



TRAVEL NOW

TRENDS AND TRIPS FOR 2024

Top: Chandon's Secret Garden railcar on the Napa Valley Wine Train
Photo courtesy of Meritage Resort & Spa

BY CAROLYN O'NEIL

A WORLD OF CARING, CULTURE, AND CUISINE AWAITS TRAVELERS SEEKING WHAT MATTERS MOST.

Enthusiastic vacationers hit the road, the skies, the rails, the seas, and even ventured into space for a few short minutes throughout a record-setting year of travel in 2023. This year is predicted to be just as busy, but 2024 travel plans are expected to look and feel a bit different—in a good way.

“After the mad post-pandemic frenzy, people are no longer desperate to grab whatever they can get,” says Jack Ezon, founder of EMBARK Beyond. “We are seeing a much more mindful decision-making process shifting the narrative from being flashy or uber-exclusive to focusing on quality and craftsmanship.”

So, rather than fancy white tablecloth cuisine, think delightfully delicious local foods (which may also be Michelin guide-worthy). Instead of navigating congested urban landscapes, imagine quiet walks through quaint historic villages or finding those special tucked-away locations in travelers’ favorite cities. “People are seeking to feel more enmeshed and immersed where they are,” says Rebecca Masri of Little Emperors, a luxury travel members club.

Perhaps the most important observation for this year is from travel advisors looking into their crystal balls. They see that travelers are planning much further ahead. “Bookings are very high already for 2024,” cautions Jennifer Falk Weiss of Atlanta-based JFW Travel. “It is important to plan early.”



The American Bar at The Stafford London

Right: The artful interior of a Stafford London guest suite

Below Right: Venison Wellington on the menu at The Game Bird

Photos courtesy of The Stafford



AT YOUR SERVICE

With hundreds of buzzy new hotels and jaw-dropping resorts opening worldwide this year and in the coming years, there’s renewed vitality to provide guests with impeccable service in an increasingly competitive landscape.

“The romance of travel is back,” says Jamsheed Pocha of The Pelican Club, a luxury travel agency based in Toronto. “Hotels must have a sense of place and offer a feeling of being in that picturesque moment.”

That means traditional hotels with loyal followers must keep in step with what guests want now. Case in point: The Stafford Hotel in London, where 60 percent of guests are repeat visitors who are now introducing new generations of their families to this fine old hotel. A short walk from Buckingham Palace in the city’s center, The Stafford is situated on a quiet mews with a warm and welcoming atmosphere.

“None of our team are robotic; they’re not formulaic, they’re just themselves, and many have been working here for as long as the guests have been visiting,” says Stuart Procter, chief operating officer of The Stafford Collection. “So, for our guests, there is a sense of belonging and familiarity. It’s like coming home, where you feel like part of the family.”

Not staying at the hotel? You’re welcome to enjoy cocktails at their famed American Bar, plan a private dinner in the historic wine cellar, take a bit of lunch on their flower-filled terrace, or feel quite royal experiencing an elegant afternoon tea service while viewing a painting of the late Queen’s corgis.

New to The Stafford’s repertoire is a restaurant called The Game Bird, which celebrates an artisanal approach to British cuisine. From the sea, there’s locally sourced sturgeon caviar and crab from Devon. Skilled servers expertly slice smoked Scottish salmon tableside. And if you’re game to try some game, perfectly sauced duck pie, guinea hen, and venison star on this menu. For dessert (or pudding, as they say in the UK), savor something sweet, such as a strawberry trifle or a selection of British cheeses served with homemade chutney.

A TASTE FOR TRAVEL

What’s on the menu is a big draw for many travelers today. Surveys from Virtuoso, a global luxury travel network, reveal that 70 percent of travel advisors have seen an increase in culinary travel, and 58 percent of their clients want food and wine-themed tours focused on hyperlocal products and cultural authenticity.

Long known as a destination for foodies, San Sebastián in the Basque Country of northern Spain continues to please palates with the unique flavors of small snacks served on toothpicks called *pintxo*, paired with the region’s refreshing and slightly fizzy Txakolina wines.

Those seeking the comfort of high-low gastronomy will be happy to grab a seat in San Sebastián’s comfortably casual Casa Urola restaurant. Specializing in grilled fish and seafood, it’s been open since 1956 and is in the Michelin Guide again for 2024.

Want to take the best culinary souvenir home with you? Join a cooking class to learn how to make regional foods. The Royal Mansour Marrakech, for example, has just launched a cooking school where guests cook shoulder-to-shoulder with Michelin-star chefs. Or take in the aromatherapy of Moroccan spices in the hotel’s hammam, where saffron is used in spa treatments.

