

The Best Places to Travel in December

From Christmas markets to private islands.

BY CATLIN MORTON
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December is the ultimate holiday month for most travelers, and there are plenty of places that fully embrace the magic of the season. We're talking fully decorated hotel suites, millions of twinkling lights, and Christmas markets plucked straight from the pages of a fairytale. Of course, not everyone turns jolly during the cold months. For those of you who prefer sun to snow, there are several warm-weather getaways we'd suggest in the U.S. and beyond. So whether you prefer to pair your travel with mulled wine or Mai Tais, here are the 9 best places to travel in December.

This article has been updated with new information since its original publish date.

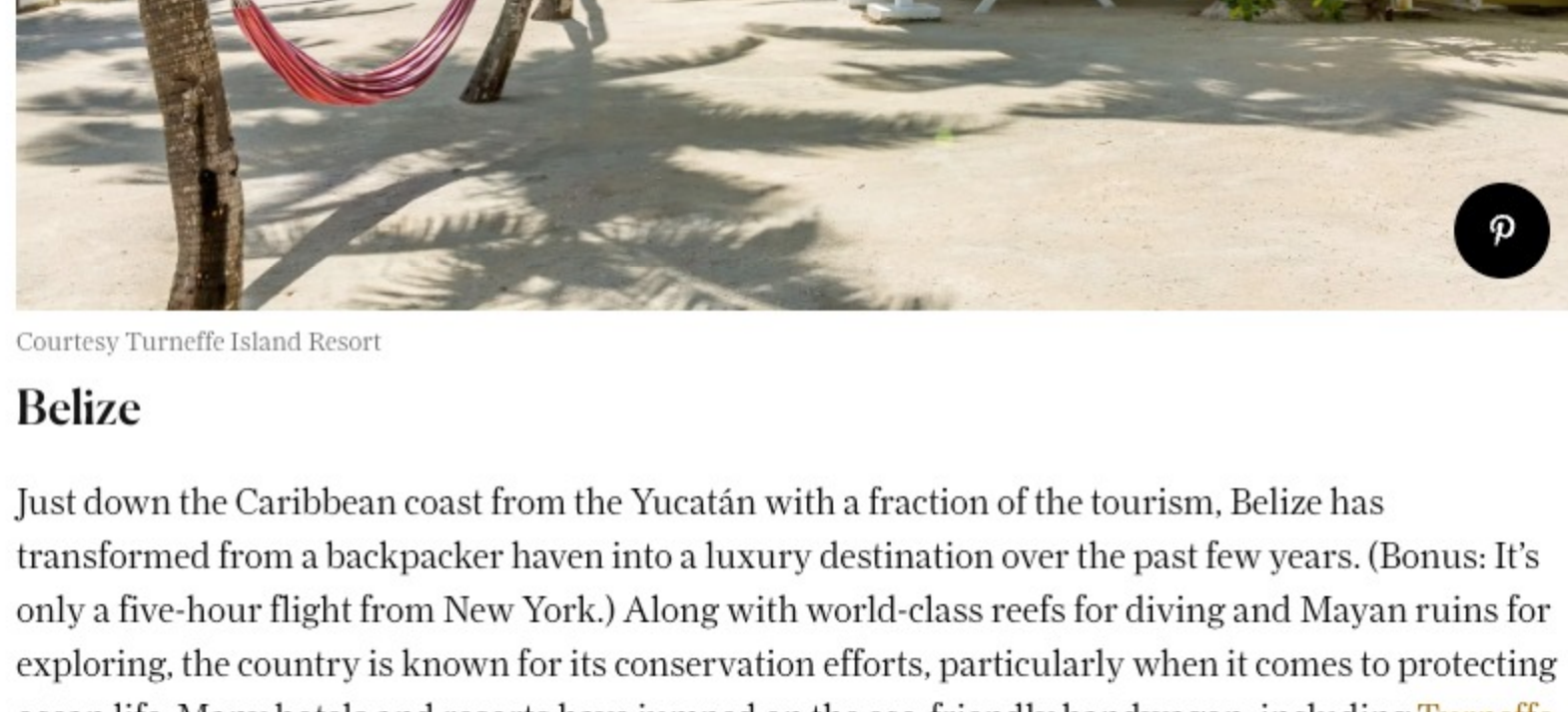


Courtesy NPS/Jacob W. Frank

Yellowstone National Park

If you haven't visited Yellowstone in the dead of winter, you are missing out on one of the most incredible travel experiences out there. Not only will you escape the typical summer hordes that make it nearly impossible to see wildlife and popular sites like Old Faithful—starting in December, the park is closed to cars and will only allow snowcoaches and snowmobiles to enter—but the relative quiet and icy chills of winter make our oldest national park feel even more like a mystical wonderland. Just imagine: sleepy bison with snow-dusted beads, bright blue pools set against a blanket of white, and boardwalks billowing with steam from the surrounding thermal features.

There are only a couple of in-park lodges open in the winter, but luckily they are incredibly cozy and convenient. Located in the heart of Yellowstone, Old Faithful Snow Lodge will get an extra dose of holiday magic this December, with trees set up throughout the hotel, in-room Christmas sweets, cookie decorating stations, and visits from Santa. Guests can also book several outdoor excursions from the lodge, ranging from guided snowshoe tours to wildlife photo safaris.



Courtesy Turneffe Island Resort

Belize

Just down the Caribbean coast from the Yucatán with a fraction of the tourism, Belize has transformed from a backpacker haven into a luxury destination over the past few years. (Bonus: It's only a five-hour flight from New York.) Along with world-class reefs for diving and Mayan ruins for exploring, the country is known for its conservation efforts, particularly when it comes to protecting ocean life. Many hotels and resorts have jumped on the eco-friendly bandwagon, including Turneffe Island Resort, which goes to great lengths to support the population of Antillean Manatees in the nearby Turneffe Atoll. Guests may get a chance to spot the gentle giants while staying on the resort's 14-acre private island, while gift shop purchases go straight to the Belize Manatee Conservation Program.

