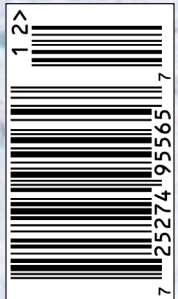


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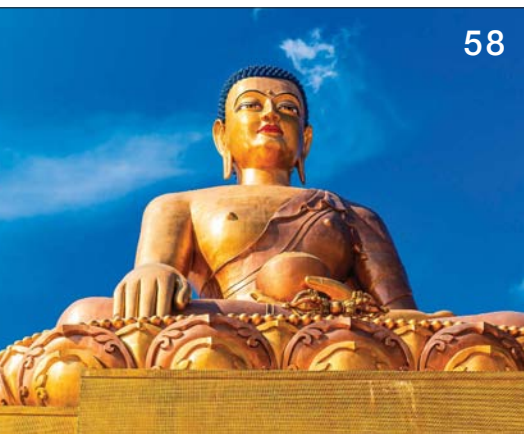
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Meet Derrick Byars, the Director of Operations at the Apollo Theater in New York City. He directs and produces a wide range of new works every year, including opera, acrobatics, multi-media, Black America and its history, and much more. To him Harlem is not just a source of pride, but also his "artistic inspiration."



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**T**he people we meet and get to know during our travels all seem to want the same thing, to live together in peace and share happiness with one another. Life is short, and to make the most of the opportunities we have, we need to come together and create a better world for everyone. “The people have the power to make life free and beautiful, to make this life a wonderful adventure,” said Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator* (1940). Here is an excerpted version of that speech that is as pertinent today as it ever was:

“I’m sorry but I don’t want to be an Emperor. That’s not my business. I don’t want to rule or conquer anyone. I should like to help everyone if possible. We all want to help one another, human beings are like that. We all want to live by each other’s happiness, not by each other’s misery. We don’t want to hate and despise one another. In this world there is room for everyone and the good earth is rich and can provide for everyone. The way of life can be free and beautiful, but we have lost the way.

Greed has poisoned men’s souls, has barricaded the world with hate, has goose-stepped us into misery and bloodshed. We have developed speed, but we have shut ourselves in. Machinery that gives abundance has left us in want. Our knowledge has made us cynical, our cleverness hard and unkind. We think too much and feel too little. More than machinery we need humanity. More than cleverness we need kindness and gentleness. Without these qualities, life will be violent and all will be lost.

Even now my voice is reaching millions throughout the world, millions of despairing men, women, and little children, victims of a system that makes men torture and imprison innocent people. To those who can hear me I say, “Do not despair.” The misery that is now upon us is but the passing of greed, the bitterness of men who fear the way of human progress. The hate of men will pass and dictators die, and the power they took from the people will return to the people.

In the seventeenth chapter of Saint Luke it is written, “The kingdom of God is within man.” Not one man, nor a group of men, but in all men, in you the people. You the people have the power, the power to create machines, the power to create happiness. You the people have the power to make life free and beautiful, to make this life a wonderful adventure. Then in the name of democracy let’s use that power. Let us all unite. Let us fight for a new world, a decent world that will give men a chance to work, that will give you the future, and old age, and security. Let us fight to free the world, to do away with national barriers, do away with greed, with hate and intolerance. Let us fight for a world of reason, a world where science and progress will lead to all men’s happiness. Let us all unite!”

Be the change you want to see in the world.

—*Robert Adams*

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## 10 MUST-VISIT QUEER BARS IN SAN FRANCISCO

by Kyrie Sismaet

**W**hen exploring a city, how can one truly ascertain a deeper understanding of its local residents and history?

While breathtaking monuments and scenic sites are vital to any tourist's agenda, uncovering the hidden, untold stories often begins in a charmingly relaxed and unexpected locale. The next time you need a casual recharge from sightseeing, consider ducking into a LGBTQ+ bar. These neighborhood watering holes offer a welcome reprieve from a city's bustle—defined by its affordable drinks, no-frills atmosphere, and friendly regulars eager to share stories you won't find in any guidebook.

In San Francisco, these bars are an indelible part of the city's identity and progress. They've sparked not only classic cocktails like the Mai Tai and Irish Coffee but also fueled mid-century counterculture movements, from the Beat Generation to LGBTQ resistance. For the queer community, bars have long been vital sanctuaries where people can gather, unite, and empower each other.

The following is a diverse list of 10 must-visit queer bars within both the LGBTQ Castro District and greater San Francisco that embody, uplift, and imbue the city's inclusive spirit through their timeless decor, engaging stories, and genuinely kind service.



Photo: Photogro

### 440

Starting off with a beloved classic, 440 is located right in the middle of Castro Street. Sporting both an intimate interior with an elevated backroom and a sunny parklet near the iconic Castro Theatre, this decades-long favorite has something for everyone. 440 first opened in 1979 as Bear Hollow and has since undergone several changes. Through

all its transformations, what has remained consistent is its steady stream of loyal patrons who trust it as a no-pressure third space to mingle and unwind. Today, weekly events like Monday Underwear Night, Tuesday 2-for-1s, and the festive Friday Luau, continue to ensure there's always a good reason to stop by and strike up a new conversation. 440 Castro St. Tel. 415-621-8732. [the440.com](http://the440.com)

### Aunt Charlie's

A living remnant from when the Tenderloin District was flourishing with gay bars, Aunt Charlie's is still a cozy beacon in what is now the official Transgender District. While narrow with limited capacity, the simplicity of the space actually hides deep historical significance. The location served as a gathering space for members of the trans community during the 1966 Compton's Cafeteria Riot. Now the intimate space continues to hold drag shows, and its railroad-style layout encourages socializing and stimulates conversations on its storied past and promising future, all while being bathed under sultry red neon. 133 Turk St. Tel. 415-441-2922, [auntcharlieslounge.com](http://auntcharlieslounge.com)



Photo: Stratford Productions

## The Cinch

If you're on trendy Polk Street and seeking a queer respite, simply find The Cinch's vibrant saloon exterior. Stepping through its saddle doors immediately reveals a cozy western ambience, with all the walls proudly resplendent with LGBTQ+ memorabilia. Self-claimed as the neighborhood's "last standing gay bar," The Cinch opened in 1974 and has since become the city's second-oldest continuously operating gay bar. Now an awe-inspiring history museum in its own right, each decorative piece tells a complex story that the inviting bartenders would be happy to pass on to you. Before heading out to the garden patio, be sure to stop by the back billiards hall, now transformed into a fully immersive Star Wars-themed space. During The Cinch's brief COVID-19 closure, longtime manager and avid cosplayer Eric Berchtold remodeled the room into a total space cantina using handmade props and refurbished household items. Packed with thoughtful, intricate details, the space is a delight for superfans and casual visitors alike. *1723 Polk St. Tel: 415-776-4162. facebook.com/thecinchsaloon*

## SF Eagle

While it leans more toward the leather scene, no list of San Francisco's historic queer dive bars would be complete without The Eagle. Since 1981 The SF Eagle has been a cornerstone of the community, defining both the culture of Folsom Street's Leather District and the city's LGBTQ+ legacy at large. Designated a city landmark in 2021, it has also inspired a global network of "Eagle" bars. Especially popular during Leather Pride events, just follow the unmistakable leather pride flag waving above Eagle Plaza, and you'll discover a spirited hub as welcoming as their drinks are affordable. *398 12th St. Tel. 628-800-0611. sf-eagle.com*

## The Edge

For those seeking a more industrial, leather-forward vibe within the otherwise colorful Castro District, The Edge delivers the perfect atmosphere. Tucked away on 18th Street, this neighborhood staple balances its sleek black leather interior with sunny windows, generous seating, and a steady lineup of community-driven events that make everyone feel welcome. Since opening in the late 1980s, The Edge has been a gathering place for activism and creativity, hosting everything from the AIDS Emergency Fund and the Mr. Edge Leather Contest to drag shows and art classes. Today, it still carries its '80s alterna-



tive charm while partnering with organizations like AIDS/LifeCycle to host monthly happy hour socials. Whether you're looking for a relaxed conversation or a meaningful connection, The Edge remains a beloved retreat from Castro's more high-energy nightlife. *4149 18th St. Tel. 415-863-4027. facebook.com/EdgeSF*

## Ginger's

Ginger's is the ultimate hidden escape from the commercial buzz of Union Square. Tucked away in an unassuming alley between storefronts, its subtle neon sign leads you downstairs to a vibrantly queer speakeasy that feels worlds apart from its downtown surroundings. Paying tribute to its predecessor, Ginger's Trois, Ginger's is a spacious underground venue replete with dazzling lights, a pool table, stage, and cocktails that honor local gay history. Whether you're bar-hopping or wrapping up Downtown First Thursdays, Ginger's is a standout spot to keep the night going. *86 Hardie Pl. Tel. 415-969-9525. gingers.bar*

## Lone Star Saloon

Lone Star Saloon is a thriving 80's icon, in more ways than one! Just six months after opening, it survived the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake and soon became a sanctuary during the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Founded by Rick Redewill as a laid-back alternative to Castro in the SOMA neighborhood, Lone Star quickly became defined by its leather and bear patrons. Now under new ownership, this spacious saloon remains a staple of Folsom Street's Leather District, particularly beloved for its sunny, tucked-away back patio. *1354 Harrison St. Tel. 415-863-9999. lonestarsf.com*

## Moby Dick

For a historic bar with a fun nautical theme, set your sails for this sunny oasis on

Castro's 18th Street. In 1979, owner Joe Cappelletti transformed what was once The Corner Grocery Bar into the maritime treasure it is still known as today, complete with themed art, classic pinball machines, and even a large fish tank above the bar! Its warm wooden interior, custom art, high ceilings, and large windows invite in radiant sunlight that feels like a leisurely paradise with a trove of crisp refreshing beer. *4049 18th St. Tel. 415-294-0731.*

## Pilsner Inn

Opened in 1980, Pilsner Inn stands as the Castro's longest-running gay sports bar, perched right at the edge of the neighborhood and conveniently across from the J-MUNI Market Street stop. Its modest exterior belies one of the most pleasant garden patios in the city—made even better with their abundance of over 20 beers on tap! Whether you're chatting by the window, playing a game of pool or darts, or simply soaking up the sun beside the koi pond, you'll feel right at home with their personable service, attentive staff, and wonderful patio. *225 Church St. Tel. 415-621-7058. pilsnerinn.com*

## Wild Side West

Perhaps saving the best for last, no tour of San Francisco's queer bars is complete without stepping into Wild Side West and wandering through its lush, multi-level garden patio. Opened in 1962 and named after the Barbara Stanwyck film *Walk on the Wild Side*, this iconic space remains one of the city's last standing lesbian bars. Original owners Pat and Nancy took the trash left outside their property by anti-gay neighbors to whimsically decorate their garden as an artistic haven with bucolic greenery. Though both founders have since passed, Wild Side West is still proudly lesbian-owned and continues to offer a magical, inclusive escape in the heart of Bernal Heights. *424 Cortland Ave. Tel. 415-647-3099. wildsidewest.com*



Photo: Ylistocking

Photo: Prostock-Studio



# A Weekend in *Versailles*

by **Richard Nahem**



Palace of Versailles

Photo: V.E



Pierre Herme Café

Photo: Richard Nahem



Orangerie Parterre Built by Jules Hardouin-Mansart (1684 - 1686)

Photo: Menorca Tourism

Latona Fountain in the Gardens of Versailles

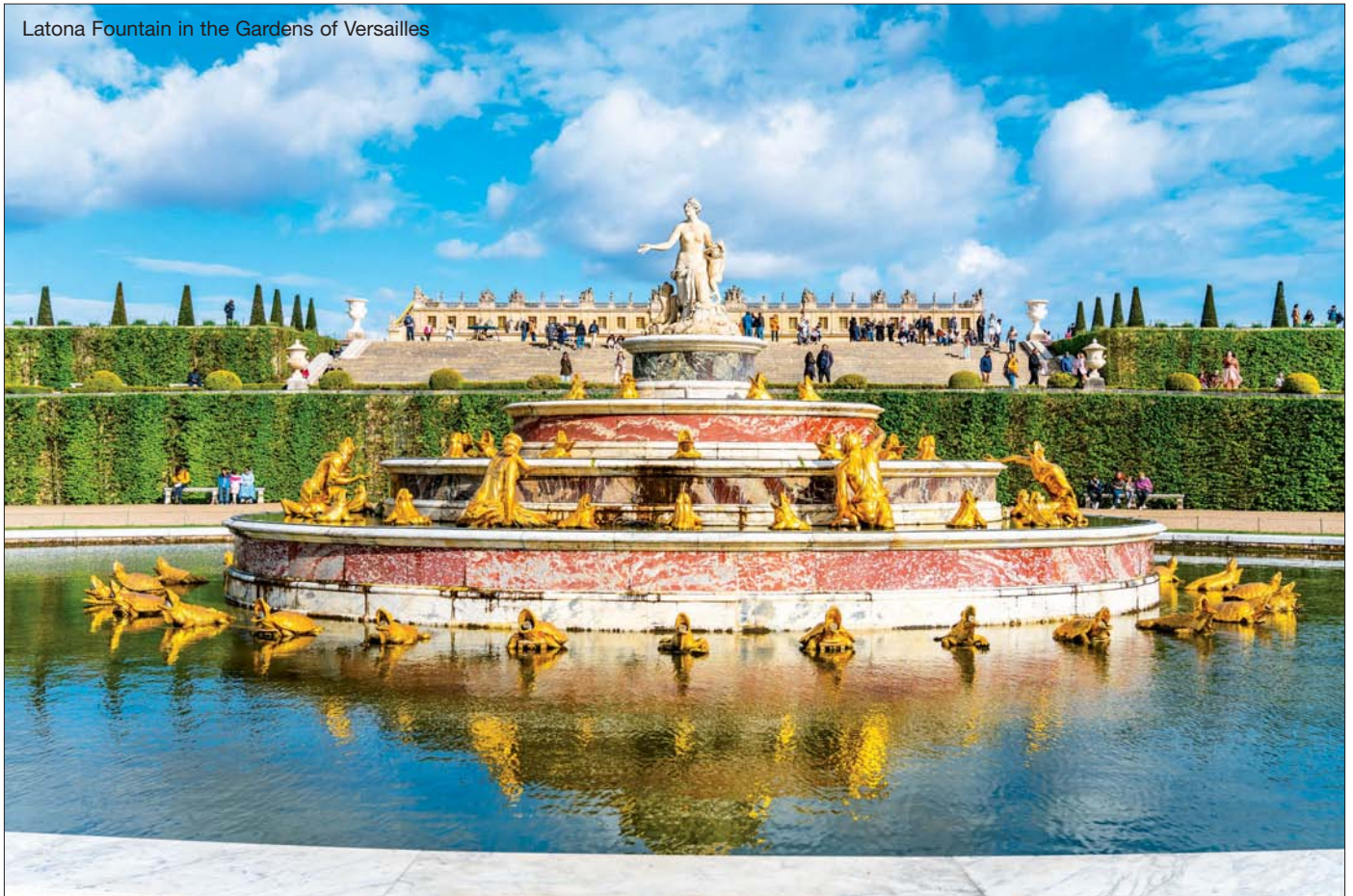


Photo: Pyty

*Originally a modest hunting lodge for the kings of France, the Chateau de Versailles was transformed by King Louis XIV in the late 1600s into one of the grandest palaces in France.*

Just 40-minutes from Paris, the town of Versailles is home to the opulent, over the top, and decadent **Chateau de Versailles** ([en.chateauversailles.fr](http://en.chateauversailles.fr)). Originally a modest hunting lodge for the kings of France, it was transformed by King Louis XIV in the late 1600s into one of the grandest palaces in France.

My partner Vincent and I arrived Saturday morning at the Versailles Rive Gauche train station, and a chauffeur whisked us away to the **Hotel des Lumieres Versailles** ([leslumieres.com/en](http://leslumieres.com/en)), a newly opened five-star hotel. The ideal location, the hotel is just a three-minute walk to the palace entrance.

Upon entering the hotel, we were offered a welcome coffee and tea while relaxing in the lobby solarium. This area is flooded with natural light and decorated with rattan framed chairs with thick, white pillows, off-white velvet love seats, and an abundance of ferns and plants.

Thibaud Leclair, the Front office manager, was kind enough to give us a tour of the hotel before we checked in. He shared the history of the building, which was a former private palace given to Édouard Colbert and Antoine III de Gramont by King Louis XIV. The 2L Collection, a family-owned, small hotel group based in France, purchased the property three years ago and did an extensive renovation.

The subtle theme and the name of the hotel is drawn from the his-

toric, cultural, and intellectual movement, the Age of Enlightenment, which spanned the 17th and 18th centuries in France and other parts of Europe. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Voltaire, two of the greatest philosophers and writers in French history, lived during this period.

Incorporating the Age of Enlightenment into the hotel, each room is named after a symbolic figure of the era. Our lovely two-room suite was named after the Montgolfier brothers who launched the first hot air balloon in France in 1783. The suite was decorated with gray walls with white moldings, framed, antique posters with illustrations of the Montgolfier brothers' hot air balloons, a king-size bed, a television cleverly hidden inside a painting frame, and hardwood floors. The spacious bathroom, almost the same size of the room, has a fabulous tub.

Working up an appetite, we had an early lunch at the **Pierre Herme Café** in the stunning former ballroom of the home, which was newly designed with light pink velvet chairs and banquettes, black bentwood chairs, crystal chandeliers, and ornate wall moldings lining the length of the room. Pierre Herme is one of the best pâtissiers in France, winning many prestigious awards for his swoon worthy and gorgeous pastries. We dined lightly on gazpacho topped with thick slices of beefsteak tomatoes and Cesar salad with shrimp so that we could keep our eyes on the prize, the dessert. Jardin Japonais, a decadent but light pas-



Gallery of Coaches in Versailles

Photo: D.seerat



Birthday Celebration for Vincent

Photo: Richard Nahem

try is a lemon-scented shortcake, filled with lemon compote and Morello cherries. It was delicious beyond our expectations.

Since we had been to the palace several times before, and it was a beautiful, sunny day, we decided to explore the grounds and the gardens. The vast gardens, covering over 2,000 acres, are much too large to see in a few hours, so we focused on the small, inner gardens close to the palace. One of the gardens fenced in by high hedges, has a striking sculpture of Venetian glass spheres by French artist Jean-Michel Othoniel. The Orangerie, the manicured garden dotted with orange and lemon trees, had a fascinating exhibition of a long, continuous tapestry mural by artist Eva Jospin.

That night, to celebrate my partner's birthday, we had dinner at the **Table des Lumières** at the hotel. The intimate dining room with soft lighting set the romantic atmosphere for the evening. Chef Erwan Le Thomas has created an innovative, concept menu, revolving around fresh vegetables. The main course is a seasonal vegetable grown in a

nearby garden, accompanied by a side order of beef, chicken or fish. Vincent's beautiful, ceramic plate had sliced carrots and carrot puree with a side of John Dory fish, and my meal featured yellow and red beets with a beet sauce, along with two slices of medium rare, Wagyu beef. We indulged in a second pastry that night to extend the celebration, a sumptuous, peach éclair with a birthday candle.

The highlight of the birthday celebration was the fantastic fireworks in the gardens of Versailles. Annual during summer, Versailles sponsors fireworks every Saturday night and we were lucky enough to catch the dazzling show lighting the formal gardens.

The next morning, we strolled over to the **Gallery of Coaches** ([en.chateauversailles.fr](http://en.chateauversailles.fr)), an exquisite and fascinating collection of horse carriages and coaches from past centuries. We marveled at the opulent carriages that Marie Antoinette rode in, the mini carriages and sleds for the royal children, and the handsome carriages for kings Louis XXIV, Louis XXV, Louis XXVI, Napoleon, and other notable royals. The Gallery was part of the Great Stables constructed around 1679 by Jules Hardouin-Mansart, the main architect for King Louis XIV.

We ended our delightful Versailles sojourn with a visit to the **Notre Dame Market** ([versailles.fr](http://versailles.fr)), which takes up all four sides of Place Notre Dame and is considered one of the best markets in France. The outdoor stalls were overflowing with summer produce and fruit, including mouthwatering watermelon, peachy keen peaches, fragrant cantaloupes, and plump apricots. Inside the covered market we bought a tin of foie gras, a selection of goat and sheep's cheese, and French dried ham. With our bounty from the market, we had an indoor, late afternoon feast when we returned to Paris. ■



Photo: Richard Nahem

# travelbound

## HOT TYPE FOR THE HOLIDAYS

PASSPORT has hit the books to find a special selection for holiday gift-giving. These include novels set in unusual locations around the globe, cookbooks by queer culinarians, Hollywood glitz, and a sexy photo volume that'll put cream on your coffee table. This year we've opted for lesser known titles from beyond the bestseller lists so you can surprise and delight recipients with something unexpected. Whether for enlightenment, education, or escapism, reading enriches us, so celebrate the holidays with a good book and turn the page on a happy new year.

—Jim Gladstone



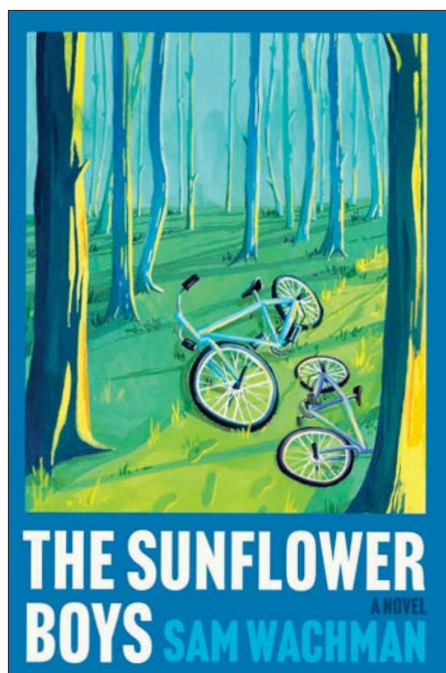
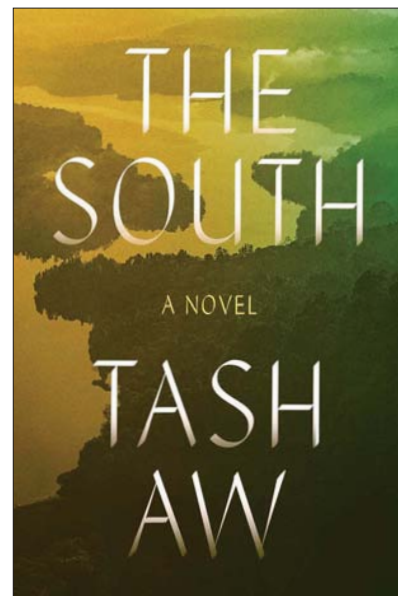
### WORLDLY AFFAIRS

A sort of "Hitchcock-in-Istanbul" thriller, **Summerhouse** by Turkish author Yigit Karaahmet is among the most engrossing gay-themed novels of the past year (\$28.95. SoHo Press. [bit.ly/passportbound](http://bit.ly/passportbound)). Set largely on Buyukada, one of the Princes' Islands, an upscale getaway about an hour by ferry from Turkey's most prominent city, this debut novel swings from tender to spine-tingling as it chronicles the consequences of imagined infidelity. A rare find in the queer canon, the book focuses on a gay couple who have been together for 40 years. Sener and Fehmi, a musician and a translator, have been a pair since a time when homosexuality was unspeakably abhorrent in Muslim Istanbul. They're forever effected by the repression of their younger years. Even now, the men—who live together, and whose relationship is common-but-unspoken knowledge among their friends—will not publicly recognize their romantic partnership. When Fehmi develops a crush on the delinquent teenage boy whose family rents

the house next door, Sener is consumed by jealousy. And when the young man, Deniz, becomes aware of Fehmi's attraction, he flirts his way toward treachery. The natural strains of longterm relationships, the sense social impotence felt by elderly gay men, and the persistent melancholy of marginalization hover over these pages until the story erupts into violence. While there's no "happily ever after" here, the conclusion is creepily romantic.

Rural Malaysia is the lushly rendered setting of Tash Aw's sensually immersive coming-of-age novel, **The South** (\$28. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, [instagram.com/tash.aw](http://instagram.com/tash.aw)). In 1979, 16-year-old Jay, his parents, and sisters leave their upper middle-class home in Kuala Lumpur to spend three humid

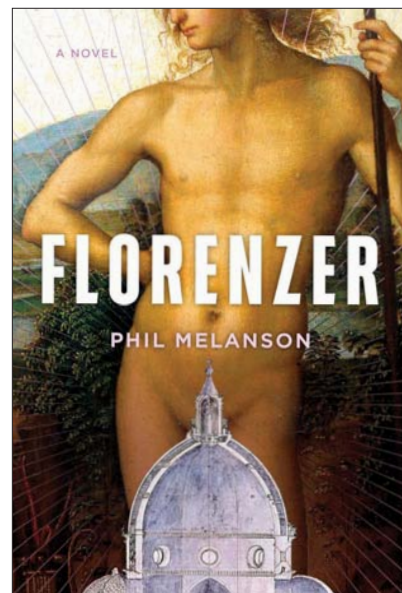
months at a modest farm recently inherited from the family's paternal grandfather. Mysteriously, the failing property has not been left to Jay's father, Jack, but to his mother, Sui. Further complicating matters: The farm's resident manager is Jack's half-brother, Fong, son of their shared father's mistress; tension about class and privilege simmers between the two men. And the object of Jay's obsession? Fong's own strapping 19-year-old son, Chuan: "He has anticipated the way every second will unfold – the way he will touch and be touched, the smooth-sticky quality of Chuan's skin... For so many years he has yearned for someone to touch him in this way – for the freedom he will experience...he is afraid of this liberation, and what it might lead to. It is the first time he has felt his body slipping away from his control." The kissing cousins' furtive, sweat-drenched affair is a private oasis, outside the soap opera tangle of the older generation. But the pair's dynamic also leads the reader to contemplate Malaysia's slow-to-change class system and the decline of small-scale farming as a viable way of life.



