

Virtual vacations II

Videos, photos, books and virtual reality will take you anywhere you want to go

In my last column, I wrote about the kids' section of the Smithsonian Institute's website, si.edu/kids, which enables you to virtually explore the museum's vast collections. This week's column looks at more of the Smithsonian's online offerings that allow you to experience faraway places while sequestered at home.

The institute has another website, smithsonianmag.com, that's the online presence of its magazine. Nestled under the Travel tab at the top of the site is a Virtual Travel link. The section was created specifically to offer those stuck at home because of the COVID-19 pandemic an outlet for their wanderlust. The section features links to articles, videos, photo galleries, books and augmented and virtual reality experiences designed to "transport you to far-off lands."

While last week's site was designed for kids, this site is more for adults, although many of the photos and videos would appeal to kids, too. The top article on the site features the recipes and histories of famous cocktails. Learn how the Moscow Mule got its kick, swing with a Singapore Sling or get blown away by a Hurricane as you learn how these and other drinks were invented and became delicious sensations around the world.

Below the main feature are numerous links to a wide variety of virtual experiences divided by category. You can tour famous artists' studios, collect fossils along England's Jurassic Coast or visit digital recreations of long-lost cultural sites. Watch fireflies in the Great Smoky Mountains, ride a dogsled through the Arctic or explore

deep-sea shipwrecks. There are virtual tours of museums, historic sites and natural wonders.

And you're not limited to keeping your feet on the ground. There are links to the Smithsonian Channel's "Aerial America" series, which let you soar above scenic deserts, mountains, cities and islands. If that's not high enough, you can visit the International Space Station, join Neil Armstrong for the first moon landing or view the Milky Way in 3-D.

All of this virtual traveling has probably gotten you a little hungry and thirsty. You can buy a cookbook from the trendy Queen's Night Market in New York featuring recipes from all over the world. If you don't feel like cooking, have something delivered from legendary restaurants around the country. Get a cheesesteak from Pat's King of Steaks in Philadelphia, or a lobster from Hancock Gourmet Lobster Co. in Maine. For dessert, get a five-layer chocolate cream pie from Betty's Pies in Minnesota. Wash it all down with a virtual tasting from a California winery.

After traveling, eating and drinking your way around the world, you probably want to relax. The site has links to games you can play online with friends, including classic board games like Monopoly and Life. There also are reviews of books, including audio versions, recommended by Smithsonian. Or you can watch a free Broadway play every Friday.

The site offers a lot of entertainment with just your desktop, tablet or phone, but not all of the features can be experienced directly on the website. Some links take you other sites.

Some of the features must be purchased and delivered to your home. And the virtual and augmented reality features may require downloading apps and using special equipment, such as a VR headset. Smithsonianmag.com has a lot to offer, but it will be nice when the pandemic is over and you can do all these things in the real world.

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