

An aerial photograph of a crowded beach. Numerous people are scattered across the golden sand, many lying on colorful towels or blankets. Some are sitting up, while others are lying flat. A few people are walking, and one person is standing in the center. The scene is bright and sunny, with long shadows cast across the sand. The overall atmosphere is one of a busy, leisurely summer day.

TRAVEL +
LEISURE

SUMMER

ESCAPES



INTELLIGENT TRAVELER



The Evolution of LGBTQ Travel (AND WHY IT MATTERS TO ALL OF US)

The way we move through the world is changing—and driving that shift are LGBTQ travelers, who are forecast to spend more than half a trillion dollars a year by 2030. That game-changing influence has destinations, hotels, and cruise lines working to be more inclusive, to the benefit of all. This month, a closer look at what it means to be gay and away in 2024.

Why I Fly for Pride

Planning a trip for the annual event can deliver much more than just a great vacation.

By Maria Eilersen

I'D ONLY RECENTLY come out to friends and a few relatives in 2018 when I attended my first Pride in London. Anxiously rocking up to Soho Square in my pink unicorn dress that Saturday morning, I was desperate to fit in.

But as soon as I arrived, I was struck by the relaxed and joyful energy of the crowd. It was a freedom I'd never experienced, and, for the first time in my life, I felt proud to be queer.

No wonder so many people are traveling to feel the same way. After all, the very first Pride marches, on June 28, 1970, in Los Angeles and New York City, attracted groups from all over the country, who had gathered to commemorate the anniversary of the 1969 Stonewall Uprising.

Today, Pride events remain a key motivator for travelers: In 2023, an estimated 2 million attendees traveled to NYC Pride. Vacation-rental site HomeToGo says searches for popular Pride destinations have nearly quadrupled since 2019.

"It's easy for people in progressive locations to take Pride for granted, but traveling to one of these events in another country might be the only opportunity some members of our global community ever get to be out as their authentic



selfes," says John Tanzella, the president and CEO of the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association.

Others I've spoken with agree that the annual occasion is a must-do. "It's important to us that our son sees other families that look like ours, because we aren't represented in mainstream media," says Corritta Lewis, one of the two moms who pen the blog *Itz a Family Thing*. "Before anyone knows we are gay, they notice that we are Black," she notes, "so we typically celebrate in more accepting places."

As Pride has grown in popularity, some queer people have wondered if corporatization and "rainbow-washing" are obscuring the continued fight for progress. In Britain, smaller, more political Pride marches have emerged, including Bi Pride UK, London Trans+ Pride, and UK Black Pride, alongside an ongoing discussion of what more intersectional events might look like.

Progress remains to be made: homosexuality is still illegal in nearly 70 countries. "Unfortunately, we still have a lot of work to do before everyone everywhere is more accepting," says Amelia Abraham, a journalist and author of *Queer Intentions: A (Personal) Journey Through LGBTQ+ Culture*.

Tanzella thinks travel can play a key role in connecting our global community. "It's often hotels and other tourism businesses that lead the way in welcoming LGBTQ travelers, even when governments lag behind," he says.

Perhaps that's what makes the rise of LGBTQ travel so significant. The more we travel, the more incentive the industry has to help elevate queer people everywhere.

◀ *Bristol Pride is one of the U.K.'s biggest LGBTQ events.*

▶ *NYC Pride brings millions to Manhattan each June.*

FROM LEFT: BRISTOL PRIDE/PEPPERMINT/COURTESY OF VISIT BRITAIN; MOLLY FLORES/COURTESY OF NYC & COMPANY





Q+A

THE EXPERT ADVISOR

John Clifford, founder of International Travel Management, a San Diego-based agency, specializes in planning trips for LGBTQ clients. He spoke with T+L about where his travelers want to go next.

You've been on the T+L A-List of travel advisors for 14 years. What's been the biggest change over that time?