For a novel that meets the moment, turn to 25-year-old gay Sam Wachman's debut, **The Sunflower Boys** (\$27.99. HarperCollins. [samwachman.com](http://samwachman.com)). The son of Ukrainian immigrants to the United States, Wachman returned to his parents' native country prior to the Russian invasion for a stint teaching English to children. When a student confided about his sexuality, Wachman was struck by the differences between growing up gay in conservative Ukraine and his own radically different experience as the son of progressive parents in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This

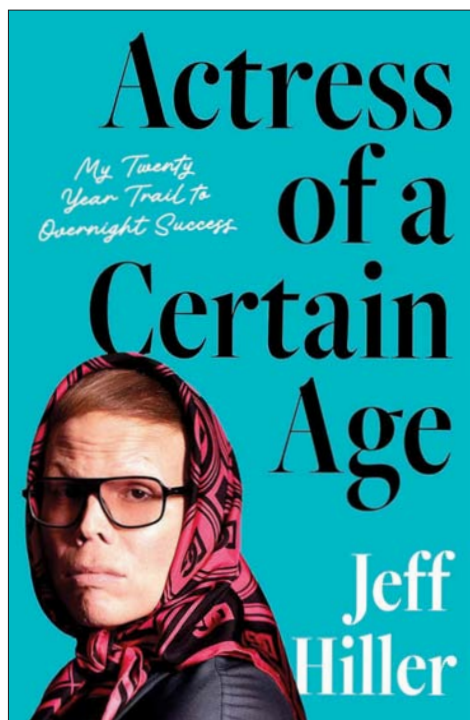
inspired the first draft of *The Sunflower Boys*, which he began writing in 2019: It focused on Artem, a 12-year-old Ukrainian boy living on his grandfather's farm and discovering his attraction to his best friend Viktor. But the escalation of real-world war in 2022 drove major plot changes in the novel-in-progress: Staying alive becomes more urgent than being in love. After losing both their grandfather and mother in a massive bombardment, Artem becomes the caretaker of his 8-year-old brother Yuri. Familial bonds supercede budding romance as the siblings cling to each other, seeking out safety and desperate to reunite with their father, who has been living and working in the U.S. In clear, heart-piercing prose, Wachman gives readers a vivid look at coming-of-age in a time of war, and how love intertwines with both grief and hope. A great read for anyone, and a wonderful gift choice for young adults in your life.

Historical fiction fans will thrill to the lavishly detailed time travel back to 15th century Italy in Phil Melanson's impressive first book, *Florenzer* (\$29.99. Liveright. [philmelanson.com](http://philmelanson.com)). The setting is Florence, where the citizens are, of course, called Florentine; the title is a Renaissance-era slur for male homosexuals who flocked to the city at the time. One of them, according to scholars, was Leonardo da Vinci, whose life story is enthusiastically embroidered upon here. Melanson follows the notorious LDV from age 12, when he comes to the city to be an artist's apprentice, through his triangular entanglement with an heir to the Medici banking fortune and an ambitious cleric working his way up the Vatican ladder. Clashes between passion, religion, and economic power fuel a twisty, provocative plot.

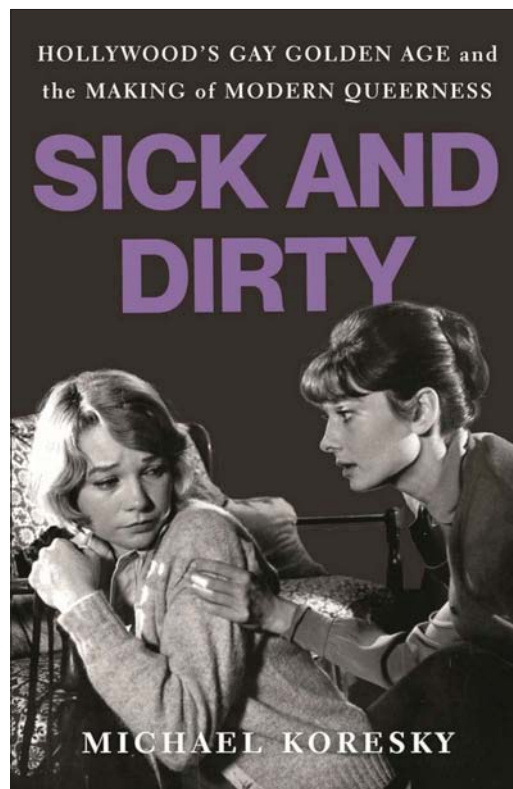


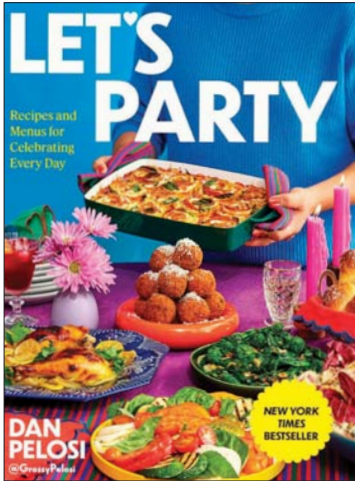
## TINSELTOWN TOMES

Sure, Jeff Hiller's book was published three months before the 50-year-old actor won this year's Emmy award for Best Featured Actor in a television comedy, but it feels like a well-earned victory lap. *Actress of A Certain Age: My Twenty Year Trail to Overnight Success* (\$28.99. Simon & Schuster. [hillertime.com](http://hillertime.com)) finds Hiller, who was awarded for his portrayal of Joel on Bridget Everett's bittersweet HBO series *Somebody Somewhere*, recounting his churchy Texas upbringing; his early work in social services jobs; and his two decades of rattling around the New York and Los Angeles improv scenes, only occasionally landing acting jobs while tiding himself over on residuals from Snickers commercials. None of this is earth shaking stuff, but it's all made uncommonly delightful by a personality on the page that's very much akin to that of his Joel character on-screen: He's funny without ever punching down, inspirationally tenacious, and gay as all get out. And he's got great comic timing: "I had a metaphorical pain in my heart and literal pain in my lower back. I began to self-medicate. My drug of choice was baked goods." You can practically hear the rim shot. Speaking of which, in addition to chuckles and uplift, Hiller provides "three stories about assholes: The bussy. The Stink Wrinkle. The Leather Cheerio. These stories are my gift to you, dear reader. Three assholes are a traditional gift for honored guests



Any gay cinephile worth his salt will want to clear a spot on his shelf next to Vito Russo's 1981 classic *The Celluloid Closet*, for *Sick and Dirty* the new book by Michael Koresky, Senior Curator of Film at the Museum of the Moving Image (\$26.99. Bloomsbury. [reverseshot.org](http://reverseshot.org)). While Russo excelled at pointing out the negative, stereotypical representations of LGBTQ characters throughout movie history, Koresky focuses on the subversive winks and secret hat-tips acknowledging queer lives in Hollywood films made between 1930 and 1960, when the studios' now-notorious Hayes Production Code forbade any depiction of homosexuality. He examines the careers of directors, including the extravagantly gay George Cukor and the underacknowledged lesbian Dorothy Arzner, and provides close readings of a selection of movies that provide the makings of a great queer streaming festival during the holiday season: The hidden homoerotics in Hitchcock's *Rope*; the deflected flamboyance of *Suddenly, Last Summer*; the military noir of *The Strange One* (Ben Gazzara's film acting debut, as a character called Sergeant Jocko de Paris); and the Sapphic subterfuge in director William Wyler's two different adaptations of Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour*, which was much franker than his film versions.





## QUEERS IN THE KITCHEN

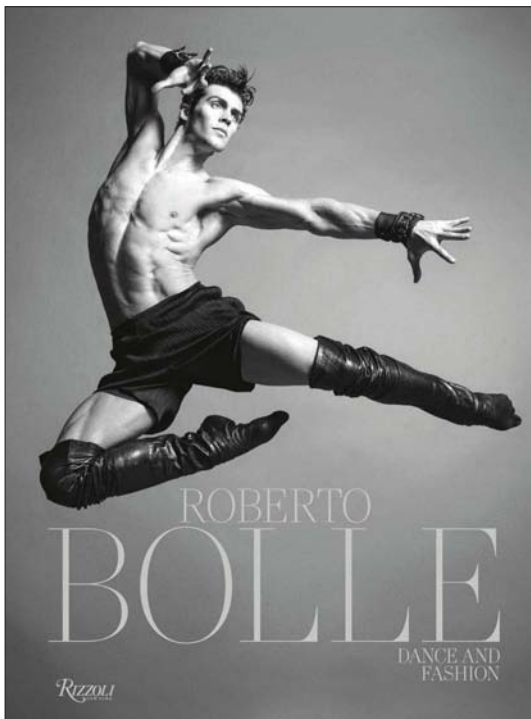
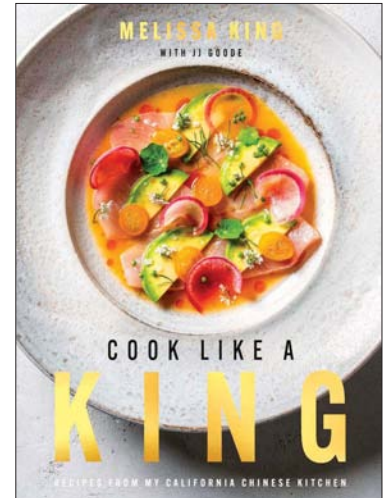
“My parties are never about perfection,” notes Dan “Grossy” Pelosi in the introduction to *Let’s Party: Recipes and Menus for Celebrating Every Day* (\$35. Union Square & Co. [danpelosi.com](http://danpelosi.com)). These are words to turn to when strenuously precious online culinary imagery and esoteric ingredient lists can intimidate casual home cooks, dissuading them from the simple pleasure of getting together to share food and friendship. Everything about cheerful queer Pelosi feels vivaciously on the edge of unkempt: From the clash of his sea green fingernail polish with his rosy homemade baked beans, to his unabashed baring of lovehandles in photos of a summer pool party, Pelosi prioritizes fun over finesse. His chatty cooking videos—posted to Instagram during quarantine—launched a second career for Pelosi, who formerly worked in retail design. He’s since become a contributor to the likes of *New York Times Cooking* and *Good Morning America*, and his encouraging, unpressured vibe translates well to his books (*Let’s Party* follows *Let’s Eat*).

Planning a meal should never involve “feeling an impending sense of doom,” Pelosi says, so for each of the book’s 16 themed menus he breaks down prep steps that can begin as long as a week

prior to a gathering so that everything can be accomplished at a reasonable pace. Among the thoughtful highlights is a party designed for small city apartment dwellers: Every dish is designed to be served in mugs and can be eaten while standing! While not related to the former speaker of the house, Pelosi is a notable Nancy nonetheless. He calls on famed Drag Queen Juanita MORE! for tips on putting together harmonious guest lists, included cute pictures of himself with his partner, theater artist Gus Heagerty, throughout the book, and he never hides his authentic sass.

Another delicious gift for culinary queens is *Cook Like A King* (\$40. Ten Speed Press. [chefmelissaking.com](http://chefmelissaking.com)).

The debut book from Melissa King, the genial queer *Top Chef All Stars* champion, makes Chinese cooking accessible to home cooks who may never have ventured into Asian cuisine. Long before she was a television celebrity King taught cooking classes, and she brings the clarity and straightforwardness of a friendly teacher to not only the recipes here, but to helpful lessons about ingredients, like an explanation of the differences between light and dark soy sauce and when to use each most effectively. A native Los Angeleno, King not only shares Cantonese dishes she first learned in her family kitchen, but recipes that reflect the influence of Southern California’s culinary diversity, like her Sino-Italian pappardelle with peas, and shiso and Mexican accented al pastor bao buns.

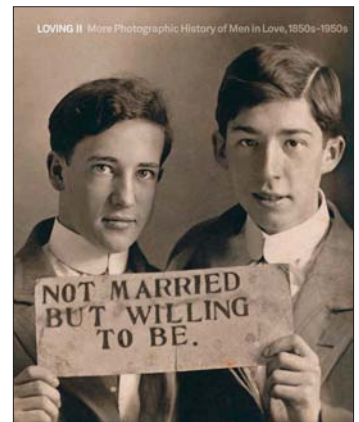


## OH, COME YE MERRY GENTLEMEN

One of the world’s most beautiful men has been objectified. The object is a hunka hunka burning coffee table book, *Roberto Bolle: Dance and Fashion* (\$70. Rizzoli. [robertobolle.com](http://robertobolle.com)). Discovered by Rudolf Nureyev at the Ballet School of La Scala when he was just 12 years old, Bolle, now 50, has danced with the Bolshoi Ballet, the Paris Opera Ballet, and many more of the world’s most esteemed companies. From early in his career, Bolle, who has been described as “a living Greek sculpture,” captured the attention of photographers as celebrated in their field as he is in dance, resulting in striking collaborations with the likes of Annie Leibovitz, Mario Testino, and Douglas Kirkland on the fashion and performance shoots featured in this all-day-sucker’s worth of eye candy. Admirers of the openly gay Bolle, from Michael Stipe to Giorgio Armani, contribute brief written tributes, and Bolle himself offers a few words, but this isn’t a book made for readers—it’s for oglers.

In 2020, Texan collectors Hugh Nini and Neal Treadwell released the first volume of images drawn from their vast archive of over 4,000 enchanting photographs of male couples taken between the 1850s and 1960s. Now, 300 more vintage images, discovered by Nini and Treadwell at flea markets, antique shops, thrift stores, and swap meets are available for heartwarming perusal in *Loving II: More Photographic History of Men in Love* (\$70. Five Continents Editions. [loving1000.org](http://loving1000.org)). The casual ease and affection captured in these once-private portraits reveals a

sense of self-acceptance and pride in decades that have more typically been portrayed as rife with closeted loneliness and internalized homophobia. These books help reclaim history from clichés, valuably reminding us that in previous times of social repression, we have found strength in each other, and love has prevailed. ■



# GALLOPING WITH PRIDE

AT THE LEXUS INTERNATIONAL GAY POLO TOURNAMENT

By Barry Hoy



Photo: Rachel Spencer

 **LEXUS**  
EXPERIENCE AMAZING

The rolling hills of Lexington, Kentucky set the stage for something truly unforgettable: the 2025 Lexus International Gay Polo Tournament, Lexington edition. Blending world-class polo with the spirit of Pride, the Gay Polo League (GPL) once again proved that sport can be both competitive and deeply inclusive.

For my husband, Teraj, and me, this wasn't just another trip or tournament. It felt like being welcomed into a family. From the very first hello, we were embraced by a community that celebrates not only athleticism but also authenticity.

The weekend began with a sparkling welcome reception and team presentation at The Apiary, one of Lexington's most stunning venues. The guests, dressed in white accented with GPL's signature orange and blue, were sipping cocktails and mingling as the athletes were introduced. Energy buzzed through the room, setting the tone for days filled with connection, anticipation, and camaraderie.

The next morning, we wandered through the Kentucky Horse Park and the International Museum of the Horse, diving into the rich history of equestrian sport. Standing beside these magnificent animals gave us a deeper appreciation for the unique bond between horse and rider, a bond that would take center stage on the field. Later, at the Players' Meeting and Stick & Ball, the athletes struck that perfect mix of focus and fun as they connected with their teammates and horses.

When the preliminary matches kicked off, the atmosphere felt less like competition and more like a reunion. Yes, the games sharpened skills and built team chemistry, but from the sidelines it felt like being at a family picnic with horses galloping past. The laughter, cheering, and easy camaraderie were as much a part of the day as the crisp crack of mallets against the ball.

Then came the main event. Game day was electric. Tailgates wrapped around the field in dazzling displays of creativity—rainbow flags catching the breeze, tables overflowing with themed décor, music and laughter filling the air. We were waved into tents as if we'd known everyone for years, and by the time the first ball was struck, we weren't just guests; we were part of the GPL family.



The athleticism on the field was breathtaking. Horses thundered across the grass, mallets connected with precision, and the crowd roared with every goal. What stood out most wasn't which team scored, it was how everyone was celebrated. That inclusivity, competition without division, is what makes GPL so remarkable.

Lexus, the presenting sponsor, elevated the experience in their own way. The Lexus TX SUV wasn't just a centerpiece at the grounds. It embodied comfort, space, and style, making it the ultimate tournament companion. From the field-side lounge to the thoughtful touches throughout the event, Lexus created an atmosphere that mirrored the Lexus TX SUV itself. We loved how their presence added a sense of celebration and flair to the tournament.

Looking back, Lexington gave us a weekend to treasure. We reunited with old friends, made new ones, and cheered for every team as if they were our own. Because when an event feels this much like family, you realize the real prize isn't the trophy, it's the friendships and memories that outlast the final whistle.

As the sun set over Kentucky, our eyes were already on the future. The next GPL will take place in Argentina this November, promising another chapter of pride, polo, and community on an international stage. For complete details, visit [gaypolo.com](http://gaypolo.com). ■



Photos: Gay Polo League



SKIING IN GRINDELWALD  
**SWITZERLAND**

by Emily Pennington



Jungfrauoch

Photo: Eva Bocek

I'm zooming down the crowd-free ski slopes of Grindelwald's Lauberhorn, the cool breeze prickling my skin like a thousand chilly needles, the imposing north face of the Eiger in front of me when suddenly I realize, this is the most carefree I've felt in months.

The storybook village of Grindelwald is tucked away in the Swiss Alps at an elevation of 3,392 feet. Since Switzerland is famous for its high-end (and on time) train system, I opted to do the entire journey by rail. I downloaded the Swiss Railways app onto my smartphone before I grabbed my luggage and entered in my destination, which made finding the correct train platform and station transfers from the Zurich airport a breeze. A scant three hours later, I was strolling down the postcard-worthy streets of tiny Grindelwald and checking into the posh **Hotel Belvedere** (Dorfstrasse 53. Tel. +41-33-888-9999).

Hotel Belvedere is one of this mountain hamlet's most beloved and historic lodging facilities, a four-star space that's been in the same family for four generations (since 1904). As such, the building's pink façade and lounge exude a certain Art Nouveau opulence, while the room interiors are simple, clean, and modern. In the hotel's basement level, there's even a Michelin-starred restaurant, 1910.

Famished after a full day of travel, I sat down for a quick group dinner at the hotel's more casual eatery, Restaurant Belvedere, which, like most dining hubs in Switzerland, serves up phenomenal locally-sourced cuisine in unpretentious digs. I enjoyed an organic beetroot carpaccio and roasted chicken with asparagus and morel mushroom sauce. It was a homey, filling end to a hectic travel day, and I fell asleep dreaming of snow-capped peaks.

The next morning, I was delighted to find that my humble hotel room boasted a sweeping view of the Swiss Alps, which jut up out of the earth like jagged granite knives, dusted with snow. In fact, Hotel Belvedere is proud of the fact that every one of its guestrooms offers spectacular mountain views. I sipped coffee on my balcony before scuttling downstairs to discover that the Belvedere's breakfast buffet is anything but ordinary. Freshly-baked bread and croissants, local yogurt, honeycomb, espresso, and hot dishes like eggs and bacon were all on display, and I had my fill before meeting my group at the Grindelwald Terminal to grab rental skis and hit the slopes.

The Swiss make it incredibly easy to traverse their country without a car, and I hopped onto a bus right in front of my hotel and was quickly whisked away to the town's main train station, which also houses a ski rental facility, a lift ticket desk, and an entrance station for the Eiger Express, a new gondola that opened at the end of 2020. After the requisite stumbling around in new ski boots and awkwardly trying on helmets and grabbing poles, my group of all lady skiers (or "slay-dies," as we liked to call ourselves) hopped onto the massive gondola.

The breathtaking beauty of the snow-covered Swiss Alps and the town's plethora of adorable, historic chalets spilled out beneath our feet as the cable car rose ever higher towards Eigergletscher, the end of the line and the highest point on the ski hill. What would have once been a 40-minute journey by train has been reduced to a scenic 15-minute ride, making it easier than ever to maximize your downhill time.

Jungfrauoch Sphinx Observatory



Photo: xbrchx



Gondola in Grindelwald and Wetterhorn Mountain

Photo: Aaron Chen PS2

**The breathtaking beauty of the snow-covered Swiss Alps and the town's plethora of adorable, historic chalets spilled out beneath our feet as the cable car rose ever higher towards Eigergletscher.**

Stepping out onto my first ski run, I was surprised at how well-groomed and uncrowded the country's slopes were. The Swiss are fond of shorter racing-style skis and groomed, hard-packed runs. For me, it meant that I could spend my days speeding down predictable, groomed snow for hours on end, rather than getting caught in bumpy moguls or losing a ski in the trees.

Our group met up at Kleine Scheidegg, one of the mountain resort's scenic passes, for a hearty lunch of Röstizza, a modern take on Swiss rösti potato pancakes, topped with tomato sauce and raclette cheese to form a makeshift, Alps-style pizza. Full enough to roll down the mountain unaided, I carefully zigged and zagged my way back down the slopes to Grindelwald Terminal to check out the après ski scene, which featured a lively beer garden, food carts, and a DJ bumping Euro house music. Once back at the hotel, I rinsed off and relaxed in the elegant first-floor lounge, which featured live piano music and a large fireplace. I couldn't believe that my group of "slay-dies" had more activities on the agenda that day.

A short (you guessed it) train ride up to Alpiglen and a quick stroll led to one of the country's premier fondue restaurants, **Berghaus Alpiglen** (Alpiglen. Tel. +41-33-853-1130). A famous, historic dormitory for mountaineers hoping to scale the icy, death-defying north face of the 13,015-foot Eiger Mountain, Berghaus has since transformed into a

budget-style hotel and traditional fondue hot spot, with beer flowing freely, small cubes of fresh bread, sacks of tiny potatoes, and enormous pots of melted local cheese. Up next? Night sledding.

Before I continue, you should know that the Swiss take their sledding very, very seriously. Whereas in the U.S., it's considered a pastime for toddlers not yet ready to ski or snowboard, in Switzerland, there are dedicated sledding (or sledging, as it's commonly called) maps, similar to an on-piste ski run map at your favorite resort. Just like ski runs, these groomed slopes each have different difficulty ratings, and at night, the sport becomes an even more adrenaline-inducing activity since you can only make out the route's edges through a series of well-spaced spotlights tucked between the pines.

Digging my heels into the hard-packed snow to turn or slow down, I tried not to run into my new friends as we giggled our way down the entire slope for 30 minutes. We hopped the train from Alpiglen down to Grindelwald proper and nestled into our hotel rooms, tired but excited for more mountainous adventures.

The velogemel is a quirky, wooden contraption that's native to the Grindelwald Valley. First invented in 1911 by Swiss carpenter Christian Bühlmann, it's a combination of a bicycle and a sled that can be ridden around town when it is too snowy for cyclists, or

Grindelwald First Cliff Walk



Photo: Siraphop Mahankasuvan



Photo: alaver

Classic Grindelwald Travel Poster

down moderate slopes. The Swiss take great pride in irreverent traditions like this, and they're awfully fond of sporty competitions. So, naturally, our guides signed my entire group up to compete in the Velogemel World Championship.

Anyone can compete in this bizarre parade of mountain maniacs zooming down a snow-covered country road at breakneck speed to glean the best overall time. I tend to value my unbroken bones above all else, so I took the scenic route and cruised down the slope, taking selfies and videos of the sunny afternoon.

Even though it was Sunday, meaning that most shops in town were closed or shuttered early, I spent the remainder of my day strolling the picturesque streets of Grindelwald, where enormous mountains spring up out of the earth with a dizzying vertical relief. Everywhere I turned provided an awe-inspiring view of a different alpine peak, and I tried to imagine what this verdant valley must look like in the summertime, when the waterfalls are roaring at full blast. Lucky for me, souvenir stores were still open, most of them selling locally-crafted cheese boards, cow-shaped pepper shakers, painted clogs, and the familiar white cross and red covering of the famous Swiss Army Knife. I grabbed a few bars of premium Swiss chocolate to take home to my partner before indulging in a much-needed post-ski hot tub moment at my hotel's outdoor jacuzzi.

Though the town of Grindelwald is too tiny for any noteworthy gay scene, Switzerland has a reputation for being one of the most queer-friendly countries in Europe, first legalizing homosexual activity way back in 1942. Since there was no proper gay bar for me to pop into that evening, I did the next best thing and met a few of my new friends for dinner in the fabulously pink **Grindellodge Hotel** (Obere Gletscherstrasse 41. Tel. +41-33-853-1082).

Themed after the sakura—Japanese cherry blossom, this deliciously rosy hotel that

Emily Skiing in Grindelwald



Photo: Emily Pennington

opened at the end of 2024 is filled to the brim with chic, pink-tinted architectural design. Its on-site restaurant, Umami, is no exception. Though sushi might not be the first thing you think of when planning your dinner reservations in a quintessentially Swiss ski haven, Umami and its executive chef, Shota Hasegawa, have gained rave reviews, and as someone who lived in Los Angeles for 19 years, I have to say that the hype is legit. The hotel and restaurant also serve as a point of cultural education, paying homage to the many brave Japanese mountaineers who attained first ascents in the Alps.

