's iconic *The Birth of Venus* (artsandculture.google.com/partner/uffizi-gallery).

Kids

Zoos across the country have set up live cams and other ways to experience the animals from afar. Some of these cameras were in place long before the pandemic, but they've become especially in demand these days. Check out these animals on view:

- Beluga whale (Georgia Aquarium: georgiqaquarium.org/webcam/ocean-voyager)
- Fiona the hippo (Cincinnati Zoo: www.facebook.com/cincinnati-zoo)
- Tigers, elephants, giraffes, etc. (San Diego Zoo: zoo.sandiegozoo.org/live-cams)

Or if you've got amateur spelunkers in the house, point them to the virtual tour of New Mexico's Carlsbad Caverns. The 360-degree tour is narrated by a park ranger, who takes you into the 4,000-foot-long Big Room (artsandculture.withgoogle.com/en-us/national-parks-service/carlsbad-caverns/natural-entrance-tour).

Virtual learning

Don't forget to keep that brain and body healthy. There are loads of online learning resources that have been made available lately. For example:

Ivy League classes. You can access free online courses from Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Harvard, Penn, Princeton and Yale through Class Central (classcentral.com/collection/ivy-league-moocs). Among the most popular courses from these elite institutions of higher learning:

- The Science of Well-Being from Yale University
- Machine Learning from Stanford University
- Entrepreneurship in Emerging Economies from Harvard University
- Financial Markets from Yale University
- Introduction to Psychology from Yale University

Please note: These options were in effect as of the writing of this report. Check with each provider or resource to see whether they are still in effect. Some of the options listed in this report are free, while others may require a fee.

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