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MONDAY FOCUS TRAVEL AND TOURISM

Gay travel: Tourism industry targets those less willing to give up vacations

Chicago, others step up marketing efforts to get share of 'pink money'

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As Americans rejigger their budgets to abide the nation's economic gloom, travel plans are being routinely cast aside, leading to plummeting airline traffic and a tourism downturn around the globe.

But at least one demographic has refused to relinquish its passion for travel. Chicagoan Tim Engdahl is part of that group: gay, gainfully employed, with no kids and a lifelong wanderlust.

"I might cut back on other things throughout the year," said Engdahl, a 46-year-old nurse who took a Caribbean cruise in February and plans another later this year. "But I have to see what's worth it to me in life, and traveling is worth it."

Bryan Herb co-owns Zoom Vacations, a Chicago company that caters specifically to the gay and lesbian community. He has seen no drop in business; in fact, it's up.

"If I'm at a cocktail party with a bunch of gay people, we're talking about travel—a lot," Herb said. "Gay people will give up a lot of things, but we won't give up our vacations. What else are we going to talk about?"

Travel agents and industry organizations across the country say the gay and lesbian community has proven far less willing than straight travelers to sacrifice vacations. Hotel chains, destination cities and airlines hit hard by the flailing economy are now digging in and chasing what's known as "pink money."

Tom Nibbio, the Chicago-based manager of global partnerships and education for the International Gay & Lesbian Travel Association, said his group is flooded with requests for seminars on marketing specifically to gays and lesbians.

"Chicago is now stepping up a nice campaign to market to gay and lesbian travelers," Nibbio said. "And many of the major communities across the country and around the world are doing the same: corporation-wise, business-wise, various hotels. It has opened the eyes of a lot of people that

there's really a great value not only financially but in the loyalty of the gay and lesbian market."

Gays and lesbians also tend to spend more when they travel. A 2006 study by the U.S. Travel Association found that gay men spend an average of \$800 per trip, compared with about \$540 for straight men.

Disposable income certainly plays a role in this. While more gay and lesbian couples are adopting children, a majority of families still fit under the designation of DINK—double income, no kids.

There's also a cultural attraction to travel that is unique to gays and lesbians.

"Many have traveled in their younger days, more so than many straight people, and they don't want to give it up," said Cynthia Marquard, owner of Aqua Terra Travel in Chicago and a founding member of the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association. "Gay culture likes to have a good time. And part of traveling is having a good time."

Chicago upped its reputation as a gay-friendly city in 2006 by hosting the Gay Games, and Mark Theis, executive vice president of the Chicago Convention and Tourism Bureau, said the city is more aggressively courting gay and lesbian visitors.

"Chicago, frankly, is just now catching up to other cities who have been aggressively wooing the pink dollar," he said. "We want people to know how gay-friendly we are and the wealth of attractive assets we have."

The bureau puts out a quarterly newsletter aimed at gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender visitors, and Chicago will host an International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association board meeting in the fall.

Patrick O'Connor and his partner, Tim Cunniff, returned to Chicago recently from a two-week trip to Australia. It was, as O'Connor put it, one of those places to see before you die.

The couple has plans to go to Paris soon and has scheduled a trip to Rio in 2010. O'Connor said Cunniff has a good-paying, secure job, which allows them to travel. But even if their financial situation were different, O'Connor said they would find a way to keep seeing the world.

"We've always traveled, even before we were together," O'Connor said. "It's just something we do."

Herb, of Zoom Vacations, said he has only one gay friend who doesn't have a passport. Gays and lesbians, he believes, may be more eager travelers because of the social circumstances they've endured throughout their lives.

"I think the idea of newness and differences in general, it makes us even more curious than other people," Herb said. "A lot of gay people have felt so different their whole life. After you come out, you almost feel like you can do anything."

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