

## TRAVEL



The annual Pride celebration highlights what Provincetown, Massachusetts, has always been known for: LGBTQ+ awareness, empowerment and diversity. PROVINCETOWN OFFICE OF TOURISM

# Classically Cool

Tried-and-true LGBTQ+ travel destinations remain popular for a reason

By Matt Alderton

For LGBTQ+ travelers, rainbow flags — now found in almost any city — are a universal symbol of hospitality that announce “You’re welcome here!” Unfortunately, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment is also prevalent in many destinations, both home and abroad. Half of the travelers polled in the 2023 report “Portrait of LGBTQ+ Travelers in America” say they must consider their safety when deciding where to travel, which means many LGBTQ+ travelers are craving the vacation equivalent of chicken soup — a “comfort food” holiday unambiguously inclusive, friendly and familiar. With decadeslong track records of catering to the LGBTQ+ community, these classic destinations remain strong draws. **CONTINUED >>**

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Drag queens entertain onlookers in Palm Springs, California. VISIT GREATER PALMS SPRINGS



A participant flies the flag at the 2024 San Francisco Pride Parade. MIKE KIRSCHNER

### GREATER PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA

“Palm Springs started as a safe haven for old Hollywood actors to get away from Los Angeles and be who they are without being watched. I think that freedom and acceptance has just carried on,” local queer artist Trevor Wayne says.

“Many gay people in the entertainment industry have retired here, paving the way for a big gay community.”

The heart of that community is the Arenas District of Palm Springs, staples of which include Streetbar, a fixture since 1991, and Quadz, where interactive show tune nights attract patrons for boisterous Broadway singalongs. The newspaper-themed speakeasy Evening Citizen is a newer addition, and a short walk away is Oscar’s, known for its weekend drag brunches and world-famous Sunday Tea Dance. Drag is also on the menu at Toucans Tiki Lounge & Cabaret; PS Air, which serves up airline-themed drag brunches; and Drag & Fly Tours, whose drag queen-hosted LGBTQ+ sightseeing tours are a hoot.

### SAN FRANCISCO

San Francisco by many accounts is the “original” LGBTQ+ travel destination. Its first gay bar, The Dash, opened (and was also closed by the police) in 1908 due to reported lascivious activity, and the city’s first lesbian bar, Mona’s Club, opened in 1934, then in 1953 became Ann’s 440, which closed later that decade.

“From the Gold Rush era, when outsiders and dreamers flocked here in pursuit of a new life far from convention, to the rise of the Castro as a global epicenter of LGBTQ+ identity, San Francisco has always embraced those who dared to be themselves,” says Hubertus Funke, executive vice president and chief tourism officer at the San Francisco Travel Association. “It’s kind of woven into the city’s DNA.”

The Castro has been the center of San Fran-

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cisco's LGBTQ+ community for decades. Explore it on foot with Cruisin' the Castro Walking Tours to see sites like the historic Castro Theatre, reopening later this year following a \$35 million renovation; the Rainbow Honor Walk, which commemorates famous LGBTQ+ figures; Pink Triangle Park, which memorializes LGBTQ+ victims of Nazi Germany; and Harvey Milk Plaza, where a memorial honoring LGBTQ+ civil rights hero Harvey Milk will open in 2028. Twin Peaks Tavern, a historic gay bar dating back to at least the mid-1940s, is a must, as is the GLBT Historical Society Museum, the country's first museum of LGBTQ+ history and culture.

Beyond the Castro, check out Mother, a queer-owned, woman- and femme-centered LGBTQ+ bar that made "Bon Appétit" magazine's "Best New Bars in the U.S." list in 2024; the new Counterculture Museum, which celebrates San Francisco's role in LGBTQ+ rights and other countercultural movements; and the healing National AIDS Memorial in Golden Gate Park.

### KEY WEST, FLORIDA

After playwright Tennessee Williams and composer Leonard Bernstein, both of whom were gay, discovered Key West in the 1940s, it became a magnet for gay artists and their friends and fans, who found in the Keys a remote paradise where they could be unabashedly themselves.

Despite an influx of straight tourists, Key West remains an LGBTQ+ haven. "Key West has always been and will remain a welcoming destination for the LGBTQ+ community," says Rob Dougherty, executive director of the Key West Business Guild. "The city's motto, 'One Human Family,' reflects its inclusive spirit."

Anglers of LGBTQ+ life in Key West are the clothing-optional, all-male resorts Island House and New Orleans House, whose themed events, pools and bars — including the storied Bourbon Street Pub at New Orleans House — are hubs of connection and community. The diverse and lively crowds on Duval Street are legendary, as are the drag shows at Aqua Bar & Nightclub, 801 Bourbon Bar and La Te Da, known for its nightly cabaret show.