As it's likely clear by now, the Swiss go gaga for their railways and technology, so it's no wonder that my local guides were itching to take our group up to "The Top of Europe," on the **Jungfrau Railway** ([jungfrau.ch/en-gb](http://jungfrau.ch/en-gb)). Set at an airy elevation of 11,332 feet above sea level, this year-round scenic train has been open to tourists since 1912. It's the highest railroad station in Europe, and once at the top, visitors can meander through an impressive series of ice caves and vista points, with jaw-dropping overlooks of the Bernese Alps and their massive, icy glaciers. In the summer months, this station can serve as a hub for a variety of hut-to-hut backpacking trips or day hiking excursions through the impossibly green Swiss countryside.

After marveling at the hand-carved ice sculptures and venturing off for a quick aperitif in the building's secret ice bar, we ate lunch at the view-filled **Crystal Restaurant**, which also sits atop the Jungfraujoeh. We chowed down on casual Swiss fare like roasted chicken and veal escalope before hopping on the train back down to the ski slopes to work off the extra calories. A few hours of speedy downhill later, I was back at the Hotel Belvedere, showering and gussying myself up for a truly special dinner.

**Hotel Glacier** (Endweg 55. Tel. +41-33-853-10-04. [theglacier.ch/hotel-glacier](http://theglacier.ch/hotel-glacier)) was recently awarded one Michelin Key for its outstanding rooms and service, and its on-site fine dining **Restaurant Glacier** was awarded 16 GaultMillau points. This hip restaurant, helmed by Chef Paul Cabayé, embodies a fusion of alpine tradition and French finesse, as well as a truly impressive wine cellar.



Velogemel

Photo: Grindelwald Tourism



Photo: PANAMAN

My group was served the restaurant's signature, seasonally-rotating six-course tasting menu full of Swiss delicacies like veal steak, hand-made tortellini, and freshwater fish and shellfish soup. For dessert? Citrus three ways, with a bright, lemony sorbet situated atop a fluffy, tart cake, garnished with edible flowers. Dinner was a decadent and chatter-filled affair that left me strolling back to my hotel at 11 P.M., eager to catch some Zs before yet another intrepid outdoor excursion.

To be sure we didn't spend all of our time skiing in the Eiger-Gletscher area, our guides took us over to the equally stunning Männlichen slopes. The Grindelwald area is such a mecca for skiing that it boasts not one but three distinct ski areas, all accessible from quintessentially Swiss mountain towns, like Lauterbrunnen, Wengen, and Grindelwald. They are all part of the same parent company, so if you purchase a 3- or 5-day ski pass, it's valid at each of these areas. This setup is ideal for travelers who like to hop around and experience different views, villages, and restaurants, but don't want the hassle of renting a car or lugging their skis and gear around a busy parking lot before they even reach the slopes.

Another thing that's worth noting about Swiss ski areas is that they grade their difficulty ratings differently than in the U.S. A blue run is considered easy, where in America it's green or easy blue, while a red run sits somewhere in between a U.S. blue and a single black diamond run. Black slopes in Switzerland are incredibly steep and should only be attempted by expert skiers and snowboarders.

Later that day, with the wind whipping my dark hair around my face,

I zipped down the Männlichen slopes, the steep spires of the Wetterhorn coming into view. I felt ecstatic to be engaging with the ski tradition in a country with a multi-century fascination with the sport. History and present comingling, I swerved around the breezy scenic trail through the forest and back into town.

For our final evening in Grindelwald, our guides had arranged for an extra-special treat, a six-course chef's choice dinner at wonderfully modern **Hotel Fiescherblick** (Dorfstrasse 203. Tel. +41-33-853-1881). Because of the restaurant's rotating menu that's determined day-of by their in-house chef, I didn't know half of the ingredients in the scrumptious dishes that I ate. Dinner here is served in a surprise-style, with no paper menus upfront (though dietary restrictions are happily accommodated). For us, it kept the atmosphere lively and curious.

Small, perfectly-seared grass-fed steaks, melon salads, and crunchy corn snacks appeared on our table over the course of several hours, as our group laughed and gabbed about how much less demure Swiss sauna culture is than the U.S., when it comes to nudity. It was an utterly divine meal and the perfect ending to a whirlwind trip of snowy fun in the Swiss Alps.

Taking my time as I sauntered and stargazed on the long walk back to my hotel, I wandered through the chilly, quiet town that looked like a postcard, feeling like I had time traveled to the most extraordinary adventure destination. Grindelwald is a place where European traditions blend perfectly with today's modern comforts and technology, a place where artisan attention to detail and mountain sports coexist beautifully. ■

# TAKE FLIGHT WITH SWISS SENSES



Travelers flying SWISS will experience a more comfortable and personal air travel experience with the new overall cabin concept on the company's brand-new Airbus A350-900s. SWISS Senses explores passengers' five senses and provides an immersive Switzerland experience onboard.

take flight with **SWISS SENSES**



“As a premium airline, we are passionate about delivering our quality and excellence promise through our SWISS Senses concept,” says SWISS Chief Commercial Officer Heike Birlenbach. “Our brand-new seats are the centerpiece of our new aircraft cabins. But SWISS Senses is more than just the seats – it’s an experience appealing to all senses – with its special human-lighting concept, and our new Alpine Valley scent that has been specially created for SWISS. All in all, SWISS Senses represents the biggest product investment in the history of our company – and a further major milestone for Swiss aviation,” she continued.

## **Transformative Innovation In All Travel Classes**

SWISS Senses creates an entire redesign of the entire aircraft cabin with hues of warm and muted tones such as anthracite, beige, and claret, providing a sense of comfort and warmth. Passengers will now find the first-ever use of suite seating arrangements in the SWISS First cabin and certain parts of SWISS Business.

take flight with **SWISS SENSES**

Human-centric lighting will be a new visual feature helping travelers better cope with jet lag. All seating classes will discover new state-of-the-art inflight entertainment systems with bigger screens and the ability to hook up their personal devices.

## **SWISS First: Solitude Assured**

Passengers flying SWISS First will discover absolute solitude with slidable closing doors, a generous wardrobe, a large seat table, heated and cooled seats, a wireless charging station, and a wide screen display as big as the suite itself. The center suite in the cabin can also be configured to suit a couple traveling together. Elegant wood accents and a warm color scheme give travelers a sense of calmness with top-of-the-line surroundings.



The SWISS First cabin will also feature a roomy washroom inspired by the famed spring in Vals in Canton Graubünden, with a green interior drawing attention to the spring's fresh and cooling water, and a slate-black exterior.

take flight with **SWISS SENSES**



SWISS Business Class Cabin

## **SWISS Business: Access The Aisle From Every Seat**

The redesigned SWISS Business cabin meets an array of passengers' wishes and needs. Various other seating options will be offered in addition to the 'classic' Business Class seats. Some seats also have the option to be closed off with a sliding door for additional privacy. The seats are all made to transform into a lie-flat bed with a length of 6 ½ feet, with cooling and heating, along with a wireless charging station. Top-quality materials in anthracite and claret will provide passengers with a comfortable atmosphere throughout the cabin.

## **SWISS Premium Economy: Dependability Maintained**

Greater seat comfort and excellent cabin service will remain an essential feature within the SWISS Senses experience in the favored SWISS Premium Economy Class. SWISS Premium Economy will continue to surpass set industry benchmarks in both its overall comfort and seating attributes.

take flight with **SWISS SENSES**

## SWISS Economy: Smart Design With A Sense Of Comfort

SWISS Economy passengers can anticipate visible improvements within the new SWISS Senses cabin featuring high-functional new seats with optimum construction offering more space. Each seat will also feature a 13-inch high-resolution screen, a Bluetooth connection for travelers' headphones, and USB ports.

For More Information on **SWISS Senses** visit [swiss.com/senses](https://swiss.com/senses)

# Pleasure in Paradise

# PHUKET, THAILAND

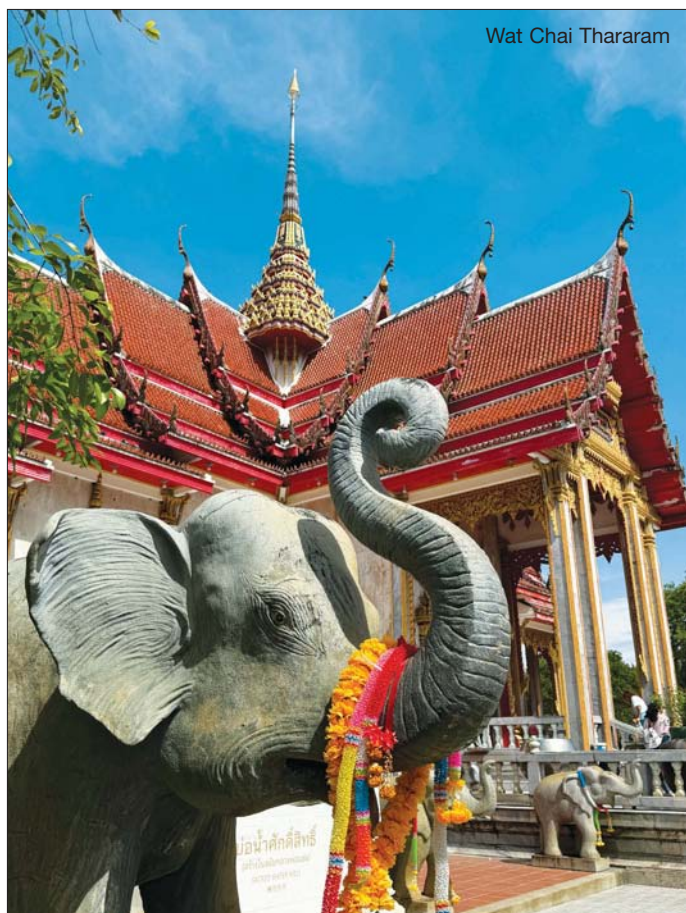
by Mark Chesnut



Photo: Preto Percia



Bond Island



Wat Chai Thararam

Photo: Mark Chesnut, DepartureLevel.com



EveryQueer Phuket Tour

Photo: EveryQueer

Same-sex marriage was legalized in Thailand in January 2025, so it's no surprise that the destination is enjoying an even higher profile than before among LGBTQ+ travelers (and it was already one of the most queer-friendly destinations in southeast Asia).

When you add in the excitement surrounding the latest season of the series *The White Lotus*, which was filmed in multiple locations in Thailand, including Phuket, the current demand for vacations in this sun-soaked paradise is even more understandable.

**Global Travel Collection** ([globaltravelcollection.com](http://globaltravelcollection.com)), a consortium of luxury travel agencies, reports that the so-called “White Lotus Effect” has driven more travelers to all of the destinations featured in the show, and Thailand is no exception.

“Some top hotel brands in the destination, such as the Mandarin Oriental and Marriott International, are seeing an over 1,000% increase in hotel sales, with average daily rates close to \$2,000,” said Angie Licea, president of Global Travel Collection.

Phuket, meanwhile, has grown into an especially enticing place for queer travelers looking for an upscale getaway, according to Duncan Greenfield-Turk, chief travel designer at **Global Travel Moments** (1633 Broadway, New York, New York. Tel. 212-537-7348. [globaltravelmoments.com](http://globaltravelmoments.com)), a luxury travel agency, member of the Global Travel Collection, and specialist in international LGBTQ+ travel.

“Phuket which has really stepped up its luxury game,” he said. “It’s important to note that Phuket is no longer just about party beaches, it’s become a true luxury destination for those wanting privacy, personal-

ization, and high-end experiences.”

I have visited Thailand before, but this was my first trip to Phuket. Like many gay men, I had preconceived notions, and I was surprised by how diverse, and how absolutely luxurious, the experiences can be here. At about 360 square miles, Phuket is Thailand’s largest island. It is home to numerous stunning beaches and unique small cities and towns, each with their own distinct ambiance. Whether you’re craving unspoiled natural beauty, nonstop partying, or indulgent luxury, you’ll be able to find what you’re looking for, as long as you know where to look.

### GETTING TO PHUKET

The island of Phuket is connected by bridge to mainland Thailand, but most international visitors arrive by plane. It’s an easy, 1.5-hour flight from Bangkok to Phuket, and you can fly from either of Bangkok’s two commercial airports. My husband Angel and I departed from Suvarnabhumi International Airport, the larger of the two facilities, and we decided to fly Bangkok Airways on the outbound and Thai Airways International on the return trip so that I could compare service (the verdict: both serve free meals in economy class, which I love. The Bangkok Airways meal was actually hot. But Thai Airways offers roomier seating so it’s physically more comfortable, plus it’s a member of Star Alliance).

Since this our first-time visit to Phuket, we decided to check out various parts of the island, including hotels in different regions. Our main base was Patong (also spelled Pa Tong), a beachfront city with the highest concentration of legendary queer nightlife. We soon discov-



Phang Nga Bay

Photo: Parilov

Whether you're craving unspoiled natural beauty, nonstop partying, or indulgent luxury, you'll be able to find what you're looking for in Phuket.

ered, however, that it's not ideal for luxury travelers, and its intense after-dark scene doesn't make for the most relaxing ambiance, so we found several rewarding ways to counter the queer bar excitement with other indulgences, including outstanding hotels, great cuisine, and interesting activities that take in the island's natural wonders. In Phuket, it's easy to create a multifaceted vacation.

### THINGS TO DO IN PHUKET

Staying in Patong provided us with easy, walkable access to Patong Beach, a lively (albeit often crowded) spot for sunbathing, water sports, and people-watching. That's one of the main reasons why people stay in that small city of just under 20,000. The other is the bustling nightlife scene, and while we enjoyed that aspect, we were also happy to balance it with hotel and nature experiences that were far removed from the thumping bars and dance clubs.

Viewing elephants was our most memorable excursion while in Phuket, and I was careful to choose what's described as the most ethical such attraction: the **Phuket Elephant Sanctuary** (100, Moo 2, Paklok. Tel. +66-76-529-099. [phuketelephantsanctuary.org/en](http://phuketelephantsanctuary.org/en)), an expansive facility where visitors can get close to these beautiful creatures, but not ride them, and the resident elephants, which are rescue animals

from various parts of Thailand, aren't forced to do stunts. It was truly wonderful to see them in a natural and relaxed setting (the admission price also includes a rather generous buffet meal).

Another popular destination on the island is the eponymous city of Phuket, where the old town's historic architecture showcases Chinese influence in the region. Temples are another must-see in Phuket, and I



Photo: EveryQueer



Jaras Restaurant at InterContinental Phuket

Photo: IHG



Tom Yum and Tom Kha Soups

Photo: Eygeenius



Pad Thai With Shrimp

Photo: Thanet Insuwan

was wowed by the beauty of Wat Chalong, also known as **Wat Chaithararam** ([wat-chalong-phuket.com](http://wat-chalong-phuket.com)), the largest temple complex on the island. Dating to the early 19th century, it features multiple buildings with intricate architectural details.

Water lovers, meanwhile, should plan to spend time out on the beautiful seas surrounding Phuket. One of the off-island attractions with the most attention-getting names is James Bond Island, the dramatic limestone island was featured in the movie *The Man with the Golden Gun*. The island is officially known as Khao Phing Kan and is part of **Ao Phang Nga National Park** ([thainationalparks.com/ao-phang-nga-national-park](http://thainationalparks.com/ao-phang-nga-national-park)).

Foodies visiting Phuket can indulge their passion at places like the **Pum Thai Restaurant & Cooking School** (66 Nanai Rd., Patong. Tel. +66-81-240-8924. [pumthaifoodchain.co.th](http://pumthaifoodchain.co.th)), which offers cooking classes that share the secrets of classic Thai cuisine.

Sports lovers curious about Muay Thai, the traditional Thai boxing, may want to catch a fight at the **Patong Boxing Stadium** (2/59 Sai Nam Yen Road, Patong. Tel. +66-81-737-7193. [boxingstadiumpatong.com](http://boxingstadiumpatong.com)). If you're really into it, you can even sign up for a private or group training class. And for an even more immersive, and luxurious, training experience, consider a stay at **Aleenta Phuket Phang Nga Resort & Spa** (33 Khok Kloi, Takua Thung District, Phang Nga. Tel. +66-760-580-333. [aleenta.com/phuket](http://aleenta.com/phuket)), a member of Leading Hotels of the World that offers a seven-day Muay Thai Retreat package that includes multiple training sessions, personalized instruction, and healthy meal options.

Since attractions and activities can be rather spread out on the island, navigating the territory can take some time. We used the rideshare app **Grab** ([grab.com/sg/transport](http://grab.com/sg/transport)) to hail rides and found it efficient and reasonably priced, although the wait could sometimes take a while.

Visiting as part of a multi-day guided tour is a good way to make exploring easier. **EveryQueer** ([everyqueer.com](http://everyqueer.com)) for example, is offering a 12-day LGBTQ+ Thailand tour in February 2026 that includes Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Phuket, with time for kayaking, snorkeling, jungle trekking, and nightlife.

### DELICIOUS DINING IN PHUKET

Thai food is one of my all-time favorites, so I was in heaven in Phuket. Among the most mouthwatering moments was a nine-course tasting menu at **Jaras** (InterContinental Phuket Resort, 333 3/Moo 3, Kamala Beach. Tel. +66-76-629-999. [phuket.intercontinental.com/dining/jaras](http://phuket.intercontinental.com/dining/jaras)), the stylish restaurant at the ultra-chic InterContinental Phuket Resort. The beautiful venue is renowned for its use of sustainable and locally produced ingredients in its sophisticated menu, and we were delighted with the creative presentation and the service, as well as the scintillating flavors. Cocktails on the beach at sunset were a wonderful way to begin our culinary experience that evening.

We also enjoyed a lovely dinner at **Sea Salt Lounge & Grill** (225 Phrabaramee Rd., Patong. Tel. +66-76-623-555. [seasaltpatong.com](http://seasaltpatong.com)), a casually upscale eatery with open-air seating that overlooks the water in Patong and features a menu of seafood and Thai cuisine (the restaurant also hosts a free fire show on Monday, Thursday, and Sunday nights).



Celebrating Pride In Phuket

Photo: Roman Zaiets



Famous Beach Sign in Phuket

Photo: Max Krist

Old Town Phuket During Pride



Photo: Elias Bitar



Giant Rainbow Doll Art Created For Phuket Pride

Photo: Mark Brandon

One of the newest dining venues in Phuket is **Coolies Club** (11-13 Soi Romanee, Phuket Old Town. Tel. +66-63-454-6966. cooliesclub.com), located in historic Phuket city, with a menu inspired by the open-fire cooking traditions of the region's tin miners. Situated in a traditional Sino-Portuguese shophouse, the venue is overseen by the owner of The Slate Phuket hotel and features one-of-a-kind décor that references Chinese opium dens—a truly creative approach.

Greenfield-Turk recommends additional noteworthy restaurants. “The dining scene has also gone luxe, with Michelin-starred spots like **Pru** (60/1, Moo 6, Srisoonthorn Rd., Cherngtalay, Thalang. Tel. +66-76-683-344. prurestaurant.com), incredible seafood at **The Kata Rocks Clubhouse** (186,22 Kok Tanode Rd., Tambon Karon, Mueng. Tel. +66-76-370-777. katarocks.com/dining/restaurant), and vibrant beachfront dining at **Baba Beach Club** (Natai Beach, 8, Khok Koi. Tel. +66-76-429-388. bababeachclub.com/natai). In Phuket, foodies can enjoy everything from high-end Thai cuisine to curated, chef-led experiences.”

#### HOTELS IN PHUKET

Phuket also impresses with its range of hotels designed to fit the tastes and budgets of diverse traveler. Greenfield-Turk gave me some excellent recommendations in this category, as well. “Personally, I feel the island's private pool villas are its biggest draw, with places

like Amanpuri, Rosewood Phuket, and The Slate offering total seclusion, world-class service, and stunning beach fronts,” he said. “Lastly let’s not forget wellness, another area where Phuket excels. Resorts like COMO Point Yamu and Anantara Layan are offering full wellness retreats, private Muay Thai training with champions, and even bespoke cultural experiences like private temple visits or guided food tours with top chefs.”

Indeed, my own personal experiences concurred with Greenfield-Turk’s praise of the destination. Among my favorites is the **InterContinental Phuket** (333, 333/3 Moo 3, Kamala Beach, Kamala, Kathu, Phuket. Tel. +66-76-629-999. [phuket.intercontinental.com](http://phuket.intercontinental.com)), which exudes a sense of relaxed elegance, enhanced by its excellent service and beautiful location (we loved the swings on the beach).

In addition, the InterContinental is decidedly LGBTQ+-friendly. To celebrate the legalization of same-sex marriage, the hotel debuted a “Love is Love” package that includes a welcome amenity, daily breakfast for two, roundtrip airport transfer, a one-hour couple’s massage, and two “pride bags” from the Ramathibodi Foundation, a non-profit organization affiliated with Ramathibodi Hospital at Thailand’s Mahidol University.

If you’re looking to sleep in one of the settings used on *The White Lotus*, consider checking in at the **Rosewood Phuket** (88/30-30, 88/28 Muen-Ngern Rd., Patong. Tel. +66-76-356-888. [rosewoodhotels.com/en/phuket](http://rosewoodhotels.com/en/phuket)), or the **Anantara Mai Khao Phuket Villas** (888 Mai Khao, Thalang District Tel. +66-76-336-100. [anantara.com/en/mai-khao-phuket](http://anantara.com/en/mai-khao-phuket)). Other upscale hotel options include **The Slate** (Nai Yang Beach 116, Moo 1, Sakhu, Thalang. Tel. +6676-327-383. [theslatephuket.com](http://theslatephuket.com)), a member of Design Hotels, and **COMO Point Yamu** (200 Moo 7, Paklok, Talang. Tel. +66-76-360-100. [comohotels.com](http://comohotels.com)).

If your goal is to be as close to the queer nightlife as possible, then the city of Patong should be your top choice. It’s not a hub for super luxurious hotels, to be sure, but there are some attractive choices. We were happy to have chosen the **Indigo Phuket Hotel** (Rat U Thit 200 Pee Rd Pa Tong. Tel. +66-76-609-999. [ihg.com](http://ihg.com)), a handsomely designed property that was a few blocks away from the beach and the nightlife, but far enough away to provide the peace and quiet we needed when it was time to relax. The hotel’s rooftop pool was an especially inviting place to sip a cocktail and enjoy the warm climate

Additional hotels in Patong run the gamut in terms of style and cost. The budget-priced **Aquarius** (127/10-17 Rat-U-Thit 200, Pee Road, Paradise Complex, Patong. Tel. +66-99-408-8018. [aquarius-guesthouse.com](http://aquarius-guesthouse.com)) is a gay guesthouse with a men-only sauna, while the **Royal Paradise Hotel & Spa** (135/23,123/15-16 Rat-U-Thit 200 Pee Road, Patong. Tel. +66-76-340-666. [royalparadise.com](http://royalparadise.com)) towers over the LGBTQ+ nightlife area (although it’s not a queer-specific hotel). **M Social** (199 Soi Rat Uthit 200 Pl 1, Patong. Tel. +66-76-601-999. [msocial.com/en/phuket/m-social-phuket/](http://msocial.com/en/phuket/m-social-phuket/)) is another decent and reasonably priced option in the city.

## LGBTQ+ NIGHTLIFE IN PATONG

I’ve seen a lot of showstopping drag performances, but in Phuket I saw my first one that actually stopped *traffic*. The city of Patong is the

white-hot center of queer nightlife, and the majority of bars and nightclubs are conveniently clustered in one neighborhood, in the **Paradise Complex** ([phuket.net/going-out/nightlife/nightlife-gay](http://phuket.net/going-out/nightlife/nightlife-gay)). Here, the drag extravaganzas often spill onto the street, forcing the occasional car to slow down or stop until the queen is done doing her thing.

We enjoyed an especially fun show outside the **Zag Club** (123/8 Soi Paradise, Ratuthit Songroipi Rd, Patong. [facebook.com/phuket.zagclub](https://facebook.com/phuket.zagclub)), where the chairs lining both sides of the street made it easy for everyone to have a great vantage point of the performances. Drag performers, dancers, and even breakdancers were among the talent on tap on that festive evening.

Zag Club is one of the biggest LGBTQ+ nightlife venues in Patong, and it has a large stage inside for both drag and coyote boy shows (coyote boys is a Thai term that’s similar to “go-go boys” elsewhere—male dancers who wear skimpy clothing but generally don’t dance naked). Drag and coyote dancers are a big thing in multiple venues in Patong, as a matter of fact. Just a few feet from Zag Club is **Cruise Club Patong** (Tel. +66 64-139-5647. [facebook.com/Cruiseclub-phukt](https://facebook.com/Cruiseclub-phukt)), which is also known for its extravagant drag shows that take place on the street. ■



Drag On The Street In Patong

Photo: Mark Chesnut DepartureLevel.com



Photo: Richie Chan



# EXPLORING JAPAN

AN EYE-OPENING TRIP TO OSAKA, HOKKAIDO, GIFU, AND KYOTO

By Jim Gladstone

**W**andering the narrow alleyways of Shinsekai, a historic working class neighborhood in Osaka, Japan, it's impossible to miss the glimmering golden statues: dozens of lovingly tended effigies of a pudgy fellow seated on a plinth. He's got an impish grin on his face and a satyric lack of clothes on his body. No, the nude dude's not Buddha. He's Billiken, a visitor from America. Billiken was first sketched in 1908 by Florence Pretz, an art teacher from Kansas City, Missouri. She declared that the barefoot sprite had come to her in a dream and explained that he was "The God of Things as They Ought to Be" and would bring luck to those who encountered him.

