

CAMPING OUT

Find nature, fun and community on these grounds

Matt Alderton Special to USA TODAY

The LGBTQ+ community has always enjoyed a bit of “camp,” but feather boas, voguing nuns or dance numbers from “The Rocky Horror Picture Show” aren’t necessarily the point of LGBTQ+ camping. Campgrounds that cater to the LGBTQ+ community offer an experience rooted more in nature, escapism and community. Here are five destinations where you can experience this kind of getaway for yourself.



SAWMILL CAMPING RESORT

Sawmill Camping Resort

Dade City, Florida

Sawmill Camping Resort (floridagaycamping.com) opened in 1999 as a haven for the LGBTQ+ community in central Florida. More than 20 years later, what began as a clothing-optional campground has evolved into a full-blown resort community with a heated outdoor pool, a spa, wooded nature trails, a lake named for actress and talk show host Ricki Lake, a nightclub, a cigar bar and nightly stage shows with drag performers, musicians, comedians and more.

Open year-round, the resort has rental cabins and sites for vans, RVs and tents. There are also regular themed events, including a women’s weekend in February, a “silver daddy” weekend in May, a pool party weekend in August and a cowboy weekend in November.

“It’s important to have a safe space, especially in today’s climate,” says Justin Perez, the campground’s general manager. “We welcome anybody and everybody. Whether you’re gay, lesbian, transgender or heterosexual, this is a place where you can come and just be yourself — no judgment.”

The Highlands

Guerneville, California

Located in Sonoma County’s red-wood-studded Russian River Valley, The Highlands (highlandsresort.com) has been around since the 1940s. Although the site had been clothing-optional since 1979, new owners Christian Strobel and Crista Luedtke are making some changes at the property. For starters, it’s no longer clothing-optional, and the accommodations are more luxurious. What used to be open tent camping is now a luxury glamping experience with 11 canvas tents with king beds and porches.

Also on offer are 15 guest rooms and 10 standalone cabins, as well as a pool, outdoor showers and a barbecue area with a fire pit for s’mores.

While its clientele remains primarily LGBTQ+, The Highlands has a “come one, come all” philosophy, according to Luedtke, who identifies as lesbian. “We wanted the space to be inclusive,” she says. “That includes our LGBTQ allies and partners. We want them to be able to enjoy and honor and celebrate diversity with us.”

► **Accommodations at The Highlands include luxury glamping tents, guest rooms and standalone cabins. There’s a pool, a barbecue area, a fire pit for s’mores and much more.** PHOTOS BY THE HIGHLANDS





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Oz Campground

Unadilla, Georgia

Situated on 150 acres in central Georgia, the Oz Campground (ozcampground.com) offers rental cabins, RV sites and tent camping year-round with plenty of amenities, including 2 miles of ATV and hiking trails, a café, a 4,000-square-foot dance bar, a dog park and a heated pool with a pool bar.

Like many LGBTQ+ camping resorts, Oz is clothing-optional with entertainment and themed events throughout the year, including a white party in May, a spa weekend in July and a drag-themed Halloween weekend in October.

“We don’t discriminate in any shape, fashion or form. Everybody is welcome,” Mike Oyston, an Oz employee, told USA TODAY. “And I mean everybody. Some people may be a little bit uncomfortable with themselves because they think they’re too big or too small, but everyone can feel comfortable being themselves here.”



The Woods Campground

Lehighton, Pennsylvania

Established in 2004, The Woods Campground (thewoods.camp) occupies 161 acres in the Pocono Mountains. Along with spacious campsites for RVs, vans, trailers and tents, there are cabins and tiny homes for rent, plus a long list of amenities. There’s a full-service restaurant, a dance club, a swimming pool and two hot tubs, not to mention professional volleyball courts, outdoor fitness equipment, an amphitheater, a massage studio and a dog park. The clothing-optional resort has more than 3 miles of hiking trails and a 4-acre lake suitable for paddleboats and paddleboards.

The resort is open May through October and offers themed weekends along with regular pool parties, bonfires, drag performances and arts-and-crafts fairs.

