

This Isn't Your Grandma's Russian Museum

Virtual reality is keeping pandemic-bound tourists happy.

By [Galina Stolyarova](#)

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Golden Ring 2.0

As Russian tourists flock to local resorts and historical sites, they are immersing themselves in Russia's rich and turbulent history — quite literally. Across the country, Russian history parks and museums are fusing together expert knowledge and modern technology to plunge visitors into the 1380 battle of Kulikovo Field, a tsar's feast or the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Museums and park for new generations

Visuals Studio is a leading Russian multimedia company that was at the heart of the country's first immersive history parks and remains a pioneer in the industry. Ilya Faizov, the studio's co-founder, says future looks bright for immersive parks.

“The generation of gamers has grown up. For people who grew up playing Tetris and the generations that followed, video games and virtual reality are nothing exotic,” he told The Moscow Times. “They are an integral and exciting part of life.”

Globally, amusement parks with a technology focus are on the rise as well. According to a Global Amusement Market Report from June 2021, the global amusement market is expected to grow about 12% this year, from \$517.44 billion in 2020 to \$579.92 billion in 2021. Some of the most popular parks merge real and virtual worlds.

In Russia, the focus of the increasingly popular edutainment business has been more on the education element. Russian regions are looking to use it to promote local tourism.

One of the Visuals Studio’s most ambitious new projects is the Golden Ring 2.0 Multimedia Park which is going to be built in the heart of the ancient town of Rostov.

Golden Ring 2.0, he said, is not meant to provide schoolbook knowledge. “This is more about building an emotional connection that will spark a greater interest in history and encourage visitors to discover more,” he said.

Oleg Zharov, the head of the Golden Ring 2.0 Multimedia Park said the future park will be built next to the Rostov Kremlin. “Together with the historical buildings the park will form an integrated tourist cluster, focusing on the history of Rostov and the Yaroslavl region,” he said. “Visitors will relive historical events, get a sense of what life was like in Rostov in different historical periods, and hopefully will see the ancient Russian town in a new light. People will sense and feel what they typically only read about, and, importantly, the structure of the immersive experience lets them make choices in history and see their consequences. This project has a strong educational element, and it is about values as much as about the knowledge.”

Russia – My History

The new parks will follow in the footsteps of an array of immersive history parks, which have mushroomed across the country over the past few years. Russia – My History is a network of multimedia history parks with branches in 23 Russian cities, including Moscow, St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, Yekaterinburg, Kazan, Perm and Vladivostok.

In St. Petersburg, the museum complex takes up a staggering 14,000 sq. meters and boasts around 900 pieces of state-of-the-art multimedia equipment.

The space covers Russian history from the rule of the Rurik dynasty to the leadership of Vladimir Putin and brings together education and entertainment. The display provides encyclopedic knowledge on a vast range of subjects, from architecture to arms production, but it also gives audiences a flavor of what the life was like: how people lived, what they ate, how they dressed, and how ordinary people experienced wars.

Nadezhda Yunatskaya is an art historian and the mother of a teenage daughter. They spend most weekends on cultural activities. “Russia – My History is a great option,” she told The Moscow Times, “especially if you are a parent and would like to give your children a more engaging and captivating art experience, something different from the traditional static

displays,” she said. “In these parks the standard museum warning ‘do not touch’ does not apply, and the tactile element really makes a lot of difference.”

“People of my generation had only books and traditional displays, and it was a rather rigid way of learning history,” she added. “In these parks you can experience things, rather than just reading or being lectured about them. It’s great because teenagers often see a history lesson as a platform for brainwashing. Some episodes of history might look a bit polished at the display, but there is still a lot of room for discussion. I am free to give my opinion on what we see. It sure is much easier to get your kid interested in history in these parks.”

The story of Russia – My History Park dates back to 2013, when Moscow’s Manege hosted a historical multimedia exhibition dedicated to the 400th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty. “It was the first grand-scale multimedia project inspired by an important historical topic,” Ivan Yesin, the director of Russia – My History Park recalled. “It was when we first tried the technologies that are now at the heart of all our parks, from touch screen desks and projectors to visual images, lightboxes and interactive dashboards.”

The 2013 exhibition became a museum blockbuster: 300,000 visitors came in the 20 days of operation. “It was followed by three similar exhibitions devoted to other periods of Russian history, which saw more than 2 million visitors in total,” Yesin said. “It was clear that this was a winning concept.” Two years later, in December 2015, the Russia – My History pavilion opened at VDNKH in Moscow, and the concept soon spread across the country.

Journey to the center of the earth

Faizov of the Visuals Studio is convinced that eventually many traditional Russian museums will follow suit, creating immersive experiences around their artefacts and their stories.

For example, an immersive park with an industrial angle is going to be created in town of Magnitogorsk, one of Russia’s main mining centers. The park will fuse together science and industry to offer a “voyage to the center of the earth” edutainment experience, giving the audiences both a sense of the mining industry and valuable knowledge of geology, geography and other related natural sciences.

More and more Russian towns are waking up to the potential of immersive parks.

“When they set foot inside a museum, visitors find themselves fighting during Siege of Sevastopol, casting their votes at the Novgorod Veche assembly or reliving the experience of an Avrora battleship sailor during the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution,” Faizov said. “This kind of immersive experience is exactly what today’s tourists are looking for.”

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