

# Black Travel Awards 2023



2023  
ESSENCE

**Best  
in Travel**

AWARD WINNERS

Now that the world has opened back up, we share the best hotels, locales and travel tips to make your global exploration a memorable one

It's time to get back out  
and see the world. >>

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# Luxurious Lodging

Nine must-visit hotels that offer five-star opulence

By **Kimberly Wilson**

## The Ritz-Carlton, New Orleans

Synonymous with N’awlins luxury, the Ritz-Carlton was formerly the historic Maison Blanche department store. The hotel’s grace and charm are evident in its marble floors, crystal chandeliers and lush, private courtyard. You’ll also be perfectly placed to enjoy the French Quarter’s unique cultural flair.

## Rosewood São Paulo, Brazil

Inspired by Brazil’s heritage, culture and style, Rosewood São Paulo is an urban oasis located in Cidade Matarazzo, a neighborhood of historic and beautifully preserved buildings from the early 20th century. The property itself is gorgeous. Amenities include a cinema, a music studio, two pools, ample event space and Asaya, Rosewood’s well-being concept.

## Hôtel Barrière Le Carl Gustaf, Saint Barth

Nestled on a hill above the port of Gustavia, the capital of Saint Barth, Hôtel Barrière Le Carl Gustaf overlooks one of the most spectacular bays in the Caribbean. The property contains just 21 rooms, bungalows and suites, as well as Villa Diane, which features five spacious bedrooms, each a haven of tranquility with a private terrace and superb views.

## The St. Regis Cairo, Egypt

Located in the heart of Egypt’s largest metropolis, the St. Regis Cairo opened in January 2021 and quickly impressed visitors. The hotel offers outstanding vistas of the Nile and Old Cairo, state-of-the-art facilities, signature spa rituals, classic St. Regis traditions, and seven thoughtfully crafted restaurants and bars.

## Pendry, Washington, D.C. —The Wharf

The Pendry has quickly established its property as the hot new spot on the Wharf for luxe accommodations and fine dining in the nation’s capital. It’s centrally located along the iconic mile-long waterfront, home to an exciting collection of world-class eateries, shops, outdoor parks, and live events and entertainment.

## Ritz, Paris, France

Did you really go to Paris if you didn’t stay at the Ritz? One of the most famous hotels in the world (Coco Chanel lived here for roughly 35 years), the Ritz has 142 rooms—all of which are simply exquisite.

## Sandals Royal, Curaçao

Sandals Resorts’ newest jewel is situated on 44 acres within the exclusive 3,000-acre Santa Barbara estate and is a convenient 15 miles from the airport. The resort offers 351 luxurious rooms and suites that include lovely seaside bungalows. Top suites are not only equipped with elite butler service, but complimentary convertible Mini Coopers are also provided for guests who prefer to drive while exploring the island.

## W, Toronto, Canada

Centered in the heart of Toronto, the first W hotel to open in the city made its debut in 2022 and has already become a cultural mainstay. The three-year project, whose opening was delayed by two years due to lockdowns, boasts three separate dining concepts, 254 rooms and a beautifully designed interior. The decor choices help to make its signature living room lobby feel as warm and welcoming as a home away from home.

## Rome Cavalieri, a Waldorf Astoria Hotel, Italy

There’s something magical about Rome, but what makes your visit even more special is having the Rome Cavalieri as your exclusive accommodation. Perched on 15 acres of private Mediterranean parkland overlooking the Eternal City and the Vatican, the hotel offers experiences ranging from outdoor cabana spa treatments by the pool to tiramisu workshops.

## Best & Black-Owned Ivy Hotel (Baltimore)

This beautifully restored 19th-century mansion is an elevated boutique hotel with 17 unique rooms, located in the heart of Baltimore’s cultural epicenter, Mt. Vernon. The Ivy is the first and only Relais & Chateaux property in Maryland.

## La Maison Michelle (Barbados)

Perched atop a hillside overlooking the sublime Caribbean Sea, along the Platinum Coast on the breathtaking island of Barbados, Villa La Maison Michelle combines the idyllic Caribbean lifestyle with five-star boutique luxury.