Aside from offering an indulgent, adults-only stay on a true white-sand beach, Matachica Resort & Spa provides interactive workshops to learn about the Belize Barrier Reef, including guided scuba diving trips and helicopter tours. Given that December 4 marks World Wildlife Conservation Day, we say there's no better time to pay these forward-thinking hotels a visit.



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Whistler, Canada

If you're desperately seeking slopes, you can't do much better than the largest ski area in North America. With 8,171 acres of skiable terrain and hills ranging in difficulty from green to double-black, the twin peaks of Whistler Blackcomb truly have something for every winter sports enthusiast. This season is particularly exciting, as both the Big Red Express lift and Creekside Gondola have been freshly reworked to hold more people, meaning the mountains will feel far less congested and visitors can enjoy even more rounds of powder.

Once you pack up your poles for the day, soak up all the après glory at Whistler Village. Here you'll find the resort area's largest concentration of bars and restaurants, ranging from the buzzy high-end seafood restaurant Wild Blue to the upscale yet relaxed Braidwood Tavern. In terms of hotels, the Fairmont Chateau Whistler looks (and feels) like a true fairy tale castle, nestled at the base of Blackcomb. Even better? The 519 guest rooms are currently at the tail end of a chic renovation and should be ready to book by this December.



Courtesy Virgin Limited Edition

British Virgin Islands

Made up of more than 60 tropical isles, the British Virgin Islands are easily one of the best places to travel in December. The archipelago is the epitome of Caribbean relaxation with white-sand beaches and lush rainforests—not to mention some of the best hotels in the entire region. Richard Branson's Necker Island is arguably the most famous resort, freshly reconstructed with an emphasis on sustainability. New wind turbines join the existing solar farm so that the resort runs on 90 percent renewable energy. Even the staff uniforms are made from recycled plastic.

The past year saw the arrival of two new private island resorts, both of which appeared on our 2022 Hot List. Off the northern end of Virgin Gorda, Saba Rock's nine-bedroom boutique hotel boasts a bustling rooftop bar, spacious guest rooms, and a seemingly endless supply of water sports. Meanwhile, Branson struck gold again with Mosquito Island, located just two miles away from Necker Island. Guests with deep pockets can choose from three private estate rentals, each with its own distinct style. Amenities like private chefs and house managers available to help 24/7—not to mention the chance of running into Branson himself on the tennis courts—offer a true taste of a billionaire's vacation.

