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No Longer a 'Niche Market' :: Travel Industry Woos LGBTs

by Kilian Melloy

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The travel industry is starting to set aside the idea that LGBT tourists are a "niche market"--and beginning to court them as a means to pull an ailing economic sector out of its slump, reported the [Agence France-Presse](#) (AFP).

Part of the drive to market to gays and lesbians comes from same-sex families having secured the right to marry in a number of countries, the article noted. Nine nations globally offer marriage parity to gay and lesbian families. In the U.S., marriage equality is currently legal in five states and in the District of Columbia.

"The tourism industry is really opening its eyes and realizing that this is a new and emerging market that they need to tap into," said the European representative of the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association, Clark Massad.

"Several years ago, it was considered a niche market and now it is really being considered a segment in and of itself," Massad added. "The economic impact of the LGBT

traveller has become apparent in the last year and especially with the economic crisis."

The AFP reported that "the IGLTA... has some 2,200 business members in 87 countries," and noted that the group was "an affiliate member of the UN World Tourism Organization."

Though the image of all, or even most, gays and lesbians being affluent is factually not correct, many same-sex couples do have more disposable income because they tend to have fewer children. Those who are childless, the article noted, "have the added bonus that they can travel outside peak holiday periods."

The CEO of marketing firm Out Now, Ian Johnson, told the AFP that GLBTs comprise 6% of tourists globally. That's a lot of travel from the community, and it represents a significant revenue stream. But that pink cash could dry up for service providers who look to sell to gays but do not offer them genuine respect, Johnson said.

"If the consumer senses that it's nothing more than a quick 'pink dollar grab' then the cynicism will kick in immediately and those hotels, airlines and destinations will find they will not get the returns on their investments," he told the AFP. Out Now seeks to assess the GLBT-friendliness of travel-related businesses, awarding those it deems truly accepting of gays a "GayComfort" imprimatur. The article said that so far, about 1,000 purveyors had earned the seal of approval.

"It is not about making gay guests feel any different, it is all about making them feel welcome, the same as all other guests," Johnson explained.

Massad said that businesses wishing to court LGBT travelers needed to avoid "just hanging a rainbow

flag outside of your business," and told the AFP, "The last thing you want is to fall into a situation of just using clichés, because the LGBT market will see right through that immediately."

That means businesses truly interested in catering to the LGBT market will need to let go of preconceived notions and prejudices when it comes to gays. It's not all about beaches, parties, and Pride; GLBT travelers are also likely to attend major cultural and sporting events, or to want to visit countries that promote natural beauty and activities such as hiking, skiing, and camping.

"Everybody wants to pigeon-hole certain gay destinations," Massad said, "but I think that's a very dangerous thing because any city that is a major tourism destination today has the possibility to attract the gay traveller."

Moreover, LGBT travelers come in all shapes, sizes--and family configurations. Couples wishing to celebrate a marriage that is not available to them at home, or to embark on an exotic honeymoon, are just as likely to be customers as are single men looking for adventure at a circuit party or on a gay singles cruise. The article noted that openly gay celebrities with families of their own--Rosie O'Donnell and Elton John, for example--raised the profile of same-sex families not only politically, but also culturally. That has an impact on the travel market.

Moreover, as the global economy, together with modern means of communication, shrinks the physical and cultural divides between nations, more and more of the world opens up to LGBT tourism. New frontiers in gay travel often start small, then balloon as travel destinations become more popular.

At some point, Johnson said, "government authorities take notice and usually the tourism office money tends to follow the success of one or two pioneering private tour operators in opening up these markets."

And the possibilities are almost endless; gay and lesbian travelers can now [trek through the Himalayas](#) or climb Mt. Everest just as easily as they can set their sights on a rousing visit to Munich for [Oktoberfest](#).

"We have seen some announcements lately from countries that in the past would probably have not been able or willing to have come out so clearly and say 'we are encouraging' [gays to visit]," said UNWTO Secretary General Taleb Rifai. "So I think it's a trend that is most likely to continue because it is connected to other global trends that are going in that direction."

As the gay travel market has grown, resources other than transportation and lodgings have popped up around it. Gay travel publication the [Spartacus International Hotel & Restaurant Guide](#) gives LGBT wayfarers information on destinations and services around the world that cater to gay tourists.

Even American cities hollowed out by decades of economic stagnation stand to be revitalized if they can successfully market to gay travelers: recently, EDGE profiled none other than the [city of Baltimore](#) as a hot destination.

Kilian Melloy reviews media, conducts interviews, and writes commentary for EDGEBoston, where he also serves as Assistant Arts Editor.

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