



By now the world is accustomed to online meetings. Zoom is a household name and everyone in the house has been online for a meeting or a class or an appointment at some time in the past year. Virtual spaces are part of our lives and the idea of having to physically meet someone when the conversation can be handled over the internet is hard to argue. People are accustomed to rolling out of bed and going on their computer for a morning meeting, forgoing a grooming ritual or a gruelling commute. Living our lives online is now part of the programme.

When lockdown started in March 2020, the tour guiding world was rocked by the idea of working from home. I started dabbling in daily YouTube and Facebook videos to keep in touch with my audience and to keep myself a little sane from boredom. My husband worked from home and had a daily ongoing Zoom call to connect with his colleagues. I was more resistant. Virtual tours started to occur, fellow tour guides were taking advantage of this new medium and hosted online events.

My initial thought was, “who would want to do that?” I admit that I wasn’t convinced. My thought was, “If I wouldn’t want to do that, who would? Don’t they want to come to London?” The catalyst

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wasn’t the pandemic, it was boredom. People wanted entertainment and this was a way of serving that problem. Several tour guides started to offer online tours, reducing the time from a walking tour of three hours to a virtual experience of just one. Most of us were not able to get out, so raiding the online free public domain photos and any photos we had taken ourselves became our visual. The little yellow man on Google maps clocked in overtime as guides pulled him all around the streets to show people this statue or that building.

I am ashamed to admit that I was not an early adopter of this trend. I think this is because I was holding on to the idea that

this would all blow over by September. While I had lost a summer of guiding, I prayed that it would finish up by autumn, just in time for me to launch the new evening tour I had been working on for a year. That didn’t happen. By October, I knew that virtual tours were the best solution.

My idea to convert my physical “Love Actually Christmas Lights” tour into the “London Christmas Lights Virtual Tour” became my pet project. As the lights were still hung across the city, I ventured out on foot and by bike to capture photos and videos. I became an “Instagrammer in the wild” as I snapped away from various angles, trying to avoid the other wannabe photographers. I offered the tour at weird hours, afternoons and evenings to capture the London crowd and at midnight to capture the American evening viewers. To my surprise, it was a hit. I reached viewers from seven countries, various age groups, some who had been on tours with me previously and others who had never been to London at all. One lady booked a group ticket for her office to enjoy on their lunch break in California.

When I am not tour guiding, I teach at a local education institution. All of my classes moved online, so the idea of teach-



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ing or talking online was not something I was shy about. I am a wizard at Powerpoint, so creating slide content was not an issue either. Why had I resisted the idea of virtual tours for so long? Again, I go back to the stubborn idea that no one would want to do that. And yet they did!

Riding on my new-found success, I looked to convert some of my tours to virtual experiences. I was amazed at how freeing a virtual tour could be. When you create a physical tour, you have to plan it carefully. A tourist or walker can't manage more than two or three hours, so you have to plan the walking as well as the talking. On a virtual tour, the walking is cut out and you are just left with a full hour of talking. This means you can convey more information that you might get out in a physical tour. Plus, if the viewer is sitting comfortably, they are giving you their full attention and they are not complaining about their sore feet or bad weather. Virtual tours don't require you to find accessible routes when construction blocks a road. Oh, and clients always know where their nearest toilet is, so that is also one less thing to worry about!

All of a sudden I was no longer constrained to physical locations. The number-one rule of guiding is to talk about what you see. If you are not standing in front of it, you have to either walk to it or try to create a narrative that will help the listener to imagine or visualise. This can be hard sometimes. With a virtual tour, the photo pops up and we continue. I noticed I could easily “bounce” around the city or even the country to add visuals to the story and make it more coherent. In a physical tour, I limited my information to

London and the history here. On a virtual tour, I could travel back to the Greeks and the Bible for content, as well as the London locations.

I looked at my repertoire of tours and realised that there were a few that didn't often sell. I have a fantastic tour of “Forgotten Fitzrovia” that never seems to sell out. Not because it is a bad tour, but because with all of the typical tourist things to do and limited time, my clients generally don't have the time to indulge in things that are off the beaten path. By transitioning this to a virtual experience, the bookings increased exponentially. I received clients who lived in London but hadn't yet explored the area.

Soon I received requests for private bookings. With these, I was able to offer more variety and tailored options. One lady from London wanted to surprise her friend with a theatre tour, another lady from Japan just wanted general history at a slow pace to improve her English. One family in Pennsylvania wanted a rundown of the royal family, another family in Canada wanted to hear about Henry VIII.

Travel is a luxury. It requires money, mobility and motivation. With the magic of the internet, London is no longer a pipe dream for many. It can be a reality. The virtual tour experience is not a pandemic-only product, but instead is a new option for those who cannot travel or those who are planning to. The realisation that virtual tours were bringing London to the masses was evident. More than this, it opens a new option of travel to a population that couldn't travel here for now or might not have ever been able to travel before. Online tourism is here to stay.



**Amber Raney-Kincade** is the American Tour Guide in London, offering walking tours and private hire to those looking to explore on foot. Find out more at [www.AmericanTourGuideInLondon.com](http://www.AmericanTourGuideInLondon.com) or follow her on Twitter @AmericanLDN.