## Salamander Resort (Middleburg, Virginia)

Sheila Johnson opened the doors to the Salamander Resort & Spa in August 2013, later becoming the only Black woman to wholly own a Forbes five-star resort—and she continues to reign supreme. The property exudes excellence in every sense of the word, including the caliber of its visitors.



Courtyard at Rosewood São Paulo, in Brazil.



Guest rooms at St. Regis Cairo, in Egypt.

FROM TOP: COURTESY OF ROSEWOOD ST. PAULO; COURTESY OF ST. REGIS CAIRO.

# Travel Like an Influencer

Globe-trotting gurus reveal their favorite destinations around the world

By **Felice León**



Jessica Nabongo has traveled to almost every country.



Kellee Edwards is a pilot and an adventurer.



Nathan Fluellen is the host of the web series “World Wide Nate.”

COURTESY OF SUBJECTS (3)

Kellee Edwards, Nathan Fluellen and Jessica Nabongo are adventurers in every sense of the word. They embody a spirit of freedom, courageously living by a compass. These intrepid wanderers are also social media influencers for whom no corner of the globe is too remote, whose posts from across the planet inspire others to lead more daring lives. But of the innumerable trips these travel pros have taken, which destination truly makes their soul sing?

## Jessica Nabongo (@jessicanabongo)

“There are so many beautiful and energizing places in the world—why choose one? I have been to Cuba five times. It is a place that I fell in love with in 2016. After my very first trip to Cuba, I returned three times within 18 months. What stands out to me is the people—they are full of joy and have a welcoming energy. And there’s an indescribable energy I feel when I’m in Bahia, a state of Brazil. Morro de São Paulo, just south of Bahia, is an island where no cars are allowed. It’s also super hilly, so when trekking the island, be prepared for a workout. There’s freedom from capitalism there, so you’re just living a simple life. Dakar is the capital of Senegal and is only about 8 hours from New York City—I’m not sure people know that! Dakar is where I go to just relax and not think about an itinerary.”

## Kellee Edwards (@KelleeSetGo)

“As a pilot and avid explorer by land, air and sea, I find that Alaska is a rare destination that remains widely untouched and unknown by tourists. Because of its vastness, there is an array of experiences to be had in every season. Whether it’s hiking trails in the spring, whale-watching during summer, seeing the Northern Lights in the fall or dog-sledding in the winter, you can connect with nature in the most intimate of ways. Alaska is as majestic, picturesque and awe-inspiring as they come, making it a journey you’ll never forget.”

## Nathan Fluellen (@WorldWideNate)

“For those seeking an unforgettable adventure, I cannot recommend South Africa enough. As a seasoned traveler I have explored numerous regions of this country, and I can attest that each offers an astonishing yet unique experience. Johannesburg, the vibrant ‘City of Gold,’ is a melting pot of cultures; you’ll encounter people from all over the continent and world. Cape Town boasts breathtaking scenery, with Table Mountain serving as a stunning backdrop. My personal favorite is KwaZulu-Natal, home to the Zulus and Durban’s King Shaka Zulu International Airport. Durban has a rugged charm. Its Indian Ocean coastline is awe-inspiring, with warm waters and great surfing waves.” >>

# Everything You Need to Know to Stay Safe on Your Next Girls Trip

With news of group trips gone bad, here are things to consider when planning your next vacation—so you'll have fun and return home safe, sound and restored

By **Rayna Reid Rayford**



Everyone is heading back outside in a post-pandemic world, and vacations are being booked faster than you can say “group trip.” But while traveling with others can be a great way to save money and create unforgettable memories, it’s important to consider how to stay unharmed in paradise.

Five years ago, I was on the trip of a lifetime, celebrating a friend’s milestone birthday abroad. It’s a running joke now about how I was wheelchair back to America—but I’m grateful for my squad, who stuck with me in an Indonesian airport; and I’ve never forgotten how, but for them looking out for me, I might not have made it back safely.

During the first half of this year alone, headlines have announced frightening stories of murder, cartel kidnappings and mayhem befalling Black travelers abroad. Shanquella Robinson was just trying to go on a great vacation in Mexico, yet she ended up dead. Shaeed Woodard and Zindell Brown were just accompanying their friends on a road trip across the southern border when they were fatally caught in cartel cross fire. And while visiting sick relatives in Haiti, Jean-Dickens Toussaint and

Abigail Michael Toussaint were kidnapped by a gang hoping to negotiate a ransom; mercifully, they were later freed. Given such cautionary tales, we want to help you make sure your next trip is both fun and safe. Here are a few things to consider before jetting off on your adventure with your own squad.