"Celebratory travel is bigger than ever, since we've all been in this pressure cooker coming out of the pandemic. Whether it's a 40th birthday or anniversary or 'friend-iversary,' there's this need to make milestones matter. Also, while it's not unique to queer travelers, cultural programming, like art, ballet, and cooking classes, and gig-tripping, a.k.a. the Taylor Swift effect, have become huge."

What are some of the challenges that LGBTQ people still face, and is the travel industry doing enough to help?

*"First and foremost, it's safety. That's job number one. I recommend checking the maps from **ILGA World**, the advocacy group, to see how certain laws impact queer travelers. Second, people don't want to be tolerated; they want to be celebrated. Gay travelers don't want to find his-and-hers robes in a hotel room anymore. As an advisor, I reach out to upper management ahead of time to make sure my clients will be welcomed."*

Do you think the distinction of "LGBTQ travel" is really meaningful anymore?

"International travel is now accessible to everyone. But a lot of the gay community has realized that with assimilation, some of our culture has been lost. We have to make sure the Palm Springs of the world are still around tomorrow. I want us to save and preserve these treasures because, if we don't, we aren't celebrating our differences."



The New Frontier

Long considered a no-go for gay travelers, Cuba is now one of the Caribbean's most dynamic LGBTQ destinations. **By David Dodge**

IT WAS LATE one night in Havana, and the popular queer party El Divino de Cuba was heating up. Audience members, all dressed to impress, were ascending stairs to the stage to pay homage to a performing drag queen with a dramatic *beso* on each cheek and a fistful of pesos folded into fake cleavage.

Truthfully, Cuba had never been high on my list. Friends had told me that the food was disappointing and the LGBTQ scene basically nonexistent. But when I finally visited the island, together with 12 other gay men, on an educational group

tour organized by **Verano Forever Travel** (six-day trips from \$1,995 per person), we found a place full of wonderful food and fun parties with drag queens.

That's proof of how much has changed in recent years, explained Carlos Gonzalez, the founder of **Travel the Artist Way** and one of our guides for the week. Two decades ago, he continued, events like El Divino would have been held secretly to avoid police raids.

Today, El Divino is on Instagram—and LGBTQ Cubans can legally marry, adopt children, and access free gender-affirming care. Rather than deport LGBTQ foreigners, as Fidel Castro once did the American poet Allen Ginsberg, the government now operates two hotels specifically marketed to queer visitors.

The country's struggles are also driving change. In 2021, Cuba erupted

▲
Cocktail hour in Havana with Verano Forever Travel.

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF VERANO FOREVER TRAVEL; BRANDON ROSENBLUM/GETTY IMAGES



◀
A classic Havana street scene.

▼
The author (fourth from right, foreground), and his fellow travelers in Havana.

in some of the largest protests since the revolution, as a result of persisting economic hardships. In response, the government relaxed rules on private enterprise, leading to the opening of more bars, clubs, and other small businesses, explained Alejandro Almaguer, Verano's founder.

LGBTQ bars in Havana, including **Pazillo** and **XY**, regularly host queer parties that last until the wee hours. Then there are mixed venues such as **King Bar**, which on a crowded Friday night featured a saxophonist jumping on the tabletops while playing along with the DJ's salsa tracks.

Not that we were focused solely on nightlife. One afternoon we had a private viewing of work by Alejandro Cañer, an up-and-coming queer digital artist. "You won't find his stuff at official galleries here," Gonzalez told us. Entering the pop-up, in a small studio in a residential building, it became apparent why.

"I'd describe my work as sexually deviant propaganda," Cañer explained,



COURTESY OF VERANO FOREVER TRAVEL

U.S. citizens can legally visit Cuba as long as they adhere to authorized travel categories, such as "educational activities" and "support for the Cuban people," established by the Department of the Treasury. Tours such as those from Verano Forever Travel qualify, as do other organized programs that emphasize cultural exchange. Americans also need to purchase a visa—available from airlines or Cuba Travel Services—and complete a digital form, D'Viajeros, within three days of arrival. Americans are prohibited from spending money at government-run establishments; the Department of State maintains a list of "restricted entities." U.S. credit cards typically don't work on the island, so bring plenty of cash.

as I admired a piece depicting a flexing Che Guevara wearing a harlequin-print thong. "I like to manipulate the history of my country, play with the symbols and concepts that accompany it, and make it scandalous."

