



## Soft power: Why hotels, restaurants and tour operators are embracing sober tourism

From tea- and kombucha-splashed drinks pairings to chalet mocktails and sober safaris, the travel industry is taking note of current drinking trends, finds **Lucy Thackray**



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*In The Independent's [travel trends](#) column, Trendwatch, we dig into the types of trip, modes of transport and top buzzwords to watch out for.*

At the beginning of this year, [I wrote about the rise in vegan tourism](#) – not just in the way of restaurants offering vegan options, but whole hotel concepts, tour menus and plant-based venues on far-flung tours. It seemed that the travel industry was finally taking this lifestyle preference seriously, and looking for ways to cater to plant-based diets and a meat-free way of life.

Now it seems [sobriety](#) might be the next lifestyle choice to make its mark on the travel world. I started spotting intriguing booze-free concepts a few months ago; first up, Switzerland's ritzy Grand Resort Bad Ragaz launched an "[alcohol-free](#) pairing menu", created by its director of wine to accompany feasts in its two-Michelin-starred Memories restaurant.

The alcohol-free tasting selection imitates a traditional wine pairing: a sommelier serves teetotal guests kombucha with a starter of caviar with horseradish and chive, followed by a curious tisane made from smoked black tea, quince, pine and Alpine herbs to go with lake char with burnt dairy cream. The difference between the tasting menu and merely offering a decent selection of "low and no" drinks is the thought that goes into them – flavour pairings are not merely selected from a cellar, but actually created, tasted, brewed or infused to go with each course.

The Swiss spa giant wasn't the only place I noticed stylish sobriety on the menu: several of luxury chalet company [Bramble Ski's](#) Alpine properties now offer an alcohol-free après ski menu, collaborating with booze-free "spirit" brand Seedlip to put some love and creativity into its soft drink options – a significant move for a traditionally alcohol-stacked type of trip.

The menu – featuring genuinely delicious sounding concoctions such as a “Plum Wahe” with Seedlip Spice 94, plum caramel and vanilla – is available at chalets in Courchevel, Verbier and Zermatt, among others. Bramble Ski partly based its decision on a 2019 report by research agency CGA which showed sales of non-alcoholic drinks had surged by 418 per cent in one year.



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*Loukia Blouti, Sommerro hotel  
Oslo*

Meanwhile, Oslo’s hottest new hotel **Sommerro** – a landmark 1930s building transformed into a hip hangout with rooftop pool and sauna this summer – has made an ambitious and bespoke booze-free cocktail menu a key part of its launch. Called The Prohibitionists, the selection’s drinks are named after key figures in the US Prohibition movement of the 1920s.

Sommerro’s mixologist Loukia Blouti says: “People choose not to consume alcohol for a variety of reasons including health challenges, driving a vehicle, pregnancy or even just for a change every now and then. But this should not be a reason to miss out on a social gathering.



Loukia Blouti has dreamt up Sommerro's cocktail selection (Sommerro)

“At Sommerro, guests will be able to find non-alcoholic creations that are made with the same care as the rest of the menu. Taste, complexity, and ingredient quality are guaranteed for every single drink, regardless of alcohol content. Our priority is and always will be predicting our guests’ needs and the existence of non-alcoholic options is a rising need.”

It seems a Diet Coke or a ginger ale will no longer cut it: **the recent trend for water sommeliers** is just another example of how booze-free options are being elevated in hotel settings.

Also in the offing for spring 2023 is a full blown “Sober Safari” with specialists **Safari Guru**. The eight-night tours of Kenya are open for booking February and March, and will take alcohol off the table completely on this usually sundowner-heavy style of holiday.

The company’s founder, Suse Lock, was inspired by a stay at a sober retreat following a tough pandemic and family bereavements. “It’s almost now a cliché to say that Covid and lockdown was a tough time for many,” she tells *The Independent*. “I definitely had a difficult time, both in personal life and business. After the UK lockdowns, I realised I was numbing my work/life issues with alcohol.

“In the end, I checked in to a rehabilitation retreat in South Africa, where I met many fantastic people, like-minded, adventurous and frankly brilliant individuals who were keen to seek out activities and interests where alcohol was not involved. And the idea of the ‘Sober Safari’ was born,” she explains.

“Safari gives you a fantastic connection to nature, wildlife, other cultures and, importantly other people – and one where there’s no real need for alcohol to be involved. It lends itself well to an alcohol-free life, often involving very early starts to catch wildlife in their natural habitat and see spectacular sunrises.” The trips are open to solo travellers as well as couples and groups, with an itinerary starting in Nairobi and moving to eco-luxe camps in the north of the country, with yoga sessions and spa treatments adding to the sense of wellbeing.



Clear-headed: Safaris from camps such as Kenya's Elewana Loisaba (pictured) pair well with an alcohol-free retreat  
(*Elewana Loisaba Tented Camp*)

As well as general trends for a healthier lifestyle, and lockdown self-examinations, the travel industry will also be catering to the next generation with this type of holiday. A 2019 DrinkAware study found that Generation Z (born mid 1990s to early 2010s) is either not drinking at all or drinking less often than older generations, with 15 per cent having a firm stance on not drinking alcohol. Meanwhile, in a 2021 survey of 3,400 Millennials and Gen Zers by American Addiction Centers, 57 per cent said that they'd rather go to the gym for an hour rather than to a bar.

Mindful drinking – the polar opposite to binge drinking – where drinkers consider each alcoholic drink they choose to have, or make conscious efforts to drink a minimal amount, is also a rising trend, with **Washington DC this week hosting a “mindful drinking festival”** celebrating non-alcoholic beverages.

A friend who made the decision to stop drinking alcohol eight years ago tells me the difference when going for drinks on holiday now, compared to five years ago, is enormous. “I can’t tell you my delight at the change and promotion for more alcohol-free options. I was forever going to a cool new hotel or restaurant and just asking for a Diet Coke as there were so few interesting choices.

“The excitement now to explore a new city, restaurant or hotel bar where I’ll be able to try a new mocktail or celebrate with a 0 per cent prosecco has changed the whole experience of travelling. I feel I’m able to indulge in luxury options just the same as an alcohol drinker.”

If health truly is wealth, the rise of sober retreats, bars and hotel offerings could well be the new luxury. If nothing else, it’s inclusive, creative and an added bonus for many types of traveller.



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*Suse Lock, Safari Guru*