Whether Pretz actually had the cockamamie vision she reported, or her dream was pure cunning, good fortune indeed came her way. Merchandise emblazoned with winsome comic characters was a staple of American pop culture in the early 20th Century, and Pretz quickly sold the rights to her concept to a Chicago novelty manufacturer. An array of Billiken merch soon hit the market, from good luck charms, dolls, and figurines, to piggy banks and pickle forks.

The Billiken fad quickly faded in America, but exported products featuring the beatific butterball's image remained popular in Japan. It's been theorized that the Japanese affection for adorable anthropomorphic characters is a cultural remnant of ancient Shinto beliefs, in which non-human spirit creatures provided comfort and protection.

Billiken was especially adored in Osaka, where he was licensed by a textile company as their advertising mascot and gradually came to be identified with the city as a whole, proliferating in Shinsekai's sidewalk shrines where passersby rub the soles of his feet for good luck.

## OPTING FOR OSAKA

My partner John and I had never heard of Billiken before visiting **Osaka** (visitgayosaka.com) to attend the 2024 convention of the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA), but we were already aligned with his positive perspective and desire to optimize circumstances.

Our quest for "things as they ought to be" included turning our trip to the IGLTA's four-day meeting into a much lengthier adventure—nearly three weeks in total. Why fly such a long distance and not make the most of it?

To the **IGLTA** (igлта.org/foundation) and its charitable foundation, "things as they ought to be" includes queer people being able to travel freely worldwide, driven by curiosity and the desire for authentic cultural exchange, without concerns about discrimination or safety. Since 1983, the organization has worked with governments, tourism-related businesses, and advocacy organizations in pursuing these goals.

Beginning in 2020, Osaka pursued the opportunity to become the first-ever Asian city to host the IGLTA's annual convention. Winning the highly competitive proposal process would provide a chance to introduce hundreds of queer travel professionals to Osaka in person, promoting the city and prefecture, along with many other participating Japanese locales, as welcoming and worthwhile destinations for the LGBTQ+ community.

While Japan does not yet legally recognize same-sex marriage at the national level, recent years have seen queer advocacy groups working with many supportive local and national government officials to pursue that cause while driving other significant progress for the community.

Osaka, in particular, has been a stronghold of advocacy. In 2018, its



Photo: Morumotto

Celebrating Pride in Japan



Billiken

Photo: Jim Gladstone

The Hill of the Buddha Temple in Sapporo



Photo: Thanit Jomchai

**The Hill of the Buddha Temple is a contemporary masterpiece honoring time-honored ideals. Architect Tadao Ando designed and constructed this colossal work, a hybrid of a building and an earth sculpture, around a 44-foot-tall Buddha statue.**

prefecture was Japan's first to offer same-sex partnership benefits, including housing and hospital visitations. Since then, more than 90% of municipalities nationally have followed suit.

The city has supported an initiative to evaluate local businesses and publicly recognize commitments to providing equal benefits to employees and equal service to customers regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. Osaka was also the first Japanese city to proudly showcase its LGBTQ culture and businesses by launching a tourism outreach program specifically directed to the global queer community.

Convention and Tourism Bureau president Hiroshi Mizohata, an outspoken supporter and highly engaged participant at the IGLTA convention noted: "I would like to make a strong impression on the people of the world that Japan and Osaka are places where everyone, regardless of nationality, age, gender, disabilities, ideology, creed, or religion...can enjoy themselves in a safe and secure environment with respect for everyone."

## A SOFT LANDING

While planning our trip, John and I came up with a strategy to turn the cloud of jet lag inside out and reveal a silver lining: Instead of fighting that fuzzy feeling brought on by transglobal travel, we would lean into it.

Our initial destination en route to Osaka was Hokkaido, the northern-

most of Japan's four major islands. We spent our first two days on the ground at **KAI Poroto** ([hoshinoresorts.com](http://hoshinoresorts.com)), a stunning onsen ryokan just 40-minutes from New Chitose international airport, where we'd touched down

*Onsen ryokan* are small inns with spa-like bathing areas fed by natural hot springs. They're traditionally rustic wooden structures, designed in a style that dates to the 8th Century, but KAI Poroto offers a luxurious contemporary twist of the norm. It's designed by celebrated architect Hiroshi Nakamura and features a quiet, light-flooded common room decorated with floor-to-ceiling tree trunks that make it resemble an indoor birch forest. The dramatic conical main bathhouse is evocative of tented shelters once built by the island's indigenous Ainu people.

While many travelers book a stay at an onsen ryokan as the grand finale to their Japanese vacation, flipping the script proved a perfect move for us. KAI Poroto served as a soothing cocoon from which we could slowly ease into Asia through long drowsy soaks, the warm water slowly dissolving our dreamy half-consciousness.

As at most *ryokan*, guests at KAI Poroto are provided comfortable *yakuta* (cotton robes) and slippers to wear throughout the premises during their stay. Bathing is in the buff, Billiken style, so there's no need to dither over fashion choices. Likewise with food. Other than registering any dietary restrictions, no decisions are required. Guests

sit back in private, single-table sections within a large tranquil dining wing, enjoying elegant, nightly-changing set dinners served in the traditional *kaiseki* style of eight courses, presented in order from lightest to heartiest. Our favorite dishes included delicate sashimi, sake-steamed rockfish, tender braised beef, and a bubbling hot pot with scallops and crab.

At breakfast, each guest is presented with a colorful array of small, handcrafted plates, bowls, and boxes containing fresh fruit, pickles, unique tofu preparations, smoked fish, miso soup, and more. Because traditional Japanese breakfasts include some items more typically found at lunch or dinner in the U.S., KAI Poroto (and most major hotels) offer Western options for less adventurous eaters.

By our second evening amidst the effortless otherworldly calm of this perfect landing pad, fatigue had begun to recede, and we were ready to venture onward.

## FAMILY HOSPITALITY

KAI Poroto was the first of three superb Hoshino Resorts properties we visited over the course our trip. The Japanese hospitality firm, which specializes in innovative architecture, elegant design, and impeccable personal service, has been overseen by four generations of the Hoshino family since its founding in 1914.

In addition to 20 KAI-branded *onsen ryokan*, Hoshino's portfolio of over 60 properties includes RISONARE, outdoor activity-centered resorts; HOSHINOYA, one-of-a-kind, design-intensive hotels, including a converted prison in Nara; BEB, hip, urban crash pads with 24-hour food service and extensive space for socializing; and bustling, centrally located OMO hotels which cater to city tourists and feature programming like local tours and early evening slide talks by specialists in cuisine and culture.

In 2028, Hoshino will open its first property in the continental U.S., a 40-room ryokan in upstate Sharon Springs, New York. The town, with a current population of around 600, boomed as a spa destination in the 19th century, then gradually fell into disrepair. In recent decades, Sharon Springs, about a 3½ hour drive from New York City, has been gentrified and become something of a queer country haven. It was the setting for 2010-2011 reality TV series *The Fabulous Beekman Boys*, a sort of gay *Green Acres* which followed a couple from Manhattan starting up a small farm.

Tapping into the town's bucolic setting and mineral springs, Hoshino hopes to introduce more Americans, and inevitably more LGBTQ+ folks, to an authentic *onsen ryokan* experience stateside, perhaps stoking their wanderlust for a visit to Japan.

## SURPRISING HOKKAIDO

Following our restorative sojourn at KAI Poroto, John and I joined a small group tour of Hokkaido highlights organized by **Out Asia Travel** (outasiatravel.com). The Tokyo-based agency headed by Shiroy Koizumi, perhaps the country's best-known advocate for queer tourism, specializes in introducing gay Western travelers to the best of Japan, assuring warm queer-friendly hospitality and informative, English-speaking assistance throughout their itineraries.

OutAsia also arranged seamless pre- and post-tour transit connections for John and me, and promptly responded to a flurry of questions we sent via email while planning our trip. Standout elements of a chockful, but not hectically paced, five days travel in a luxury mini-bus

included a hike at the **Toya-Usu UNESCO Global Geopark** (toya-usu-geopark.org), a hotbed of volcanic activity where some of the structures damaged by the most recent eruption and lava flow, in 2000, have been preserved in their states of dramatic disrepair.

A collapsed village school building, a mangled steel bridge, and other remnants of havoc serve as striking testimony to nature's unbridled power, but so does the spectacular local landscape of rocky green hills surrounding a caldera lake formed in the wake of a major eruption over 100,000 years ago.

Geothermal uproar is also responsible for the misty allure of Noboribetsu-onsen, an entire small town of *onsen* leisure hotels cloaked in a scrim of steam drifting up from spring-fed Hell Valley, where ancient populations believed devils were at work.

At least once a week from June to October, locals and travelers gather for the after-dark descent of drum-pounding, fire-spewing demons along a ridge on the valley's perimeter. It was genuinely eerie to watch this procession of frightful masked figures with shadowy, sulfurous plumes rising behind them.

The following night, we took a boat ride to the middle of Lake Toya and floated amidst the surface reflections of a twenty minute fireworks display overhead. This show takes place nightly between May and October.

One relaxing afternoon was spent wandering the atmospheric port town of Otaru on the Sea of Japan, an hour west of Sapporo, Hokkaido's capital. While best known for its romantic canal side walking paths, small arts and crafts galleries, and excellent sushi restaurants (for fabulous fish at a modest price, do lunch at Fuku Zushi), we were delighted to discover that there's a dedicated spot for local gays to gather in this quiet corner of Japan.

**Koi Zakura** is a queer bar owned and operated by Yuichi Takahashi, a stylish, heavily tattooed Otaru native who drew inspiration for his venture from years spent living in San Francisco and working in men's fashion. At the bar's occasional men-only parties, the dress code is strictly *fundoshi* (Traditional Japanese loin cloths).

## SAVORING SAPPORO

Sapporo is the country's fifth largest city and the hub of the queer community on the north island, supporting a major Pride celebration each September, and a small but rambunctious nightlife scene. While many servers and patrons have limited English skills, foreigners are warmly welcomed at Sapporo gay bars. Most are clustered near the central Susukino district where we stayed two nights at the **Mercure Sapporo** (mercuresapporo.com)

A cheerful, chummy hospitality is extended to Western gays at other popular Sapporo haunts including **Bridge**, **Bar Orb**, and **Marmelo**.

Renowned throughout Japan as a culinary capital, Sapporo is beloved for its fragrant curry soups and fresh-caught seafood. One of my most vivid memories from our entire trip is a laughter-filled dinner at the Susukino flagship location of **Hachikyo** (hachikyo.com), a seafood *izakaya* (social pub) that's spawned several other locations around the city.

Spawn, as it happens, is Hachikyo's simple but delectable signature dish of bright orange orbs of soy sauce-marinated salmon roe. It's literally ladled over rice at your table, and piled on until it overflows the bowls. In Japanese this is *tsukko meshi*; I call it "traffic cone caviar."

As the sticky, glistening fish eggs are dished out, Hachikyo's bois-

The Doya-Doya Festival is Held Annually on Jan. 14th at Osaka's Shitennoji Temple



Photo: Osaka Travel & Visitors Bureau

terous servers holler *Oisah!* (delicious!). Diners are expected to echo back and, since the city's namesake beer flows as freely the roe, the wood-walled dining room is a constant happy clamor.

The morning after this fish egg-stravaganza, our guide arranged a special tour of its source: Sapporo's enormous fishermen's wholesale center, a collection of cavernous warehouse-like rooms where, early each day, fresh catch is hauled in and sold to markets and restaurants by auction. It's a kick to observe the elaborate system of hand-gestured bids and scribbled notes at this seafood Sotheby's.

No Sapporo gorge would be complete without an equally over-the-top dessert experience, and that's handily taken care of with a visit to **Shiroi Koibito Park** ([shiroikoibitopark.jp](http://shiroikoibitopark.jp)),

Shiroi Koibito is a large Japanese baking company, famous for its beautifully packaged *langue de chat* sandwich cookies: thin layers of chocolate, matcha, and other flavored fillings between crisp, buttery wafers. The recipe was inspired by a classic French confection, evocatively called *langue de chat* (cat's tongue in French) for its narrow oval shape. Shiroi Koibito's version is square, but the name remains.

The park is the company's village-size celebration of its blockbuster biscuit (a theoretical American equivalent might be called Oreopolis). At its heart is a well-organized factory tour offering visitors a chance to observe large-scale baking and packaging processes, but it's overwhelmed by embellishments. A city block sprawl of animatronic farm animals, marching toy soldiers, a fairytale castle, and kitschy gift shops smother the main attraction. And it's all designed in the cutesy juvenile style called *kawaii* that's beloved in Japanese culture. *Au revoir* cat's tongue, Hello Kitty Licker!

Our final stop in Sapporo was an exemplar of far finer design. Built in 2015, **The Hill of the Buddha Temple** ([takinoreien.com/pages/108](http://takinoreien.com/pages/108)) is a contemporary masterpiece honoring time-honored ideals. Architect Tadao Ando designed and constructed this colossal work, a hybrid of a building and an earth sculpture, around a 44-foot-tall Buddha statue that had previously sat in an open field, bare to the elements, for 15 years. Now, only the top of the statue's head can be seen, peeking out from an aperture at the peak of a hollowed hill.

Covered by a lavender field, the gently rising mound blends well with the natural surrounding landscape, but its base, an austere white concrete walkway dramatically crosses a reflecting pool then pierces the hill, becoming a cool, shadowed tunnel.

On foot, visitors feel the light and temperature shift dramatically as they pass through the earth, then again as they emerge in the structure's spiritual core, a rotunda encircling the base of a massive pedestal where the cross-legged Buddha awaits, enormous and awash in sky light.

## RETRO OSAKA

It was just after the 90-minute flight from Hokkaido to Osaka that I first became acquainted with Billiken. With a free day prior to the IGLTA convention, we checked into **Hoshino's OMO7 Osaka** ([hoshinoreorts.com](http://hoshinoreorts.com)), a 436-room property with a buzzy urban vibe entirely different from placid KAI Poroto. Unique amenities include a private park where guests can watch a nightly light show projected on the 14-story screen of the building's exterior while sampling from a local brewery.

Just after arriving, we joined a free walking tour of the local Shinsekai neighborhood led by a member of the hotel's engaging activity staff, known as OMO Rangers. When we inquired about the first half-

dozen gilded Billiken statues we spotted (in less than a single block's walk!) our Ranger clued us in to the character's American origin.

Japan's initial swoon for Billiken coincided with Shinsekai's early days. Now a cradle of cultural nostalgia, the district was considered cutting edge when it was inaugurated as an entertainment hub in 1912. (Shinsekai means New World).

The district bustled with theaters, restaurants, and a small amusement park, all crowned by Tsutenkaku (Tower Reaching Heaven). The tallest structure in Japan at the time, it boasted an observation deck with sweeping views and its own altitudinous Billiken shrine.

World War II accelerated Shinsekai's gradual decline. Tsutenkaku was destroyed in a 1943 fire, its steel salvaged for military use. And as a bombed-out Osaka was rebuilt post-war, laborers blew off steam after work, carousing in Shinsekai and attracting crime, gambling, and prostitution to the neighborhood at its nadir.

While newer areas of the city have supplanted Shinsekai's original role as Osaka's nightlife district, the neighborhood has been cleaned up over the intervening decades. A replacement Tsutenkaku was erected 1956.

Today, much of Shinsekai's original charm has been restored. It's become a retro-cool zone, scruffy-but-safe. The neighborhood teems with young locals and tourists in search of cheap eats. A district-specific specialty is *kushikatsu*, skewers of meat and vegetables battered and fried to order, then dipped in salty-sweet sauce. Streetside vendors also hawk hot *takoyaki* (minced octopus fritters), arguably Osaka's signature snack. Just remember: If you've been rubbing Billiken's feet, wash your hands before you eat.

## HISTORIC LANDMARKS

For the IGLTA convention, we transferred uptown from Shinsekai to the quieter, more refined Chuo ward. Our room at the **DoubleTree Osaka Castle** (hilton.com), which has perhaps the most privileged location of any hotel in the city, featured a spectacular view overlooking the grounds of its iconic namesake palace, where the convention's opening ceremonies would be held.

Nestled along a tributary of the Yodo River, the brand new hotel, just opened in 2024, is markedly more upscale than Hilton's U.S. Doubletree properties. And because it's located on the 6th to 20th floors of a contemporary tower, even the indoor swimming pool offers panoramic perspectives.

One of Japan's most recognizable national landmarks, **Osaka Castle** (osakacastlepark.jp), which dates to 1583, is accessed by bridge, over two daunting moats. The tiered green roofs of its pagoda-like main structure catch the eye from a distance, but the complex, reconstructed repeatedly over the centuries, incorporates over 15 acres of gardens and outbuildings.

Portions of the castle's interior have been converted into modern museum spaces with exhibitions chronicling its architecture and history, from its role in the unification of feudal governments in the 17th Century to its use as an armory in WWII.

Another must-visit historical site in Osaka, and a lovely spot to wind down a busy day, is **Sumiyoshi Taisha** (sumiyoshitaisha.net), an ancient Shinto shrine, founded in 211. Set in a shady grove, its four main sanctuaries are constructed in the low-slung, single-story, gabled-roof architectural style that became a template for Shinto sites nationwide. The bright, red-painted trim of these otherwise plain wooden buildings is dra-

matically picked up by the footbridge arching over an adjacent stream and fuses with its reflection, perfectly forming the shape of an eye.

## JAPAN'S KITCHEN

The upbeat midwestern American temperament that Billiken embodies is like the Osakan take on life. Throughout Japan, the city's residents are characterized as easygoing and welcoming, particularly in comparison to the intenser folk of go-go Tokyo. Tokyo is the country's New York, Osaka its Chicago.

While the U.S. midwest has been called "America's breadbasket," Osaka is known as "Japan's kitchen," not so much for its agriculture as the fact that it's a city where you can find regional dishes from all over Japan, along with international food and local favorites.

Blocks-long, alley-like, covered markets like Kurumon, smack in the center of the city, are a bracingly hectic mix of locals shopping for fresh food from butchers, fishmongers, and greengrocers alongside tourists grazing on creamy sea urchin, just cracked open and spooned direct from its spiky shell; sea scallops hot from mini charcoal grills; bite-sized cubes of marbled Waygu beef; and ubiquitous skewers of glacéed strawberries, light reflecting off their shiny sugar coats.

Housemade noodles will knock your socks off at Osaka's countless ramen shops, cooked to your desired tenderness and topped with your choice of savory tidbits. John and I particularly enjoyed the texture-boosts provided by unctuous boiled egg yolks and toothsome bamboo shoots that remained crisp in steaming, fragrant broth (Osakans lean toward chicken rather than pork-based broths).

As visiting ramen aficionados, though, we felt obliged to pay homage to Momofuku Ando, the man who helped the dish reach beyond Japan to the ends of the earth by developing a cheap facsimile that's come to serve as the gateway drug for noodle newbies worldwide. A statue of the great inventor stands outside the official **Cup Noodles Museum** (cupnoodles-museum.jp).

A half hour's train ride from central Osaka, this pilgrimage site shares the story of instant ramen's painstaking, years-long development and subsequent rise to global domination. Visitors also have an opportunity to make their own custom cup of noodles. John and I happily got in line with dozens of schoolchildren on field trips of their own.

What Cup of Noodles is to authentic ramen, Chicken McNuggets are to the progression of marvelous morsels served at Michelin-starred **Yakitori Matsuri** (<https://omakaseje.com/restaurants/rp992154>). This extraordinary, elevated version of the quick service chicken-on-a-stick shops found all over Osaka accommodates no more than 13 diners at each of 14 weekly sittings (6 P.M. and 8:30 P.M., Tuesday through Sunday, with bonus 3:30 P.M. dinners on weekends only).

The sleek, low-lit room is intimate and narrow with patrons seated along a single long wooden tabletop that feels like a cross between a sushi bar and the counter of a jewelry shop.

Over a leisurely two hours, specially trained yakitori chefs prepare 13 wee courses, most featuring precise cuts of specially-raised chicken, from thigh meat to cartilage and offal, each grilled, seasoned, and sauced in a distinctive manner to optimize both flavor and texture. They're accompanied by a pairing of four wines or sakes.

One chef and a single assistant prepare everything in full view, happy to leave you be, or to engage in detailed conversation about their culinary techniques, their city, and why it's indeed safe to consume the chicken *tartare*. These fellows can describe the provenance of every

bird they serve, but their good humor and hospitality made the experience feel premium, but not precious.

## RAINBOW OSAKA

Osaka is committed to making sure the city's widely acknowledged friendliness specifically extends to gay friendliness. The IGLTA convention coincided with the annual Osaka Pride celebration and the entire city was flying the rainbow stripes in acknowledgement of the occasion.

From airport signage to downtown banners, to rainbow trails tracing local drivers' trips in the Uber app, it was clear that a message of acceptance, inclusion, and genuine welcome was being sent not only to the over 500 queer travel professionals in town, but also to the city's residents and the representatives of government tourism organizations from throughout Japan and other Asian countries who were in attendance.

A highlight of the convention's two days of educational programming was a panel discussion on "Exploring Social Inclusion in Asia-Pacific," which included speakers from Bhutan, Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka. Partially underwritten by the Asian Development Bank, the forum centered on advancing queer tourism, while considering legal, economic, and human development perspectives.

Osaka's own formidable LGBTQ+ scene ([visitgayosaka.com](http://visitgayosaka.com)) enjoyed a major moment in the international spotlight as well, as conventiongoers explored its offerings. The city's over 100 queer and queer-friendly bars and clubs include an impressive dozen-plus lesbian or women-only options, more than New York or San Francisco, and about 30% of the *total* number of lesbian bars in the entire U.S.

The largest all-gender venue is **Explosion** ([explosion.osaka](http://explosion.osaka)), which functions as a bar during the week (closed Tuesdays) and hosts massive dance parties on weekends that typically run until 5 A.M.. It's located in the amusingly named Doyamacho neighborhood amidst a cluster of queer hot spots, including all-gender **Grand Slam** ([grandslam-osaka.com](http://grandslam-osaka.com)), and **Douxce** ([visitgayosaka.com/bar/lesbian\\_bar/douxce](http://visitgayosaka.com/bar/lesbian_bar/douxce)), a women only bar which celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2025

Just over a year in business is the men only **Eagle Osaka** ([eagleosaka.com](http://eagleosaka.com)), which features a large dance floor on the ground level, and a strikingly handsome, warmly lit lounge with its own bar upstairs.. Furnished with contemporary wooden furniture, ceiling hung paper lanterns, and a gallery's worth of manga-style art, the second floor space feels almost like an entirely different venue.

Osaka Pride, also known as **Rainbow Festa** ([visitgayosaka.com](http://visitgayosaka.com)), is an annual two day celebration (second in Japan only to Tokyo) with recent attendance around 20,000 participants. That's a sizable number in a traditionally conservative country, where any public discussion involving sexuality, even the straight sort, is relatively unusual.

Both days of the festival are held in Omigachi Park, just a few minutes' walk from the DoubleTree Osaka Castle. The event highlights community organizations distributing information; queer artists showing their wares; a stage with drag, fashion shows, musical performances, and guest speakers; and corporate sponsors, including Salesforce and Panasonic, manning booths to show their support. The Pride parade take place on the second day.

During our visit, the Pride participants seemed energized by the IGLTA's international contingent with representatives from more than 50 countries.



Dessert at Hoshino's OMO7 Osaka

Photo: Jim Gladstone



Breakfast at Hoshinoya Kyoto

Photo courtesy of Hoshino Resorts



Dinner at KAI Poroto

Photo courtesy of Hoshino Resorts



Jim Gladstone and Hiroshi Mizohata, President of the Osaka Convention & Tourism Bureau

Photo: Jim Gladstone

## GREETINGS FROM GIFU

Among Japan's less touristed treasures is **Gifu** ([visitgifu.com](http://visitgifu.com)), a picturesque, largely rural area just 75-minutes from Osaka and a refreshing complement to the urban hubbub (Like Osaka, Gifu is the name of both a prefecture and its capital city).

The region's efforts to build international tourism is in a nascent stage (particularly regarding Western visitors), but it has been embracing LGBTQ+ travelers from the outset. Following Osaka Pride, John and I joined a small group of fellow IGLTA attendees on a three-day guided tour organized by Gifu along with the Out Asia travel agency.

Unique highlights of the region included the fragrant and visually intoxicating **Gifu World Rose Garden** ([gifu-wrg.jp](http://gifu-wrg.jp)), among the largest of its kind at 200 acres. Over 6,000 varieties of roses thrive in beautifully landscaped themed areas. An observation tower, accessed by glass elevator, provides dizzying views of the epic carpet of blooms.

Nearby, the rather gently named **Sanshu Cutlery** ([hamonoyasan.com](http://hamonoyasan.com)) offered a close-up demonstration of the region's 700-year-old sword smithing tradition. We watched as glowing orange lengths of steel emerged from live flame and met hammer and anvil, sparks flying. A discussion of feudal Japan's warrior traditions and a fearsome demonstration of battle skills by the rugged artisans followed. While Sanshu still makes custom swords for collectors, its business today is built around kitchen and garden tools. John and I picked up some Samurai-quality toenail clippers.

