AGORA

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Module 4

Enhancing regenerative tourism activities through technology

Developed by DomSpain

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LEARNING OUTCOMES

After you have completed the module, you will...

Knowledge

- Grasp the concept of a virtual experience, its role in regenerative tourism, and its potential impact on destinations
- Outline the pros and cons of specific virtual experiences in the context of sustainable tourism

Skills

- Explain the advantages and disadvantages of various methods and tools for the creation of immersive and regenerative experiences
- Suggest new creative insights for virtual encounters for community and destination promotion

Competences

- Be able to apply acquired knowledge for designing or re-shaping a regenerative tourism experience in their daily practices
- Generate new ideas on the incorporation of virtual experiences in tourism offers, prepare the content and materials for their implementation

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Duration: This module requires approximately 20 hours of preparatory, implementation, and follow-up work, including instructional time, hands-on activities, and project work.

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MODULE IN A NUTSHELL

In the evolving landscape of travel, regenerative tourism is reshaping the way we explore the world, while technology can provide tourism agents and customers, communities, and destinations with new opportunities to make a tourism experience more enriching, immersive, and sustainable.

This module focuses on technological tools as a method to enrich the tourism experience. It has been prepared based on the evaluation and analysis of good practices in promoting destinations, communities, and local producers both within and outside the European Union. Participants will explore the theoretical underpinning, evaluate the advantages and challenges of virtual experiences, and discover practical tips for creating regenerative virtual tourism encounters through the following units:

- Nurturing tomorrow: the theoretical underpinning of Regenerative Tourism and Virtual Experiences
- Advantages and challenges associated with incorporating virtual and interactive elements into regenerative tourism experiences
- Suggestions for (re-) designing a regenerative tourism experience using technology tools

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4.1 Nurturing tomorrow: the theoretical underpinning of regenerative tourism and virtual experiences

The synergy between Regenerative Tourism and Virtual Experiences represents a symbiotic relationship that is redefining the future of travel.

Regenerative tourism is a transformative philosophy that goes beyond traditional travel, promoting a holistic approach to make tourism a force for positive change. See more about the AGORA vision on Regenerative Tourism in the AGORA Guide.

Aligning with the principles of regenerative tourism, virtual experiences have emerged allowing us to explore destinations while minimising the environmental footprint. The connection between sustainable practices and technological advancements becomes the cornerstone of a transformative travel experience.

Moreover, in a world where physical and economic constraints often limit exploration, technology, and digital tools make a travel experience more engaging, accessible, and sustainable. Immersive experiences backed up by new technologies offer both *alternative* or *complementary* means to engage with diverse cultures, environments, and communities.

ALTERNATIVE as through Virtual Travel, users can explore iconic landmarks, natural wonders, and cultural heritage sites as if they were

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physically present. A game-changer in the realms of virtual tourism has become Google Earth which allows you to explore areas throughout the world at the touch of a button.

Virtual tourism becomes a conduit for knowledge-sharing, fostering awareness about the beauty and significance of various destinations without leaving home. Different types of virtual tourism offerings can combine virtual reality, still images, videos and audio, narration, interactive elements, and other multimedia formats to provide an experience that a user cannot get through images or websites alone. For example, Bratanov Winery and BM Vision VR Experience (Bulgaria) allow visitors to explore the winery, learn about the winemaking process, and participate in a virtual wine tasting through 360-degree video and interactive elements.

Tourists can access virtual content using a virtual reality headset for the most immersive experience, but it's also possible to view the content on a normal computer or a mobile device. For example, an interactive map can allow virtual travellers to explore the ruins of an ancient city, such as Pompeii.

Augmented reality, *virtual reality* (games, escape rooms), *3D images and videos* enrich tourism experiences, allowing users to visit...

- non-existent places, such as Second Life, connecting to people or things in this imaginary destination using an avatar;
- places that are restricted or challenging to access in real life, for example, flying across Mount Everest;
- ancient places or the past of the existing locations, such as Timescope.