“The Woods and other LGBTQ+ campgrounds provide a unique opportunity for individuals within the community to connect with others, express themselves freely, engage in shared interests and enjoy the beauty of nature in a safe and welcoming environment,” owner Pat Gremling says.



▲ The Woods campground occupies 161 acres in the Pennsylvania Poconos. THE WOODS CAMPGROUND



▲ Campit Outdoor Resort near Saugatuck, Michigan, is open from May until October, with themed celebrations every weekend.

Campit Outdoor Resort

Fennville, Michigan

Located just outside Saugatuck, Michigan — aka “the Provincetown of the Midwest” — Campit Outdoor Resort (campitresort.com) is celebrating its 40th anniversary, according to owner Michael O’Connor.

Encompassing 33 wooded acres with a variety of lodging options — cabin rentals, RV sites, a five-bedroom bunkhouse, tent camping and vintage trailer rentals — the clothing-optional resort includes a clubhouse, game room and heated in-ground swimming pool, as well as volleyball, horseshoes and nature trails.

Open April through October, the resort has themed celebrations every week, including a drag weekend in May, a Pride weekend in June, a trans week in July and a bear weekend in August.

“There’s a huge unmet need for friendships in our community, so we work really hard at Campit to create low-anxiety social opportunities,” O’Connor says, adding that Campit’s mantra is inclusion — not only for gay men, but also for women and trans campers. “We’re all about love and peace and taking care of each other.”

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Respect for elders

Older LGBTQ+ people can often feel forgotten, but they remain resilient

Matt Alderton Special to USA TODAY

Being an older gay man is harder than 71-year-old Richard Daniels thought it would be. Even in a place as populous as Manhattan, he says, he and his 84-year-old husband often feel alone.

"Isolation has become a major issue that I never imagined it would be," Daniels says. "Our connections with others have really dwindled."

Being a young gay man wasn't easy in his day, either.

When Daniels was coming of age, LGBTQ+ people existed only on the fringes of society. Even after the Stonewall uprising that ignited the modern gay rights movement in 1969, representation in the mainstream public sphere was virtually nonexistent, discrimination and violence against LGBTQ+ people were routine, and marriage equality was a



▲ A SAGE-sponsored Thanksgiving event in New York. SAGE provides programming at senior centers, a phone buddy program and more. SAGE



▲ The Avenidas Rainbow Collective promotes successful aging and well-being for LGBTQ+ elders. "For many participants, our programs are their only outlet for social engagement," says social worker Thomas Kingery, creator of the group. "I wanted to help LGBTQ older adults build community by creating shared experiences, because it's through shared experiences that you grow relationships." PROVIDED BY LUIS PEDRO CASTILLO



▲ Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders, or SAGE, is the world's largest and oldest organization dedicated to serving older LGBTQ+ individuals. KAMILA HARRIS PHOTOGRAPHY/SAGE



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 fairy tale. In fact, just being gay was illegal in many states until 2003, when the U.S. Supreme Court struck down laws that criminalized intimacy between same-sex couples.

Even in their darkest moments, however, LGBTQ+ people found community with one another. Consider the AIDS crisis that traumatized an entire generation of gay men. Although he lost his first partner to AIDS in 1994, Daniels says he felt supported and loved in ways he no longer does.

“During the AIDS wars, people were putting together care families with their friends,” Daniels recalls. “But we were all much younger then and had much larger social circles. It’s a very different situation now. As a gay couple with no children, we have very little family who are able to give time or assistance, and a lot of our peers are retreating into their own challenges as they get older. That kind of support is just not there for us.”

Although Daniels often feels alone, he isn’t: There are an estimated 2.4 million LGBTQ+ people age 65 or older in the United States, many of whom are struggling with challenges that are either unique to the LGBTQ+ community or disproportionate within it.

As they chart the future of LGBTQ+ rights, activists and allies must celebrate and support those who conceived and grew their movement, says Michael Adams, CEO of Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders, or SAGE, the world’s largest and oldest organization dedicated to serving older LGBTQ+ individuals.

“They paved the way for the lives and opportunities we have today as LGBTQ+ people,” Adams says. “As part of a larger community that’s knit together by a sense of responsibility and mutual commitment, it’s up to us to improve their quality of life and ensure they’re treated like the heroes they are.”