Don't leave without visiting the modest-yet-informative Tennessee Williams Museum, where you can pay homage to the Pulitzer Prize winner who helped plant Key West's LGBTQ+ roots more than 80 years ago.

### GREATER FORT LAUDERDALE

Greater Fort Lauderdale has been an LGBTQ+ hot spot since at least 1935. That's when the area welcomed its first gay bar, Club Ha-Ha, which described itself as a place where "gayety knows no restraint." Nearly a century later, this LGBTQ+ community is still without restraint, according to Stacy Ritter, president and CEO of Visit Lauderdale.



Duval Street in Key West, Florida, is jammed with revelers outside the Bourbon St. Pub in 2017.

ROB O'NEAL/AFP/GETTY IMAGES



Fort Lauderdale beach is a must-visit destination in this LGBTQ+-friendly city.

ANTHONY J. RAYBURN/VISIT LAUDERDALE

"There are so many places in this country right now that are capitulating to political pressure. We're not doing that," Ritter says.

The nucleus of LGBTQ+ life in Greater Fort Lauderdale is in Wilton Manors, often referred to as the LGBTQ+ capital of South Florida. Brunch at Rosie's Bar and Grill is mandatory, as are drinks at Georgie's Alibi Monkey Bar. The 1950s Florida bungalows at Ed Lugo Resort are an ideal place to stay. And if shopping is your vibe, check out Wilton Collective, an upscale thrift and consignment store whose proceeds benefit Julian's Fountain of Youth, which supports LGBTQ+ young people.

In Fort Lauderdale proper, highlights include the lively drag shows at Aquaplex, formerly known as LIPS; the day spa at the gay-owned and -operated all-male Grand Resort & Spa; the eye candy at Sebastian Street Beach; and the uplifting exhibits at the Stonewall National Museum, Archives & Library.

### PROVINCETOWN, MASSACHUSETTS

In 1899, painter Charles Hawthorne established the Cape Cod School of Art in Provincetown. It attracted artists and other creatives from all over — including New York's LGBTQ+ Greenwich Village scene. Provincetown has been an art colony and LGBTQ+ mecca ever since.

"There's nothing quite like the LGBTQ+ community filling Provincetown's streets with joy, color and celebration," says Anthony Fuccillo, director of tourism for the Town of Provincetown. "Everyone needs Ptown now more than ever."

The businesses and bars on Commercial Street are pure Provincetown. Longtime favorites include the historic Crown & Anchor, which is ground zero for drag, cabaret and dancing; A-House, which is one of the country's oldest gay bars and Provincetown's only year-round dance club; and The Boatslip, whose daily afternoon tea dance is a Ptown institution each summer.

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The Pride parade in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, is one of the most exciting, diverse and inclusive celebrations in that country. PUERTO VALLARTA TOURISM BOARD

## Other definitive LGBTQ+ destinations

### FIRE ISLAND, NEW YORK

Among the nation's oldest LGBTQ+ communities are the car-free hamlets of Fire Island Pines and Cherry Grove. The former is known for pulsating nightlife while the latter is more relaxed and bohemian thanks to laid-back beaches, nature walks and drag-tastic venues like Cherry's on the Bay. Says Ross Levi, executive director of the New York State Division of Tourism/I LOVE NY, "Fire Island has long been a cherished sanctuary for LGBTQ+ travelers — a place where freedom, creativity and community have thrived for generations."

### SAUGATUCK, MICHIGAN

An art colony, beach town and beloved LGBTQ+ enclave, Saugatuck is often referred to as the Ptown of the Midwest. You can patronize LGBTQ+-



Partiers can join other like-minded people on the Fire Islander Clipper to Fire Island Pines, New York.

PROVIDED BY KERRY QUINN

owned businesses like the cozy and community-oriented Uncommon Coffee Roasters; celebrate LGBTQ+ history at the Saugatuck-Douglas History Center's "A Century of Progress" exhibit; or party hard at The Dunes Resort. Leslie Fitzell, owner of glass art shop Laffing Glass, says, "People know that they can find family here and that they won't be treated differently from anyone else."

### PUERTO VALLARTA, MEXICO

Its blend of LGBTQ+ culture with traditional Mexican heritage has earned Puerto Vallarta a reputation as the "San Francisco of Mexico." You can explore Banderas Bay with LGBTQ+ tour operator Diana's Boat Tours; sunbathe at the gay beach, Los Muertos Beach; and explore the cobblestoned streets of the Zona Romántica. Luis Villaseñor, managing director of the Puerto Vallarta Tourism Board, says "Puerto Vallarta stands out as the only beach destination in Mexico with a vibrant and diverse gayborhood."