Windstar Cruises sailing ship in St. Lucia

Photo courtesy of Windstar Cruises

Below: Sunset view from the Wyndham Grand Clearwater Beach

Photo courtesy of Wyndham Hotels & Resorts

BIG APPEAL FOR SMALLER SHIPS

While cruise ships keep getting larger and larger, there’s a growing demand for sailing on smaller vessels. They’re seen as less intrusive on ports of call and can anchor in harbors rarely visited by other passenger ships.

Windstar Cruises, with its fleet of six boutique all-suite yachts, carries fewer than 350 guests on each voyage. Their sleek sailing vessels are considered among the most beautiful ships afloat and carry fewer than 150 passengers. Windstar’s innovative culinary program includes James Beard Foundation cruises and a dedication to plant-based menu options on all ships.

I experienced firsthand how Windstar delivers on the promise of destination authenticity and immersive experiences. *The Star Legend’s* summer voyage around the British Isles brought guests into the tiny ports of Oban in Scotland for hilly hikes and whisky tastings, then Fishguard in Wales for pints in a pub with the locals. But the tiniest of places we went ashore was in the Isles of Scilly, a garden-like archipelago in southwest England off the coast of Cornwall. Local boatmen ferried us to a small dock to explore the wide beaches, natural surroundings, and a small winery and to buy baked goods in the teeny post office. It felt good to positively impact the small businesses there, tread lightly on their environment, and feel so welcomed. *The Star Legend’s* journey concluded with a fantastic finale navigating up the Thames River and under London’s Tower Bridge, something larger ships would not be permitted to do.

BETTER FOR YOU BEING THERE

Sustainability concerns are playing a more vital role in the travel planning equation. The Virtuoso Impact Report found that 88 percent of travelers want to see tourism dollars go toward protecting the planet, including wildlife conservation. In Florida, the Wyndham Grand Clearwater Beach has created family-friendly rooms themed around Winter the Dolphin, with a portion of the proceeds donated to the Clearwater Marine Aquarium to support the care of rescued marine animals.

Picnic in the vineyards of the Meritage Resort in Napa Valley

Photo courtesy of Meritage Resort & Spa

TELL ME A STORY

Storytelling is a significant component of what travelers want today. “These micro experiences are really important as guests seek a higher level of education and engagement,” says Misty Belles of Virtuoso.

Literally going higher to tell a story, Napa Valley Balloons lifts guests via hot air balloon two thousand feet above and across the beautiful landscape. The pilot points out wineries, vineyards, and towns below and shares details of hot air ballooning mechanics today—not too different from the time of its invention in the late 1700s.

More stories of the region emerge on the rails as the Napa Valley Wine Train takes travelers through the area and back in time. “The train tracks were established in 1864,” says general manager Nathan Davis. “We are the ‘everything experience’ for the valley, from wine tasting to food to phenomenal photography to just about the best vistas in the valley.”

The harmony of food, wine, wellness, and music shapes the story of Meritage Resort and Spa, the perfect location to set the stage for a vacation in Napa Valley. Their food and wine center features cooking classes and chefs’ demos, and Meritage Resort is the home of the area’s popular Blue Note concert series.

Of course, the ultimate tales in wine country are about the wine itself, and that narrative is changing at wineries such as Hill Family Estate. Their innovative tastings begin with bites of tiny tomatoes and herb flowers to illustrate nuances of flavors and aromas before sampling the wines accompanied by an acoustic guitar solo.



Travel in restored Pullman railcars on the Napa Valley Wine Train.

Below: Moroccan elegance at the Royal Mansour Marrakech

Photo courtesy of Royal Mansour

ON THE HORIZON

What else can we expect in 2024 and beyond? Over-tourism is still an issue in super popular Italy and Greece, especially in summer, so smart travelers are booking shoulder seasons or even off-season to avoid the crowds.

If you’ve got France on your travel list, take heed of Virtuoso surveys. Due to elevated interest in the upcoming Paris Olympics, as well as its status as a beloved destination among foodies and art connoisseurs, France should be extra busy this year.

Meanwhile, our neighbors to the north say they’d love to welcome more visitors. “We don’t have demand for all we have in Canada!” says Mark Telio of Entrée Destinations.

Looking for luxury on a budget? Ezon says Argentina is a bargain. “Extreme inflation puts the country on a half-off sale. There’s never been a better time to explore the glacier-cut mountains of Patagonia, the wine lands of Mendoza, or the vibrant city of Buenos Aires.”

To make international travel a bit easier this year, there’s no need for a visa to go to Europe until June 2025. Falk Weiss adds, “We have good news that passports are going to be able to be ordered to arrive much more quickly!”

Bon voyage and safe travels! 🍷

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