Elders at risk

Compared with their straight and cisgender peers, older LGBTQ+ adults are more vulnerable financially, medically and socially.

“For a variety of reasons, members of LGBTQ+ communities have unique experiences as they age,” Adams says. “For one, they experience very high levels of isolation and loneliness because they often have very thin support networks. One of the reasons for that is that they historically are much less likely to have



▲ SAGE works to counteract the loneliness and isolation that many LGBTQ+ older adults feel. PHOTOS PROVIDED BY SAGE



▲ “It’s up to us to improve their quality of life and ensure they’re treated like the heroes they are,” says Michael Adams, CEO of SAGE.

kids and are twice as likely to grow old single. We live in a country where adult children and spouses are the primary sources of support and care for elders, and that’s missing for a lot of LGBTQ+ older folks.”

According to the Williams Institute, which conducts research on sexual orientation and gender identity, 25% of LGBTQ+ people ages 65 and older live alone, compared with 15% of straight/cisgender people.

“It’s not just that they’re less likely to have children. LGBTQ+ people also are more likely to be estranged from their families of origin,” says Ian Meyer, a distinguished senior scholar for public policy at the Williams Institute. “I know lots of older gay men who haven’t talked to their families in decades. That means they’re less likely to get support from siblings or nieces and nephews, too.”

According to Meyer, LGBTQ+ people are more likely to experience anxiety and

depression, and they are particularly vulnerable to violence. In fact, more than one-third of LGBTQ+ adults have been victims of crime, including assault and theft, according to the Williams Institute, which says more than half have experienced threats of violence, while approximately three in four have been verbally insulted or abused.

These experiences affect both mental and physical health, says Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen, founder of the Goldsen Institute, which researches health and wellness in vulnerable populations.

“Many LGBTQ+ older adults have experienced a lifetime of discrimination, violence, harassment and bias, which we know are associated with health disparities,” Fredriksen-Goldsen says. She’s the primary investigator for “Aging with Pride,” the first national longitudinal



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study of health and well-being in LGBTQ+ older adults. Violence and discrimination lead to stress, she says, which in turn leads to chronic conditions like obesity, arthritis and cardiovascular disease, many of which affect LGBTQ+ older adults in greater numbers.

Exacerbating vulnerabilities even further is a lack of culturally competent care that's specific and relevant to LGBTQ+ needs. "Because of discrimination in health care, many folks avoid accessing health care ... until it's an emergency," says Adams, of SAGE. "When people don't get preventive care over the course of their lives, they end up with worse health outcomes as they age."

There are economic disparities, too. "There's a stereotype that LGBTQ people have more money and more disposable income, but that has been refuted. It's not true," Meyer says. In fact, Meyer says, LGBTQ+ people earn less due to workplace discrimination and are less likely to enjoy the shared income and spousal benefits that often benefit straight married couples. As a result, 20% of LGBTQ+ older adults have incomes below the federal poverty level, according to the Williams Institute.

Helping hands

Advocates are doing what they can to help LGBTQ+ elders age with dignity in spite of the barriers they face.

Among them is social worker Thomas Kingery, creator of the Avenidas Rainbow Collective, which promotes successful aging and well-being for LGBTQ+ elders in Santa Clara County, California. What began as a monthly meetup now includes an entire slate of social programs catering to LGBTQ+ elders. For example, there's a social group for lesbians that meets virtually twice a month, a walking group that meets monthly for lunch and exercise, a monthly LGBTQ+ movie night and a song appreciation group. There also are regular exercise programs and technology classes that teach how to use smart home devices or dating apps.

"For many participants, our programs are their only outlet for social engagement," Kingery says. He created the Avenidas Rainbow Collective in response to his own fears about aging. "I'm a 50-year-old gay man who never had kids. As I've gotten older, I've started wondering who's going to take care of me ... I wanted to help LGBTQ older adults build com-



◀ **SAGE members participate in the New York City Pride March in 2022.**

KAMILA HARRIS
PHOTOGRAPHY/
SAGE

munity by creating shared experiences, because it's through shared experiences that you grow relationships."