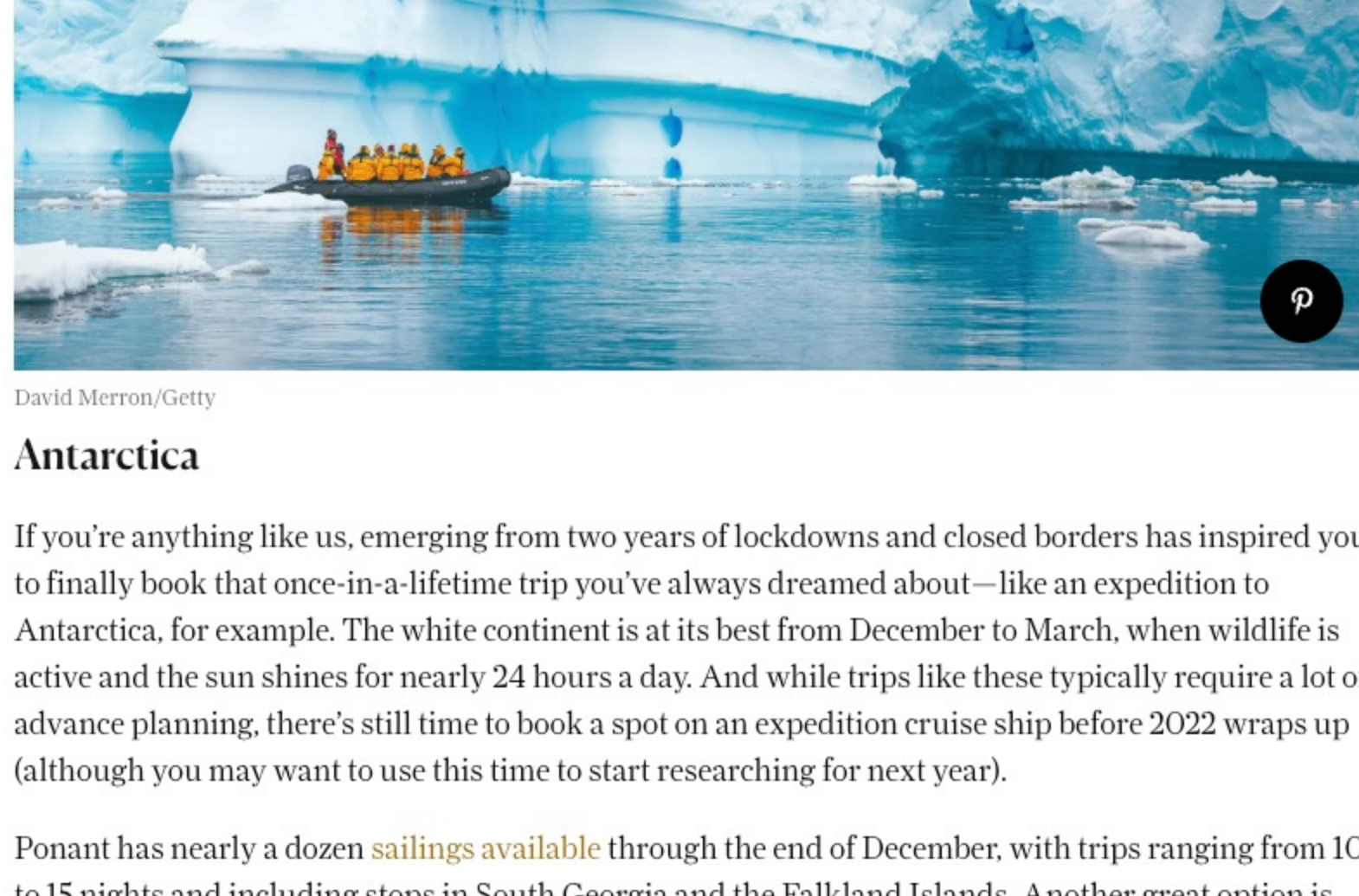


David Merron/Getty

Antarctica

If you're anything like us, emerging from two years of lockdowns and closed borders has inspired you to finally book that once-in-a-lifetime trip you've always dreamed about—like an expedition to Antarctica, for example. The white continent is at its best from December to March, when wildlife is active and the sun shines for nearly 24 hours a day. And while trips like these typically require a lot of advance planning, there's still time to book a spot on an expedition cruise ship before 2022 wraps up (although you may want to use this time to start researching for next year).

