

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

With urbanization slated to make space a luxury, VR opportunities arise

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The InterContinental in Hangzhou, China

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Virtual reality and brand immersion are the centerpieces of luxury travel's future.

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Faith Popcorn, CEO of marketing consulting firm BrainReserve, is known for her ability to predict trends across industries, anticipating the demise of celluloid film, the shift in preference for four-wheel drive vehicles and today's clamoring for healthier food. Hospitality brands need to keep their finger on the pulse and be able to distinguish fad from future to keep ahead of competition.

"Our collaboration with Faith Popcorn and partnership with Tara Bernerd further ensures the InterContinental brand remains at the forefront of luxury travel," said Simon Scoot, vice president of global brand strategy at InterContinental Hotels & Resorts. "Innovation and pioneering spirit is in the InterContinental brand's DNA.

"Since the launch of the brand in 1946, followed by the opening of the first hotel in Belem, Brazil, InterContinental Hotels & Resorts opened the gateway to a whole new world of glamour and discovery for a jet-set generation," she said. "Seventy years on, as global travel has transformed, the InterContinental brand has evolved and adapted with it."

The way of the future

Ms. Popcorn has partnered with InterContinental Hotels & Resorts, where she will help improve the guest experience, service and design. She and the brand are particularly focused on virtual reality escapism.



Development of InterContinental Songjiang hotel, China

Ms. Popcorns' forecast goes far into the future as far as 2086 when urbanization has condensed a growing population into ever-smaller spaces. As the world continues to trend in this direction, space will be the biggest luxury.

Accordingly, she predicts that virtual reality will enable friends and family to share adventure and luxury with one another in real-time, regardless of location. Through a shared network, they will be able to share an ocean swim with extinct marine life, among other possibilities.

Similarly, Ms. Popcorn predicts that today's luxury will become accessible, forcing tomorrow's affluent to extreme experiences in virtual environments, where they can live out danger in safe environments. Spaces will likewise be tailored via virtual reality, with single hotels offering cultural experiences from different parts of the world using the technology.



Contemporary art at InterContinental Dusseldorf, Germany

More tangible, hotels could partner with fashion brands to have in-room wardrobes, customized to the preferences, size and itinerary of guests. Guests may also be able to customize holographic wall art and otherwise have more control over interiors.

The current focus in the luxury hospitality industry is on sustainability, philanthropy and multi-generational travel, with hotels repeatedly taking steps to cement their reputation on those grounds. Other industries, from fashion to automotive, are intersecting with technology in more visible ways.



InterContinental Davos, Switzerland

While this trend has been lost on the hospitality industry, Ms. Popcorn's predictions, regardless of how distant they are and whether or not they come true, are a reminder of the possibilities that technology has for the industry.

Virtual worlds

While a far cry from true virtual reality, there has been some experimentation with letting consumers look around virtual environments already.

For example, Dubai, United Arab Emirates-based international hotel chain Jumeirah is transporting guests behind its walls.

"Jumeirah Inside" offers consumers 360 degrees of luxury, allowing for exploration of the brand's Burj Al Arab hotel in Dubai and parts of its other hotels. Consumers are inundated with options when traveling, so giving them a look inside will help Jumeirah stick out in the minds of prospective clients ([see story](#)).

Besides InterContinental, other hotels have already tapped into virtual reality directly, experimenting with early manifestations of the opportunities Ms. Popcorn predicts.

In October, Shangri-La rolled out virtual reality headsets to transport potential guests to properties across its global portfolio.

Shangri-La's Samsung Gear virtual reality headsets, along with 360-degree view YouTube videos, will bring the hotel chain's properties to life to allow guests to travel to far reaching destinations. According to Shangri-La, it is the first luxury hotel chain to implement fully integrated virtual reality technology into its sales process, a tactic often used by automakers ([see story](#)).