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Rome's Ancient Colosseum Beamed Into Cyberspace

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ROME (Reuters) - In its heyday, Rome's Colosseum could only accommodate 50,000 spectators for the bloody battles between gladiators and lions, but soon it will throw open its doors to millions of visitors -- virtual visitors.

The ancient stadium has gone online, and by the beginning of next year it will be wired with more than 40 Web cameras that will enable cyberspace surfers to stay plugged-in 24 hours a day, Italy's Culture Ministry said on Wednesday.

"People will be able to see things that aren't available to normal visitors, like Commodus' Passage," a spokeswoman for the ministry said, referring to the private tunnel used by the emperor to reach the amphitheater.

The cameras are expected to make the Colosseum, already Italy's most-visited archaeological site with almost three million tourists a year, even more popular. The ministry said the number of visitors could jump to 10 million.

Unlike traditional tourists, virtual visitors will also be able to "climb" to the top of the stadium, watch restoration work under way and spy on live concerts and exhibits held in the ancient gladiator stadium at www.colosseumweb.org.

Internet surfers will, however, have to pay for some of their privileges, the spokeswoman said. Although the details have not been worked out, online gladiator games and other interactive features may be pay-per-view only.

The ancient Roman stadium was inaugurated in 80 AD when gladiator contests designed to prepare soldiers for battle and involving lions, elephants and bears, were the main attraction.

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