Benin, Ethiopia Emerge Biggest Winners at Africa Tourism Awards 2026 in London

Benin claims top destination honours as Ethiopia dominates aviation and luxury hospitality, with Angola, Nigeria and other African tourism leaders recognised for excellence and innovation.

LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM –

Benin and Ethiopia emerged as the standout winners at the **Africa Tourism Awards 2026 (The Balearica Awards)**, held on Sunday, 1 November, at the Hilton London Canary Wharf, as Africa's tourism industry gathered to celebrate outstanding achievements across destinations, aviation, hospitality, tourism investment, sustainability and individual leadership.

The prestigious awards recognised outstanding organisations, destinations and personalities helping to shape the future of tourism across Africa and the wider African diaspora.

Benin Takes Centre Stage with Major Destination Wins

The Republic of Benin enjoyed a remarkable evening, securing three of the most coveted awards: **Country Destination of the Year, Cultural Destination of the Year and Tourism Board of the Year**, the latter awarded to the Benin Tourism Board.

Benin's strong showing was further complemented by the award for **Tourism Video of the Year**, won by *Explore Benin, A World of Wonders*, bringing the number of winning entries directly associated with the destination to four.

The results represent significant recognition of Benin's growing profile as an African tourism destination and its efforts to position its cultural heritage, historical attractions and visitor experiences within the international tourism marketplace.

Ethiopia Dominates Aviation and Luxury Hospitality

Ethiopia reinforced its position as a major player in Africa's tourism and aviation ecosystem, securing three significant honours.

Ethiopian Airlines was named *International Airline of the Year*, recognising its standing in connecting Africa with international markets.

The **Ethiopian Skylight Hotel** received the *Luxury Hotel of the Year* award, while **Ethiopian Skylight Hospitality Group** earned a *Special Recognition Award for Tourism Investment*, underscoring the importance of hospitality infrastructure and investment in Africa's tourism growth.

Together, these awards highlighted the relationship between air connectivity, quality accommodation and strategic investment in building internationally competitive tourism destinations.

Angola, Nigeria and South Africa Among Other Major Winners

Angola also featured prominently among the honourees, receiving a **Special Recognition Award for Tourism Investment**, while **His Excellency Márcio de Jesus Lopes Daniel** was named *Tourism Personality of the Year*.

Nigeria recorded several notable successes across the industry. **Finchglow Travels** was named *Travel Agency of the Year*, **WAKANOW** took the *Online Travel Agency of the Year* award, and **The Envoy Abuja** won *Independent Brand Hotel of the Year*.

Nigerian tourism personalities also earned recognition, including **Ibrahim Makanjuola**, named *Young Tourism Personality of the Year*; **Dayo Adedayo**, recognised as *Tourism Photographer of the Year*; and **Collins Nkem**, named *Travel Content Creator of the Year*. The **Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University**, won *Tourism Attraction of the Year*.

South Africa's **FlySafair** received the *Regional Airline of the Year* award, while **Kruger Shalati** won *Safari Lodge of the Year*. The coastal city of **Swakopmund, Namibia**, was recognised as *Adventure Tourism Destination of the Year*.

Other major winners included **ONOMO**, named *Hotel Group of the Year*; the **Gorilla Junction Foundation**, recognised as *Tourism Non-Profit of the Year*; and the **West Africa Ecotourism Network**, which won *Responsible Tourism Initiative of the Year*.

Celebrating Africa's Tourism Leaders and Industry Icons

Beyond destination and corporate excellence, the awards paid tribute to individuals whose leadership, advocacy and contributions continue to influence the development of African tourism.

Fatmata Carew received the *Women in Tourism Leadership Award*, while **Harriet Akinyi Owalla** was named *Travel Writer of the Year*.

Four distinguished tourism professionals — **Akwasi Agyeman, Gerhard Franken, Septi Bukula and Thomas Noll** — were recognised as Industry Icons.

The evening also celebrated longstanding contributions to the tourism industry, with **Craig Rix** and **Ambassador Alain St. Ange** receiving *Lifetime Achievement Awards*.

Africa Travel Exchange received a *Special Recognition Award for Tourism Innovation*, recognising its contribution to the development of new approaches and opportunities within the travel and tourism industry.

Barbados Recognised for Its Connection to Global Africa

In a reflection of the Africa Tourism Awards' focus on the African diaspora, **Barbados** was named *Destination of the Year – African Diaspora*.

The recognition reinforces the Awards' vision of a globally connected Africa, acknowledging the historic, cultural and economic relationships linking the African continent with communities of African descent across the Caribbean, the Americas, Europe and beyond.

Africa's Tourism Future Must Be Built on Collaboration

Commenting on the significance of the 2026 awards, **Efetobo Awhana, Executive Producer of the Africa Tourism Awards**, said:

"The Africa Tourism Awards are about much more than recognising winners. They are about celebrating a continent of extraordinary possibilities and the people, businesses and institutions working to turn those possibilities into sustainable economic opportunities.