An all-too-brief lunch visit to **Ryokan Ichikawa** ([ichikawaryokan.jp](http://ichikawaryokan.jp)) included a specially prepared presentation of sushi, arranged to resemble the rainbow flag. It made us covet a return to this 400-year-old family-owned inn, which mixes luxe amenities with traditional shoji screen and tatami mat rooms.

John and I enjoyed two distinctly different (but equally easy) hiking

experiences in Gifu. First, the Mitsu-Taki Course, a looping route through woodlands along the Ngorigo River. The area is rated among the best in Japan for taking in fall colors and, in late October, it did not disappoint. But even this profusion of multi-hued leaves couldn't distract us from the trail's sampling of waterfalls, just a handful of over 200 along routes through the Osaka-cho area.

A gentle walk along a stretch of the Nakasendo, an ancient, stone-paved trading route connecting Tokyo and Kyoto took us through the village of **Magome Juku**. Nestled in a valley surrounded by the Kiso Mountains beneath endless blue skies streaked by clouds resembling kenji characters, this afternoon amble felt like time travel to Japan's pre-industrial Edo period.

A similar sensation of tumbling into the past accompanied us through a visit to old town **Shirakawa-go**, a scrupulously preserved collection of thatched roofed wooden houses with origins in the late 1600s, when the town was a center of silk weaving. Some of the homes remain occupied, and as we walked the settlement's dusty streets and imagined life in another era, the flap of laundry on a clothesline or the sight of an old woman peering through the shutters of a third story window reminded us that this not a museum.

We overnighted in **Gifu at Gero Onsen Sasara** ([sasara.co.jp](http://sasara.co.jp)) and **Takayama Green Hotel** ([takayam-gh.com](http://takayam-gh.com)). In our room at Sasara, we took good advantage of an eight-foot wooden bathtub resembling a cross between a fallen redwood and a dugout canoe. And both hotels had spring-fed communal bathing facilities that we enjoyed late into the night.

Thinking back on some of the conversations I'd had at the IGLTA convention, I recognized that onsen bathing, one of Japan's profoundest pleasures and a touchstone of the country's cultural heritage, may need to evolve along with the country's efforts to attract queer tourism.

At every communal *onsen* we visited throughout our travels, there were either separate bathing facilities or alternate hours of use for men and women; surely a discomfiting prospect for trans folk.

Like Japan, some European countries, including Germany and Czechia, don't allow swimwear in public baths. But these Western facilities are, nonetheless, not segregated by gender. That's certainly a happy coincidence rather than a progressive policy made in anticipation of the trans-rights movement, but it offers a precedent that Japan will need to acknowledge and balance with its desire to preserve cherished traditions.

## A MOMENT IN KYOTO

As our traveling companions continued back to Osaka, John and I hopped off the bullet train two stops prior for a short but unforgettable visit to Kyoto before heading home to California. It's worth noting that Gifu, Kyoto, and Nara (Japan's first capital, adored for its free-roaming deer) can each be reached in less than 90-minutes by train from Osaka.

Considered by many to be the quintessential Japanese city, Kyoto has, in recent years, suffered from overtourism. Indeed, the city's most popular attractions, Nijo Castle, the Imperial Palace, and the bamboo forest were thronged, though still enjoyable, when we visited.

Still, with our new pal Billiken top-of-mind, we indulgently created a Kyoto experience "the way it ought to be," spending two nights at **Hoshinoya Kyoto** ([hoshinoresorts.com](http://hoshinoresorts.com)), one of Hoshino Resorts' most remarkable properties, where even the check-in process verged on transcendent.

From the train station, a taxi delivered us to a small dock on the Katsura River, which divides Kyoto's urban core from Arashiyama, the city's greener, more traditional quarter. A small boat soon arrived from the hotel for the 12-minute ride to the inn.

As a staff member led us into the heart of the property from the boat dock, we heard the gentle bell tones of a traditional composition. To our great surprise, we soon saw that rather than a recording, this music was being played on a set of chimes and a vibrating sound bowl by a young woman who sat cross-legged on a stone platform suspended over a small lily pond. No other guests were in sight. This was a private welcome song, played for each new arrival.

Our accommodations were more house than room: Large separate living and bedrooms, each with window walls framing views of the brilliant fall foliage and river below, as if a traditional Japanese print had come to life.

With only eight accommodations on the property, each in a low-slung, single-storied wooden building, Hoshinoya feels like a secret village in the forest. And the village has an incredible restaurant, serving modern Japanese cuisine with French technique and *kaiseki*-style service. Requests for special ingredients and dishes are welcome. Elaborate Japanese breakfasts are delivered and served in guest's quarters, allowing for lazy but well-fed mornings.

Private incense ceremonies, river cruises, and gentle, instructor-led morning stretching in an elegant rock garden are offered to guests; as is a music room, with a collection of traditional Japanese instruments to experiment with.

Hoshinoya's dock is within walking distance of Arashiyama's most popular sites; so, with shuttle boat service free on demand, guests can easily arrange their visits to the district's towering bamboo forest, serene temples, and gallery-lined artisan communities at early morning and late afternoon hours when the tourist crush is least intense.

Early one morning, on the advice of a Hoshinoya host, John and I headed to the absolute must-see **Otagi Nenbutsu-Ji Temple** ([otagiji.com](http://otagiji.com)), where we were able to explore with nobody else around. Well, nobody if you don't include the 1200 amazingly expressive stone faces staring from the temple's sloping hillside.

With their weathered features and mossy green beards and buzzcuts, one might assume these are ancient sculptures. In fact, while the temple itself dates to the 1800s, the heads were carved beginning in the late 1950s. Kocho Nishimura, a sculptor as well as a Buddhist priest, helped strengthen the emotional and spiritual attachment between worshippers (as well as visitors) to the temple by teaching them to carve their own statue for the site.

One result of so many sculptors having worked on the project over decades is an incredible variety of details and facial expressions. Walking among the noggins, I saw bowler hats and a tobacco pipe, heart-break, and fury.

Custom has it that guests are supposed to look for the face that resembles their own. John and I couldn't find our twins, but there were near ringers for Richard Nixon and Tilda Swinton.

I was particularly drawn to one statue with pointy ears and a pert upturned nose. He looked like Billiken. With the trip of a lifetime reaching its end, this was surely things the way they ought to be. ■



John & Jim at Otagi Temple

Photo: Jim Gladstone

LGBTQ

WEST  
HOLLY  
WOOD

by Jason A. Heidemann





Photo: Ringo Chiu

Cardi B at Weho Pride

I have somehow managed to twist myself into a nude pretzel and am not sure how to get out of it. Surrounding me are about a half dozen other bendy boys likewise contorting themselves into the same position. We are at **Naked Warrior Yoga**, a serene studio in West Hollywood, California where men come to practice their seated forward fold, crescent lunge, and aptly named plow pose entirely in the buff. As we move into table position and six perfectly sculpted sets of buttocks come vividly and intimately into full view it suddenly occurs to me, I should really spend more time in WeHo!

At 1.9 square miles, West Hollywood is California's smallest city and sixth smallest nationwide. It remained unincorporated until 1984, which means it is barely 40 (though still older than most of the queer boozehounds who crawl the Santa Monica Boulevard bar strip at night). It became a city thanks to a coalition of seniors, tenants, and LGBTQ activists who wanted to create a place with strong renter's rights and progressive policies. It's bona fides are impressive and include a Domestic Partnership Ordinance since 1985 and a Transgender Task Force since 2001. West Hollywood was also the first city in the nation to have a majority LGBTQ city council and a lesbian mayor.

It's tiny boundaries pack a mighty punch for visitors and locals alike. As a friend of mine says, "West Hollywood is what most people think of when they think of Los Angeles." He's not wrong. WeHo is a land of sun-dappled hotel swimming pools, celebrity sightings, decadent nightlife, and upscale shopping. I live on the opposite side of town, and recently decided it was time to spend a whole weekend cocooned in this queer paradise.

**FRIDAY**

It will be 72 degrees and sunny in West Hollywood today. My bags are packed, and my Uber has been hailed. Kitty lifts his head skyward as I give him a couple of vigorous chin scratches. He knows the sight of my

carry-on luggage means I'm leaving, but he's unaware I'm traveling only six miles from my home in Silver Lake, an LA gayborhood populated by daddies, bears, and queer artists. The ride is a straight, westward shot down Santa Monica and eventually Sunset Boulevard. Along the way I pass noteworthy city icons like the Griffith Park Observatory and the Hollywood Sign, whose letters are slightly crooked like a set of teeth awaiting braces. One billboard heralds the arrival of *Mid-Century Modern*, the thinly veiled *Golden Girls* revival starring Nathan Lane, Matt Bomer, and Nathan Lee Graham. We also pass the **Andaz West Hollywood** and the **Hotel Ziggy**, both of which have rolled out the rainbow carpet in the form of summertime gay pool parties.

The Union Jack hangs alongside the US flag outside the five-star **London West Hollywood**, and it's just one of several ways this luxury, all-suite hotel leans into its UK heritage. The London also boasts the Brit-inspired Boxwood Restaurant and afternoon tea service on weekends (including a Pride version in June). In fact, it is such an anglophile hotel that I half expect the bellhops to walk only on the left side of the hallways. The rooms at this all-suite hotel are generous. Mine has a balcony with sunny views of both downtown and the Hollywood Hills. At the foot of my king bed there is also a living room area with assorted magazines splayed across the coffee table in accordion fashion. The most recent issue of *LA Magazine* features Paris Hilton on the cover and for a second I flash back to a year ago when Hilton sat right behind me at Madonna's Celebration Tour. I head to the huge bathroom to brush my teeth. It boasts a two-person shower, which of course fills my head with ideas.

I am trying not to look too obvious while constantly shifting sightlines and pretending to nibble on a Chinese chicken salad. I am now at the **Tower Bar and Restaurant**, an eatery tucked within the historic Sunset Tower Hotel on Sunset Boulevard, and having lunch with a colleague in

London West Hollywood rooftop pool



Photo courtesy of The London West Hollywood



Dance Floor at The Abbey

Photo courtesy of The Abbey

*At The Abbey, I spin around to discover a jacked muscle queen dressed only in a tiger print loincloth and faux fur stole. He is holding two leashes and at the ends of each are collared pups wearing only jock straps.*

the Tower's casual poolside lounge. In decades past, celebrity regulars included Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, Howard Hughes, and John Wayne. The Tower Bar remains an A-lister haven, and I'm told Adam Sandler is a fixture, and that I just missed Lisa Kudrow. Robert DeNiro, Leonardo DiCaprio, Pedro Pascal and Emma Stone, among others, also hang out here. As my friend tells me how much the stars love the joint's lowkey vibes and dramatic city views, a ripped hunk removes his shirt and descends into the swimming pool. (I agree, the views are indeed stunning.)

Compact West Hollywood is a great place to take a whiz, and my post-lunch plan is to do just that. I'm at **Bikes and Hikes** on Santa Monica Boulevard where tour guide Josh is dressing me in a garishly yellow neon jacket and adjusting the seat height on my e-bike to accommodate my tall, Germanic frame. And just like that we are whizzing all over town, including past **Vaseline Alley** a fabled side street and legendary gay cruising area. We whiz down leafy neighborhood streets lined with anorexic palm trees whose bushy tops look like pom poms, and privacy hedges that obscure turreted Tudor homes and Spanish-tiled bungalows. We whiz past the red, blue, and green Pacific Design Center where Elton John once hosted an Oscars party, down Sunset Boulevard where I spotted Natasha Lyonne smoking a cigarette outside my dentist's office, and RuPaul crossing the street in front of trendy **Dialog Cafe**. We whiz past

storied Sunset Strip nightclubs including The Viper Room (where the first table read for *Pirates of the Caribbean* was held), Whiskey a Go Go (where the term go-go dancer was allegedly invented), and the Rainbow Room (where Marilyn Monroe was first set up on a date with Joe DiMaggio). Finally, I can't take it anymore. No more whizzing! I return to the London West Hollywood and collapse onto my king bed until dinnertime.

There's a line wrapping around the side of the block at Heart, a nightclub once co-owned by Lance Bass, though recently sold to festive gay bar **Beaches** across the street. It's a bit early to see so many nightcrawlers out and about, however I learn from a queued-up cutie I've hooked up with before (and will do so again in a few weeks) that the line is for a viewing party for *RuPaul's Drag Race* and contestant Lexi Love is appearing live. I pass **Gym Bar** where a familiar face swilling beer on its sidewalk patio hugs me warmly. I can't remember his name, though I'm certain he's a nudist friend. I also walk by a vacant storefront that will be the future home to lesbian bar Sweetwater.

At the **Kimpton La Peer Hotel**, the door swings open wide for me, though I'm guessing it's being held specifically for the pretty ladies entering right behind me. I'm at **Ladyhawk**, a tantalizing Mediterranean

restaurant helmed by *Top Chef* spinoff winner Charbel Hayek. The dining room is bathed in an amber glow, the same honeyed color that washes over Southern California in late afternoon. It's also mostly full, including a conspicuous number of three tops and even a cowboy at one table. When I really like the food at a restaurant I eat like a pig, and that's what I'm doing with the seared haloumi in spicy tomato sauce and puddles of parsley pesto and octopus chopped up with seasoned potatoes and nestled in bowl of chorizo butter with dabs of lemon aioli.

Back on Santa Monica, a big yellow trolley is idling at the corner of Robertson. It's called **The Pickup**, and it's a free bus that shuttles drunk homosexuals up and down the boulevard on weekends. The street is twinkling tonight. The entire strip is illuminated by rainbow string lights, big ones that resemble those rooms full of plastic balls that kids jump around in at places like Chuck E Cheese. Bois, bachelorettes, and baby dykes are out and about, while gay men are conspicuously absent. I'm taken aback, that is until I hear RuPaul's cacophonous cackle emanating in unison from every bar on the boulevard and realize the gays are tucked inside the taprooms glued to *Drag Race*.

I head to **Schmitt's**, a kitschy queer neighborhood saloon resembling a gay Gen Xers attic apartment. "You have the rosiest cheeks and the shortest shorts," I tell the bartender who bears more than a passing resemblance to Freddie Mercury. "It's the lighting," he says. "My shorts aren't that short." I head to the patio and huddle at a highboy close to a handsome stud with a severe part in his hair who takes an affected drag from his cigarette like he's Errol Flynn. He's wearing a crop top that reads "Yes, Daddy!"

It's a tad chilly tonight and several preppy gays have draped their sweaters over their shoulders and tied them in the front like '80s teen movie villains. "I don't even have that dick pic anymore," I overhear one guy say to his friend. "That pic was from my first LA apartment. Bitch, I was 21!" I chat up my friend and Schmitt's bar manager Bruce Daniels who is also a comedian that once opened for Margaret Cho and runs an excellent standup showcase at Akbar called *Drunk on Stage*. "I have to clean up after my barback since he's not doing it," he says removing several empty tumblers.

My next stop is crowded **Revolver**, where I enter to Cyndi Lauper's "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun," which segues into Katy Perry's "Teenage Dream." The bartender is confused by my bitters and soda order. It's Frat Boy Fridays and he looks at me as if no college dude would ever drink that. I approach a group of guys in black muscle tees that all say "side piece" on them and inquire as to the meaning. "We're just here to accompany him," they say pointing to a handsome gay in a wife beater

and sash that has the word "groom" emblazoned in gold typeface. I fish around my wallet for a dollar and fork it over to a heavily tatted go-go stud in a lavender brief with chain link side. He deliberately stretches the fabric toward me revealing his ample auberge-like phallus in its entirety. He spins away from me, and I notice his buns twitching like a person with a facial tic.

At **Mother Lode**, a legacy bar that has been open since 1979, I run into Orlando, a friend from my queer bowling league. He swipes his finger across my Scruff feed and immediately orders me to remove a pic where I'm scowling. "We'd do you," an eavesdropping couple from San Diego County tells

me. Mother Lode attracts its fair share of WeHo's young and beautiful, but vibes old school and that's why I love it.

I have a full day ahead of me tomorrow so it's time to call it a night. I'm not that hungry, but am dreaming of **Prince Street Pizza**, a late-night joint close to my hotel. I order a single slice, and before taking my first bite marvel at its perfect crust, thick like Detroit style and smothered with a dozen little pepperoni cups each resembling contact lenses. I devour it unapologetically in bed before turning out the lights.

## SATURDAY

It will be 72 degrees and sunny in West Hollywood today. I pull back the curtain to reveal ample sunshine—though a layer of mist still hangs stubbornly over a distant downtown. I shower, shave, and don walking shoes. My destination this morning is the side street-set **Sunset Marquis**, a tucked away hotel with a rock 'n' roll pulse that opened in 1963 at the dawn of LA's rock era.

The hotel houses 100 suites and 52 villas and is a legendary rock God haunt. Bob Marley, Blondie, and the Clash all lived here at one time. Neil Diamond used to perform sets around the main swimming pool to pay his tab, and Elton John, Bruce Springsteen, Usher, and Sting have stayed here more recently. Courtney Love even wrote the song "Sunset Marquis" about her hotel affair with Trent Reznor.

I order a simple breakfast of avocado toast and local berries at the hotel's open-air restaurant Cavatina, a terraced eatery with a cascading water feature on one side that

faces a stocked koi pond and lush hillside garden. After brekkie, I stroll the 3.5-acre property with coffee in hand. Tucked among the villas is a recording studio; there's also a second, more private swimming pool where a Speedo-clad dude with a dad bod lounges in the sun like a contented cat.

A quick e-scooter ride whisks me to the Melrose Design District in no time. I park it in front of **The Butcher's Daughter**, a chic, woman owned all-day café boasting a sunny, plant-filled interior. Out front, a couple of queer cuties, one with pink hair, sip lattes out of big cups and stare at each other with deep infatuation. I can tell they're on a first date and wish them my best.



Opening Night Reception for Jaco Moretti at Circus of Books



Casa Madera at West Hollywood's Mondrian Hotel

Photo: Jason Heidemann

Photo courtesy of CasaMadera/Noble 33



Behind the restaurant I see **West Hollywood Aquatics and Recreation Center**, which boasts a rooftop swimming pool that's open to the public.

Though Santa Monica Boulevard has a handful of queer shops worth checking out like **Block Party WeHo**, the largest Pride store in Southern California, and indie men's clothing store **Brick & Mortar**, where I've picked up many a muscle tee, the Design District is WeHo's shopping hub. This is where David and Alexis Rose would've flexed their spending power before losing all their coin and being shipped off to Schitt's Creek.

I wander first into **Hamilton-Selway**, a fine art gallery specializing in pop art originals from the likes of Damien Hirst, Keith Haring, Andy Warhol, and Basquiat. I ask hunky gallerist Mike why there's no security guard; the beefy bicep he flexes in my direction is the perfect response.

Also in the Design District, **Ken Fulk** is an expertly curated and eclectic furniture store, while ivy-covered and tucked away **Du Vin Wine & Spirits** is where to pick up a pinot en route to a soiree in the Hills. Justin Bieber has been spotted at matcha-centric cafe **Cha Cha Matcha**, which sits next door to **Pizzana**, a purveyor of cracker-thin pies so good it boasts a bunch of locations around town. **Jay Wolf Clothing**, meanwhile, sells men's basics and is so well known it has zero online presence. Lastly, there's **H Lorenzo**, where every piece of clothing is so unrecognizably avant garde I can only imagine the store is purpose built for Hollywood A-listers bound for the Met Gala.

By profession very few people would recognize me, but by height it's easy to mistake me for a somebody, and it's fun to see heads swivel when I enter **Cecconi's**, a modern classic Italian eatery owned by the SoHo House group and currently boasting around a dozen locations worldwide. The lush, plant-filled dining room features a marble countertop bar and zebra-striped flooring, while it's parking lot is now an outdoor patio (a

remnant of the COVID pandemic). I order the signature crudité, which is served in an iced champagne bowl alongside whipped ricotta and truffle honey for dipping, and pair it with a pizza topped with Nduja sausage, broccoli rabe, mozzarella, and Calabrian chili.

An hour later I'm swimsuit-clad and reclining in a lounge poolside at the **Bamford Spa at the 1 Hotel West Hollywood**. In one hand is my copy of *Love Junkie*, queer author Robert Plunket's comic novel about a delusional suburban housewife who becomes entwined in New York's gay scene at the dawn of the AIDS crisis and winds up hopelessly infatuated with a porn star. A toddler ambles past and points his fat little finger at my pink lobster bikini while another child clumsily attempts the butterfly stroke as her doting mother cheers her on. Looming over all of us is a billboard of a sultry Michelle Pfeiffer looking better in an Yves Saint Laurent suit than I ever could.

I'm here because I'm not yet ready to show Saturday night my face. My appointment at the spa begins exactly as the sun's westward drift casts a shadow over the entire pool area, chilling us all like we're oysters on ice. A facial is just what I need, and I fall into a state of liminal bliss while my technician massages, moisturizes, and smooths out all the rough edges with tenderness and care.

At **Circus of Books**, a legendary gay porn shop and erotic art gallery that became the subject of a widely viewed 2019 Netflix documentary, I stare past a sea of Tom of Finland "pleasure tools," wands for women, Nasty Pig jock straps, and assorted lubricants, until my eyes at last land upon my friend Tarik in a fetching romper. He waves me over and introduces me to his friend Mike and husband Dennis. I also say hello to Charles, whose frolicking fanny I recognize from page 20 of *Palm Springs*, a new fine art book featuring saturated and sun-drenched male nudes from

Route 66 Sign



Photo: courtesy of WestHollywood.com

desert-based shutterbug Jaco Moretti, who we are here to celebrate tonight.

Moretti, who rents a gallery across the street from queer bar Tool Shed in Palm Springs, is in attendance and has brought with him several dozen prints featured in the book that are well hung (pun *definitely* intended) throughout the gallery. I already own a signed copy of the book, which tonight is selling like hot cakes, and if I were a 'mo with more dough I would snatch a print of the "The Weekenders," a fabulous photo featuring my friend Matthew competing poolside in a game of naked chess. The scene is a hat tip to the famous Slim Aarons' photo "Poolside Gossip," which I also adore. Follow Moretti on Instagram at [jaco.moretti.arts](https://www.instagram.com/jaco.moretti.arts).

The floor-to-ceiling arched windows inside the dining room at **Casa Madera** offer stunning views of the entire LA Basin, which tonight is cloudless and twinkling. The restaurant is located inside the Mondrian Los Angeles, a posh Sunset Strip hotel, and to reach the dining room I navigate a valet area crammed with BMWs, Ferraris, and Teslas, which many Californians are now trying to sell. The dining room is awash in creamy banquettes, teardrop lighting fixtures, and pulsing Latin beats, which give the entire room a nightclub vibe. I play it safe with familiar fare like a duo of shrimp tacos, house guacamole, and street corn, which is all rushed out at once and tardily, though complimentary hot churros served with a quartet of dipping sauces heals all wounds.

"Are you mad at me Daddy," asks a drunken twink who bumps into me causing the contents of my cocktail to slosh over the rim of my tumbler and onto my cupped hand. I ignore him. I am at **Hi Tops**, a gay sports bar in the heart of the 'hood which boasts a second outpost in Loz Feliz and an original location in San Francisco. I run into my friend Jordan Service, a photographer who has taken nude pics of practically every gay in town for their Only Fans and Bluesky Social feeds.

**Roosterfish** is the newest entry into the Santa Monica queer nightlife scene. It's the WeHo version of a Venice fixture that for 37 years was a local hangout for beach gays until it closed in 2016. It reopened post-pandemic as a mostly straight bar (though last time I visited the bathroom wallpaper was still covered in gay porn). I poke my head in onto to discover it's a Hot Flash party tonight, a ticketed event for queer women.

At **The Abbey**, the legendary West Hollywood gay bar and nightclub that has been a neighborhood fixture since first opening in 1991, I'm standing in line among a sea of gays and attempting a drink order. I spin around to discover a jacked muscle queen dressed only in a tiger print loin cloth and faux fur stole. He is holding two leashes and at the ends of each are collared pups wearing only jock straps. I receive my White

Claw just in time to see a burst of confetti rain down upon a caged dancer in a Barbie-pink bikini press himself and his monster phallus against the bars and beckon me. Of course, I rush right to him. He then places in my hand his long, firm, and dripping wet water bottle and motions for me to toss it for him. He is just one of about a dozen go-go gods and goddesses waiting to be worshipped. On the other side of the bar, gaggles of women snap selfies in front of a life-size plastic horse with the words "Pink Pony Club" scrawled across it, a nod to Chappell Roan who wrote the song in response to discovering queer freedom during her first Abbey visit.

## SUNDAY

It will be 72 degrees and sunny in West Hollywood today. I am the first to arrive at the rooftop pool at the London West Hollywood, where a staffer in crisp navy shorts is busy stacking towels in pyramid fashion, filling ice bins, and raising umbrellas. I have exactly one hour to catch a few rays before heading to drag brunch. From this sunny perch I see all of LA's icons, including downtown, the Hollywood sign, and the San Gabriel Mountains, which even in spring are occasionally still snow-capped. Two young straight dudes take up a couple of loungers lining the pool's perimeter. They are both good looking, but trapped in baggy swimwear that extends to their knees thus muting their bulges like a couple of Ken dolls. Aside from a thimble-sized hummingbird flapping its tiny wings an impressive 80 beats per minute, it's pin drop quiet. That silence is about to be pierced in a way that perfectly captures the spirit of WeHo.

