AWARDS // TRAVEL

USA TODAY 10Best READERS' CHOICE 2025

Must-see: 10 best film festivals in the US for 2025

Celebrations of cinema

Best Film Festival (2025)

MARCH 12, 2025

Film festivals can be as astonishingly varied as cinema itself, showcasing everything from glossy premieres to daring independent productions to underground cult films.

Whether its focus is on an underrepresented group, specific genres or mediums, or just a celebration of film in all its many forms, each of these winning film festivals — nominated by our panel of experts and voted as the best by readers — is truly special.

SUN VALLEY
FILM FESTIVAL

Photo courtesy of Sun Valley Film Festival

No. 10: Sun Valley Film Festival - Sun Valley, Idaho

Known for its guest list filled with Hollywood legends, the Sun Valley Film Festival combines the charm of Idaho's mountain setting with a carefully curated selection of independent films. Celebrating innovative storytelling, the festival features cutting-edge films and TV premieres, narrative features, documentaries, and shorts by both emerging and established filmmakers. Attendees can participate in industry panels, Coffee Talks with industry icons, a Screenwriters Lab led by acclaimed writers, and a vibrant series of parties, including the Awards Bash.

AMERICAN BLACK FILM FESTIVAL
BEST OF THE ABFF AWARDS
@americanblackfilmfestival
#ABFF2023
AMERICAN BLACK FILM FESTIVAL

Photo courtesy of NICE CROWD / Aaron J. Thornton

No. 9: American Black Film Festival - Miami Beach, Florida

With a lively backdrop of Miami Beach, the American Black Film Festival (ABFF) celebrates and amplifies Black voices in the film industry, showcasing a diverse selection of films across genres, from drama and comedy to documentaries and shorts. Known for its focus on independent Black filmmakers, the festival provides a platform for both emerging and established talent. Attendees can expect engaging panel discussions, Q&A sessions with filmmakers, and networking opportunities, award ceremonies, and workshops.

SCENE
TAKE
ROLL

Photo courtesy of Jag_cz / iStock Via Getty Images Plus

No. 8: Pan African Film and Arts Festival - Los

Angeles, California

As the largest celebration of Black stories and culture in the United States, the Pan African Film and Arts Festival (PAFF) showcases the work of the African diaspora film and arts communities. PAFF is an Oscar qualifying film festival for Best Short Narrative Film Award, Best Short Documentary Award, and the Best Animated Short category. Attendees can explore a diverse lineup of narrative features, documentaries, and shorts, as well as an expansive art market, engaging panel discussions, filmmaker Q&A sessions, and workshops.

HAMPTONS
INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL

Photo courtesy of Jessica Dalene for HamptonsFilm/HIFF

No. 7: Hamptons International Film Festival - East Hampton, New York

Hamptons International Film Festival (HIFF) is a prestigious celebration of cinema, renowned for its thoughtfully curated lineup of films from around the globe. Showcasing narrative features, documentaries, and shorts, the festival champions independent voices and diverse storytelling. HIFF also highlights environmental and socially conscious films through special categories like “Air, Land & Sea.” Attendees can expect engaging Q&A sessions, insightful panel discussions, and opportunities to connect with filmmakers and industry leaders.

FREMONT
SLO FILM FEST
APR 25-30
SLOFILMFEST.ORG
BOX OFFICE OPEN FRIDAYS

Photo courtesy of Namu Williams

No. 6: San Luis Obispo International Film Festival - San Luis Obispo, California

Set in the middle of California’s picturesque Central Coast, the San Luis Obispo International Film Festival offers a unique blend of cinematic excellence and scenic charm. Known for its dedication to diversity and inclusivity, the festival features narrative features, documentaries, shorts, and student films, highlighting both emerging and established filmmakers from around the globe. Attendees can enjoy Q&A sessions, panel discussions, and engaging special events such as brunch fundraisers and wine tastings paired with screenings.