"The outstanding achievements of Benin, Ethiopia, Angola and our other winners demonstrate what is possible when investment, destination marketing, aviation connectivity, innovation and visionary leadership come together.

"Africa's greatest tourism opportunity lies not only in attracting more international visitors but also in strengthening travel within Africa and reconnecting the continent with its vast diaspora. We must build stronger partnerships, develop exceptional tourism products and make it easier for people to explore and experience Africa.

"Every winner recognised tonight contributes to a bigger story — one of an Africa increasingly confident in its identity, ambitious in its vision and determined to take its rightful place in the global tourism economy."

A Distinguished International Judging Panel

The Africa Tourism Awards 2026 was supported by a distinguished ten-member judging panel comprising tourism, hospitality, media, business and sustainability professionals.

The judges were **Biubwa Omar**, CEO of Safari Gateway Ltd; **Dine Bouraima**, CEO of Benin Royal Hotel; **Hafsa Gaher**, CEO of Halal Travel Network; **Larch Gauld**, Travel Writer at Silver Nomad; **Liz Tapawa**, Director of Sales & Marketing at Hilton Garden Inn Nairobi Airport; **Oluwaseyi Adeyemo Adegoke**, Publisher of Inside Watch Africa; **Shefik Mehmet**, Travel Influencer and Photographer; **Sithembile Sandla**, Senior Manager at Azets; **Stella Appenteng**, CEO of Apstar Tours; and **Thomas Armitt**, Director, Climate & Diversity at Planeterra.

The judging panel brought together expertise from different sectors and markets, reflecting the Awards' commitment to recognising excellence across the African tourism value chain.

Recognising Sponsors and Partners

The organisers acknowledged the contributions of the organisations supporting the 2026 edition.

These included **Brichone Experiences** and the **West Africa Tourism Organisation** as sponsors, **ATC News** as Media Sponsor, and **Story in Motion** as PR Partner.

The Africa Tourism Awards continues to serve as a platform for celebrating excellence, strengthening professional networks and promoting African tourism to international audiences.

OFFICIAL WINNERS – AFRICA TOURISM AWARDS 2026

Destinations and Tourism Development

- **Country Destination of the Year:** Benin
- **Cultural Destination of the Year:** Benin
- **Tourism Board of the Year:** Benin Tourism Board
- **Destination of the Year – African Diaspora:** Barbados
- **Adventure Tourism Destination of the Year:** Swakopmund
- **Tourism Attraction of the Year:** Yemisi Shyllon Museum of Art, Pan-Atlantic University
- **Responsible Tourism Initiative of the Year:** West Africa Ecotourism Network
- **Tourism Non-Profit of the Year:** Gorilla Junction Foundation

Aviation and Travel Services

- **International Airline of the Year:** Ethiopian Airlines
- **Regional Airline of the Year:** FlySafair
- **Travel Agency of the Year:** Finchglow Travels
- **Online Travel Agency of the Year:** WAKANOW

Hospitality

- **Luxury Hotel of the Year:** Ethiopian Skylight Hotel
- **Hotel Group of the Year:** ONOMO
- **Independent Brand Hotel of the Year:** The Envoy Abuja
- **Safari Lodge of the Year:** Kruger Shalati

Tourism Media and Content

- **Tourism Video of the Year:** Explore Benin, A World of Wonders
- **Travel Writer of the Year:** Harriet Akinyi Owalla
- **Tourism Photographer of the Year:** Dayo Adedayo
- **Travel Content Creator of the Year:** Collins Nkem

Tourism Leadership and Personalities

- **Tourism Personality of the Year:** HE Márcio de Jesus Lopes Daniel
- **Women in Tourism Leadership Award:** Fatmata Carew
- **Young Tourism Personality of the Year:** Ibrahim Makanjuola
- **Industry Icon:** Akwasi Agyeman

- **Industry Icon:** Gerhard Franken
- **Industry Icon:** Septi Bukula
- **Industry Icon:** Thomas Noll

Special Recognition and Lifetime Achievement

- **Special Recognition – Tourism Investment:** Ethiopian Skylight Hospitality Group
- **Special Recognition – Tourism Investment:** Angola
- **Special Recognition – Tourism Innovation:** Africa Travel Exchange
- **Lifetime Achievement Award:** Craig Rix
- **Lifetime Achievement Award:** Amb. Alain St. Ange

About Africa Tourism Awards

The **Africa Tourism Awards (The Balearica Awards)** is a platform dedicated to recognising and celebrating excellence, innovation, leadership and sustainability in the African travel and tourism industry.

Through its annual awards and associated initiatives, the platform seeks to raise the international profile of African destinations, encourage investment, foster industry collaboration and celebrate individuals and organisations contributing to the advancement of tourism across the continent.

The Awards also recognise the importance of the African diaspora in strengthening cultural connections and creating new opportunities for travel, trade and tourism development.

Tagline: *Celebrating Excellence, Inspiring Tomorrow.*

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