



# UK Leisure Industry Welcomes Innovation



**Leisure activities in the UK are a key part of the economy and yet have mostly been overlooked in terms of innovation and investment. Here, Michael Harrison, Chief Growth Office and Co-Founder of Gravity, discusses how the sector has been reinvigorated and how immersive experiences are the way forward.**

Some activities have seen some revitalisation, such as the new wave of trampoline parks that brought a breath of fresh air to the sector six years ago, upgrading from aging leisure centres to exciting, colourful trampoline centres with fun for all ages. However generally, other activities haven't had the investment needed to properly develop. It is only the last few years, with pressure from consumers for more experiences, combined with struggling retail companies that has led to more investment, both financially and strategically into the leisure sector, signalling a new era for the industry.

For some sectors, this has just been as simple as upgrading the offering to appeal to consumers, for example indoor golf has been invigorated, with the likes of McMulligans, Puttshack, and Swingers growing rapidly over the past two years. Previously seen as an outdoor destination with aging parks, these are now destinations for consumers who want to have some fun while socialising with colourful layouts, neon lights and loud music.

## Diversification has helped

For others, rather than upgrading, it has been about diversifying what is on offer, with consumers demanding more activities in one location.

Bowling has been an example of this; traditionally seen as a low-tech industry the likes of TenPin and Superbowl in the UK have embraced virtual reality as a way to diversify from their core offering, with TenPin also launching a laser arena with infrared light guns and a 4D experience.

At Gravity, we also saw the need for diversification. While we started with trampoline parks, we quickly realised that consumers wanted more and we started to invest in different activities from climbing walls to fitness classes to keep people entertained. We now have over 30 offerings across our portfolio, and our most recent opening in Wandsworth has 10 different activities across 85,000sq ft, including the first ever indoor e-karting track. The aim is to ensure consumers stay engaged and active when visiting a site and with diversification, they never get bored.

## Embracing technology

While most industries have seen a wave of innovation from technology, leisure didn't seem a natural sector to develop. Finally we are now seeing some really exciting developments.

As we mentioned, bowling has been a traditionally low-tech industry, and while others have just introduced diversified offerings at their site, we have gone one step further, and combined technology with bowling, something never seen before in the UK. Using projection technology to revolutionise the game, players can choose various different games to play that offer graphics such as flames on the ball.

Technology has also been key for the development of immersive experiences, another key trend in the UK leisure sector with the UK now the world leader of immersive and experiential content. Virtual Reality has been a key part of this and is expanding rapidly.

According to the Immersive Economy report in 2019, the UK's VR entertainment market was likely to grow faster than any other entertainment and media sector. While this may have been delayed by Covid-19, we are still seeing strong growth, and is still on track to be worth £294M in 2023.

There are standalone providers of VR experiences, such as DNAVR or Otherworld, and at Gravity, you can experience at our Electric Gamebox which invites you to interact with projection mapping, touch screens and motion tracking.

Immersive isn't just about technology though, we are also seeing consumers want more from their environment. This goes back to the likes of indoor golf locations creating club atmospheres with neon lights and loud music, and now can be seen across other activities. We have embraced this atmosphere for our e-karting track which has bright music and lights, really elevating the traditional go-track experience.

Other providers have gone even further; Rogue Productions are one of the leading providers of immersive escape games, having launched the likes of Heist, Jungle Escape and Crystal Maze. These have done so well, enabling the customer to be completely immersed in a different environment, even using actors to make the entire experience authentic.

## UK leisure has the opportunity to set trends

Innovation has been really important for leisure activities, enabling it to grow and become more resilient to consumer trends, as well as helping other sectors such as retail. With these new offerings and investment, the UK is really becoming a country to follow globally. There are many exciting companies growing, with just a few mentioned in this article, and we are proud to be one of them, setting the trends for what comes next in leisure.

