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Safaris, swords and stars: Covid travel with kids

● Children are not eligible for vaccines, but high-end travel firms have introduced themed getaways for families

Sara Clemence

To the long list of ways that Covid-19 has changed travel, add this one: the kids' club just doesn't cut it anymore.

Pre-2020, glorified day care was almost an essential component of five-star family getaways. Children could make origami butterflies or explore tidal pools under the watchful eyes of resort staffers, while parents happily got reacquainted with relaxation.

But the pandemic has raised the bar on family travel. Consider a new offering from travel outfitter Black Tomato, best known for planning exotic adventures for upmarket clients – now building entire itineraries around beloved children's stories.

The company's new 'Take Me On a Story' programme is a fanciful step up from Harry Potter-themed walking tours. Its Oxfordshire trip, inspired by *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, includes a foraging class and a bespoke costume made by a top atelier, complete with hand-stitching and a fitting in a charming Cotswold cottage.

Pricing starts at R655,000 for a family of four. As part of the 'Treasure Island' itinerary in the British Virgin Islands (from R436,000 for four), kids can take lessons in sword-fighting and celestial navigation, and participate in an underwater treasure hunt. Other options explore Arabian Nights in Morocco, Journey to the Centre of the Earth in Iceland, and Call of the Wild in Alaska.

Black Tomato co-founder Tom Marchant says the idea for 'Take Me On a Story' dates back to 2019 but has taken time to come to fruition. Now, he says, is the perfect moment for it. "People are looking for genuine escapism," he explains.

Other high-end travel firms are also raring to satisfy those pandemic desires, and the willingness to splash out. After a year of lockdown, they're



**Jumbo fun:** African safaris are a popular travel option for wealthy families desperate for an exotic break. /123RF/Susan Schmitz



**Alaska calling:** Kayaking near Winterlake Lodge on Black Tomato's Call of the Wild itinerary. /Black Tomato

launching cruises, safaris and itineraries, all aimed at travellers with children under 18.

And yet, family travel has never been a more complicated proposition. Vaccines aren't expected to be widely available to the under-16 set in the US, possibly not until early 2022.

Aaron Millstone, a paediatric infectious diseases physician at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, says Covid-19 presents an extremely small threat to unvaccinated kids, but it's not zero. Decisions come down, in part, to how comfortable you are with a potential positive for them and yourself. "Even though I'm vaccinated, if I get a mild Covid-19 case, I can't work for 10 days," he explains.

The risk of spreading the disease post-vaccine, however small, also still exists, particularly in destinations with poor vaccine access or uptake where locals may be more vulnerable.

Travelling in a private car – or private plane – comes with less risk than commercial flights, though a lack of testing and tracing among airlines has made the risk of flying difficult to assess.

"There's a lot of data to suggest that plane travel can be safe," says Susan Coffin, a paediatric infectious diseases specialist at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. "But you could be the person who gets put in the middle of a row and have people coughing on your right and left."

**LOCAL CASE COUNTS** Millstone suggests skipping food court meals at airports, going straight to the gate just before the flight, and wearing your mask throughout the trip.

Even if you're not concerned about contracting the virus, Malley recommends checking local Covid-19 case counts

wherever you go, not just to mitigate your family's risk and avoid adding vectors of transmission, but to reduce potential strain on a burdened health-care system – parents and children alike can still get injured or sick from non-Covid illnesses.

"Would you want to be in a country where the medical system is in trouble?" he says.

Millstone says the wisest move is to wait, even just a month or two: "Most models are predicting that by summer, rates will have gone down."

Parents will have more high-end options then as well. Besides Black Tomato, boutique cruise company Uniworld just

launched a "Christmas in July" series of trips, designed as a do-over for the 2020 holidays. The cruises will feature red-and-white décor, winter-themed cocktails and on-board holiday markets.

In March, Ker & Downey Africa started selling 10-day private safaris specifically for families that include visits to Tanzania's Ngorongoro Crater, Serengeti National Park and Selous Game Reserve. For R123,000 a person, clients have exclusive use of 4x4 vehicles, as well as safari camps and villas chosen for their child-friendliness. (Children, lions and luxury don't always go hand in hand.) The itineraries respond to

a marked increase in East Africa requests from families, says Sarah Morris, sales manager of Ker & Downey Africa.

The same holds true for Roar Africa, which recently introduced a *Lion King*-themed itinerary in SA, complete with themed children's activities and, of course, the chance to spot all of the animals who featured in the film.

"No-one made their summer travel plans as far in advance as they usually do," says Roar CEO Deborah Calmeyer. "Now they are ready, and they want to go big."

