

Virtual travel a reality

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AS virtual and augmented reality apps continues to develop, it's becoming more likely that travellers will interact with these technologies, whether before or after their trips.

"We're seeing lots of people play with different forms of what I call 'content excitement,'" said Mike Croucher, the chief architect at the technology company Travelport. Examples of that are the websites of hotels with 360-degree "look-arounds" of their properties, he said, and airlines are experimenting more with digitally immersive experiences as well.

The global virtual reality market is expected to increase from US\$7.9 billion (RM32.2 billion) last year to US\$44.7 billion by 2024, according to a recent research report published by *Markets and Markets*.

While these technologies have existed for several years, factors like high cost of production and limited consumer access have capped its reach in the travel industry, said Croucher.

"It's still early days. But you could see the impact it's going to have," he said.

Several airlines, restaurants and travel companies have in recent years released easy-to-use virtual features that are beginning to change how

people plan for travel and experience destinations. Here are a few that you may encounter the next time you travel or plan to do so.

Will your carry-on fit? There are apps for that. Like retailers producing augmented-reality smartphone apps that allow customers to try on a pair of sunglasses or see what a particular couch may look like in their living room, airlines have found the practical use for this technology.

EasyJet, working with Travelport, recently released a smartphone feature that allows users to check the size of their carry-on luggage with the camera of their phone. Using this new option of the airline's app, travellers can determine if a bag is within the carry-on size limit by seeing if it fits into a virtual box. LATAM Airlines released a similar smartphone feature in its app in September last year.

On KLM's app, a "Tune into your Travel" augmented-reality feature is designed to entertain passengers at the airport while they wait for departure. By using their smartphone cameras and Facebook, travellers can interact with animated characters and view landscapes from various destinations.

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Travelport worked with easyJet to build a new augmented reality app that helps travellers find out if their carry-on bag will fit in the overhead before they board.