We also had a chance to explore beyond Havana. In Viñales, our group took a short horseback ride through the countryside before arriving at a private tobacco farm, where we learned to make fresh sugarcane juice and puffed on cigars. Lunch was a farm-to-table feast at **Restaurante El Cuajani** (entrées \$13–\$20), which serves dishes such as bruschetta and fresh pumpkin soup.

Toward the end of our week, Gonzalez surprised us with a pig roast in the countryside outside Havana. The ground still wet from rain, we danced barefoot in the mud alongside our hosts until a drag show began. During a Lady Gaga medley, a queen named Salma de Armas hoisted me in the air—an impressive feat considering all the pork, tostones, and yuca I'd just eaten.

"Come with a sense of adventure," Gonzalez said, "and you'll have a good time."

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THE FAMILY TRAVEL PRO

London-based writer **Lotte Jeffs** is a frequent traveler and, with Stu Oakley, co-author of *The Queer Parent: Everything You Need To Know From Gay to Ze* (Cleis Press), out this month. The book is filled with case studies, practical advice, interviews, and personal anecdotes about her own experience navigating queer family travel with her wife, Jenny Southan, and their five year-old daughter.

What advice would you give other LGBTQ families, particularly those traveling abroad for the first time?

"I'm from a very privileged background in terms of being white and middle class; I'm aware of that. Still, as queer people, we're often hyper-attuned to other people's perceptions. An interesting question to pose to your family is, 'When are we going to be out? What's our family line on this?' Once, when our daughter was still too young to pick up on it, a taxi driver in Italy assumed my wife was the nanny. In that situation, is it worth correcting him?"

How do you decide which destinations are right for your family?

"Some places can get problematic for the three of us that never were when it was just us as a couple. I seek out places that we know for certain are LGBTQ friendly, such as Lisbon, where people will look at us and think, 'what a lovely family, how nice, how normal.'"

What is something that has surprised you while traveling with your daughter?

"You often hear horror stories, but I've never had to prove that our daughter is indeed ours. I keep our documentation in these plastic envelopes, ready to fight our case, but everyone has always said, 'Welcome, come on through.' It's good to be prepared—but you don't need to feel like you're going to battle."

Beyond Provincetown

The Massachusetts artists' colony has a global rep. These queer-friendly spots are hot on its heels.

By John Paul Brammer

I'VE ALWAYS SAID that getting to the Pines, on New York's Fire Island, requires a bit of a secret handshake: you take the train to the bus to catch the ferry from Sayville—and you better have \$11, cash, for the boat.

That quirkiness is, to me, one thing that makes the island so special. You've got to be in the know. For generations, the gay community has been sharing insider tips to direct rookies to our sanctuaries.

In the 1940s, word spread of another such place, a gay haven on the sandy tip of Cape Cod. Within a few short years, the sleepy village now known as Ptown transformed into a vibrant, glittery refuge for drag queens, queer film auteurs, and vacationers seeking an oasis where they wouldn't have to hide.

Since then, many more destinations have welcomed the LGBTQ community with open arms—and plenty of verve.



RUSSIAN RIVER VALLEY California

Home to a string of seven bohemian waterfront towns, this corner of western Sonoma County is often called the “Gay Riviera.” Of the bunch, Guerneville (above) is probably the most celebrated.

WHERE TO STAY The **Highlands** (doubles from \$179) dates back to the 1920s but became an LGBTQ destination after an overhaul in 1979. **Dawn Ranch** (doubles from \$174) is another refreshed retreat, and just made it on to T+L's It List of the year's best new hotels.

WHAT'S ON Sonoma County Pride festivities run the whole month of June, while **Lazy Bear Week**, an annual fundraiser, starts July 29. Every May, Guerneville hosts **Women's Weekend Russian River**, which organizers call “a femme-centered event.”