As for Black Tomato, the most extravagant trip of all may be the Call of the Wild journey in Alaska. During the nine-night experience, families can go on a kayaking safari and a custom survival course, as well as take a private helicopter to the top of a glacier, then spend the day learning how to drive a dog sled. The trip clocks in at almost R582,000 a person.

"If children are lucky enough to go on these trips, it's going to be not only inspiring but educative," Marchant says. "And we're trying to create something that adults will enjoy as well." /Bloomberg



**Story time:** Belmond Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons, the accommodation for Black Tomato's 'Alice in Wonderland'-themed itinerary. /Black Tomato



NUCLEAR POWER

Atomic superyacht aims to be a floating platform to highlight climate concerns

Adam Majendie  
Singapore

A nuclear-powered ship full of scientists, activists and billionaires sailing the world and examining the state of the oceans. That is the dream of entrepreneur Aaron Olivera, who believes the novel vessel will help raise environmental awareness.

The ship, called Earth 300, was designed by superyacht specialist Ivan Salas Jefferson. Almost 300m long and 60m high, it will be able to accommodate 425 people. Most of those will be staff, scientists and students, travelling for free. A handful of wealthy tourists, housed in luxury suites, will pay \$3m each for a 10-day journey – helping to make the venture profitable.

At a launch dinner in Singapore, Olivera talked enthusiastically about his dream, rolling off names of entrepreneurs and politicians mixed with emotive phrases about saving the environment,

inspiring the youth and furthering science. He wants Earth 300 to be a global architectural icon that encourages people to think more seriously about the climate. The modernist design, clean lines, cantilevered observation deck and 13-storey glass "science sphere" are meant to spark awe.

"We wanted the sphere to inspire whoever looks at it to save the planet," Olivera said, in a restaurant that was once the ticket hall for ferries to Singapore's outer islands. "Imagine if we could build an object that would galvanise people around the planet."

He calls the ship "The Eiffel Tower of our generation".

Beyond the hubris, there is still a long way to make the boat a reality. It has taken six years and \$5m to get to this point, where the design is advanced enough to take to shipyards to work out construction quotes. Olivera said the group is considering shipyards in Europe and South Korea.

Earth 300 executives estimate the total cost would be \$500m-\$700m. Part of the high price tag would be a zero-emission atomic power plant from UK-based Core Power, which is developing a ship-borne molten-salt reactor, a technology led by the Bill Gates-founded US nuclear company TerraPower.

With the ship scheduled to launch in 2025 and certification for the reactor not expected for another five to seven years, the vessel is likely to run initially on synthetic green fuels. Atomic propulsion may also create issues with nations such as New Zealand, which has banned nuclear-powered ships from docking since 1984.

**WEALTHY ECOTOURISTS** Olivera wants the vessel's first trip to be a circumnavigation of Antarctica, followed by an Arctic voyage. The ship would be designed to operate for 300 days a year, generating about \$100m from wealthy ecotourists, with additional revenue from hosting events or movie sets, he said.

Those who pay for the 10 luxury suites with private balconies would also get accommodation for personal staff in a separate set of cabins. Another 10 suites would be made available to what Olivera calls very interesting persons – people from all walks of life who would bring a unique knowledge to the voyage.

Olivera envisages inviting artists, explorers and students to spend time on the ship, hobnobbing with billionaires, but paying a lower fee, or even travelling for free.

With them, working in 22 laboratories, would be about 160 scientists, who would carry out research and gather data

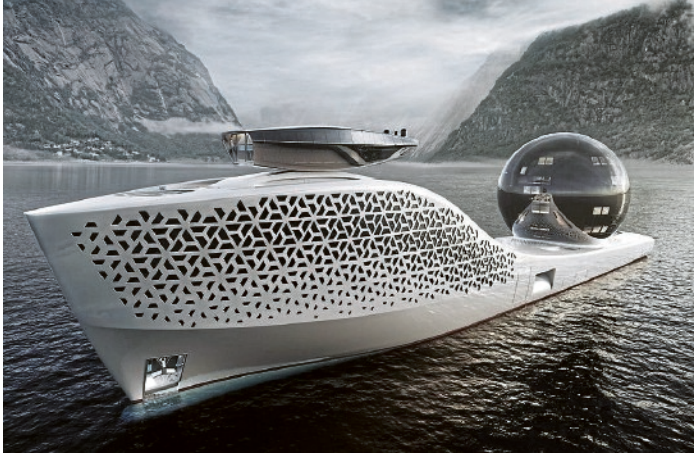
using the ship's equipment and thousands of built-in sensors, including what could be the first commercial ocean-going quantum computer.

