

3D gives taste of life and combat in ancient Rome

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By Stephen Brown

ROME (Reuters) - For tourists who struggle to make sense of the ruins around the Roman Forum, a new high-tech show provides a 3D sense of what life was like for plebeians and gladiators in ancient Rome.

Blending Hollywood animation and video-game technology with Cinecitta studio technicians' versions of ancient frescoes and brickwork, plus academic research, "3D Rewind Rome" sucks the visitor back in time to 310 AD, the reign of Emperor Maxentius.

In a refurbished theater just off the Colosseum, the visitor center opening to the public on November 20 tries to breathe life into the tourists' experience of Rome's ancient artifacts, which for all their majesty are sorely lacking in orientation.

"Now all of Rome is at your feet," says Sapientus, the tubby, balding, toga-clad 3D guide to a detailed virtual model of the city, developed by University of Virginia archaeologists.

Smoke, grime, graffiti and street scenes involving 60,000 virtual characters give visitors a 30-minute taste of what life was probably like in ancient Rome.

You get a peeping-tom's view of the Vestal Virgins, watch a rowdy Senate debate and see the plebeian district Suburra. There is even a financial crisis that may ring a bell with modern viewers.

"Oh no! My life savings! I could have earned more by keeping my money under the mattress!" moans Sapientus.

But the effects are most dramatic in gladiatorial scenes in the Colosseum. A preview audience kitted out with 3-dimensional glasses leapt back when evil gladiator Bestia shoved his sword at them.

The combatants were brought to life with "motion capture" technology, using body-sensors on real people at a modern-day gladiatorial school in Rome run by a local historical society.

Commentators and trumpets bring it to a climax when the audience screams for a thumbs-up or thumbs-down from Maxentius with shouts of "Mitte!" (mercy!) or "Iugula!" (kill him!).

Archaeological sites in Rome are often unearthed by digging for roadworks or metro lines and *Rewind Rome* starts with a walk through a building site and frescoed tunnel to the "discovery" of the gladiators' living quarters near the Colosseum.

Then visitors board a high-tech version of the pulley-system elevators that existed under the floor of the arena and glimpse a tiger and a hunter locked in combat overhead.

"When the audience watches the show they get a really immersive feeling of how it was like to be in ancient Rome as if you were an actor on the stage of history," said Joel Myers, the managing director of the hi-tech entertainment firm Virtuality.

The feeling lingered in the streets of present day Rome afterwards, when this visitor, blinking in the sunlight, bumped into two flesh-and-blood gladiators on the corner, taking a cigarette break from posing for tourists at the Colosseum.

(Writing by Stephen Brown; Editing by Janet Lawrence)