I am in line at **Hamburger Mary's**, and everyone is out this morning. The sidewalks are crammed with shirtless joggers and gay couples pushing strollers (filled with dogs, of course). Two women behind me both have their hair dyed red like Kate Pierson of the B52s and are trying to remember the last time they met up. It was apparently during the pandemic when one of them read "the worst script" she'd ever been handed. "I hope I get carded until I die," says the other forking over her ID to the seating chart attendant.

Drag brunch at Hamburger Mary's happens at 11 A.M., 1 P.M., and 3 P.M. on Sundays and is a well-oiled machine. Servers deliver fat and juicy burgers like the Proud Mary or the Buffy the Hamburger Slayer with efficiency alongside boozy mimosas served in long and leggy fishnet stocking souvenir glasses. "On the count of three I need everyone in the room including the bitches in the back to make some noiiiise," screams host Ms. Luna who warns: "I'm not showing you my p\*ssy unless you show me your money!"

These queens deliver in spades. Ivy Colby feigns giving head while lip-synching to Sheila E.'s "Glamorous Life." Birthday girl Allusia lip-syncs "Poker Face" in a Cruella de Vil wig, but rips it off midway through the number only to segue into Gaga's "Abracadabra," which includes high kicks and showering herself in the singles she's collected. "The more you tip us, the more we're able to buy drugs," shouts one queen dressed as Rizzo from *Grease* who then sends the audience into a deafening frenzy with a crowd-pleasing rendition of "We'll Always Be Together." But nobody mines the moment better than Sparkle Stone who sings a rhinestone-studded version of "Pink Pony Club."

Outside Hamburger Mary's, I board the #4 Santa Monica bus with my carry-on luggage in tow. I take a seat, don my headphones and play "Pink Pony Club." As WeHo fades in the distance I listen to the song lyrics over and over. "I heard that there's a special place where boys and girls can all be queens every single day." The place Roan is referring to is West Hollywood, and I just spent an entire weekend there. How awesome is that? ■

## HOTELS

**Andaz West Hollywood** • Sunset Strip hotel that sometimes hosts Pride pool parties. 8401 W Sunset Blvd. Tel: 323-656-1234. [Hyatt.com](#)

**Hotel Ziggy** • Boutique hotel with rock 'n' roll vibes and occasional LGBTQ pool parties. 8462 W Sunset Blvd. Tel: 323-654-4600. [HotelZiggy.com](#)

**Kimpton La Peer** • Chic boutique hotel in the heart of the gayborhood. 627 N La Peer Dr. Tel: 213-296-3038. [LaPeerHotel.com](#)

**London West Hollywood** • Swanky Sunset Strip hotel with Brit vibes and a rooftop hotel. 1020 N San Vicente Blvd. Tel: 844-489-9660. [TheLondonWestHollywood.com](#)

**Sunset Marquis** • Legendary hotel tucked away on a side street featuring both suites and villas and famous for hosting rock stars. 1200 Alta Loma Rd. Tel: 310-657-1333. [SunsetMarquis.com](#)

## RESTAURANTS

**The Butcher's Daughter** • Sunny, charming and woman-owned all-day café. 8755 Melrose Ave. Tel: 310-707-1630. [TheButchersDaughter.com](#)

**Casa Madera** • Clubby, upscale Mexican restaurant inside a Sunset Strip hotel with a dining room offering jaw-dropping city views. 8440 W Sunset Blvd. Tel: 310-878-0814. [TheCasaMadera.com](#)

**Cecconi's** • Trendy Northern Italian restaurant located in the heart of the WeHo Design District. 8764 Melrose Ave. Tel: 310-432-2000. [CecconisRestaurants.com/west-hollywood](#)

**Cha Cha Matcha** • Café serving matcha-infused products like coffee and soft serve ice cream. 510 N Robertson Blvd. Tel: 855-924-2242. [ChaChaMatcha.com](#)

**Dialog Café** • Corner café with a full breakfast and lunch menu that attracts a trendy crowd. 8766 Holloway Dr. Tel: 310-289-1630. [DialogCafe.la](#)

**Hamburger Mary's** • WeHo offshoot of nationwide burger franchise famous for bingo nights and drag brunches on weekend. 8288 Santa Monica Blvd. Tel: 323-654-3800. [HamburgerMarys.com/weho](#)

**Ladyhawk** • Chic Mediterranean restaurant helmed by a Top Chef winner and located inside a buzzy Kimpton hotel. 623 N La Peer Dr. Tel: 213-296-3036. [LadyhawkRestaurant.com](#)

**Pizzana** • Popular eatery with several city-

wide locations serving up cracker-thin crust pies. 460 N Roberston Blvd. Tel: 310-657-4662. [Pizzana.com](#)

**Prince Street Pizza** • Beloved late-night pizza joint on the Sunset Strip. 9161 W Sunset Blvd. Tel: 323-446-2244. [PrinceStreet-Pizza.com/west-hollywood](#)

**Tower Bar and Restaurant** • Day and nighttime eatery with vintage vibes and home to numerous celebrity sightings. 8358 W Sunset Blvd. Tel: 323-848-6677. [SunsetTowerHotel.com](#)

## BARS

**The Abbey** • World famous queer bar, nightclub, café and community stalwart with long lines for entry on weekends. 692 N Roberston Blvd. Tel: 310-289-8410. [TheAbbeyWeHo.com](#)

**Beaches WeHo** • Compact gay bar, restaurant, and lounge featuring themed nights and drag brunch on weekend. 8928 Santa Monica Blvd. Tel: 310-360-0395. [BeachesWeHo.com](#)

**GYM Bar WeHo** • Chill queer sports bar and lowkey neighborhood hangout. 8919 Santa Monica Blvd. Tel: 323-473-4166. [GymBarWeHo.com](#)

**Hi Tops** • Queer sports bar with excellent food and cocktails, neighborhood vibes, and a second East Side location. 8933 Santa Monica Blvd. [HiTopsBar.com/west-hollywood](#)

**Mother Lode** • Vintage gay bar with old school vibes and a lively patio. 8944 Santa Monica Blvd. Tel: 310-659-9700.

**Revolver Video Bar WeHo** • Compact corner gay bar and nightclub featuring a small outdoor patio and go-go boys galore. 8851 Santa Monica Blvd. Tel: 424-382-1108. [RevolverWeHo.com](#)

**Roosterfish West Hollywood** • Newish WeHo entry based on a legendary Venice queer bar of the same name and featuring various themed nights. 8948 Santa Monica Blvd. Tel: 323-329-5724.

**Schmitt's West Hollywood** • Neighborhood queer taproom with festive décor, cute staff, and a lively outdoor patio. 8737 Santa Monica Blvd. Tel: 323-572-6400. [SchmittsWestHollywood.com](#)

## HEALTH AND WELLNESS

**Bamford Spa at the 1 Hotel West Hollywood** • Upscale day spa located inside a chic, Sunset Strip hotel offering massages, waxing, skin and body therapy, and more. 8490 W Sunset Blvd. Tel: 310-424-1600. [1hotels.com/west-hollywood](#)

**Bikes and Hikes LA** • Group e-bike tours around iconic Los Angeles neighborhoods that can be customized for private groups. 7740 Santa Monica Blvd. Tel: 323-796-8555. [BikesAndHikesLA.com](#)

**West Hollywood Aquatics and Recreation Center** • Rooftop swimming pool that's open to the public for lap swimming. 8750 El Tovar Pl. Tel: 323-848-6538. [WeHo.org](#)

**Naked Warrior Yoga** • Men-only studio featuring nude yoga classes, tantric workshops, pole dancing, and more. 8206 Santa Monica Blvd. Tel: 323-306-2074. [Naked-WarriorYoga.com](#)

## ATTRACTIONS

**The WeHo Pickup** • A free yellow bus shuttling bars goes up and down the Santa Monica Boulevard nightlife strip. [WeHoPickup.com](#)

**Vaseline Alley** • Legendary cruising area tucked away behind Santa Monica Boulevard. Between Sweetzer Ave and Kilkea Dr.

## SHOPPING

**Block Party WeHo** • Centrally located shop featuring club gear, Pride merch, cutie undies, sex toys, and more.

**Brick & Mortar** • Men's boutique offering chic shorts, muscle tees, sexy swimwear, cute undies, and more. 8713 Santa Monica Blvd. Tel: 310-652-6605. [shopatbrick.com](#)

**Circus of Books** • Sex shop, bookstore, and art gallery that was also the subject of a Netflix documentary. 8230 Santa Monica Blvd. Tel: 323-337-9555. [circusofbooks.com](#)

**Du Vin Wine & Spirits** • Ivy-covered and tucked away wine shop with a knowledgeable staff. 540 N San Vicente Blvd. Tel: 310-855-1161. [du-vin.net](#)

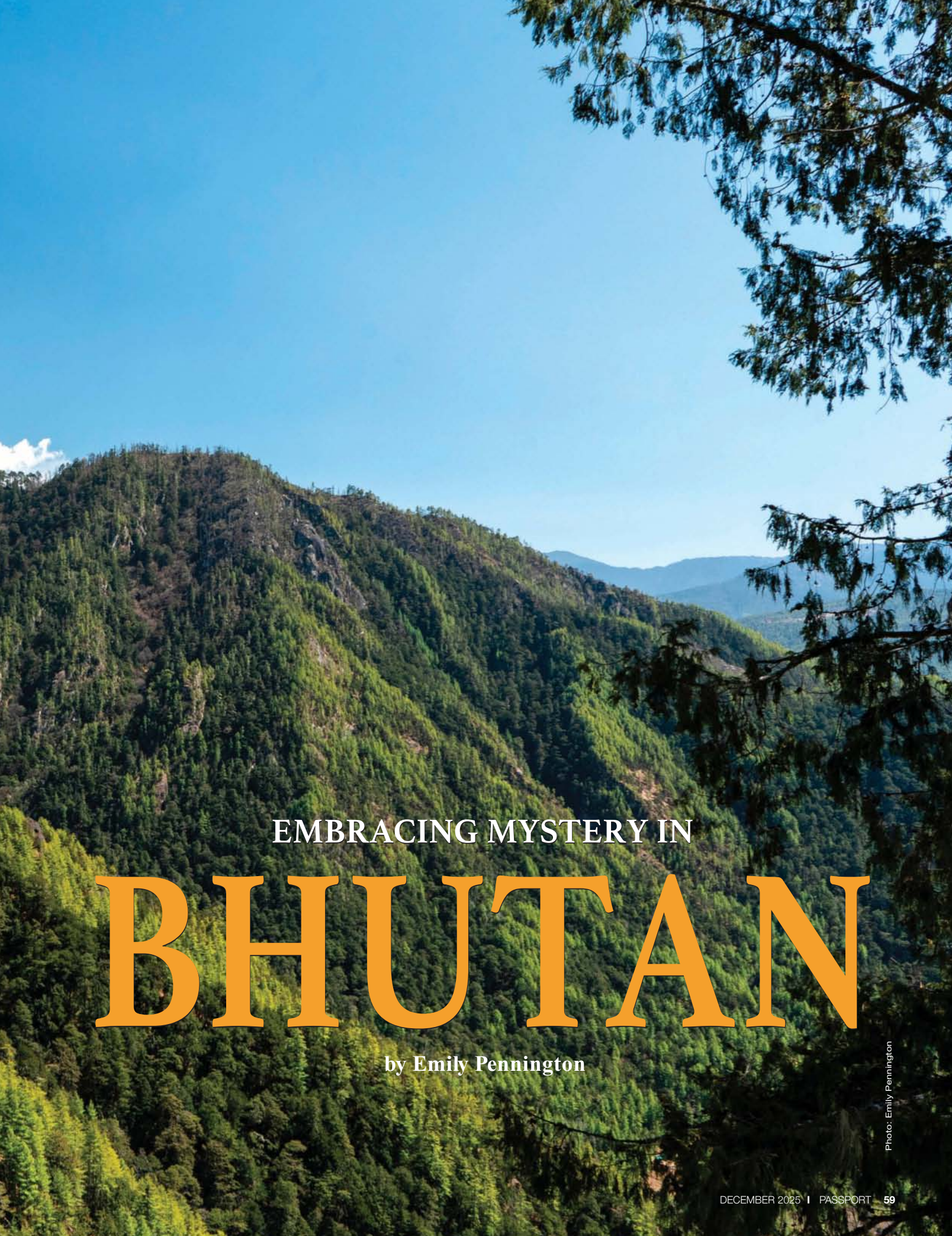
**H Lorenzo** • High-end retailer offering outrageous and over-the-top runway-ready threads. Various locations. [hlorenzo.com](#)

**Hamilton-Selway Fine Art** • Design District gallery representing famous pop artists like Andy Warhol and Keith Haring. 8678 Melrose Ave. Tel: 310-657-1711. [hamiltonselway.com](#)

**Jay Wolf Clothing** • Chic men's clothing store offering upscale men's basics. 517 N Robertson Blvd B. Tel: 310) 273-9893.

**Ken Fulk** • Expertly curated and eclectic furniture store. 555 Norwich Dr. Tel: 323-408-8564. [kenfulk.com](#)





EMBRACING MYSTERY IN

# BHUTAN

by Emily Pennington

Photo: Emily Pennington

**W**arm morning light trickles down from the three-story atrium as I stand, awestruck, beneath a mind-melting assortment of hand-carved Bhutanese art. Everywhere I look, for thirty vertical feet, is a cornucopia of technicolor dragons, lotus flowers, and intricately crafted geometrical patterns. It's a uniquely Bhutan-style welcome after over 36 hours of travel time to reach this famously preserved Himalayan kingdom.

Unlike India, which sits along its southern border, Bhutan was never conquered, and as such, it remained closed off to the western world until the 1970s. The country didn't even have a television broadcasting station until 1999. A visit to its mountainous, Buddhist hamlets is like stepping back in time, where traditional dress and handicrafts are on full display, even in the capital city of Thimphu. Most buildings, including the international airport and residential homes, are lavishly adorned with hand-carved symbols meant to promote prosperity and peace, as well as intricately painted phalluses, for protection and fertility. Getting off the plane was like stepping out of a time machine.

I checked into the **Zhiwaling Heritage Hotel** (Satsam Chorten, Paro. Tel. +9-75-827-1277. zhiwalingheritage.com), in the cultural hub of Paro. Because of its remoteness, most travelers have to take an assortment of three to four flights to arrive in Bhutan. Thankfully, I was met with a luxe welcome, as the receptionist quickly brought me a warm towel to wash my face, a cup of herbal tea, and a heavy brass key for my room, meant to symbolize a thunderbolt. This five-star hotel was an incredible sight to behold, with two on-site restaurants, a private meditation studio, and original artwork everywhere I looked.

My room was a light-soaked haven with views of the Himalayan foothills, complete with a large soaking tub to soothe my post-flight

muscles. I quickly unpacked and cleaned up, then dashed down to the Lingka Restaurant for a lunch of fresh beetroot salad and traditional momos—Bhutanese dumplings filled with meat and veggies.

Travelers to this far-flung country are generally required to have a state-sanctioned guide, as tourism is heavily regulated within Bhutan. Before your plane ever touches down, you'll have to nab a \$40 visa just to enter the country, then pay a Sustainable Development Fee of \$100 per adult, per day that you're visiting. Guides in this part of the world are highly trained and take great pride in their work, plus they can offer invaluable cultural and historical context while showing you around Bhutan's various villages and museums. Expect to spend \$35 to \$75 per day on your guide, depending on their level of seniority. Tack on your desired level of accommodation (three star hotels are considered standard for tourists), and you've got yourself a Bhutan budget.

While it's certainly not as wallet-friendly as other Himalayan countries, like Nepal, Bhutan has much less visible poverty and offers incredible cultural insight into one of the only majority Buddhist countries on the planet. The people are friendly and welcoming, and the food is generally locally sourced and high quality.

I spent much of my first day in Bhutan strolling around the impressive **National Museum of Bhutan** (nationalmuseum.gov.bt), which sits inside a historic cylindrical watchtower built in 1649. Many of the country's most noteworthy sites were built during this time period, after the famous Tibetan lama, Shabdrung Ngawang Namgyal, who fought to unify the country. I spent the afternoon standing slack-jawed in front of various centuries-old Vajrayana Buddhist paintings featuring wrathful incarnations of various gods and guardians and peaceful Buddhas meditating with utmost grace. Buddhism in this slice of the globe is much more colorful and dynamic than the stoic, Zen ideals we might



Zhiwaling Heritage Hotel Room View

Photo: Emily Pennington

Buddha Dordenma Statue in Thimphu, Bhutan



Photo: Framalicious

*Most buildings, including the international airport and residential homes, are lavishly adorned with hand-carved symbols meant to promote prosperity and peace, as well as intricately painted phalluses, for protection and fertility.*

be more familiar with. It's not uncommon to see images of various gods engaged in coitus or trampling their foes, and each pose and figure has a requisite symbolic meaning, often for wisdom or protection.

Next, my guide walked with me to the striking façade of the Paro Dzong. During the same period of unification, a series of fortresses, or dzongs, were built along the Himalayan hillsides to watch over and protect Bhutan's many towns and villages. These sites now serve as the schools, residences, and meditation spaces for the Central Monastic Body. I snapped a few photos of the dzong's incredible architecture and marveled at the many monks in crimson-hued robes sauntering between different ornate rooms. Later, I perused the many local handicraft shops on the main thoroughfare of Paro before my guide and driver dropped me off at the hotel for a fabulous dinner of roasted chicken and root vegetables in its fine dining room, Gawa.

Hiking in the Himalayan Mountains is one of my all-time favorite travel experiences, so I made sure to get a short trek in during my time in Bhutan. After a hearty breakfast of French toast with melon and dragon fruit on the side, I hopped into a private car with my guide and took off up a dusty dirt road to meet with our team of porters.

Be forewarned: when it comes to trekking, Bhutan goes hard. Major cities, like Thimphu and Paro are situated more than 7,200 feet above sea level, and hiking trails tend to ascend straight up from there. However, the local guides make trekking as comfortable as possible for guests, staffing a handful of adorable pack horses and porters who help set up camp and cook all of your meals, so you only need to carry a day pack.

The **Druk Path Trek** follows an ancient trading road and is considered one of the easier backpacking trips in the country, at just three nights and four days. Within that time, you can expect to climb and descend 2,000-3,000 feet per day and sleep at an altitude of 12,500 feet. It's the equivalent of hiking up a huge mountain in the U.S. and then sleeping atop its frigid summit, every day for three nights. Along the way, trekkers are treated to astonishing mountain views.

The first day of the Druk Path Trek winds through a forest of blue pine, hemlock, and rhododendron forests, and I was grateful that I could huff and puff uphill under a shady canopy of foliage. Two hours into our journey, we stumbled into the Jela Dzong temple, a remote, high altitude enclave of monks and pilgrims with a sweeping view of the high Himalayas, including 24,035-foot Jomolhari. This 400-year-old temple

Photos: Emily Pennington



Emily Hiking on the Druk Path Trek



Photo: Emily Pennington

Photo: Emily Pennington



Schoolgirls in Paro, Bhutan

Photo: Emily Pennington



Zhiwaling Heritage Hotel Dinner

and monastery is home to a wide array of colorful Buddhist paintings and artifacts, and I was lucky enough to get a water blessing from an old monk while inside its historic core.

We camped at a centuries-old yak herders' campsite, perched on a high grassy bluff, and I munched on a dinner of sautéed greens, rice, and generously-sauced chicken as I watched the sun set over the mountains. I burrowed my body deep inside my down sleeping bag in the subfreezing air and prayed that I would sleep through the frigid night.

Though the Druk Path Trek is traditionally completed as a three- or four-night affair, I had limited time in Bhutan, so I laced up my hiking shoes and left early the following morning to speed walk to what is ordinarily the third evening's campsite with my guide and pony porters. Of course, I say "speed walk" with a wink and a nod here, because once I'm above 12,000 feet, any form of walking starts to feel like a crawl.

With my guide in tow, I undulated along an arid ridgeline, speckled with scrubby bushes and the occasional low tree. We stopped for lunch along the shoreline of Jimilang Tsho, a crystal clear alpine tarn rimmed with jagged frozen waterfalls. Then, it was more ups and downs through leafy rhododendron forests until we reached our stopping point for the night, the picturesque lake Janye Tsho. Right after setting up camp, an impenetrable fog settled into the valley, and I snuggled up in my sleeping bag to read my Kindle with glee,



Druk Path Trek Pack Horses



Punakha Dzong

Photo: Aarochi Rane

happy that I wasn't outside in the dark and the damp.

My final day of trekking took me through lush greenery all the way to the high point of Labana Pass, situated at an elevation of 13,891 feet. I giggled with glee as I reached the beautiful stupa marking the summit of the trail, then I sped downhill with my guide past incredibly decorated monasteries and temples until we reached Thimphu, Bhutan's capital city.

Eager to rinse off after three intense days in the bush, I checked into the elegant **Zhiwaling Ascent** (Kwang Do, Upper Motithang, Thimphu. Tel. +9-752-336-486. [zhiwalingascent.com](http://zhiwalingascent.com)) a four-star hotel on the outskirts of town boasting remarkable views of the surrounding countryside. I chowed down on a lovely dinner of homemade pasta and organic vegetables in the lodge's dining hall, then promptly booked myself an on-site massage to calm my rowdy, post-hike muscles.

I wanted to switch up my guide for the next portion of the trip, which would be largely city-based, and was introduced to Tshering the following morning. One of the very few senior-level female guides in the country, she brought a wealth of insight and cultural knowledge to my journey. This was on full display as she took me to **ARTyantra** ([instagram.com/artyantra](http://instagram.com/artyantra); FJ6V+FJH, Thimphu. Tel. +9-75-1760-7215) and **VAST Studio** (FJHQ+JMF), Thimphu. Tel. +9-75-7775-2813), two contemporary art galleries in the heart of the city, and proceeded to explain the intricacies of different Bhutanese legends and Buddhist symbols in the various paintings I saw.

Our busy day in Bhutan's capital also took us to the **Centenary Farmer's Market** (FJGR+7G2, Thimphu), where we shopped for exotic fruits, and I was wowed by the outrageous number of dried chilis on offer. The Bhutanese people go ga-ga for their spicy food, and I was able to sample a smattering of traditional dishes when we sat down for lunch at **Heritage Home** (783 Doebum Zur Lam 309 Se, Thimphu. Tel. +9-75-17-61-7027), an ancient residence that's been repurposed into a village-style eatery. My personal favorite delicacy? Fresh Bhutanese chilis doused in local cheese.

As one of the few majority Buddhist countries in the world, Bhutan

is a surprisingly gay-friendly culture, as its predominant religion does not explicitly prohibit being queer. As such, the country has never made it illegal or discriminated against its gay population, the way that more conservative Himalayan countries, like Nepal and India, have. To learn more about the vibrant LGBTQ+ scene in this region, I met for coffee with Karma Tshering Wangchuk (nickname Lhari), a prominent fashion designer, photographer, and founder of the Instagram account **Bhutan Street Fashion** ([instagram.com/bhutanstreetfashion](http://instagram.com/bhutanstreetfashion)).

"It's funny that in many Western countries, a man wearing a dress is this radical thing, but for us it's just a part of traditional Bhutanese clothing," he said while telling me about the country's national pride in wearing their traditional garments, the Gho for men and the Kira for women. To this day, you can see men and women across the country working in offices, driving taxis, and serving in restaurants in these beautiful, woven designs. "Gender roles are not so rigid here... both men and women will work in the fields in their traditional garments," said Lhari. To help highlight the impressive textiles found in the various regions of Bhutan, he organized the country's first-ever fashion week in October of 2025.

Though I adore hiking through rugged mountainsides, I must say that it was a treat to explore a handful of Bhutan's towns for my remaining few days in the country. The following morning, Tshering took me to the largest sitting Buddha in the world, the Buddha Dordenma Statue, which is perched on a scenic bluff just outside of Thimphu. This impressive feat of sculpture and engineering rises a neck-craning 169 feet above its base and houses over 100,000 gold-gilded Buddha statues inside its large interior.

Afterwards, Tshering took me to the **Pangrizampa Astrology School** (GJPX+R74, Dechenchholing-Dodena Lam, Thimphu), for a reading from one of Bhutan's top Buddhist astrologers. As you might imagine, the Bhutanese revere these auspicious readings, and I took heed when he looked at my palm, consulted my birth chart, and told me that I should wear more green, for good fortune, and not attend any births or funerals for a while.



Six Senses Bhutan

Photo: Emily Pennington

Bhutan is also revered for its use of the **Gross National Happiness Index** (GNH), and I was excited to meet with one of its special government advisors on the topic that afternoon. The GNH is a research-backed measurement of 33 different indicators, such as education, living standards, and ecological diversity. The country of Bhutan uses this measurement to prioritize its national budget, with a keen focus on the overall happiness and wellbeing of its people, rather than economic growth. The advisor I met with in Thimphu sent me off with a handful of books and pamphlets on their incredibly detailed approach.

To round out my final day in Thimphu, Tshering took me to the **Royal Takin Preserve**, which is home to dozens of Bhutan's national animal, the takin. Looking like a cross between a yak, a goat, and a wildebeest, these ice age-looking mammals are classified as a threatened species, so it was incredibly special to witness the country's breeding program firsthand.

I rose early the next morning to go for a two-hour drive to the verdant **Punakha Valley**, home to one of Bhutan's most stunning monasteries. Along the way, Tshering insisted that we stop at a famous fertility temple, where many couples of all genders go for luck in their family planning. Afterwards, we motored over to the breathtaking **Punakha Dzong** ([punakha.gov.bt/en/tourism/punakha-dzong](http://punakha.gov.bt/en/tourism/punakha-dzong)), the second oldest and second largest in the entire country.