Olivera said the project would be "open source", with information and processing facilities shared with other climate research efforts around the world.

At the dinner in Singapore, Olivera lined up an array of scientists and environmentalists via video links to voice their support for the venture. He says he has interest from unnamed wealthy private backers and that most of the funding for the project would be raised through traditional financial instruments.

Olivera is undaunted by the long list of challenges.

He said the business plan has been stress-tested by KPMG, and 80% of the profit will be channelled to environmental causes. His priority is for the project to be "inspirational", he said. "The future of humanity lies in ambitious projects like this one." /Bloomberg



**New frontier:** Aaron Olivera's ambitious Earth 300 superyacht, which could cost up to \$700m, will be powered by a zero-emission atomic plant. /Bloomberg

LIQUID INVESTMENT

Nonalcoholic wine is hardly worth the squeeze



**Do not drink:** Nonalcoholic wine is not grape juice and just for the seriously thirsty. /123RF/RAStudio

I spent much of last year wondering if the perennial liquor bans would catapult the de-alcoholised beverage business from almost embarrassing obscurity to front of stage.

Suppliers undoubtedly experienced a mini-boom, if only because a number of imaginative and sleight-handed restaurateurs used their products as window-dressing (or perhaps fig leaves) while serving trusted patrons the more traditionally satisfying fruits of the harvest. There was certainly a time when you could sit down in quite reputable establishments and see some of the best known of the alcohol-free wines on the tables of diners far too joyous to be drinking from the bottles set before them.

It's curious how ready we are to assume that no-one in her or his right mind would ever voluntarily drink nonalcoholic wine. This is not because of a macho presumption, the beverage equivalent of "real men don't eat quiche". Nor is it because wine is regarded as the obvious shortcut to inebriation. In fact, unless papsakke are your preferred form of packaging, wine is probably the least economically efficient way to raise your blood alcohol level.

It is because fine wine is more about the nuances of taste than most other drinks, so why would you consent to anything that would compromise your pleasure?

There's plenty of genuinely alcohol-free beer about, and all the ones I've tasted are pretty decent. They may be a little less substantial than normal strength beer, but they are hardly a shadow of what they purport to be.

You cannot say this for de-alcoholised wine, or zero octane gin-and-tonic. You would have to be deeply delusional to assert that the taste difference is insignificant: you can put all the juniper, angelica and quinine you like into a fancy bottle, jazz it up with a blast of CO<sub>2</sub>, and a twist of lemon, but it still will be what the Americans call a soda and we a soft drink.

The test is very simple: de-alcoholised vodka is called water, and is about as interesting. In Liverpool they say: all hair on top and no bread in the house.

Alcohol-free wine is not grape juice. Like zero-alcohol beer, it's been fermented in the normal way, and the alcohol has been removed, mainly by reverse osmosis, though low-pressure evaporation has also



MICHAEL FRIDJHON

been used. The technology is now so good that there is less alcohol in the finished product than you would find in recently squeezed orange juice.

But something happens when you do this to wine, something that doesn't appear to affect beer in the same way or to the same extent: you strip it of its body, its mid-palate weight, its freshness and its vinosity. The aromas become fragile, the mouthfeel attenuated, the finish falls flat. In short, unless you were stumbling out of the Atacama Desert and seriously

**DE-ALCOHOLISED VODKA IS WATER, AND AS INTERESTING. IN LIVERPOOL THEY SAY: ALL HAIR ON TOP AND NO BREAD IN THE HOUSE**

dehydrated, alcohol-free wine would not be on your wish list.

But sometimes it can be the only beverage on the table, other than Coke, water and fake gin. On those special (and hopefully infrequent) occasions, you will want to know what your best options are. I braved the gloomy places where such wine is marketed and assembled a line-up of many of the major brands, which I then tasted blind. I was told by my tasting room manager which wines were zero alcohol and which merely "low alcohol".

Statisticians who might like to claim that this information prejudiced my judgment may be scientifically correct but factually way off the mark. The differences are screamingly obvious. The de-alcoholised offerings come with a whiff of wine on the nose, but that's as close as you get. Scrawny and sherbetty, most taste more of Cal-C-Vita than grapes.

The best of the bunch were the Leopard's Leap Naturas, white and red, closely followed by Darling Cellars Shiraz. All of the low-alcohol offerings beat the zero-alcohol wines, but that's a little like saying that if you are alone on a desert island, a blow-up doll is a life-changing gift.