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COMPLEMENTARY as an in-person tourism experience can be enriched by leveraging new technologies to merge the digital and the physical. Most of us experimented with augmented reality opportunities through a popular smartphone app called Pokemon Go and know how immersive and engaging such an experience can be. AR-enabled mobile apps can provide tourists with virtual tours around places of interest, nearby attractions, recommended hotels/restaurants, and exclusive offers before their physical travel.

While at the place, AR can be used to scan physical maps or signs to receive instant digital information overlays, making navigation and exploration more convenient and guest-friendly. WAM – World Around Me – app helps tourists and locals worldwide find places of interest and services around them, stay healthy, shop, and move using the phone's camera. By pointing their device's camera in a specific direction, guests can see virtual arrows or markers overlaid on their real-time camera view, guiding them to desired locations. The technology eliminates the frustration of getting lost and enhances the overall guest experience.

AR enhances the real world by overlaying digital information, allowing it to access valuable details about landmarks, historical sites, and local attractions simply by pointing their smartphones or AR glasses. At home or on the go, the Smartify app can be of help if you appreciate art and love exploring museums. Using this application, you can scan the historical art piece to gather more information about it. It comes with preloaded data from several museums, including San Donato Museum in Italy, Reina Sofía Museum in Spain, etc.

Closely related to AR, *virtual reality* (VR) places the user within an environment where they can interact with its elements. Besides, to

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enrich an in-person experience, diverse stakeholders – tourism professionals, educators, and community agents, even without a special technical background, can co-design *interactive polls* and *quizzes*, *animated data visualisations* and *infographics*, or *immersive scavenger hunts* for guests to explore the places of interest following virtual clues and searching for digital objects or markers. For example, GeoCaching, a popular outdoor activity and online community, uses GPS coordinates to locate hidden gems or "caches" placed by other participants and combines elements of treasure hunting, technology, and exploration.

The interactivity makes authentic experiences more regenerative as well as more appealing, engaging guests to explore the destination further. For example, in The Taste of Berlin experience, before a virtual event, all the participants receive a food box with delicious tastings and carefully selected gifts. During interactive sessions they together taste, meet Berlin's top gastronomic chefs, iconic baristas, and local foodies, visit virtually various hotspots of Berlin's fascinating and diverse food scene and culture, dance, laugh, and win prizes.

The incorporation of virtual experiences into tourism practices makes them more immersive and opens up new dimensions of exploration and sustainability. Virtual tourism experiences:

- **Foster environmental stewardship,** allowing tourists to witness the beauty of ecosystems without physically impacting them. This promotes environmental conservation by minimising the carbon footprint associated with traditional travel.

- **Promote Preservation of Cultural Heritage,** celebrating the unique identity of destinations virtually immersing tourists in local cultures,

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traditions, and heritage. This, in turn, supports the regeneration of cultural vitality.

- **Engage Responsible Exploration,** providing a basis for educating tourists about responsible tourism practices. Through informative content and interactive features, they encourage ethical choices, minimising negative impacts on destinations.

- **Amplify Local Economies,** giving a spotlight on local businesses and artisans. This, in turn, supports the economic regeneration of the community or destination, encouraging tourists to visit and stay in areas that may not typically be popular tourist destinations. For example, the Star Sleep online platform offers an experience of booking a nature-based experience that embraces spending a night in a comfortable luxury bed in an open space and an alternative outdoor experience, such as agritourism activities (harvesting crops, milking cows, etc.) or wildlife tours in rural and remote areas.

Virtual tourism can also **extend the tourism season**. For example, tour guides can do in-person tours of a tourist attraction or destination during the busy spring and summer, and in the off-season, these tours can be customised and offered virtually.

The role of technology and virtual experiences in promoting regenerative tourism is multifaceted. Beyond being a tool for exploration, these digital encounters become instruments for positive change and contribute positively to the well-being of local communities and tourism destinations.

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4.2 Advantages and challenges associated with incorporating virtual elements into regenerative tourism

In the evolving landscape of regenerative tourism, the integration of virtual experiences raises questions about its benefits and challenges. Examining the pros and cons is essential in understanding the potential impact on communities and destinations, tourists, and the environment.