Ponant has nearly a dozen sailings available through the end of December, with trips ranging from 10 to 15 nights and including stops in South Georgia and the Falkland Islands. Another great option is Quark Expeditions' "Antarctic Explorer: Discovering the 7th Continent" voyage, an 11-day trip with departure dates of November 19, 23, and December 28 (plus main in 2023). Each sailing includes the typical stops, but Quark also started offering a major cool add-on last year: alpine heli-trekking, in which guests board a helicopter (just imagine those views) and fly to typically inaccessible terrain to enjoy hiking or snowshoeing.



Tanner Marquis/Unsplash

Charleston, South Carolina

If you want an immersive Christmas experience but aren't a fan of cold weather, Charleston is the perfect destination for you. In fact, we'd argue that winter is one of the best times to visit, when temperatures hover around the 50s and 60s. Holiday attractions this year include the 33rd Annual Holiday Festival of Lights (November 11 - December 31), featuring an estimated 2 million twinkling lights, and Holiday Swing (December 3), a concert of reimagined Christmas carols courtesy of the Charleston Jazz Orchestra.

The city has no shortage of fabulous hotels, but some notable properties go all out for the holidays. The French Quarter Inn, voted one of the best hotels in Charleston by our readers, will be fully decked out with a Christmas tree and free gingerbread cookies in the rotunda, while the Sleigh Bell Suite comes with even more festive amenities: an in-room eggnog bar, freshly-baked cookies served by the fireplace, and holiday movie screenings. Be one of the first to stay at The Ritz-Carlton Key Biscayne, housed in a former 24-hour post office—or choose from one of the many established hotels in the city.



