

Perillo Tours Tries Live Video Tours and Cooking Classes

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COVID-19 has clearly pushed the curve of technological evolution, changed society irreversibly and sent it off on a new course. Where it goes, nobody knows. But we can be sure that we will see a wave of innovation.

COVID has been the harshest Mother of Invention in a lifetime. And now, as the dust clears and we begin to pull our way out of this colossal pileup, we can begin to assess not only the damage, but also the benefits from the innovation that was forced by the global emergency.

We're seeing some of the resulting innovations unfolding now, and I suspect we'll be seeing a steady stream of them for a long time. It's going to be an interesting ride, because I don't think anyone expects our world to return to what it was pre-COVID.



Cooking Class with a Tuscan Chef. Credit: Perillo Tours

Generations of Innovations

One of the innovators in the travel space is Perillo Tours. It has been a media savvy company since its founding in the Bronx in 1945, as an Italy tour operator. In the 1950s, its founder, Joseph Perillo, advertised on radio. In the '70s, Joseph's son Mario appeared in TV ads and became known to millions of viewers in the New York region as "Mr. Italy."

Today Mario's son Stephen, who has been president since 1997, is pushing the media envelope with Perillo TravelVR, an operation separate from the tour company. Before COVID set in, the company was promoting its new virtual reality equipment for travel marketing. With the rapid advance of the technology and plunging prices, Steve Perillo was saying then that VR would soon take over from video as the prime medium for marketing travel.

Then, of course, the pandemic changed everything. With actual travel practically paralyzed, both video and virtual reality have new applications. If you can't go anywhere physically, virtual tours and experiences might be the closest you can get to actual travel.

While You're Waiting

Meanwhile, Perillo Tours has been using video technology and live transmission to offer cooking classes and tours live from Italy. It was one of those things creative people came up with when they were suddenly boxed in by the virus.

"Last year I had done a few live cooking classes, maybe eight or 10," said Diana Ferro, vice president of Perillo Tours and the orchestrator of the virtual events. "And now, realizing that Italy is not going to be open this spring as we thought it would be, I decided to start these live tours. We don't even have commercials now. So, it was a way for people to see our tours, or parts of our tours, on social media without traveling."

It's also a way to throw a little work to tour guides who have been mostly out of work for a year. Perillo pays them to conduct the virtual tours.

"It's a way for people to meet our tour leaders," said Ferro, "while also seeing Italy right now, what it looks like. It's crazy to see. The streets are deserted. There's nobody out there."

Though Italy is much more shut down now than the US is, the virtual tours take the camera into local stores to meet merchants.

"Our tour guides bring us each week into a store," said Ferro. "Last week we went into an ice cream shop. They meet the owners, talk to them, and we show the ice creams that are available."

Each week they choose a different place to tour, depending on what parts of Italy are open.

"For the cooking classes," said Ferro, "we have a winery that we work very closely with in Tuscany. The owner himself does live cooking classes. He's very entertaining and funny.

"We set the menu, and give the ingredients as well, so everyone can cook along with us. Or you can just watch later on, and try on your own. They are recorded so you can watch them after the live show."

Advantages of Live Performance

The events are live and interactive, which gives them another dimension of experience beyond that of watching a pre-recorded program.

"You're meeting the store owners and interacting with them in a way," said Ferro. "It's great that they are live, because you are able to interact more. People are asking questions, making comments, and the tour leader is answering as they are walking the streets. It's pretty cool."

The Italian government is now talking about a possible opening date of June 2nd. Ferro says she thinks the opening may be pushed back farther.

The virtual cooking classes and the virtual tours take place on Wednesdays, at 11 am and 4 pm respectively.

Right now the virtual events are scheduled through mid-May, but Ferro is already considering extending the series through June. And now that the idea has caught on, the company may make them a permanent part of its business.

"We're bringing Italy to you since we can't bring you to Italy," said Ferro. "It's been great. We've gotten a lot of great feedback. I'm getting excited about it. We're actually getting emails now from people saying, 'Where are we going next week?'"

"Hopefully we won't have to do this a lot longer, but in the meantime it's something."

The words "virtual travel" can mean different things, from a recorded video presentation of a tour, to an actual live event transmitted by video technology, or to a realtime interactive 3D virtual reality experience.

The live tours and cooking events do not use the virtual reality platform yet, but Stephen Perillo has plans to integrate virtual reality into the live tours and classes. He hints that some breakthroughs will be coming soon.

"We're getting a virtual reality camera to do it in that style now, live," said Perillo, "which is going to be the first time in the history of the world that we're going to have a live VR tour."

And now that the live tours and cooking classes are generating a following, they may become permanent. "We may continue to do this," said Ferro, "maybe not once a week, but maybe once or twice a month. We will definitely continue."

There is always the question: will virtual travel encourage people to travel, or could it be a substitute, something people will do instead of real travel?

For some people, in elder care homes for example, even after the pandemic subsides, virtual travel may be the best they can get. But for those who love travel and can, there is no substitute for the real thing.

How to Find the Live Events

The virtual cooking classes and tours can be found on [Perillo's Facebook page](#).

You can find the realtime event there as it happens, or later refer to the archived version. There's no charge to join in.

Here's the schedule of the virtual events that have happened so far and what is coming up:

- March 10 - Piazza Navona and surrounding area in Rome, gelato shop
- March 17 - Live tour of Florence
- March 24 - Tour of Florence and Bucchette del Vino, leather shop
- March 31 - Cooking class - spaghetti alla carbonara
- March 31 - Tour of Tenuta Torciano Winery in San Gimignano
- April 7 - Tour of San Gimignano
- April 7 - Cooking Class - Stuffed Zucchini Flowers
- April 14 - Tour of San Gimignano and a privately owned tower in San Gimignano
- April 14 - Cooking Class - Pork Filet in a Red Wine Sauce
- April 19 - Tour of Waikiki Beach in Hawaii
- April 21 The Pantheon and Piazza Navona
- April 21 - Cooking Class - tiramisù
- April 28 - Tour of the Colosseum and Circus Maximus
- April 28 - Cooking Class - spaghetti and clams
- May 5 - Tour: Trevi Fountain
- May 5 -Cooking Class: Braised salt cod Livornese style

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