Located at the confluence of two powerful rivers, this dzong serves as the winter residence for the Central Monastic Body of Bhutan. After crossing an ancient cantilever bridge, my guide showed me around its incredible temple art, which included many centuries-old depictions of wrathful guardian figures. I was fortunate enough to catch the unique droning and horns of a monastic ceremony taking place, and I enjoyed the magic hour light as the monks calmly chanted for many minutes.

By far, the most impressive hotel I stayed at while in the Kingdom of Bhutan was the **Six Senses Punakha** (JRF2+X4C. Tel. +9-75-235-0773. [sixsenses.com](http://sixsenses.com)). True to the brand, this posh, all-inclusive haven was stunning inside and out, surrounded by terraced agricultural fields and high Himalayan peaks. My room was adorned with plush bedding, honey-colored wood, and an assortment of drinks and welcome snacks. It was heavenly.

I plopped myself down in one of the resort's serene meditation salas

and stilled my breathing as the sun turned the surrounding mountains blush pink. Afterwards, I was treated to a floral-scented foot scrub and a full-body massage in the hotel's chic on-site spa and wellness center. Afterwards, I noshed on a three-course dinner and requested that the dessert be brought directly to my room so that I could lounge and unwind in the humongous soaking tub before falling into bed.

My final day's itinerary featured an ambitious hike up to the infamous **Tiger's Nest Monastery** ([parotakt-sang.org](http://parotakt-sang.org)), just outside of Paro. Since it's a three-hour drive from far-flung Punakha, I had to rise early and eat breakfast in the car as we ascended over a high mountain pass.

Though the Tiger's Nest Monastery might seem like a simple drive-up selfie opportunity from the thousands of social media photos you've likely seen, the journey to get to this cliff's edge sanctuary requires a nearly all-day hike of 4.5 miles and over 2,000 vertical feet. It's well worth the sweat and effort, though, as once you reach the temple you are allowed to go inside, meditate, and receive monastic blessings, if you wish. However, phones and shoes are not allowed within these sacred walls, which is why you won't find images of its astonishing interior art anywhere on the internet.

To cap it all off, my guide, Tshering, booked me a traditional hot stone bath at an old Bhutanese farmhouse just outside of Paro. It was the perfect end to an exhausting day of hiking and driving, and I luxuriated in the steamy water for nearly 45-minutes before heading inside the family's residence for a home-cooked Bhutanese meal of pork, rice, organic greens, and, of course, chilis with cheese sauce. I fell asleep back at the Zhiwaling Heritage Hotel happy and not quite ready to go home.

The intricate Vajrayana temples and the homespun hospitality that I experienced in Bhutan were absolutely soul-stirring. The kinds of experiences that are singularly unique on this lush planet we get to call home. Bhutan exemplifies the reasons why so many of us travel: it's extraordinarily beautiful, culturally rich, and full of diverse opportunities for adventure. It feels silly to even admit it, but this magical kingdom was well worth the 44 hours of travel time required to get me home. ■



Takin in Bhutan

Photo: Wirestock Creators

# BUSINESS CLASS



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## HOTEL EXCELSIOR DUBROVNIK

by Kelsy Chauvin

**W**hen I stepped onto my balcony at the **Hotel Excelsior Dubrovnik** (adriaticluxuryhotels), the Adriatic Sea seemed to stretch out forever. I soaked in the view from my primo perch, feeling suspended over the crystal-blue bay. To the right, the historic Old City stood as an ancient fortress capped by red roofs, its marina dotted with sailboats and yachts. Peering leftward, along the route of small ferries motoring to Lokrum Island nature reserve, the waves lapped towards the soon-to-be-setting sun.

This was my first dive into Dubrovnik, the southernmost city on the Croatian Riviera known as the “Pearl of the Adriatic.” I had long heard about its beauty and tranquility, rich history, and remarkable Medieval architecture, now I could see all this from the windowed walls of Hotel Excelsior. It was clear this place would exceed the hype, and I was lodging in a spectacular location to enjoy it all.

**H**otel Excelsior Dubrovnik is in the sweet spot that's a quick 14 miles from the airport, and a five-minute stroll to the Old City. In other words, close enough to everything without being too close, with panoramic views to boot. The property occupies a marvelous five-story stone “Villa Odak” built in 1913, and a modern tower addition that debuted in 2017 as part of an expansive hotel transformation.

The hotel is the flagship property of Dubrovnik-based **Adriatic Luxury Hotels**, which also owns and operates a dozen more stunning seaside hotels and villas along Croatia's Dalmatian Coast. As the jewel of the ALH collection, however, the Excelsior shines brighter thanks to a meticulous overhaul that polished every corner of the property, from its 158 guestrooms and suites, to its glamorous spa with huge indoor pool, creatively Croatian restaurants, and inviting indoor-outdoor cocktail lounge.

Modern luxury is center stage here, which is clear from the airy hotel lobby adorned with local artworks, polished marble, and a Deco-style crystal chandelier. Guests lodge in spacious city-view or sea-view rooms, enjoying custom-made furniture, wooden floors, large



View From The Palm Terrace at the Hotel Excelsior Dubrovnik

bathrooms with bathtub and shower, and private balconies. Rooms have desks, not that I aimed to work. Rather, I found time to enjoy the uber-comfortable bed with sheets so luxurious it was hard not to melt into them.

**M**elting came instead at the hotel spa. Through the serene spa reception it was impossible not to feel the huge 65x25-foot indoor pool beckoning, but I diverted first to the treatment area where, from the tantalizing spa-menu choices, I indulged in a hot stone massage with warm oil, and a signature Sisley phyto-aromatic hydrating facial.

Blissed out post-massage, the spa's wellness area further loosened me up with its Jacuzzi, Finnish sauna, and Turkish and Roman steam baths. Then at last it was time for what felt by comparison like a cold plunge in the freshwater pool, though in just a few moments the water felt simply soothing, and perfect for some laps. The large fitness studio occupies a mezzanine above the pool's relaxation zone, so even while working out I daydreamed about a good float.

The Excelsior spa is located on the ground floor of the tower, with a door that opens onto a seaside terrace along the water. One of my favorite moments was stepping outside in my swimsuit and spa robe, breathing in the Mediterranean fresh air and sunlight. In that

moment, I relinquished everyday stress in favor of complete Croatian surrender.

**T**hough the hotel offers 24-hour room service, I was eager to try Excelsior's dining options. But first came a detour to the **Abakus Piano Bar**, where the evening's moonlight streamed in across the terrace. Cushy club chairs and sofas, along with modern art and décor, make a warm setting for the creative cocktails, live music, and sea views.

The bar gives way to **Sensus Restaurant**, a contemporary fine dining experience that showcases unconventionally creative dishes inspired by tradition, and thoughtfully paired with Croatian wines. A native of Konavle just south of Dubrovnik, Chef Petar Obad is a master of local ingredients and his menu celebrates regional delicacies such as fresh-caught seafood, delicately prepared root vegetables and grains, seasonal herbs, and dessert sweets.

Chef Obad also delivers his best at **Prora**, the hotel's beach-side restaurant that tempts diners with a more compact menu featuring regional meat and fish dishes using traditional Mediterranean flavors. Meanwhile, **Salin** is the Excelsior's morning dining room, where guests enjoy a huge selection of buffet and a la carte breakfast delights. I found it was an excellent place to linger with a fresh juice and watch the sea waves.

Across all its properties, Adriatic Luxury Hotels stands out for its culinary offerings. Guests are right for checking out its sister restaurants, like Michelin Guide-listed **Vapor**, a gourmet dining destination in the nearby **Hotel Bellevue**. By contrast, **Maslina Tavern** inside the **Hotel Dubrovnik Palace** (on the north end of town) invites a more familial vibe with live music and dishes like Dalmatian charcuterie, seasonal-vegetable risottos, and local fish soup.

As much as I adored the style, cuisine, and stress-relieving sensations of the Hotel Excelsior, my seamless stay clearly was a result of impeccable service. The team genuinely cared about my comfort and pleasure at every turn, whether they were minor room requests or detailed drink orders (I am particular about martinis).

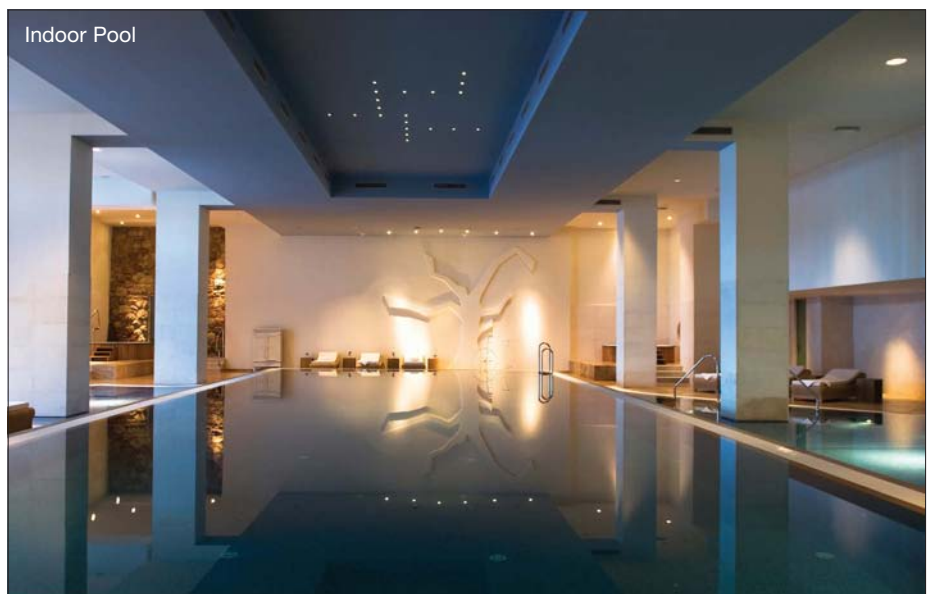
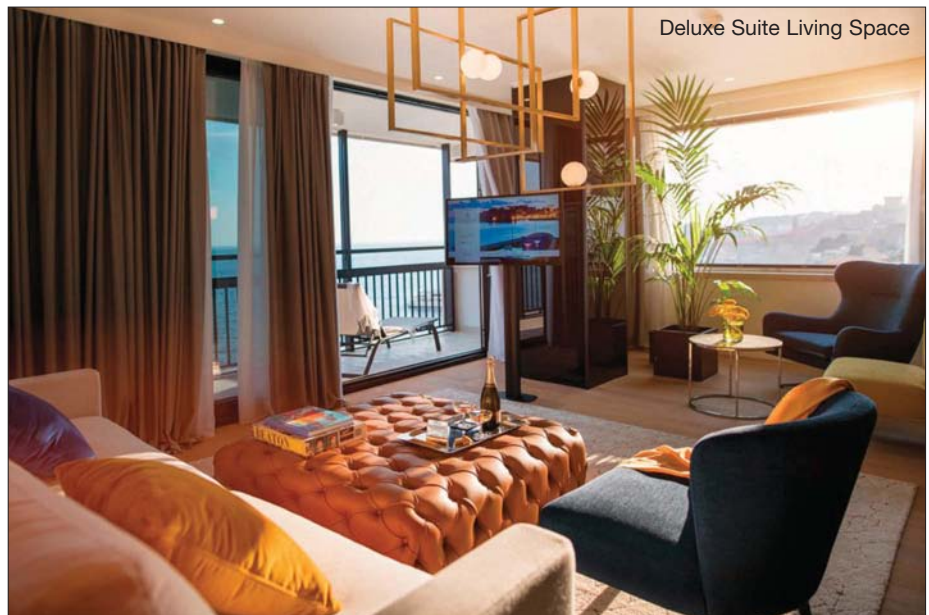
The concierge team was genuinely thoughtful in arranging local outings for me, which included a walking tour through the Old City, a UNESCO World Heritage area since 1979. When I asked about local LGBTQ+ culture, they even knew to recommend the new-in-2024 **Milk Bar**, a posh cocktail lounge and late-night club tucked away near the famous Game of Thrones “walk of shame” stairs (aka the Jesuit Stairs).

My visit to Dubrovnik kept me exploring the city, rewalking its 13th-century perimeter fortress walls, zipping up the mountain via cable car, and otherwise taking full advantage of the many museums and attractions available when using the **Dubrovnik Pass**.

The hotel team also set up two excursions that proved unforgettable. One was a day in the **Konavle Valley** to the south, where I visited family-owned **Botaro Winery**, walked the promenade at the seaside town of Cavtat, and dined al fresco beside a lush flowing stream at **Konavoski Dvori Eco Green Restaurant** that serves authentic, sustainably sourced Croatian dishes.

The next day, I toured **Peļjesac Peninsula** to the north (with more Game of Thrones settings), where the small town of **Ston** is home to ancient salt flats and small-scale oyster farming. I didn't expect to find such a seafood paradise in this corner of Croatia, but there I was on a floating picnic barge, learning how local oysters are farmed and tasting just how delicious they are.

As many traveler friends had suggested, my first visit to Dubrovnik was indeed marvelous. And from this first exploration of Croatian food, culture, landscapes, sea views, and the remarkable Adriatic Luxury Hotels hospitality, I know I will return. ■



## holiday gift guide

### WE'LL DRINK TO THAT

Hey gin lovers, there's a delicious new way to safely savor twice the martinis, negronis, and gimlets. Launched in 2025, New York-based **Second Sip Gin** is distilling the small-batch spirit with 50 percent less alcohol—and it's delicious. Inspired by classic London Dry gin, Second Sip is crafted with 10 botanicals and natural flavors, elevating your favorite libations with less potential for dreaded hangovers. Bartending legend Leo Robitschek, who's proudly part of the LGBTQ+ community, is one of the trio of Second Sip founders, so be sure to pour, shake, and stir his signature recipes customized for this gin's flavor profile. \$34. [secondsip.com](https://secondsip.com)

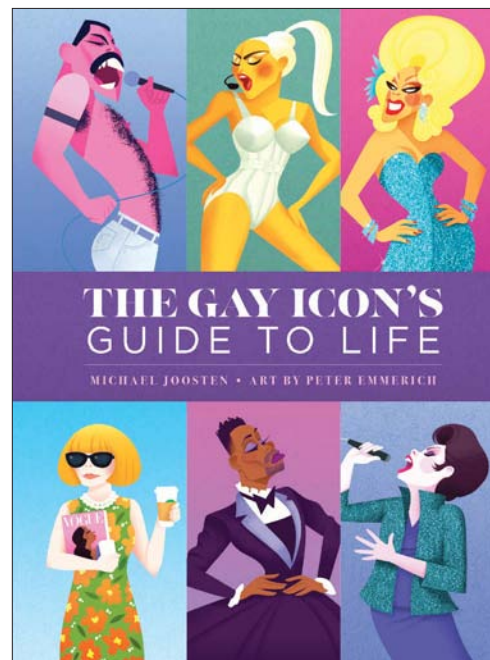


### STEP UP TO THE BAR

Ditch the coasters and sip in style with Snowfox's elegant barware collections. This woman-owned brand designs insulated stainless-steel bar essentials that look and feel like classic glassware. Unlike other insulated glasses, Snowfox uses light, thin-rimmed stainless-steel to make the most of your beverage, keeping it cold longer without affecting flavor. Along with carafes, wine-bottle chiller, shakers, stemmed glasses, and more, sets like the **Stainless Steel Ice Bucket with Rocks Glass Set** is a favorite for keeping your ice cold and cocktails easy to hold. Choose from five different collections each with their own style, like the handsome walnut wood-grained and marble looks of the Fusion Collection. \$100. [snowfox.fun](https://snowfox.fun)

## YOU CAN QUOTE US ANYTIME

Holiday spice is mostly nice (and sometimes sassy) with **The Gay Icon's Guide to Life**. Written and illustrated by Michael Joosten and Peter Emmerich, the book features fun, insightful, and relatable quotes from 70 different LGBTQ+ luminaries and allies. Find inspiration from Dolly Parton, style tips from Boy George and Grace Jones, goal-setting from Billy Porter, and wisdom for overcoming adversity from Oscar Wilde, Lil Nas X, and Alan Cumming. Or just share a laugh with comic treasures including the late, great Leslie Jordan, who said, "I fell out of the womb and landed in my mother's high heels." This may be the merriest gift of the year. \$19. [insighteditions.com](http://insighteditions.com)



## FLAME ON

Travelers longing for California's forest air can enjoy the redwoods at home thanks to **Queer Candle Co.** The Philadelphia-based enterprise has crafted small-batch soy candles in seductive scents since 2018. Made with authentic, non-toxic fragrances, these candles conjure nature settings, different seasons, and uniquely fresh flavors from orange grove and tomato leaf, to ginger tea, teak, leather, and many more. Dive into a mix of favorite scents with Queer Candle's **Discovery Kit** of either three or six scents of your choice. Ten percent of QCC's profits are donated to the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, an NYC-based organization working to protect individuals' gender diversity and expression. \$36 or \$70. [queercandleco.com](http://queercandleco.com)

## POLYGLOT POTENTIAL

With gentle reminders, social sharing, animations, and hot tips, Duolingo is a bright way to learn a new language. And it's easy to spark your friend's lingual aspirations this holiday season by gifting a full year of **Super Duolingo**. There are 40 different languages available, lessons are tailored to each student's level, and it's all laid out in bite-sized sessions that make daily practice easy. The Super Subscription provides ad-free learning with personalized verbal and written exercises, plus inspirational incentives to help you speak a new language swiftly ahead of the next big trip. \$80. [duolingo.com](http://duolingo.com)



## CARRY ON IN STYLE

Breeze through your journey with a spacious carry-on that's designed to maximize your packing capacity. The **Quince Front Pocket Carry-On Suitcase** is a hard shell, 360-degree spinner that's lightweight, expandable, and water-resistant, plus it comes with a secure front pocket that fits a 16-inch laptop. Like all Quince products, this luggage is made sustainably with recycled materials by responsible manufacturing partners. Along with compression panels and a removable laundry bag, Quince invites you to choose from seven cool colors to match your travel style. \$160. [quince.com](https://www.quince.com)



## INVEST IN EQUALITY

This holiday season, stand with an organization that's doing everything possible to advocate for, amplify, and celebrate diverse LGBTQ+ communities around the world. Since 1990, **Outright International** has advocated for human rights, inclusion, and equality with active programs globally. The group works with the United Nations LGBTI Core Group, regional human-rights monitoring bodies, and other partners to push for change so that queer people everywhere can live with dignity and free from violence. **Outright International donations** help provide humanitarian aid, safe housing, food for LGBTQ+ people in crisis, local community-center funding, and much more. [outrightinternational.org](https://www.outrightinternational.org)



## RAINBOW BLING

Don your holiday season pride with unique style and expression. The Rainbow Pride Ring is finely crafted by California-based Taylor Custom Rings to support the LGBTQ+ community—with 25 percent of sales donated to the Trans Lifeline, a peer-support hotline and non-profit community resource. Each ring flies the colors of love and courage using lab-grown gemstones that are identical to earth-grown diamonds, emeralds, sapphires, rubies, and other gems, but are more sustainable and affordable. The brand also offers a "Design Your Own Ring" option so you can customize their styles, or even reuse and redesign your own heirloom gems into new jewelry fashioned by Taylor's experts. \$930. [taylorcustomrings.com](https://www.taylorcustomrings.com)



## ELECTRIC PERSUASION - LEXUS RZ

Eager to dazzle your beloved with an unforgettable ride this holiday season? The **2026 Lexus RZ** is ready to rock the road. The new all-electric RZ features more power, greater range, and an overall experience designed around the driver. Enjoy boosted horsepower with all three models—FWD, AWD, and Sport AWD—with faster charging, and improved traction and driving stability. Along with the brand's quiet-ride design, the luxurious interior cabin is both minimalist and sophisticated, with options like the panorama glass roof, Ultrasuede door trim, aluminum pedals and footrests, and other posh details. Along with 11 monotone and bi-tone color options, this year introduces the exclusive new Wind shade of sleek metallic gray. Starting at \$47,295. [lexus.com](https://www.lexus.com)



## SOUNDS GOOD TO ME

Reduce the ruckus of travel with **Technics Noise Cancelling Over-Ear Headphones**. Built with the brand's legendary sound quality, these EAH-A800 wireless headphones feature true high-fidelity audio and crystal-clear call clarity thanks to their eight mics, JustMyVoice amplification, and Technics's wind- and noise-reduction technology. They're available in black and silver, and sport super-soft earpads that evenly distribute pressure for a stable fit, with a headband that reduces pressure across your entire head. There's no better way to relax into your own world of sparkling sounds. \$350. [us.technics.com](https://www.us.technics.com)



## DERRICK BYARS

DIRECTOR OF THEATER OPERATIONS APOLLO THEATER, NEW YORK CITY

by Marlene Fanta Shyer



Photo: Human Flower Productions

**T**hese days **Derrick Byars** (He/She/They) is to Harlem as a guitar is to its strings. The queer, 29-year old Black musician, now director of theater operations at the legendary Apollo Theater, has bonded with the city he hopes never to leave. “I always dreamed of coming to New York” he says, with the emphasis on “always.” He directs and produces a wide range of works, including opera, acrobatics, multi-media, Black America and its history, and much more. To him Harlem is not just a source of pride, but also his “artistic inspiration.”

Byars lives with his partner, Conrad Fox, an area manager of a jewelry company. They live in an apartment with a view of 125th Street, one of Harlem’s principal arteries. Nearby is the 125th Street train station, just one stop from Grand Central terminal, which

connects Harlem to the rest of New York City and its eastern suburbs. On an adjacent track, the Metro North trains lead passengers out of town along the Hudson River and its western neighbors.

**T**he Apollo Stages opened in 1914, at 253 West 125th Street where it has provided performance spaces devoted to serving the Black community since 1934. At first it was a burlesque house, evolving into a stage for jazz, swing, R&B, until it became known as a launchpad for future stars. It’s well known that historically marginalized performers had been unwelcome downtown for generations. In more recent years, it helped launch the careers of Black performers Michael Jackson, James Brown, and Stevie Wonder, among others.

The famous Amateur Night was intro-

duced 91 years ago and its popularity grew, attracting a greater, multiracial audience and introducing fresh talent. The contests continue to this day. It’s open to the public twice a year, submissions are offered online with entry fees ranging from \$22 to \$75, and there are three winners every Wednesday night. These winners continue to the semi-finals and finally to the last show of the season and its top performer, who takes home \$20,000. The first big winner was Ella Fitzgerald, whose trajectory into huge success is well known. Stardom for being victorious here is not a guarantee, nor is the judgment of the audience reliable. Both Dave Chappell and Lauryn Hill were booed off the stage early in their careers.

Apollo’s partner, the Victoria Theatre, burst on the scene as a refurbished, modernized, luxe new space in 2024. The addition,

two doors away, adds two theaters, a gallery, lobby, office spaces, and a posh lounge and restaurant. Once called Town Hall, the Victoria was the first Apollo renovation in ninety years. Presently the complex, with its combined capacity of over two thousand seats, has become the beating heart of Harlem entertainment. The Apollo is currently being renovated, but performances will continue in pop-up spaces until it reopens in 2026.

**B**yars came to New York City from his Huntsville, Alabama hometown in 2022. He arrived by way of the University of Alabama, where he'd majored in theatre and voice, followed by two years at the University of North Carolina in Charlotte, which had recruited him. He'd studied Black culture and when he finally made it to Harlem, living temporarily with his god sister (by definition, the daughter of his godmother). An only child, Byars felt fortunate to have the cushion of his college expenses provided without question. "I had a very happy childhood" he says. His parents, who were both accepting of his sexuality, supported his education without question and must have guessed early on that music was his destiny. He began playing piano at four on the family's upright and continued with lessons his godmother provided eight years later.

**P**laying the organ was another skill, helpful at his other New York City job, where he is currently Director of Music Ministry at the West End Collegiate Church. Here he plans concerts, art installations, conducts the sanctuary choir and the West End community chorus. His favorite hymn? "Holy, Holy, Holy." It's a crowd pleaser! he laughs. Built in 1892, West Collegiate is the oldest Protestant Church with a continuing organization in America. It's also proudly multi-ethnic and multilingual, and its Dutch-influenced architecture, authenticity, carved pulpit chairs, and three Tiffany windows have helped put it into the National Register of Historic Places. The church is on West End Avenue at 77th Street, about a mile and a half south of Harlem.

But where exactly is Harlem? Its boundaries run approximately from 110th Street to 155th on the north and Fifth Avenue on the east to the Hudson River on the west. Within these approximate borders, there are sub-neighborhoods: East, West and Central Harlem, each with its own character, vibe, and points of interest. Both East and West Harlem are magnets for new arrivals and often attract Broadway actors.

**T**he Apollo is in Central Harlem, its most historic area, which is home of jazz clubs, trendy cocktail bars, and Baptist churches. It is also famous for Strivers' Row, once the 19th century's exclusive suburban enclave for New York's rich white population. At West 138th and 139th Streets is a stretch of Harlem's most elegant residences, now selling in the millions of dollars, its racial population mixed.

East Harlem is often called El Barrio and is known for its Dominican vibe, Salsa music, spicy Mexican cuisine, and Puerto Rican demographic. There are also remnants of Italian culture, since early in the last century many Italian immigrants settled here. Rao's is an iconic small restaurant with a big reputation for excellent authentic Italian food, but unless you're a cousin of the new Pope, you'll find it hard to get a reservation.

