

## Your next vacation may be virtual

Japan's biggest airline is betting that the future of travel isn't traveling at all. For the last month, a married couple has been interacting with a robot — called an Avatar — that's controlled by their daughter hundreds of miles away. Made by ANA Holdings Inc., it looks like a vacuum cleaner with an iPad attached. But the screen displays the daughter's face as they chat, and its wheels let her trundle about the house as though she's really there.

"Virtual travel" is nothing new, of course. Storytellers, travel writers and artists have been stimulating the senses of armchair tourists for centuries. It's only in recent decades that frequent, safe travel has become available to the non-wealthy.

Yet even as the world's middle classes climb out of the armchair and into economy-class seats, there are hints of a post-travel society emerging. Concerns about sustainability are taking a toll on carbon-intensive airlines. And the aging of affluent societies is both *inhibiting* physical travel and creating demand for alternative ways to experience the world. For the travel industry, virtual reality offers a *tantalizing* response to these trends.

inhibit 抑制; 禁止

tantalize 逗弄

tantalizing 撩人的; 逗引的

elusive 难懂的

Of course, far-out technologies encourage far-out claims. ANA doesn't plan to start selling Avatars until next year. Profits, too, will probably be *elusive*: By one estimate, the global market for this kind of technology will be worth only about \$300 million by 2023. By contrast, ANA's traditional travel business brought in more than \$19 billion last year.

But if the business case for virtual vacations is still weak, the market for technologies that bridge physical distances between families and coworkers seems likely to only expand. ANA's robots may not replace its airplanes any time soon, but they'll almost certainly be a part of travel's high-tech future.