## **Share your location with a family member or trusted friend.**

If your phone doesn’t have that capability, you can share your location via Facebook Messenger. Make sure that whoever you’re sharing it with is not with you on the trip.

## **Pack a portable carbon monoxide detector.**

Not all countries require that hotels have them. This odorless gas can prove deadly, and you can’t smell or see it, so this little gadget could save your life.

## **Check in with the State Department for the latest updates on your destination.**

Head over to [travel.state.gov](https://travel.state.gov) for any travel advisories before your departure date. Also

register your trip to ensure you receive alerts and can be located in the event of an emergency.

## **Have a backup fund.**

If things go south, you want to make sure you can take care of yourself—whether that means finding new accommodations or buying an earlier ticket home. Trust your gut, and get out if anything feels wrong.

## **Buckle up, wear a helmet and use a life jacket.**

Drowning and traffic accidents are among the most common causes of tourism-related deaths. Take safety precautions and avoid problems that are preventable, just as you would at home. And it obviously goes without saying, don’t drink and drive.

## **Make sure your companions know about any major medical conditions within the group.**

If anyone has serious allergies, do you know where they keep their EpiPen? If a medical malady comes up, you want to be able to provide the EMTs with all relevant information. »

# Flying the Friendly (for us) Skies

American Airlines is amplifying Black businesses

By **Kimberly Wilson**

There's a reason American Airlines has been ranked one of the top airlines in the United States. Beyond the fabulous experience you'll have with its business class or in its Admirals Club, the airline consistently aims to prove that the friendly skies are now even friendlier for us all—particularly Black travelers.

Over the past couple of years, American has made considerable advances in diversifying every part of the flying venture, from its staff to its lounges to the food that is served and the in-flight entertainment offered. Couldn't go to the American Black Film Festival this year? No problem. The ABFF channel is available as part of American's free in-flight entertainment. For over 20 years, the airline has partnered with ABFF, to help uplift the work of Black filmmakers and to connect customers to diverse artists during their travels.

The airline's food and beverage collaborations also help set the company apart. Last year, American Airlines announced a partnership with Silver Spoon Desserts, serving their delicious bundt cakes on all domestic flights between 900 and 1,499 miles. Now able to reach a broader swath of travelers, Silver Spoon founder Tamara Turner is on a mission to transform the meaning of "silver spoon," from a symbol of privilege to one of transformation, equality and freedom for all.

In addition, American's domestic first-class snack baskets feature cookies from the Black-owned company Partake. The baked

goods company's founder and CEO, Denise Woodard, created her recipes using ingredients that would make sharing Partake's treats a worry-free experience even for those with food allergies.

American Airline's Flagship First dining in most Flagship Lounges and in Admirals Club Lounges across the country also offers Black-owned Uncle Nearest 1865 Premium Whiskey. The brand, founded by Fawn Weaver, honors Nathan "Nearest" Green, a former enslaved man who is credited with teaching Jack Daniel how to distill whiskey. He became the head distiller at Jack Daniel's distillery after the Civil War. Another high-profile partnership

initiated by American is with the James Beard Foundation (JBF), one of the most influential organizations in the culinary industry. The collaboration began in 2019 to help the airline find diverse chefs to curate menus in its Flagship Lounges—such as Chef Tiffany Derry, a two-time James Beard Award finalist. Wine educator, writer and consultant Julia Coney also consults on the onboard and ground dining programs.

So if you're wondering why you might want to choose American Airlines the next time you fly, some good reasons are all the Black businesses and diverse talent you'll be supporting when you do.



An airline's quest for equality and inclusion.