ADVANTAGES:

- **Environmental Protection**

Virtual tourism reduces carbon emissions associated with travel by eliminating or reducing the need for international travel, helping to protect the environment. Virtual experiences can also educate about sustainable practices, fostering a more responsible approach to tourism. For example, FRAGA NATURE TRAIL & PRIZE-WINNING GOAT CHEESE FARM WITH TASTING (Spain) allows the participants to learn not only about the geographical characteristics of the area and regional environmental policies, local gastronomy and the methods used to make cheese products but also about regional environmental policies, strengthening their ecological awareness.

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Backed up by technologies, physical travel can also be made eco-friendlier as communities and destinations can reduce the ecological footprint associated with travel, minimising carbon emissions and environmental degradation. A good example is the city of Malaga, Spain, which introduced a parking app to help travellers park more effectively and reduce congestion.

- **Cross-Cultural Understanding**

Digital interactions can promote cultural awareness and appreciation, safeguarding traditions and heritage from physical disruptions. Virtual cultural experiences – participating in a virtual wine party, exploring artisan shops with an augmented reality app, discovering the language and traditions of a community or destination through an interactive escape room, technology can help users gain a greater appreciation for diverse cultures and bring people closer together. Timescope directly involves the tourists and the community in knowing and preserving the heritage and their know-how can serve culture and all the actors bringing territories, venues, and brands to an inclusive group of visitors.

- **Accessibility**

Technology and virtual experiences enhance accessibility, allowing a broader audience to explore destinations, including those with financial limitations, and provide an opportunity for tourists with special needs to be involved in activities that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. Thus, virtual or augmentative reality tools can be used to create routes and events for people with mobility impairments or disabilities and allow them to explore new places, both as entirely virtual or as a part of in-person experiences.

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Eliminating the need for airline and accommodation costs, virtual tourism provides a more accessible option compared to physical travel to those who have economic limits.

- **Education and Awareness**

Technology and digital tools provide inclusive learning opportunities, such as an educational journey Certificat de Dégustation du vin developed by the Revue du Vin de France and Franck Thomas Formation, a certifying training course to master wine tasting, grape varieties, types of wines, and wine pairings.

Through virtual experiences, tourists can explore ancient civilizations but also provide a better understanding of the community they visit in person, providing a spotlight on historical events or epochs significant to the community.

Virtual tourism can also **stimulate in-person tourism** promoting the actual tourist destinations being mimicked. A virtual tour can be the first step in purchasing a physical trip.

While technology and digital tools hold great potential for regenerative, sustainable, and immersive tourism, some **CHALLENGES** need to be addressed:

- **Digital Divide**

Not all communities, local producers, and tourism agents have equal access to technology, such as smartphones or tablets, creating a digital divide that limits the inclusivity of virtual experiences. Besides, virtual trips and events require a stable Internet connection, and access to cutting-edge technologies is needed. In regions with limited

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technological resources, for example, rural or remote areas, implementing virtual initiatives can be challenging.

Moreover, not all users have sufficient knowledge and skills to go through a fully virtual experience on their own.

- **Loss of Authenticity**

Fully virtual experiences may struggle to replicate the authenticity of physical interactions, missing sensory and emotional aspects of travel. Striking a balance between virtual and real-world experiences is essential to avoid diluting the cultural richness that travel offers.

- **Economic Impact**

For communities heavily reliant on tourism, the absence of physical visitors may lead to economic challenges and loss of livelihoods.

- **Technological Dependence**

The ease of virtual exploration might lead to overconsumption of digital content, contributing to environmental impacts associated with data storage and energy consumption.

Relying on technology poses risks such as cybersecurity threats, potential data breaches, and the need for robust infrastructure.

Having analysed the benefits and challenges, let's have a closer look at various initiatives backed up by technologies designed to promote communities and destinations.

TARRACO ROMANA (Tarragona, Spain): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hXMmM-z9W8c

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Interactive exhibition of Tarraco Romana. *Source: Tarraco 360.*

PROS: Virtual reality allows visitors to immerse in the history of Tarragona, exploring the antique Tarraco of the Roman Empire epoch. The digital recreation of events and historical places offers an educational and immersive experience, highlighting the cultural wealth of the region.