Atlanta's LGBTQ Film Festival
OUT ON FILM

Photo courtesy of Sher Pruitt

No. 5: Out On Film - Atlanta, Georgia

Out on Film was established in 1987 as one of the first film festivals dedicated to LGBTQ stories and artists. The festival is now an Oscar-qualifying film festival that spans 11 days, with a full lineup of film screenings and premieres. While many films address topics like discrimination, healthcare, religion, marriage equality, and intersectionality, there's lots of diversity in genre. There are comedies, horror films, coming-of-age stories, and romances; films about everything from sports, to drag, to politics, to music.

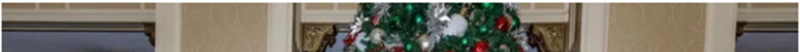


Photo courtesy of Maranie Rae

No. 4: Pittsburgh Shorts Film Festival - Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

For those who just can't budget the time to sit down for hours of feature films, this festival is for you — there's nothing but short films from around the globe being screened at the landmark Harris Theater in downtown Pittsburgh. The festival is diverse, mixing local and international shorts, and hosts a filmmaker conference, red carpet interviews with guest filmmakers, and live readings by local actors of the festival's script competition winners. The festival only lasts four days, but it's absolutely packed with shorts and other events.

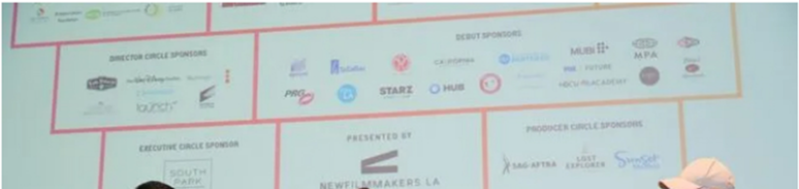


Photo courtesy of NewFilmmakes Los Angeles (NFMLA)

No. 3: NewFilmmakers Los Angeles - Los Angeles, California

While most film festivals only come around once a year, NewFilmmakers Los Angeles has a monthly festival of shorts, documentaries, and feature films made by diverse and emerging filmmakers from around the world, followed by Q&A sessions with each filmmaker. Each festival has a distinct focus ranging from LGBTQ+, Latin, and Black cinema to topics like immigration, disability, and international animation. There's something of interest for everyone here.

SALUTE YOUR SHORTS FILM FEST
EASTSIDE
SECRET PIZZA

Photo courtesy of Brook Trantor

No. 2: Salute Your Shorts Film Festival - Los Angeles, California

Salute Your Shorts was started by filmmakers for filmmakers and is now considered one of the top short film festivals in the country, noted for offering top-notch programming and a weekend of inspiring, thought-provoking cinema. Judges have directed films, won Oscars, served at Sundance, and curated for Vimeo — you're in knowledgeable hands at this annual happening.

DREXEL
WELCOME
CINEMA COLUMBUS

Photo courtesy of Mitchell Multimedia

No. 1: Cinema Columbus Film Festival -

Columbus, Ohio

With a mission to inspire and connect audiences through the power of cinema, the Cinema Columbus Film Festival collaborates with venues throughout central Ohio to showcase a curated selection of independent films from around the world. Spanning multiple genres including drama, comedy, documentary, and experimental works, the festival highlights the diversity and creativity of contemporary filmmaking. Attendees can immerse themselves in engaging screenings, thought-provoking panel discussions, and Q&A sessions.

✓ ABOUT 10BEST READERS' CHOICE AWARDS

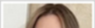
Nominees are submitted by a panel of experts. 10Best editors narrow the field to select the final set of nominees for the Readers' Choice Awards. Readers can vote once per category, per day. For any questions or comments, please read the FAQ or email USA TODAY 10Best.

THE EXPERTS

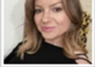
ALLISON LEVINE

Allison Levine is the owner of Please The Palate, a boutique agency specializing in marketing and event planning for the wine and spirits industry. With over 15 years of experience in communications, marketing, and event planning, Allison is passionate about the world around her and the diverse people in it. Allison holds a master's degree in international communications with a focus on cross-cultural training from the American University School of International Service and holds a WSET Level 3 Certificate from the Wine & Spirits Education Trust (WSET). As an industry expert, she has worked with wine regions around the world. She has traveled extensively and has lived abroad in Italy, Spain, and Mexico where she developed her passion for food and wine. Her work allows her to live life to the fullest and, as a freelance writer, Allison communicates her experiences in articles, as well as in her blog. Allison is the US Host for the international podcast Wine Soundtrack where she interviews winemakers and gets to know them in 30 questions, and she is co-host of the YouTube wine series Crush On This. Her website is www.pleasethepalate.com and you can follow her on Instagram @plsthepalate.