The Seattle-based Goldsen Institute is building community in a similar fashion with its Legacy Letters and Dine Together programs. The former connects LGBTQ+ elders and youth through cross-generational correspondence and storytelling, while the latter brings LGBTQ+ older adults together for monthly shared meals.

For its part, SAGE offers SAGEConnect — a nationwide phone-buddy program that matches LGBTQ+ elders with younger volunteers for weekly phone calls — as well as in-person programming at five SAGE-run senior centers in New York.

"It's harder as an adult to make new friendships. SAGE in that regard has been a lifeline," says Daniels, who has attended numerous SAGE-sponsored classes and support groups.

Because social programs alone won't sustain LGBTQ+ elders, SAGE also provides SAGECents, a digital wellness platform that helps LGBTQ+ older adults with financial planning and budgeting. Similarly, Chicago's Center for Disability and Elder Law provides free legal services to LGBTQ+ elders in areas like estate planning through its Proud to Thrive program.

"As we age, we lose the ability to make decisions for ourselves. So we have to ask ourselves: Who's going to make decisions for me? That's usually family. But LGBTQ+ elders don't always have that support system, so documents like ad-

vance directives are really important," says the center's legal director, Michael Stone. He adds that lawmakers typically write end-of-life laws in heteronormative ways that favor blood relatives instead of chosen family — which can be problematic if you have an unmarried partner your family doesn't recognize, or a gender identity your family won't respect for your obituary or grave marker. "If you're LGBTQ, your blood relatives don't always have your best interests in mind," Stone says

Systemic solutions

Organizations like SAGE and the Center for Disability and Elder Law have finite reach and resources. What LGBTQ+ elders need most is systemic change.

"We need to think about the services we provide for older people, and we need to provide them in ways that are culturally sensitive so that LGBTQ people feel included," says Meyer, from the Williams Institute. "For example, so many services for older people are offered through churches. Whether it's true or not, many LGBTQ people might assume they're not welcome there."

The need for systemic change is particularly pronounced in the area of housing, says Meyer, who has been accompanying his husband on tours of independent living facilities for his in-laws. So far, they've toured at least 15 places in Los Angeles, and not one has featured advertising or programming indicating inclusivity for LGBTQ+ individuals.

The lack of inclusive housing has created a phenomenon known as "re-closeting." "As they age, many LGBTQ individuals are having to move into locations where they no longer feel comfortable being their authentic selves," Stone says.

To that end, both SAGE and the Goldsen Institute offer training for long-term care facilities and elder care providers to help them provide welcoming, safe and inclusive care for LGBTQ+ individuals.

"(My community) used to have a policy against same-sex couples unless you were related by blood. You could move in together if you were sisters but not if you were lovers. That changed in 2016, and in 2018 they began doing training for their staff with SAGE," says Jane Kniffin, a 78-year-old resident of Givens Estates, a SAGE-certified life plan community in Asheville, North Carolina.

Although she didn't initially seek out an LGBTQ+-inclusive community, she says living in one has given her a sense of belonging.

"I'm not alone," says Kniffin, who helps run a social group for LGBTQ+ residents. "I'm part of a group, and that's been of great benefit to me personally."

The challenges facing LGBTQ+ elders are real. But so is their strength.

"Like any other stigmatized group, these people should not be seen as victims, but as survivors of prejudice and discrimination," Meyer says. "They have experienced and overcome so much. And yet, their resilience should not be used as an excuse to withhold services."

Adams agrees. "We're talking about folks who have lived through extraordinarily difficult times when it was often dangerous if not life-threatening to be LGBTQ. But they still built community," he says. "They still built relationships. They still figured out ways to thrive. They're an extremely powerful group of people, and they shouldn't have to grow old alone. They need partnership and allyship."

Also, Adams notes, they need opportunities to share their wisdom. Not only with LGBTQ+ youth — who are facing a new era of social backlash and discrimination in states like Florida and Tennessee — but also with straight and cisgender elders who are coping with isolation and poverty. "The aging experiences that LGBTQ older folks have been dealing with for decades are becoming the experiences of more and more Americans in general," he says. "LGBTQ people have brought a lot of innovation and creativity to the table as they age. There's a lot that the rest of society can learn from that."