LOCAL FLAVOR **Rainbow Cattle Co.** is one of Guerneville's most iconic bars; **Stumptown Brewery** is a characterful riverfront spot with plenty of outdoor seating.



FORT LAUDERDALE Florida

This seaside city (above) has been setting the standard for inclusion for decades, says Richard Gray, the tourism board's SVP of inclusion and accessibility. In the 1990s, the destination took out ads in LGBTQ publications such as the *Advocate*; a decade ago, Fort Lauderdale launched a campaign to encourage transgender people to visit.

WHERE TO STAY The **Grand Resort & Spa** (doubles from \$179) bills itself as the biggest men-only resort in the region, and it's right near the popular Sebastian Street Beach. Also close by is the **Ritz-Carlton, Fort Lauderdale** (doubles from \$518), which has nautical-chic rooms and suites, all with balconies.

WHAT'S ON **FlockFest**, on July 6, is a colorful beach party that draws hundreds of revelers, who bring along elaborate floats, many of them shaped like swans and flamingos. **Broward Center for the Performing Arts** has a packed lineup of events, including live music, theater, and comedy.

LOCAL FLAVOR Wilton Manors is the city's most storied LGBTQ neighborhood, full of restaurants and nightlife venues; **Stonewall National Museum & Archives** has exhibits and hosts talks on gay history and culture.

NEW HOPE Pennsylvania

This Delaware River town in Bucks County has a dynamic nightlife and theater scene (below), and a long history of hosting LGBTQ events: New Hope's first “drag race” was held in 1975, with people running up and down Mechanic Street in high heels.

WHERE TO STAY Gay-owned **Pineapple Hill Inn Bed & Breakfast** (doubles from \$175) is set in a colonial manor built in 1790. The **Logan Inn** (doubles from \$225) is another historic option: its original building dates back to 1727, making it one of the oldest continuously operating hotels in the United States. **River House at Odette's** (doubles from \$364) is a T+L reader favorite with a piano lounge.

WHAT'S ON **Sand Castle Winery** hosts drag brunches in the summer. Fall is harvest festival time in the area—and drag race season.

LOCAL FLAVOR **Karla's** (entrées \$29–\$39) is a favorite gay haunt; **John & Peter's Place** has been hosting live musical acts since 1972.

FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF SONOMA COUNTY TOURISM; COURTESY OF VISIT LAUDERDALE





DOUGLAS & SAUGATUCK *Michigan*

These twin cities on the eastern shore of Lake Michigan are making waves as a freshwater version of Ptown. Saugatuck, in particular, delivers a Cape Cod vibe, with its grassy dunes and artsy flair.

WHERE TO STAY Douglas is home to the **Dunes Resort** (doubles from \$189), an intentionally inclusive retreat that has several categories of cottages and suites, plus a calendar of drag shows, live music, and theme weekends.

WHAT'S ON Pride Month is full of activity. And the area's **Oktoberfest** celebration is organized by Community Pride, MI, an LGBTQ justice group.

LOCAL FLAVOR The trek up **Mount Baldhead** is 302 steps—but worth it for the views of Oval Beach and Lake Michigan; **Phil's Bar & Grille** (entrées \$20–\$48) is known for its potato-crust walleye.

AND BECAUSE IT'S ICONIC FOR A REASON...

PROVINCETOWN *Massachusetts*

WHERE TO STAY Established in 1810, **Pilgrim House** (doubles from \$199) is a boutique hotel in the heart of town with a roster of events that includes live piano nights. Gay-owned **Gaslamp Bed & Breakfast** (doubles from \$174), with its patinated maritime décor, is one street over from the galleries and clubs on Commercial Street. At the **Red Inn** (doubles from \$240), the second-floor Cape Light Room has great views over the harbor and Long Point Lighthouse.

WHAT'S ON Ptown (above) is rightly famed as an arts community, and the Summer Workshop Program at **Fine Arts Work Center** offers 65 courses in writing, painting, drawing, photography, and other mediums, led by writers such as Carmen Maria Machado (*In the Dream House*) and Melissa Febos (*Body Work*), as well as visual artists including Ilana Savdie, whose work is on view in the Whitney Museum of American Art. A notable fall event is **Trans Week**, which starts October 20.