AMANDA MACTAS



Amanda Mactas is a freelance journalist based in New York City. Her work has appeared in



Time Out, Women's Health, Eat This Not That, Bella Magazine, and PureWow, among others. Her favorite pastime is eating and drinking her way around the world, and when she's not doing that, she's probably thinking or writing about doing just that. Besides being on the hunt for the best food offerings in any given city, she's often looking for a cozy independent bookstore, beautiful cemetery, or haunted locale to discover. You can follow her work and her travels on Instagram.

DAVE STAMBOULIS

Dave Stamboulis is a travel writer/photographer based in Bangkok. Born in Greece and growing up in the U.S., Dave discovered Bangkok on a 45,000-kilometer world bicycle trip and moved there in 2005. Dave is the author of *Odysseus' Last Stand*, which received the Silver Medal for Travel Book of the Year from the Society of American Travel Writers. He is the author of 500 Hidden Secrets to Bangkok, a writer for Lonely Planet, Fodor's and DK Eyewitness Guidebooks, and his travel features and photography appear in publications around the globe.

JACKY RUNICE

Born in Bucktown (Chicago) when bulletproof was a home safety choice and not a coffee order, Jacky Runice has been knocking around Chicago as a professional print, online and broadcast journalist and editor specializing in separating the riff from the raff in culture, entertainment, food, travel and pure unadulterated fun. Jacky is a member of the International Food, Wine & Travel Writers Association (IFWTWA) and relies on her vast experience and gray matter to produce informative, entertaining content.

JENNY PETERS

Jenny Peters – aka Jet Set Jen – is a Los Angeles-based freelance journalist, editor and party columnist specializing in travel, entertainment, film, food, wine, fashion and the other good things in life. She is a founding/voting member of the Critics Choice Association, who present the Critics' Choice Awards every January. Her favorite places to be are on the beach in Southern California playing volleyball, scuba diving with the sharks in warm tropical waters or strolling the streets and soaking in the atmosphere of one of the world's great cities (New Orleans and Florence are her favorites).

KRISTEN LUMMIS

Kristen Lummis is a freelance writer based in Western Colorado. The mom of two now-adult sons, Lummis broke into her writing career through snowsports, founding the website braveskimom.com in 2010 to provide family-friendly tips across a full range of winter topics. And while skiing is Lummis' first true outdoor love, she grew up camping, hiking, biking, kayaking and traveling extensively with her family — pursuits that she continues today. She prides herself on unbiased opinions, based on activities and destinations she's visited and experienced. Lummis is honored to be considered an "expert" for 10Best. Follow her @braveskimom on Instagram and Facebook.

LAURIE LYONS-MAKAIMOKU

Laurie Lyons-Makaimoku is a Hawaiʻi Island-based freelance journalist and travel writer. She has had the privilege to visit all six of the major islands in Hawaiʻi and has written about them for such publications as Fodor's Travel, Matador Network, Hawaiʻi Magazine, SF Gate, Trip Advisor, Local Getaways, and others. Her writing carries with it the *kuleana* (responsibility) of helping to produce more educated, conscientious visitors to this culturally and ecologically sensitive place, advocating for tourism that is sustainable and ethical. Laurie's areas of expertise include Hawaiʻi hotels, family travel, luxury travel, food & beverage, Indigenous excellence, animals, sustainability, voluntourism, and nonprofits. You can read her work on her website, or follow along with her on social @hawaiitravelwriter.

