

Next-Generation Technology Is Making Waves In The Cruise Industry

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Soon, some lucky cruise guests might be able to access Wi-Fi from the topmost sun deck of their ship to all the way down below—way, way below. Virgin Voyages, the new cruise line from Sir Richard Branson’s Virgin Group, calls it “Wa-Fi” and promises that guests will be able to stream photos, messages and video underwater while snorkeling or even diving. “Stepping into the untapped industry of ocean-based Wi-Fi seemed like the next natural step for Virgin Voyages,” Andy Schwalb, chief technology officer for the cruise line, [told Porthole Cruise](#). “Wa-Fi’s capacity for underwater connection will undoubtedly position Virgin Voyages as the most Instagrammable cruise line in the world.”

Virgin Voyages isn’t just doing this for the pretty pictures. Wa-Fi (which, by the way, is free!) is one of many customer experience (CX)-driven technologies the cruise line is pioneering as they get ready for their maiden tours in 2020. It’s also one of the many reasons I find this to be one of the most exciting companies in the cruise industry to watch right now.

Virgin Voyages is tricking out every cabin with digital tablets so that guests can adjust the mood lighting, change the temperature or place a food order, all with a simple swipe. Appealing to a younger crowd, the cruise line is getting rid of buffets, schmaltzy shows and add-ons and adding a tattoo parlor, free food and yoga (among other really cool amenities they define as “[Rebellious Luxe](#)”)—all of which guests can research and book digitally. “[It’s] how we create great experiences for those people,” Dee Cooper, senior vice president of design and customer experience, [said last year](#) of the

overall work they are doing to ensure an amazing voyage for their guests. “It’s that magic that creates a difference in the marketplace.”

It will be really fun to see what magic emerges from the company, which has long made CX a priority for its airline, Virgin Atlantic. But Virgin Voyages is far from the only cruise line dabbling in digital technology to enhance its customer experience. Carnival Corporation, for example, recently debuted OceanMedallion technology on its Princess Cruises line. The size of a quarter, OceanMedallion is a talisman that guests use to open their cabin doors, connect to the cruise’s Wi-Fi network, request massages, order and pay for food and drinks (a waiter will find you, wherever you might be on the ship thanks to geo-location technology), stream movies, find friends on the ship and even get on-boarded in a more timely manner. Guests use the device in conjunction with seven smartphone apps, and so far, it’s been met enthusiastically, albeit [with a few mixed reviews](#). My guess is if they figure out a way to merge those seven apps into one, it might find even better success. At OZ, we know that if technology isn’t intuitive and seamless, customers won’t use it.

Royal Caribbean’s [Anthem of the Seas](#) check-in technology uses a portside tablet to get guests from “street to ship in 10 minutes, with no check-in counter, no forms to fill out and no lines to wait in.” That kind of pre-travel technology will greatly reduce one of the biggest headaches in cruise vacations: the bottleneck during check-in when lines of people have to wait—sometimes for hours—to get to their cabins. Anthem of the Seas also uses smart luggage tags with high-tech RFID technology so that guests can track their bags on their Royal iQ smartphone app. Meanwhile, MSC Cruises offers parents [free digital wristbands](#) equipped with geo-location technology to keep an eye on their children. And [NCL’s Cruise Norwegian app](#) helps you call and message your fellow passengers (among many other conveniences).

All of these apps and digital services provide guests with a wildly exciting CX that feels custom-made for them. And guess what—chances are, smart companies will use the data these devices collect to create an even better experience for the guest’s next cruise. For example, it could send a reminder that they had a certain type of cocktail last time, or ask whether they’d like to book another skydiving adventure with Jorge when they reach land. Perhaps it will adjust the cabin’s room temperature just as the guest checks in, using her preference from last year. Or maybe it will ping guests to book a massage ahead of time before it fills up.

Forbes [recently said](#) that Virgin Voyages’ Scarlet Lady “is not your father’s cruise ship.” I think this is right and that we are about to see many new generations suddenly interested in taking a cruise. After all, decked out with the right technology, cruises are primed to be just about the most innovative places floating around on earth.