LOCAL FLAVOR **Herring Cove Beach** is a short bike ride from the center of town; there's a women's section to the left of the parking lot.



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THE CLUED-IN CONNECTOR

Palm Springs–based **David Rubin** is a longtime member of the T+L A-List and the owner of the agency David Travel. He specializes in luxury trips for LGBTQ clients.

How has the growth of LGBTQ travel positively impacted the world of hospitality?

*"Companies have learned the need for, and the benefit of, really personalized information. I just wrote to Laurence Tafanel, the owner of the hotel **Esprit Saint Germain** (doubles from \$737), about some clients who are visiting Paris. I mentioned their favorite breakfast—brioche French toast stuffed with bananas—and that they don't drink alcohol. Hotels have started to learn that they shouldn't assume things about guests, gay or straight."*

But there's more work to be done?

"It's often forgotten that our community is a whole spectrum—something the rainbow flag symbolizes. I have clients who want a beach holiday, who want a cruise, or who want to go to Saudi Arabia because they're passionate about learning and exploring. And I have other clients who are taking their son, who happens to be gay, to Mexico City and they'd like somebody to show him around. I don't like pigeonholing people."

At the same time, you're on the A-List specifically for LGBTQ travel. How has your specialty changed?

"I'm getting the most valuable and rewarding calls of my career, particularly on issues related to trans travel. I had a grandmother call and say, 'My grandson transitioned and his husband also did—and I want to take the family on a multi-generational trip to Egypt. Can you do it for us and do it safely?' I asked her a lot of questions—frankly many of the same ones I'd ask any grandmother traveling with adult grandchildren. I checked with my local contacts, and it all worked out wonderfully."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF THE DUNES RESORT; COURTESY OF PROVINCETOWN TOURISM; COURTESY OF VISIT BUCKS COUNTY



The Champions

Meet the companies making the world more accessible to LGBTQ travelers.

By Chris Dong

“I’VE MADE IT MY mission to encourage more Black LGBTQ travelers like me to explore the world,” says Michael Henderson. After years of being the go-to trip planner for his family and friends, Henderson launched his own agency, **B.A.G. Travel**, in 2021. Today, he’s coordinating group departures to countries including South Africa and Thailand, with an eye to helping his queer clients navigate issues like when and where it’s considered appropriate to show affection.

He’s also representative of a booming ecosystem of specialist advisors and niche tour operators that are helping specific segments of the queer community find the perfect trip.

For **Brand G Vacations**, which organizes cruises for gay men, group trips are about more than just a good time. “I’m not saying we don’t have fun, but the community and the destination are the driving factors for us,” says Brian Van Wey, cofounder of the tour operator, which collaborates with lines such as **Atlas Ocean Voyages**. The company also arranges land tours to destinations such as India and Mongolia, which some queer travelers may be skeptical of visiting. “Traveling together gives us the opportunity to bring awareness and acceptance to those destinations,” Van Wey says.

One long-established player is **Olivia**, which has coordinated cruises and retreats for queer women since 1990. Over the years, Olivia has hosted more than 350,000 guests on full-ship buyouts, resort takeovers, and other journeys, in destinations from the Maldives to Morocco.



B.A.G. Travel arranges group trips to destinations including Cape Town.

Mainstream brands are following the lead of these specialists. Though **Lindblad Expeditions** doesn’t advertise this fact, captains of the line’s U.S.-flagged vessels can legally officiate same-sex ceremonies. One particularly memorable union took place in 2018, says Noah Brodsky, the company’s chief commercial officer. Lucho Verdesoto, a marine biologist, and Javier Cotin, an ornithologist, met while working for Lindblad and decided to tie the knot aboard the *National Geographic Explorer*.

BIGGER BRANDS MAKING STRIDES

Preferred Hotels & Resorts launched its Preferred Pride program in 2011 to spotlight properties that commit to diversity training for their staff.

