Visiting the stars (and planets, and telescopes) in VR

Having a computer strapped to my face for 40 minutes was one reason to feel a little sweaty. But the tour of the Universe I had just received in virtual reality—including visits to the near vicinity of the Sun, the giant black hole at the center of our galaxy, and a hellscape of an exoplanet 41 light-years distant—provided another excuse for sensing some heat.

Smithsonian Starstruck: An Immersive Experience is a 40-minute astronomy walk-through. It debuted in Washington, DC, in May with solo adult tickets now ranging from $29 to $35 and group tickets for four or more starting at $18 each (all now discounted by 15 percent); it will also open in Denver, Orlando, Florida, and San Antonio, Texas, later this year. I stopped by on a Monday in June to take it in.

After some onboarding that included setting such preferences as closed captioning and signing a waiver, I had enough time to sit on a bench next to the exhibit space (which has hosted other VR experiences) to enjoy watching another attendee with a VR headset blurt out, “Oh my God!”

After putting on an HTC Vive Focus 3 headset and receiving introductory coaching about how to move through the exhibit space, the tour began. My virtual self was standing below a glittering night sky at the Multiple Mirror Telescope at the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory’s Whipple Observatory.

The stars in my VR night were big and bright, but they blurred noticeably when I moved my head. I had to wonder how a headset

more recent than this 2021-vintage model would have performed; in other cities, Starstruck patrons will don a newer HTC product, the Vive Focus Vision, and the DC exhibit will move to that model at some point.

https://arstechnica.com/culture/2026/07/smithsonian-starstruck-vr-exhibit-lets-you-stroll-through-the-stars/