

Ubeek

“So, how was China? Was your thing really the future after all?”

Those mocking words suddenly pulled me out of my daydream. I was sitting with John, a friend, over tea in Place du Commerce.

Ubeek, “the future of tourism,” as it was called, was a brand new way to travel. After international flights were banned for being too carbon intensive, a billion tourists had their wings cut. But one company seized the opportunity. The idea? For one week, someone on the other side of the planet would show you their country, all streamed live through your virtual reality headset. Then, the following week, the roles were reversed.

Thus was born Ubeek tourism. Passionate about China, I had jumped at the chance.

The registration process was simple: a few forums, a few fees, a few clicks. YuanLong, a man in his thirties living in the valleys of Zhangjiajie, welcomed me warmly.

As planned, he showed me everything. Early in the morning, I would sit cross-legged, close my eyes, and from afar, climb steep mountains, admiring the misty cliffs surrounding me, all from the comfort of my living room. He described to me the incredible spirituality that emanated from the place and explained how the valley had saved his life after years of working in the smog and constant stress of Beijing. There stretched an infinite natural wealth. I spent the week following my guide as if in a dream, sighing only when it was time to turn off the video feed.

Then it was my turn to roam through the countryside. With the camera strapped to my forehead, I was determined to impress him in return and show him the most beautiful landscapes along the Loire. But he seemed strangely silent, mute from the other side of the planet. I still tried my best to show him the most praised walks, the ones that had unanimous acclaim online, running in every direction to please him.

The week went by in that disappointing silence. So imagine my surprise when, at the moment of rating our experience, YuanLong showered me with praise, saying he had lived an unforgettable moment in my company. Yet deep down I felt a strange unease, an inexplicable void, as if something were missing, even though we had both seemingly done our best for one another.

I mentioned it to John, who thought for a moment before saying,

“In my opinion, travel is incompatible with the virtual, because to travel is to face the unknown, you know? The problem is, in China you only followed your guide, but at the slightest problem you could have just taken off the headset and canceled everything. Same thing here, you followed the suggested routes. You didn’t travel, you strolled.”

“All right, and how do you travel today then?” I asked, irritated.

He shrugged with a smile, paid the bill, and left without a word.

The scatterbrain had forgotten a book on the corner of the table.