BluejayPhoto/Getty

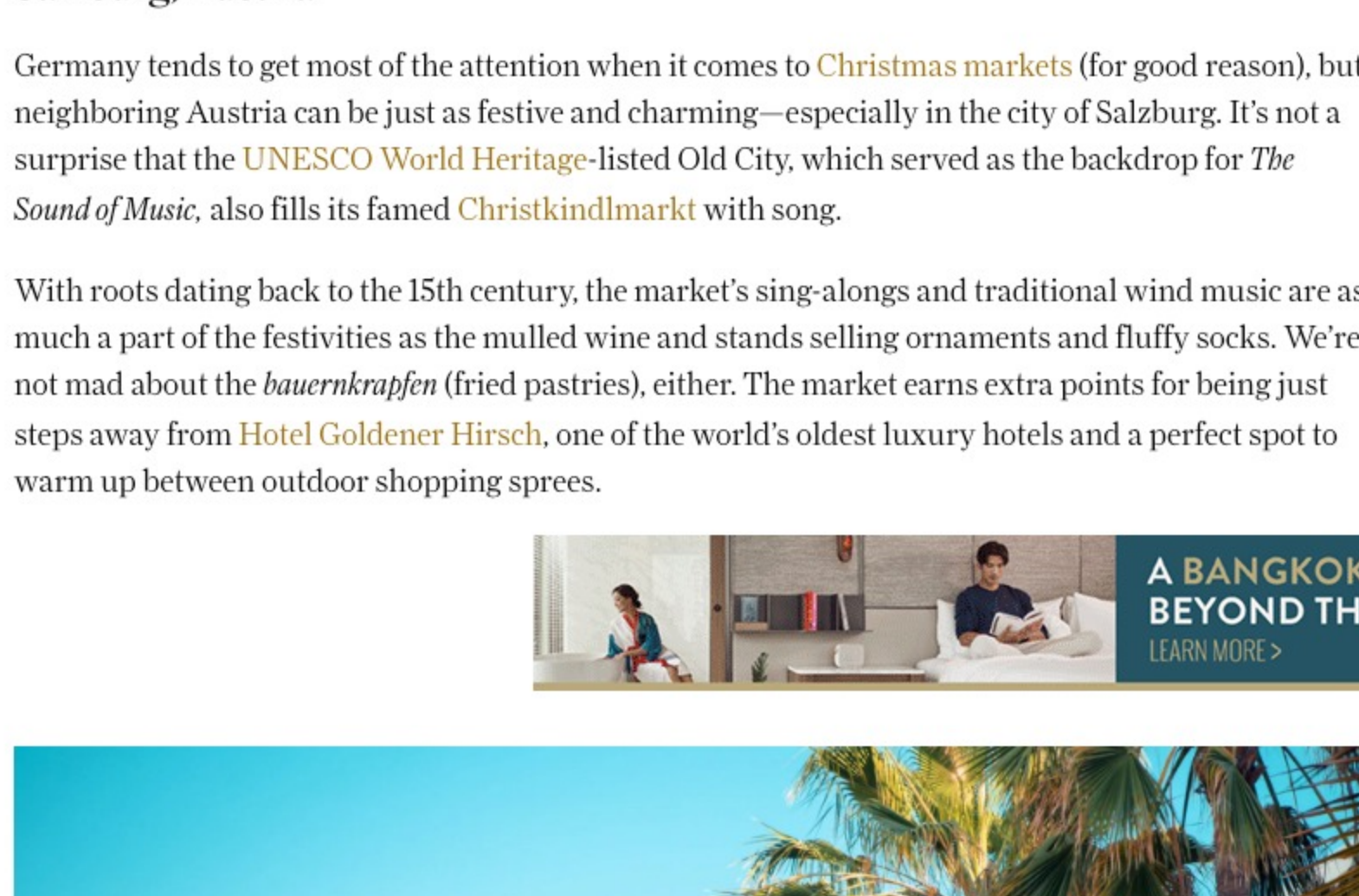
Salzburg, Austria

Germany tends to get most of the attention when it comes to Christmas markets (for good reason), but neighboring Austria can be just as festive and charming—especially in the city of Salzburg. It's not a surprise that the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Old City, which served as the backdrop for *The Sound of Music*, also fills its famed Christkindlmarkt with song.

With roots dating back to the 15th century, the market's sing-alongs and traditional wuffy music are as much a part of the festivities as the mulled wine and stinging selling ornaments and fluffy socks. We're not mad about the *kaueknäpfen* (fried pastries), either. The market earns extra points for being just steps away from Hotel Goldener Hirsch, one of the world's oldest luxury hotels and a perfect spot to warm up between outdoor shopping sprees.