Virgin Atlantic updated its gender identity policy in 2022; airport and flight crews can now choose any uniform. Travelers, meanwhile, can select the gender-neutral title Mx. or list their gender as U (Undisclosed) or X (Unspecified).

Delta Air Lines also offers a broader choice of identifiers, including Mx., U, and X.

Lindblad Expeditions seeks out LGBTQ guest speakers, such as an Inuit researcher who talks not only about her climate-change research but also about growing up queer in Greenland.

LEADING THE WAY



A special Belmond train trip in the U.K. to Brighton & Hove Pride.

Belmond may be best known for iconic luxury hotels such as **Cap Juluca** (doubles from \$1,300), on Anguilla, and trains like the **Royal Scotsman** (two-night trips from \$5,055 per person). But the company has also quietly made a name for itself among queer travelers, thanks in part to the 2015 creation of an LGBTQ advisory board.

“We want to be known as a safe space for the queer community,” says Parker Smith, Belmond’s account director for LGBTQ and entertainment.

To that end, in 2022, Belmond launched a Travel with Pride itinerary on the *Venice Simplon-Orient-Express*. A 2023 edition helped raise funds and awareness for Not A Phase, a U.K. charity supporting trans individuals. A 2025 edition is in the works.—C.D.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
Emily Bielagus (left) and
Mara Herbkersman at the
Ruby Fruit; the Los
Angeles spot focuses on
natural wines; the evening
scene at the Ruby Fruit.



Finding Your People

For many who identify as LGBTQ, travel is a way to build community. Chris Dong finds out how technology is making that easier than ever.

THE LONG HISTORY of the LGBTQ experience is wrapped up in the search for community havens, places of shared experience and safety—venues where queer people, like me, can be fully authentic.

“It’s in our DNA to seek out others like ourselves,” agrees Ed Salvato, a professor at New York University who specializes in tourism. “What can often connect people instantly across cultures, across a linguistic or religious barrier, is the fact that we’re queer,” he says.

Despite massive strides toward inclusivity in recent years, the need for physical spaces just for LGBTQ people remains critical. A recent Booking.com survey, for example, revealed that 74 percent of trans-identifying travelers say they consider some destinations off-limits from a safety perspective.

“When traveling, it’s vital to have a safe space for all marginalized genders within the queer community,” observes Erica Rose, a writer/director and

co-creator of *The Lesbian Bar Project*, a TV documentary series on Roku. The show, which Rose developed with director Elina Street, spotlights the couple dozen lesbian bars remaining in the U.S.—a handful compared with the hundreds that existed decades ago. In fact, bars across the queer spectrum are in jeopardy of shuttering. Between 2002 and 2019, according to one academic study, LGBTQ bar listings across the U.S. declined by 41 percent.

But while IRL venues may be on the decline, a digital ecosystem of LGBTQ apps is flourishing. **Grindr** is probably the best known among the broader public, thanks in part to its (not entirely undeserved) association with hookup culture. Other identity-driven apps, such as **Her** and **Lex**, are key tools in how LGBTQ people see and explore the world.

Many users of Lex, for example, log on to ask others about the latest cultural or queer happenings in a particular

city, or to search for recommendations. “People can connect online before connecting in person,” explains Austin Konkle, the app’s head of growth marketing. “That’s true even if no physical spaces that reflect their identity exist in the destination.”

Grindr has become my go-to travel app, and the welcome messages pour in whenever I change my profile to “visiting.” Over the years, I’ve gotten tips on where to stay in Baja California, Mexico, and restaurant recommendations in Bogotá, Colombia, to give just two examples.

For Mara Herbkersman and Emily Bielagus, the co-owners of the **Ruby Fruit**, a Los Angeles wine bar for lesbians, nonbinary, gender-nonconforming, and trans folx, having both digital and real-life spaces is important. “While being online is wonderful for its accessibility, we also need human interaction,” Herbkersman says. “We can’t just exist online; no one can.”