DANIEL GARRIDO/GETTY IMAGES

## Easily Accessible Babymoon Vacation Spots for Adventurous Parents-to-Be

These domestic getaways are perfect for strengthening your bond with your partner, your baby on the way and, most importantly, yourself

By **Jasmine Browley**

A vacation is a surefire way to gain a much-needed refresh and respite, particularly for those who will soon be stepping into a new phase of life. This is particularly true for expectant parents. A "babymoon"—a colloquial term for a getaway before the baby arrives—has become increasingly popular. The best time to travel while pregnant is typically the second trimester; however, consulting with your trusted health care provider is a must before confirming any travel plans when expecting. And as enriching as this can be, the planning process during such a delicate time can be a bit daunting. The good news is, there are plenty of relaxing destinations just a short plane ride away that are ideal for a babymoon. We've rounded a few of them up for you to consider.

### St. Croix, USVI

Known by locals as a smaller, more serene sister of St. Thomas, this island is a step into some of the lushest territory within the United States. Yes, you heard that right: As one of the U.S. Virgin Islands, St. Croix is accessible without a passport if you're an American citizen, which makes your travel planning that much easier. With turquoise waters, sandy beaches and

talented artisans who create self-care products straight from natural sources, the island provides a serene opportunity to pamper yourself and reconnect with your partner as you both await the addition to your family.

### Fredericksburg, Texas

You may be surprised by this one, but hear us out. This central-Texas gem flies under the radar, but it's worth adding to your list. With its idyllic views, fine vineyards and rich cuisine, you'll have an experience that offers similar vibes to Napa, California—despite hitting pause on the alcohol while expecting—sans the pricey plane ticket.

### Savannah

When it comes to gracious southern retreats, Savannah is a top-tier destination to

consider. Although only about a four-hour drive or a 58-minute flight from metro Atlanta, it feels like entering another world. Its balmy temperatures make it easy to slow down, while its swath of eateries and lively nightlife activate the senses in the best way. A bonus: Savannah's historic architecture and cobblestone streets will leave you feeling as if you've stepped back in time.

### Scottsdale, Arizona

Arizona is synonymous with beautiful deserts and warm weather, but Scottsdale, in particular, is often cited as one of the country's top spots for five-star relaxation. The town is home to top-ranked spas complete with yoga programs, award-winning massage centers and dedicated professionals who are ready to welcome expectant parents. »



Travel to Savannah for soul-soothing riverside views.



Belize is undoubtedly the jewel of Central America.

## The Caribbean's Best-Kept Secret

People from all over—including singles, couples and families—return to this Central American gem for good food and lush living

By **Metanoya Z. Webb**

With over 240 miles of Caribbean coastline and roughly 450 islands called “cayes,” Belize is relatively untapped and incredibly beautiful. Travelers from around the world come to the island to explore its marine life—it is home to the second-largest coral reef system on the planet. There are also mangrove swamps, jungles, rainforests and ancient Mayan ruins. The country’s lush landscapes are next-level, but it was the coconut-infused rice and peas, plus the fly mash-up of ethnic groups, that first sold me on Belize 16 years ago.

In March 2023, I returned to San Pedro—a chill town on Ambergris Caye that I once called home—for the first time in nearly two decades. But for this run, I wasn’t on a solo literary pursuit, occupying a second-floor walk-up on the lagoon. Instead, I was introducing my 6-year-old son, Journey, to one of the Caribbean’s hidden gems, and, admittedly, one of my favorite destinations on this side of the globe.

Getting to San Pedro isn’t easy, but as with traveling to Dominica, the journey is well worth it. Flights from around the world arrive at the main airport just outside of Belize City; from there, travelers can reach their destination via boat and local flights. We took the aquatic route and cruised through the Caribbean Sea to Alaia Belize—an Autograph Collection hotel nestled on Mar de Tumbo beach, mere minutes away from the Belize Barrier



Become immersed in the country's natural beauty.

Reef Reserve. Flaunting three pools—including Belize’s first-ever suspended rooftop pool and lounge, with 360-degree views—a full-service spa and gym, and modern studios, suites and villas featuring their own private-plunge pool, Alaia was perfect for us. It’s luxe with upscale amenities, but with a laid-back local vibe.