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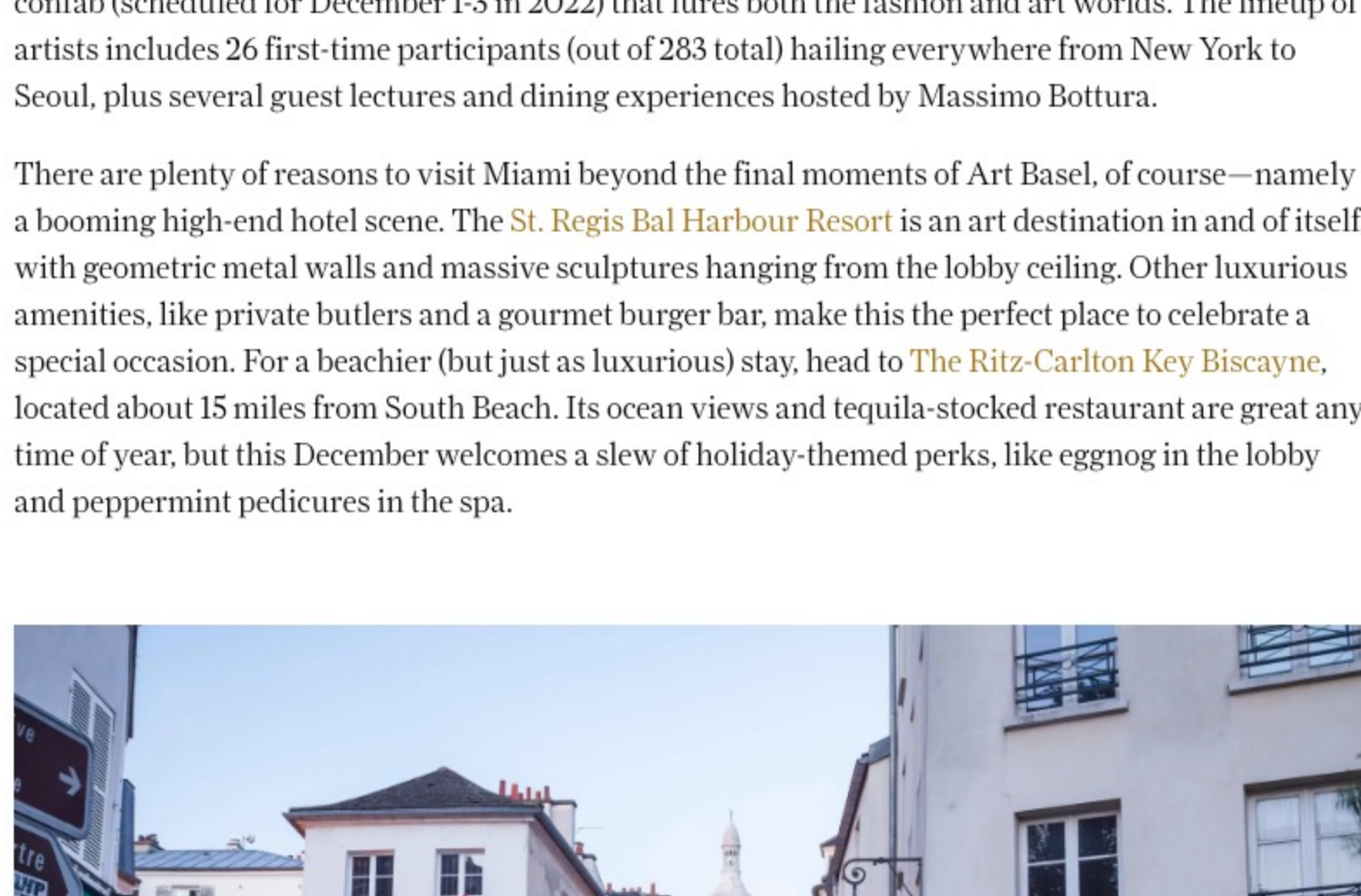


Litlen/Getty

Miami, Florida

Many people head to Miami in early December for Art Basel Miami Beach, a glittering, four-day confab (scheduled for December 1-3 in 2022) that lures both the fashion and art worlds. The lineup of artists includes 26 first-time participants (out of 283 total) hailing everywhere from New York to Seoul, plus several guest lectures and dining experiences hosted by Massimo Bottura.

There are plenty of reasons to visit Miami beyond the final moments of Art Basel, of course—namely a booming high-end hotel scene. The St. Regis Bal Harbour Resort is an art destination in and of itself, with geometric metal walls and massive sculptures hanging from the lobby ceiling. Other luxurious amenities, like private butlers and a gourmet burger bar, make this the perfect place to celebrate a special occasion. For a beachier (but just as luxurious) stay, head to The Ritz-Carlton Key Biscayne, located about 15 miles from South Beach. Its ocean views and tequila-stocked restaurant are great any time of year, but this December welcomes a slew of holiday-themed perks, like eggnog in the lobby and peppermint pedicures in the spa.



Julian Elliott Photography/Getty

Paris

Paris shines extra bright during the holiday season, from the lights along the Champs-Élysées to store window displays that rival museum art installations. This year is a particularly great time to take a trip, with inexpensive nonstop flights with French Bee (France's first low-cost carrier) and a crop of new hotel openings. Be one of the first to stay at Bulgari Hotel Paris or Hôtel Madame Réve, housed in a former 24-hour post office—or choose from one of the many established hotels in the city.

For an extra-special holiday experience, book a spot on the "Paris at the Holidays" group trip (December 1-8) from specialty planning company French Affaires. Curated by France travel expert Elizabeth New Seitz, the trip includes an evening tour of the city's Christmas lights, a private tour of the Louvre, a Buche de Noël (yule log) cooking class, and French afternoon teas at some of the city's top palace hotels.