CONS: However, the lack of physical interaction and the inability to perceive details through touch can detract from the authenticity of the experience. Additionally, accessibility to virtual reality devices may be limited for some visitors.

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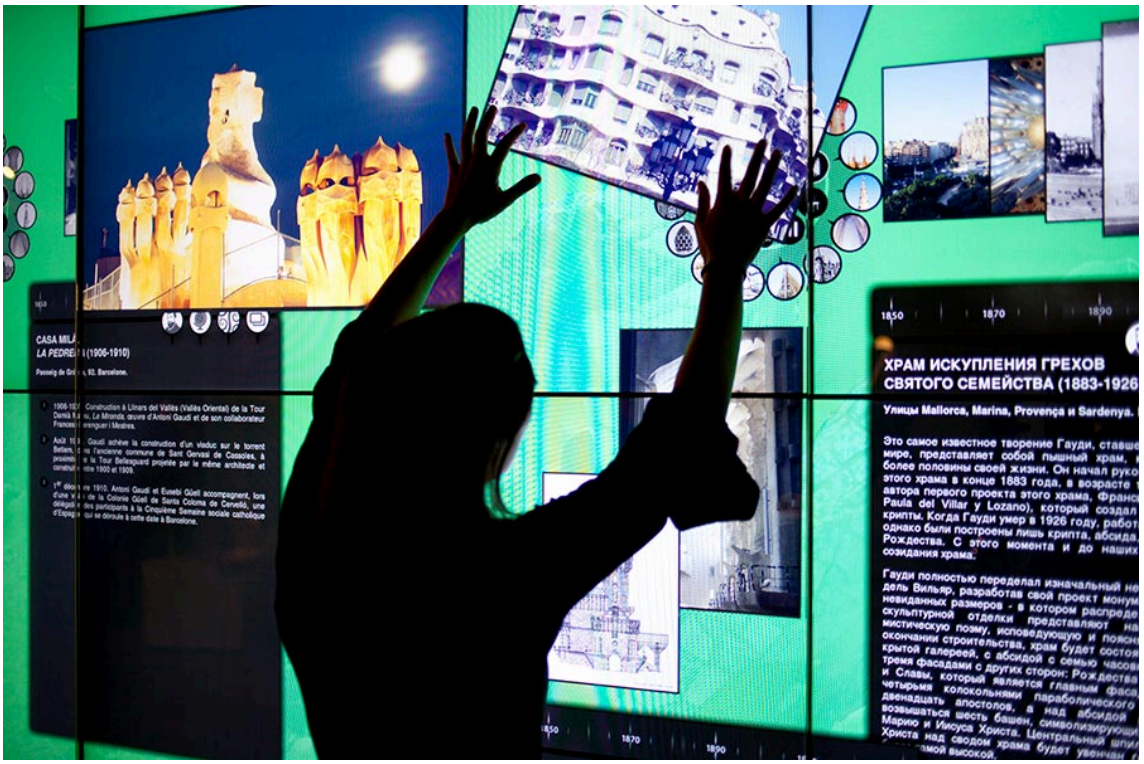
GAUDI HERITAGE: A VIRTUAL WALK THROUGH THE TEACHER'S CREATIVITY (Reus and Barcelona, Spain)

In the *Gaudi Museum of Reus*, visitors can explore the remarkable forms created by Gaudí through tactile and interactive models. They can also uncover the mysteries of his innovative architecture and enjoy a 360° multi-screen audiovisual presentation.



Interactive exhibition of the Gaudi Centre. *Source: Gaudí Centre Reus*

G Experiència (Barcelona) offers an interactive experience with 4D technology and augmented reality through the creative universe of this Modernist Architect. The visitors can discover firsthand how nature inspired Gaudi's creations and his main works with the Scope screen, 7.1 surround sound, active stereoscopic vision, and moving seats with special effects. In the exhibition area, there are two models and large

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interactive boards in nine languages.

PROS: Augmented reality and special effects allow visitors to immerse themselves in a storyline and go for a virtual walk through the places that influenced the life and work of Antoni Gaudí. AR interactivity allows users to explore the architectural details of his heritage.