MARLA CIMINI

Marla is an award-winning writer with a passion for travel, music, surfing and culinary adventures! An avid globetrotter and guidebook writer, she has covered topics such as the Hawaiian islands (including food trends and luxury beachfront resorts), as well as European getaways and global destinations. Her articles have appeared in many publications worldwide, including USA Today. Marla lives in New Jersey (Philadelphia area) and is a frequent visitor to Hawaii and Southern California, and often covers those destinations. Her travel website is: www.marlacimini.com

MELANIE REFFES

Melanie is an island girl at heart . Born in Manhattan, she now lives on the sunny island of Montreal and covers the Caribbean for a variety of publications including USA TODAY 10Best, CaribbeanTravel.com and MarryCaribbean.com. A journalist with a boatload of writer awards under her belt, Melanie's affection for the Caribbean started young when her family vacationed in Puerto Rico. An avid fan of spicy food, Melanie enjoys the diversity of Montreal - especially during the warmer months -when she's not en route to the Caribbean. She holds a Masters Degree in Social Work from the University of Toronto.

MELISSA CURTIN

At age 20 Melissa Curtin traveled around the world on Semester at Sea, igniting her passion for globetrotting and learning about new cultures. She is a longtime educator, a Fora travel advisor, and has been a freelance travel and food writer for over 10 years - published in Lonely Planet, Fodor's, Insider, MSN, AAA World, Travel Awaits, and many more. Raised in Connecticut, she has joyfully lived in California the last 17 years splitting her time between Malibu and Palm Springs.

MELISSA LOCKER

Melissa Locker is a freelance travel, lifestyle, and culture writer and world-renowned fish telepathist. You can learn more about Melissa at melissalocker.com and connect on Instagram and Twitter via @woolyknickers.

MELODY PITTMAN

Melody Pittman is the owner and creator of Wherever I May Roam Blog and is co-owner of the Southern Travelers Explore annual conference, in its 4th year, which brings CVBS and writers/influencers together from all over the country. She is a digital influencer and writes for both online and print publications, such as Travel Awaits, Charleston Home and Living Magazine, Matador Network, She Buys Travel, and more. Melody has worked with major brands during her nine-year career, such as Viking River Cruises, Ritz Carlton, Four Seasons, Disney, hundreds of tourism boards, and GO RVing. Melody's first book "100 Things to Do in West Virginia Before You Die" was released in the spring of 2023. She has a podcast, 100ThingsWV, and social channels to go along with the book. Melody loves road trips, small towns, cruising, and sharing lesser-known destinations with her followers via TikTok, Youtube, IG, and FB. After a year of full-time RV travel, she now resides in Mesquite, Nevada.

NICHOLAS DEKKER

Nicholas Dekker, aka Dr. Breakfast, is a food and travel writer based in central Ohio, writing his award-winning blog Breakfast With Nick since 2007, where he and his family document their journeys exploring restaurants, coffee, donuts, beer, the arts, family travel, and much more. Nick writes for *Columbus Monthly*, *Ohio Magazine*, TourismOhio, Experience Columbus, The Kitchn, Great Lakes Publishing, Experience Worthington, Cubby at Home, *Worthington Spotlight*, *Proof Magazine,* and other publications. He can be found on Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.

SHEA PETERS

Based in NYC, but a Southern girl at heart, Shea has traveled to 45 of the 50 states and innumerable international destinations. As a former pre-med student, she's fascinated with science and history through the lens of travel and food, and went to graduate school in New York for a Master's Degree in Medical Microbiology. When Shea's not writing or searching for new recipes, she can be found growing veggies & flowers in her rooftop urban garden.

SKYE RODGERS

Skye Rodgers is a seasoned travel writer who fell in love with Tampa, Florida over a decade ago and has since made it her home base. Originally from Canada, Skye traded snowy winters for sunny beaches and now enjoys sharing her adventures with readers worldwide. Whether she's uncovering hidden gems in Tampa Bay or jetting off to exotic destinations, Skye's passion for exploration shines through in her engaging travel narratives. Follow her journeys and discover the best of Tampa and beyond on her Facebook page @BestofTampa.

WENDY O'DEA

Born and raised in western New York, **Wendy O'Dea** moved to L.A. to attend the USC graduate School of Journalism and stayed for the innovative and creative lifestyle the city offers. Other than the traffic, there's not much about California she doesn't love. You can track her gallivanting ways on Instagram via @WendyTravels .