Virtual Travel

I spent the years 1988–90 as a postdoc at Japan’s Institute of Space and Astronautical Science, whose campus is in Sagamihara, an industrial suburb of Tokyo. During that time, I lived in an apartment above a ramen restaurant called Koguma (“bear cub”).

Koguma, it turned out, was one of the best ramen restaurants in Sagamihara. I ate there at least twice a week. After sampling everything on the menu, I favored two dishes: spicy leek ramen in miso broth, and beef ramen with a raw egg in soy broth. My next job was at NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center outside Washington, DC. I didn’t eat ramen in DC until 2014, when the ramen restaurant Toki Underground opened on trendy H Street. Now the city has more than a dozen places to savor the toothsome noodle dish.

I applaud the proliferation of one of my favorite foods. On the other hand, it’s yet another manifestation of the international homogenization of cuisine and culture. If you walk into a hipster coffee shop in Prague, Sydney, Buenos Aires, or Cape Town, you’ll see chalkboard menus, artisanal biscotti, responsibly harvested coffee beans, and bearded baristas. Only the language spoken in the shop varies. Also converging toward a uniform look and feel are luxury beach resorts—at least judging by the interchangeable photos I see in the travel sections of the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and Financial Times. The Frenchman David Guetta, the Dutchman Nicky Romero, the American Steve Aoki, the Finn Darude, and their ilk all produce blandly perky electronic dance music whose national provenance is impossible to discern.

If things taste, look, and sound the same, why travel? I don’t know whether the leaders of Japan’s largest airline, ANA, asked themselves that question, but they might have done. In April, ANA announced that it would be investing $10 million to develop a virtual travel system. The initiative is not as fanciful as it seems. The system’s main ingredient is a robot avatar through whose senses any number of armchair tourists can experience remote locales. Besides acting as a tourist surrogate, the robot could conceivably perform tasks in hazardous environments. Indeed, one of the project’s inspirations was the realization that a remotely controlled robot could have entered the reactor rooms of the Fukushima Daiichi power plant and averted nuclear disaster.

But if homogenization is making real tourism pointless, won’t virtual tourism suffer the same fate? After all, virtual reality’s principal figure of merit is how closely it matches reality. If I were ANA’s CEO, Osamu Shinobe, I’d add fictional or past worlds to the robot avatar’s menu of virtual destinations. Wouldn’t you like to visit Middle Earth, Tatooine, ancient Rome, and Tang Dynasty China? It would be like Westworld but without rampaging robots and the need to fly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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