CONS: The main disadvantage lies in the dependence on an Internet connection (for example, foreign tourists in the Gaudi museum in Reus, especially those living outside the Schengen area). Additionally, information saturation can divert attention from the experience.

To strike a balance, a thoughtful approach that includes community engagement, technological accessibility, environmental impact assessment, and cultural sensitivity is crucial. Considering the pros and addressing the challenges, emphasising local engagement, supporting communities, and ensuring inclusivity in virtual initiatives can mitigate some challenges. Regenerative tourism should harness the strengths of both physical and virtual experiences, leveraging technology as a tool for positive and global change while respecting the essence of responsible travel. A harmonious synergy of the physical and virtual realms will be key to fostering a sustainable and enriching travel experience for all.

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4.3 Suggestions for (re-) designing a regenerative tourism experience using technology tools

Regenerative virtual tourism experiences are a powerful tool to connect with diverse communities sustainably. Here are practical tips to (re-)design and implement immersive and regenerative virtual tourism experiences.

Storytelling and Storydoing

Craft compelling narratives focusing on customer experience, highlighting the cultural, environmental, and social aspects of a community or destination. Do not just tell a story, but create a memorable and immersive experience that engages visitors emotionally, fostering a sense of connection and empathy. The immersive experience of Taste Savo Virtual Dinner in Kuopio, Finland takes the customer to a restaurant dinner in another reality employing a virtual reality headset, sounds, smells, and tastes. The dinner is very much a visual experience, but a fundamental part is played by stories about food and nature as written by the author Antti Heikkinen.

Interactive Elements

Incorporate interactive features, such as virtual tours, 360-degree videos, and live Q&A sessions. These elements enhance engagement, allowing participants to explore and learn about the destination actively.

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For example, Virtual Tastings organised by Tasting In, an online platform, passionate about sustainability and quality gastronomy, allow everyone to experience food and drink tasting without having to travel. They bring together food experts and foodies, sharing the universal love of food and drink, telling the stories behind food, and highlighting the passion of the producers and experts through virtual tastings of wine, chocolate, cheese, beer, ham, etc.

Co-creation and co-design

Involve various community agents – local producers, professionals of the creative and cultural sector, and civil organisations, in the development of immersive tourism experiences, backed up by new technologies. Collaborate with local experts, environmentalists, and cultural ambassadors to provide authentic insights. Create a story to showcase traditions, craftsmanship, and daily lives of the community members, that would engage a visitor to be part of it, to immerse in it either virtually or in person.

To develop and promote their digital tours, Clio Muse Tours collaborates with various community agents, including the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, the Jewish Museum of Greece, the Municipality of Athens, universities, and cultural institutions. The platform community aims at preserving and promoting cultural heritage, thus contributing to the preservation of local identity and sense of community. They work with local guides and experts, creating job opportunities and supporting the local economy.

Technological Accessibility

Ensure that virtual experiences are accessible to a wide audience by considering varying levels of technological expertise. Optimise for

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mobile devices and provide alternatives for those with limited access to advanced technology.

Consider factors like language diversity, accessibility features, and user-friendly interfaces.

Educational Components

Integrate educational elements into virtual experiences, offering insights into the community's history, ecology, and cultural heritage. Foster a learning environment that inspires responsible travel practices. For example, a London Blue Badge Tourist Guide presents virtual tours of London with amazing stories about London's top tourist attractions, the British Museum and its exhibits, the City of London, and many others. These tours also provide an opportunity to interact with the tour guide or other viewers, adding a social and human aspect to the virtual tourism experience.

Regenerative Call-to-Action

Encourage and empower visitors to contribute to the well-being of the community and destination. Implement regenerative calls-to-action, such as supporting local initiatives, participating in virtual volunteering, or contributing to conservation efforts.