The hotel offers complimentary golf carts for guests to explore San Pedro at their leisure. During our stay, we drove through town and across the bridge at the far north and leeward side of the island—over to Secret Beach, a stretch of shallow, crystalline water. It has floating bar tables, live music and even a water park in the ocean for the little ones to enjoy. Back at Alaia Belize, we mingled with families from Brooklyn, Boulder, Kansas City and St. John while enjoying local staples such as fry jacks, sweet plantains, snapper ceviche, and Belizean rice and peas. We even took a “molecular mixology” class at the hotel’s Piano Bar—and slowly sipped cocktails (mocktails for my son) with ice cubes infused with rose petals and dragon fruit.

Before you leave the island, take a half-day snorkel excursion with Belize Pro Dive and swim with nurse sharks in their natural habitat. You’ll also encounter hundreds of different species of coral, fish and invertebrates. It was a truly unforgettable trip, even more so because I was able to enjoy it through my son’s eyes.

FROM LEFT: BOB KRIST/GETTY IMAGES; TETRA IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; INGO ROESLER/GETTY IMAGES

## Exploring Brazil's Rich Culture

There’s much more to this diverse country than meets the eye

By **Kimberly Wilson**



Brazil has long captivated Black travelers.

Renowned for its diverse heritage, Brazil has long served as a getaway for Black travelers looking to escape to warmer weather, picturesque beaches and breathtaking landscapes. Home to the largest population of African descent outside of Africa, with around 56 percent of Brazilians identifying as Black, the country is filled with strong diaspora customs that show the importance of our contributions. It’s why from the moment you step off the plane, the energy and familiarity of both the people and the place engulf you.

The country’s main destinations, Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo and Salvador da Bahia, each offer something different for the Brazil-curious traveler. Rio is known for its natural wonders, world-famous tourist spots, exciting nightlife and beautiful beaches. It’s usually the first city that comes to mind when you think of Brazil. São Paulo, on the other hand, is the country’s cultural epicenter. Similar to what New York is to the United States or Mexico City is to Mexico, São Paulo features numerous museums, luxury hotels and eclectic dining experiences, plus an abundance of street art and a multiethnic social scene. And then there’s Bahia, the mecca of the Afro-Brazilian experience. As Brazil’s most African state, it is the heartbeat of the nation, filled with a rich and flavorful history of diasporic culture.

Of course, you may also want to sunbathe on world-famous Copacabana Beach, see the historic Christ the Redeemer statue and take in the magnificent views from Sugarloaf Mountain.

For those visiting Brazil for the first time, here are some don’t-miss experiences in this vibrant South American country.

**SEE:** Considered among Rio’s most famous landmarks, Escadaria Selarón, or the Selarón Steps, are the work of Chilean-born artist Jorge Selarón. He decorated the steps as his “tribute to the Brazilian people,” and they have even become popular in American culture

(they appear in Snoop Dogg and Pharrell’s “Beautiful” music video). The steps run from Joaquim Silva Street to Pinto Martins Street and are so striking, they’re hard to miss.

**EAT:** In Rio, the Black woman–co-owned Meza Bar helped to establish Botafogo as a dining and nightlife hot spot when it opened in 2008. This and Yayá Comidaria are chef Andressa Cabral’s sought-after eateries, with visitors always coming back for more. Biyou’Z Gastronomia Africana, in São Paulo, is a traditional African restaurant serving authentic dishes such as croquetas and cruado.

**DO:** One of the biggest draws to the country is its Carnival celebration, typically in January or February. Thankfully, you can experience this all year long with the Carnival Experience at the Grande Rio Samba School. Open to visitors who want to know a little more about the creation and production of Carnival parades, the school operates in the months leading up to the annual event at Sambadrome Marquês de Sapucaí, each Carnival season. You’ll get to go behind the scenes to see how the costumes and the assembly of the big cars are done by hand—and to meet the hard-working people behind the revelry.

**STAY:** While you’re in Rio, a hotel on the beach will put you close to all the action. Fairmont Rio de Janeiro Copacabana is located in one of the most spectacular places in the seaside city, the Copacabana Beach, while Hotel Fasano Rio de Janeiro is situated on Rio’s legendary Ipanema Beach. Both offer sophisticated luxury and are rated among the city’s best accommodations. In São Paulo, the art-filled JW Marriott São Paulo, located in the upscale business district of Chácara Santo Antônio, will take your breath away when you walk through its lobby doors. It’s a no-brainer as one of the best hotels for a unique local experience.