Collaborative Platforms

Leverage collaborative platforms and forums to connect community agents and tourism professionals with tourists, like-minded organisations, influencers, etc. Pool resources and knowledge to amplify the impact of regenerative virtual tourism initiatives. Encourage feedback from visitors to improve and refine the virtual tourism experience continuously. Incorporate community insights to

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enhance authenticity and address any concerns. For example, GeoCaching (Italy), mentioned earlier in this module, is set around a strong online GeoCaching community, which fosters a sense of belonging and connection among participants. The ability to connect, share experiences, and collaborate with others in finding caches creates a vibrant and supportive community around the activity, which is functional to promote a collaborative and cooperative spirit among participants.

If you are planning to visit Spain, you can get in-depth information about nearby places and outdoor locations using a web and mobile application Senditur, a collaborative platform that provides information related to active and cultural tourism and includes itineraries in web and PDF format with GPS tracks, photos and videos as well as ratings, comments, and contributions of hikers.

Measuring Impact

- Implement metrics to measure the positive impact of virtual experiences on the destination.
- Track engagement, awareness, and any tangible contributions to local communities or environmental conservation efforts.
- See here the video series “Measure, Act, Track” of Environmental Insights Explorer (EIE), designed for government policymakers and climate analysts. It was developed using Google’s global mapping data and machine learning to fight the climate crisis and help accelerate the transition to a low-carbon future.

These tips offer a roadmap for creating meaningful, sustainable, and enriching virtual experiences. By embracing these strategies, we can ensure that our virtual journeys contribute positively to the

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preservation and well-being of the communities and destinations we explore.

You can find more information about these and many other good practices promoting virtual experiences for regenerative tourism in the AGORA LAB section with the Interactive Map.

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GLOSSARY

Virtual tourism

Offers tourists experiences without them having to physically leave their homes. Different digital tools can be used to create an immersive experience, allowing people to explore and learn about remote places including virtual reality, augmented reality, and mixed reality.

Virtual experience

This kind of experience can be recorded or live-streamed interactive presentations with knowledgeable and engaging tourist guides. The virtual experience aims to create a near-life touring experience of a particular destination or tourist attraction.

Virtual reality

The combination of different hardware and software components makes possible the creation of a virtual environment with which the guest can interact in real time. It can increase the quality of the visitor experience of a destination.

Augmented reality

This technology overlays the user's view of the current environment with digital objects, creating a mixed experience that combines virtual

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and real elements. It helps to increase the quality of the visitor experience of a destination.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

1. Could you give an example of a virtual experience that better fits your tourism activities/experiences? And another one which fitted the worst?
2. Take a look at *The Taste of Berlin experience link/map*. List the pros and cons as done in Unit 2.
3. Read about the *Primarolia Festival link/map*. What interactive elements could you add?

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WORKSHEETS

Scenario 1.

International Mavrud Day (Bulgaria): adaptability of the experience and replicability in other local and international contexts.

Scenario 2.

Redesign and rethink your tourism experience/tourism activity taking into consideration:

- Analysis and needs of your target group. The local context and demand.
- The type/kind of experience offered. Positive and negative aspects. What can be improved through virtual elements?

Scenario 3.

Imagine you can visit the *ancient Roman city of Tarraco* (modern Tarragona, Spain), from the comfort of your own home using a 3D virtual tour and immersing yourself in the history of that epoch.

- Do you think this 3d virtual tour enriches your knowledge of that historical period? If yes, how?
- How does this virtual experience differ from a physical visit to Tarragona?
- Can you list the advantages and disadvantages of virtual tourism for the conservation of archaeological sites?

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Scenario 4.

Enjoy a traditional festival in Mexico, take part in a tea ceremony in Japan, or immerse yourself in the daily life of an indigenous community in Congo. Travel virtually through different cultures and discover new perspectives on the world.

- How can virtual tourism promote environmental awareness?
- What are the challenges and opportunities of virtual tourism for raising awareness of cultural heritage, fighting against prejudices, and promoting cultural integration?

Scenario 5.

Visit monuments virtually, take part in a virtual wine or local product tasting, or participate in a walking tour from the comfort of your sofa at home. Virtual tourism offers you the opportunity to enjoy tangible and intangible cultural heritage from anywhere in the world.

- How can virtual tourism democratise and foster access to culture?
- What is the potential of virtual tourism for heritage education and the promotion of cross-cultural dialogue?

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