Easier access is to Lido, Derrick Byars's favorite restaurant. Whether dining outdoors or indoors, its Italian dishes are

made in house by its award-winning chef. It's on Harlem's Restaurant Row at 2168 Frederick Douglass Boulevard. He also likes Maison Harlem at 341 St. Nicholas Avenue. It's cozy and quaint, and of course, French. The *coq au vin*, c'est bon.

A nearby gay bar? It's 4West Lounge at 127th Street and Frederick Douglass Boulevard. Curated events, mango jerk chicken, and new friends are celebrated evenings here.

The eagerly awaited Studio Museum will be added to Harlem's attractions soon. Originally opened in 1968, some of its original works and many new ones will be exhibited in a grand new building, at 144 West 125th Street. The works of Tom Lloyd will highlight its opening late in 2025 along with the new pieces, all chosen in keeping with the museum's mission: the art must be created by artists with African backgrounds.

Very likely, Derrick Byars will be at the museum's opening. He's pretty much everywhere nowadays. Harlem is his town now. ■



Photo: Human Flower Productions

## BUFFALO, NEW YORK

by Jeff Heilman

Associated with paralyzing winters, post-industrial decline, and football fans famed for body-slammng folding tables, Buffalo might seem hard-edged and possibly unhinged. Think again. This reenergized Rust Belt city is an irrepressibly cheerful hub of open-arms hospitality with a much-evolved culinary scene. Founded in 1832 on Lake Erie's far eastern shores, New York's second most-populous metro, the "City of Good Neighbors" wined and dined me like I was family.

Other bright monikers include The City of Light, after hydroelectric power from nearby Niagara Falls illuminated Buffalo in 1896. Decade ago, celebrated local graphic artist and printmaker Michael Morgulis popularized "The City of No Illusions" as a nod to Buffalo's no-nonsense sense of optimism in the face of adversity.

Once an economic powerhouse, Buffalo's original nickname was "Queen City of the Great Lakes." Today, Queen City is home to a strong citywide LGBTQ community centered in two historic neighborhoods, trendy Elmwood Village, and bohemian Allentown. Architectural masterpieces abound, including six-plus Frank Lloyd Wright projects and City Hall, an Art Deco confection crowned with a public observation deck.

I'll add to the canon, the "City of Great Eats." Long founded on homegrown icons, including the eponymous chicken wing and roast beef on a kummelweck roll, or the beef on weck sandwich, Buffalo's updated culinary identity includes two James Beard-nominated restaurants and eclectic global cuisine.

As Visit Buffalo's new "That's Buffalo For You" tourism marketing campaign emphasizes, the food scene is "Refreshingly Spicy," with revelations at every turn.

The expression "Historically New," describes Buffalo's restored landmarks, including the former Buffalo State Asylum for the Insane. Opened in 1880 on grounds landscaped by the legendary Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, the



Buffalo, New York Skyline

Photo: Sean Pavone

monumental sandstone edifice, with two wings fanning out from its twin-towered core, was architect Henry Hobson Richardson's largest commission and first example of his eponymous Romanesque Revival style.

Mothballed in the 1970's, the National Historic Landmark, one of eight in Buffalo, was reborn as the 88-room **Richardson Hotel** (444 Forest Avenue. Tel. 716-493-2610. richardsonhotel-buffalo.com) following a \$100 million transformation.

The four-star hotel's corridors, staircases, and other expansive interiors—including my sun-drenched two-story room—foster the purpose-designed atmosphere of peace and calm, with the convivial lobby bar picking up the tempo. Set on the 42-acre Richardson Olmsted campus, the hotel is an anchor of the adjacent cultural district where the **Buffalo AKG Art Museum** (1285 Elmwood Ave. Tel. 716-882-8700), with its world-class collection of 20th century painting and sculpture, dazzles following a \$230 million transformation.

Like many Buffalonians, the friendly and engaging Richardson staffers were dialed into the culinary scene and shared a host

of restaurant and gay bar recommendations, including Allentown neighbors **Beacon Grille** (185 Allen St. Tel. 716-413-3630. beaongrille716.com), and **Fugazi** (503 Franklin St. Tel. 716-881-3588. facebook.com/fugazi.buffalo/#).

The former, a wood-fired concept opened in 2024 by married restaurateurs Amanda and Bruce Wieszala, summons diners with beacons such as the signature Smoked Manhattan cocktail and well-organized menu of globally-inspired small and large plates. Served with Spanish olive oil tortas and a tangy salsa of sultanas and caperberries, the marinated Spanish sardines were a zesty prelude to the charred octopus with paella rice and Berkshire pork chop with grilled peaches and roasted corn.

Nearby Fugazi is an established watering hole with friendly bartenders renowned for its menu of 100-plus Martinis such as Orange Chocolate, Pistachio, and Watermelon.

Other popular Allentown gay bars include 26, The Underground Nightclub, and funky, no-frills dive **Frizzys** (140 Allen St. Tel. 716-883-5077. facebook.com/frizzys) for high-octane booze and late-night dancing and drag.

**T**orched by the British in 1814, Buffalo's fortunes turned in 1825 when the village became the western terminus of the Erie Canal. Enabling the movement of goods between the East Coast and the Midwest, this set Buffalo up for global supremacy in the transshipment of grain.

In 1842, local merchant Joseph Dart built the world's first grain elevator. Subject to fiery explosions, his steam-powered wooden design gave way to steel bins and then reinforced concrete. By 1924, the elevator complexes along Buffalo's inner and outer harbors led the world in grain handling, peaking in the 1940's before declining in the 1970's. Today, these behemoths, in varying states of abandonment and revitalization, form Elevator Alley, an eye-popping wonderland that also serves as an epic backdrop for memorable dining and drinking experiences.

Located by the Michigan Avenue Lift Bridge, which crosses the Buffalo River into Elevator Alley, **Ballyhoo** (211 South Park Avenue. Tel. 716-240-9901. buffaloballyhoo.com) is an authentic old-school tavern serving homemade sausages, craft beers, and cocktails, from well-executed classics to Jam Sessions, spirits mixed with jams. Seated outside wolfing down the TJ Dawg link of chorizo pork and bacon, my nostrils filled with Buffalo's hallmark aroma: Cheerios. The source, across the bridge, is the historic General Mills plant that has sweetened the air with the smell of toasted oats since 194 when Cheerios launched as Cheerioats. "My city smells like Cheerios" is another badge of local pride. Buffalo remains a milling capital, with 18-wheelers and freight trains cycling in and out of the plant evoking the thunder of the port's glory days.

Nestled among grain silos, **Wonder**

**Coffeehouse Downtown** (323 Ganson St. Tel. 716-844-8134. wondercoffeehouse.com) is an inviting spot for coffee and scratch-made waffles on the way to Silo City. Featuring three silo clusters on 14 acres, this transporting quarter has been reimaged as a cultural event destination with its own must-visit restaurant-bar, **Duende** (85 Silo City Row. Tel. 716-235-8380. duendesilo.city).

Named for the Spanish word for "soul of an artist" and housed in a former flour company office, the main tavern is furnished with repurposed materials and serves tasty pub fare. There's live music inside (a jazz band played during my visit) and a second bar outside in a former garage. The urban refuge includes an outdoor performance stage and gate-like "The Door to Nowhere" leading to a wild field.

Upholding Buffalo's grain milling tradition, **Miller's Thumb Bakery & Café** (258 Highland Parkway. Tel. 716-364-6362. millerthumbbakery.com/home) in Tonawanda, a town in metro Buffalo, makes and serves fresh traditional and naturally-leavened European-inspired breads, bagels, and pastries onsite. "Worth a miller's thumb" refers to the practice of repeatedly thumbing the flour to ensure its superior quality. I bought loaves to go and The Commuter, a hearty sandwich of egg, bacon, and cheese on sourdough bread, at this inviting locals' breakfast and lunch favorite, which features a wall-sized mural depicting the history of Buffalo's grain elevators.

**B**y most accounts, 19th-century German immigrant William Wahr gets credit for the kummelweck roll, a salty, caraway-seed crusted creation inspired by German ceremonial breads. Pub owners reputedly served the roll to

keep patrons thirsty. The kummelweck was later baked into Buffalo lore as the foundation the "beef on weck" sandwich: slow-roasted, hand-carved roast beef with enough horseradish "to make you sneeze," served with au jus dip.

My introduction to Buffalo's original culinary icon the "Boeuf on Weck" at **Moriarty Meats** (1650 Elmwood Ave. Tel. 716-239-8465. moriartymeats.com) ruined me for any other version. Atypically served cold with horseradish mayonnaise, it was one of the most satisfying sandwiches I have ever eaten. I want one right now.

Trained at France's premier butchery academy, L'école Nationale Supérieure des Métiers de la Viande, and at Spain's prestigious La Escuela de Hostelería de Leioa, Tom Moriarity opened his eponymous butcher shop-café with his wife and business partner Caitlin in 2018. Inspired by the couple's travels, the place, as intended, feels like a step into a small European neighborhood shop.

The couple and staff are welcoming hosts, and with other savory menu items and chalkboard specials, including fish, salad, and Basque-style tapas, or pintxos, I'd lunch there daily. Now I really need that Boeuf on Weck.

**A** blessing from *Texas Monthly's* celebrated barbecue editor Daniel Vaughn is as good as gold. In 2024, Vaughn tried out 149 establishments in 37 states for his inaugural "United States of Texas Barbecue" list of the best Texas-style joints outside of the Lone Star State. His seals of approval included Buffalo's **Southern Junction** (365 Connecticut Street. Tel. 716-262-0575. southernjunction716.com), in sixth place.



Allentown Mural



Swan Street Diner

Photo: Jeff Heilman

Photo: Jeff Heilman



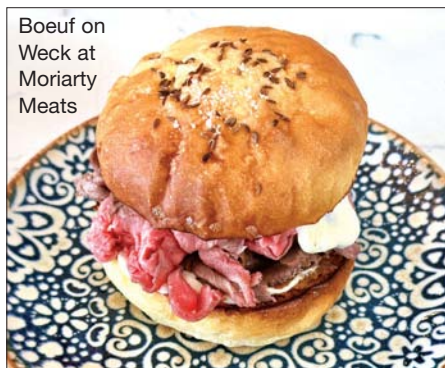
Chef Ryan Fernandez at Southern Junction

Photo: Jeff Heilman



Southern Junction

Photo: Sharon Cantillon



Boeuf on Weck at Moriarty Meats

Photo: Jeff Heilman



Sausages and Beer

Photo: Igor Normann

Born in southern India and raised in Plano, Texas, Chef Ryan Fernandez's fusion of his two worlds earned him James Beard finalist honors in 2024 for Best Emerging Chef. This year, he was a semifinalist for Best Chef: New York State.

Indian and Texan influences retain their identity while creating harmonious new tastes in signature dishes like the barbecury beef, smoked beef shoulder with curry leaves, and house-made Indian spice blend; the Brisket Biryani of Basmati rice with chopped brisket and house sauce; and cardamom-infused cornbread.

His West Side "Texish Smokehouse" feels airlifted from Austin, starting with first-come, first-served Texas-style service. Fernandez smokes seven meats daily that all go quickly. So, line up early to get your meat and sides on a classic papered tray. There's indoor and outdoor seating, including a covered patio and picnic tables. Or mosey up to the bar for cold Shiner beer from Texas. I liked it so much I went twice. As Vaughn posted of Southern Junction: This was his "entire reason for coming to Buffalo, and they made it worth the trip."

In the historic Black Rock neighborhood, stylish wine-driven **Waxlight Bar à Vin** (27 Chandler St. waxlightbaravin.com) was a Beard semi-finalist for "Outstanding Wine and Other Beverages Program" for the past three years.

The chef-sommelier team brings serious

domestic and international credentials to an inventive daily tasting menu and sophisticated wine selections. My nightcap of a Rabigato, a rare white grape known for its acid and structure, and grown in Portugal's ancient Douro Valley region, was a fruity, peppery pleasure.

Other Black Rock standouts include communal **Raha Coffee House** (370 Amherst St. Tel. 716-615-5555. rahacoffeehouse.com) for Yemeni-style coffee, and casual-upscale locals favorite **The Dapper Goose** (491 Amherst St. Tel. 716-551-0716. thedappergoose.com).

The latter's owner, Keith Raimondi, who made his name as a bartender in Philadelphia before returning home, delivers well-prepared locally-sourced dishes, including my tempura-style cauliflower with Green Goddess dressing, ricotta toast with blueberries, and fettuccini with lump crab and sweet corn. Exceptional cocktails include Broken Garden Tools, a proper thirst-quencher of gin, celery, parsley, lemon, Moroccan spice, and black pepper.

I love vintage diners, and Buffalo has a barrel-vaulted, porcelain-tiled, mahogany-trimmed beauty in **Swan Street Diner** (700 Swan Street. swanstree diner.com), where house-made mini-donuts headline classic breakfast and lunch fare. Seated at the counter in this restored 1937 diner car, I chatted with general manager and cook Amanda Amico. The local restaurant veteran spoke of the vibrancy of Buffalo's LGBTQ community, Swan Street's commitment to inclusive hiring, and celebrating Pride with her wife. It was a fitting "swan song" to my first taste of Buffalo, knowing that I had just scratched the surface of the culinary scene.

As a chicken wing aficionado, I sacrilegiously missed The Anchor Bar, the presumed birthplace, in 1964, of Buffalo's signature food item. I also skipped Watson's chocolatiers (1946) in Elmwood Village, a historic vendor of Buffalo's famed sponge candy, and remain unanointed in the rum- and brandy-infused Tom and Jerry cocktail.

Locals I met raved about Italian-inspired restaurant and cocktail bar Roseland's Atlas in the Five Points neighborhood, where you'll also find Paradise Wine is an LGBTQ-owned natural wine shop and bar. It's always good to leave hungry, and I'd go back in a heartbeat. ■

## TAKE A MINI-VACATION AT A TIKI BAR

by Jeff Heilman



Photo: Vladimir Kolens

**T**he well-groomed Delaware River town of Stockton, New Jersey may seem an unlikely place to let your hair down in a Hawaiian shirt and lei, but such was my night of revelry at the **Stockton Inn's** (1 S. Main Street. Tel. 609-460-4209. [stocktoninn.com](http://stocktoninn.com)) "Tiki Takeover" event this past summer.

Built in 1710 and relaunched last year, the high-end Inn itself is steeped in lore, including operating as a speakeasy during Prohibition. F. Scott Fitzgerald and Jackie Kennedy Onassis slept here, and Margaret Mitchel penned part of *Gone With the Wind* within the Inn's stone walls.

Executive Chef Bob Truitt, a James Beard semifinalist who previously worked alongside such greats as Stephen Starr in Philadelphia and Ferran Adria in Spain, oversees the fine-dining and lively tavern-style concepts at this nine-room heirloom.

From his decorated run as head bartender

at NYC's celebrated Death & Company to serving as Tanqueray's first NYC Brand Ambassador, Beverage Director "Captain" Brian Miller brings star credentials to the bar program, including his pioneering role in Tiki's modern-day renaissance.

Now at the Stockton Inn for "a new challenge," the self-styled pirate put on a master class in curating the Tiki Takeover. Attracting a festive crowd to the Inn's outdoor Terrace event space, it was a fitting title for this American pop culture icon's return to prominence.

**T**iki drinks are complex constructions. I counted eight ingredients as Miller made my Tahitian Rum Punch. "Here is one of the many reasons that Ernest Raymond Beaumont Gantt is the Don of Tiki," he said as he handed me his liquid work of art.

Going as Donn Beach, Gantt was the New Orleans-born globetrotter and deco-

rated WW2 hero who launched Tiki culture in 1934 at his Don the Beachcomber bar in Hollywood, California. The Tahitian Rum Punch was among his original "rum rhapsodies" along with the Zombie, Navy Grog, and flaming Volcano Bowl.

"Who is Jeff Berry?" I asked, seeing the name credited with several cocktails on the menu. "Jeff is the guy whose book *Grog Log* ignited my passion for rum and tiki cocktails and changed my life and career forever," replied Miller. "And he is standing right behind you."

Dubbed "the Indiana Jones of Tiki drinks" by the *New York Times*, "Beachbum" Berr singlehandedly sparked the modern revival of Tiki drinks. "Gantt set the standard for the tiki bar, along with Trader Vic's founder Victor "The Trader" Bergeron Jr.," said Berry, who caught Tiki fever at age ten, in 1968, at a family dinner at Ah Fong's restaurant in the San Fernando Valley. "I was too young to drink, obviously,

but loved the atmosphere and décor,” he recalled. “Tiki became a quest.”

Exclusive and expensive, the original Tiki wave attracted Hollywood elite, socialites, and royalty, including Queen Elizabeth II who visited Trader Vic’s in San Francisco. Even as Tiki faded into a perceived “tackiness,” Berry, who graduated from UCLA film school into a career as a journalist and Hollywood screenwriter, never lost his enchantment with the culture.

In 1991, Berry and his future wife Annene, whom he courted at the former Trader Vic’s in Beverly Hills, became “cocktail archeologists” as they began locating and reverse-engineering long lost, infamously well-guarded Tiki drink recipes. They also collected menus, coasters, and other historic Tiki memorabilia and artifacts.

Berry has since channeled his research into seven immersive books on vintage tropical drinks, including *Grog Log* in 1998 and *Intoxical!*, his follow-up volume with more “lost” recipes from Tiki’s mid-century golden age. He also pours his energy into **Latitude 29** (321 N. Peters Street. Tel. 504-609-3811. latitude29nola.com), his Tiki bar in New Orleans.

Serving classics like the Navy Grog, Frank Sinatra’s favorite Tiki drink, alongside his own “Latitude 29” of eight-year Demerara rum, passion fruit purée, custom Madagascar vanilla syrup, orange, pineapple, and lemon, Berry credits Miller, his bartending “guru and mentor,” for his spearhead role in the Tiki turnaround.

“Brian brought Tiki onto the NYC craft cocktail scene when bartenders, thinking that Tiki meant syrupy, slushy, cheap cruise ship drinks, saw it as everything they were fighting against,” he said. “It took Brian, developing recipes from my books, to show them that these were the craft cocktails of the 1930’s and 1940’s.”

The “Tiki Takeover” has since gone nationwide. “The tide turned and now everybody is crafting Tiki drinks,” continued Berry. “I’ve lost track of the new openings.”

While their ranks are diminished, vintage Tike venues maintain the standard amid the wave of newcomers. Berry’s old school favorites include **Trader Vic’s** in Emeryville, California (Tel. 510-653-3400. tradervicsemerlyville.com). “This 1972 original has kept its luster while adapting to the times,”

Berry said. “With Eve Bergeron, Vic’s granddaughter, keeping his legacy alive, the revamped space is gorgeous.”

Overlooking San Francisco Bay, the bar’s calling cards include the Mai Tai. Created by Bergeron in 1944 with the exclamation, “It’s mai tai roa ae!” (Tahitian for “out of this world, the best!”), this mix of light Martinique rum and dark Jamaican rum with orange Curaçao, orgeat and rock candy syrups, and lime juice remains a timeless Tiki icon.



**Tonga Room & Hurricane Bar** (950 Mason Street. Tel. 415.772.5278. fairmont-san-francisco.com/dine/tonga-room-hurricane-bar) at the Fairmont San Francisco is among my all-time favorites. In 1945, MGM set designer Mel Melvin transformed the hotel’s historic 1929 indoor swimming pool into the S.S. Tonga, an Art Deco cruise liner-themed restaurant. Renamed the Tonga Room, this Tiki wonderland is a must-visit for live entertainment, rain and thunder effects, exotic cocktails, and Polynesian-fusion fare.

Other West Coast heirlooms include L.A.’s third-generation family-run **Tiki-Ti** (4427 Sunset Boulevard. Tel. 323-669-9381. tiki-ti.com), from 1961. Opened in 1958, **The Tonga Hut** (12808 Victory Blvd., North Hollywood. tongahut.com) is L.A.’s oldest surviving Tiki bar, with a second location in Palm Springs.

Housed inside Chicago’s Three Dots and a Dash restaurant, **The Bamboo**

**Room** (435 N. Clark St. Tel. 312-610-4220. threedotschicago.com/the-bamboo-room) is a nationally acclaimed boutique Tiki oasis focused on rum (molasses-derived) and rum (sugarcane) drinks.

Savannah’s historic Ellis Square (1733) features the oldest continuously operating commercial structure in Georgia, the 1809 Gibbons Range Building. Expanded eight-fold over time, the landmark today houses oyster and cocktail bar **Sorry Charlie’s** (116 West Congress St. Tel. 912-234-5397. sorrycharlies.com), and **Bamboo Room Tiki Bar** (bambooroomtikibar.com), where elaborate interiors created by prominent Georgia-based Tiki designers Dave “Basement Kahuna” Wolfe and Jim “Woodland Giant” Stacey set an exotic stage for Tiki classics like the Mai Tai and Zombie.

Moving south to sunny Florida, **Mai-Kai** (3599 N Federal Hwy. Tel. 954-563-3272. maikai.com) is an exalted grande dame in Fort Lauderdale. “Opened in 1956, Mai-Kai, quite simply, is the mother ship,” said Berry. Introduced in 1961, the venue’s nightly Polynesian Islander Revue is the longest running Polynesian dance show in the U.S., including Hawaii.

Greater Boston, a Tiki hub for decades, provided my Tiki initiation, in 1985, at **Hong Kong Restaurant** (1238 Mass Ave., Cambridge MA. Tel. 617-864-5311. hongkongharvard.com). Founded in 1954 by the Lee family, this three-floor Harvard Square institution is the birthplace of the intoxicating Scorpion Bowl, a secret family recipe of rum and juices shared with long straws. Regarded as a rite of passage for generations of college students and other revelers, Hong Kong has a second karaoke-driven location by historic Faneuil Hall.

“Blending the spirit of American Chinese restaurants with the escapism of classic Tiki bars,” nearby **Wusong Road** (112 Mt. Auburn St., Cambridge, MA. Tel. 617-528-9125. wusongroad.com) offers an atmospheric setting for tropical cocktails in custom Tiki mugs, as well as delicious bites, including hand-folded Maryland blue crab rangoons.

Other Boston mainstays include massive **Kowloon Restaurant** (948 Broadway. Tel. 781-233-0077. kowloonrestaurant.com) in suburban Saugus, MA. Turning 75 this year, the 1,200-seat palace may be scaled down in the future.

Photo: P. Moss

Photo: Jeff Heilman

In New York City, where I had my second Scorpion Bowl experience at the former Trader Vic's in the basement of the Plaza Hotel, my go-to these days is **Otto's Shrunken Head** (538 E. 14th St. Tel. 212-228-2240. [ottosshrunkenhead.com](http://ottosshrunkenhead.com)), a rocking East Village joint since 2002 with cool Tiki mugs and stiff drinks to match.

Setting the transporting Tiki aesthetic of thatched roofs, bamboo furniture, Polynesian-inspired artwork, Tiki torches, and other décor, Donn Beach branched out to NYC, Palm Springs, and other hotspots, including Las Vegas in 1963 at the Sahara, following the 1960 opening of fabled *Aku Aku* (1960) at the former Stardust.

Named after Thor Heyerdahl's book *Aku-Aku: The Secret of Easter Island*, the restaurant and its Moai statues, carved from volcanic rock quarried in northern Nevada, became a symbol of Vegas itself. Remembered as "the original Beachcomber," principal carver Eli Hedley made his name as a driftwood artist in L.A. and on projects like the Enchanted Tiki Room at Disneyland.

With the main 30-foot statue now residing on an island in Vegas's Sunset Park, Hedley's grandson, "Bamboo Ben" Bassham, carries on his legacy as a globally renowned Tiki bar designer. His local projects include another personal go-to, **Frankie's Tiki Bar** (1712 West Charleston

Blvd. Las Vegas. Tel. 702-385-3110. [frankiestikiroom.com](http://frankiestikiroom.com))

Opened in 2008 by author-musician P. Moss, this Downtown oasis near Las Vegas Boulevard kicked off the Vegas Tiki revival. Updating the 1950s-era Frankie's Bar & Cocktail Lounge, the 24/7 venue's pink neon and giant arched entrance is the gateway to elaborate South Seas interiors, classic and custom drinks rated from one to five skulls for their potency, and for around \$39, souvenir Tiki mugs.

In 2015, another Tiki aficionado, Branden Powers, amped Vegas's Tiki appeal with **The Golden Tiki** (3939 Spring Mountain Rd. Las Vegas. Tel. 702-222-3196. [thegoldentiki.com](http://thegoldentiki.com)) in Chinatown. After falling into Tiki "paradise" at San Diego's former Hanalei Hotel, Powers went all out in creating his exuberant 24-hour "adult Disneyland" of shrunken celebrity heads, giant clam waterfalls, pornographic peepholes, and knock-out cocktails like The Painkiller.

Other Tiki revival pioneers and preservationists include Bosko Hrnjak, who critically revived Tiki sculptural, ceramic, and other art forms in the 1980's. Sven Kirsten's 2001 *The Book of Tiki* is considered the bible of Tiki culture, design, and architecture. Launched in 2001 by Otto and Baby Doe von Stroheim, **Tiki Oasis** ([tikioasis.com](http://tikioasis.com)) celebrated its 25th anniversary this year at San Diego's historic Town and Country Resort as the world's largest Tiki festival.

"Tiki has always flourished in tumultuous times as a form of escapism," said Berry. "Launched in the Great Depression, Tiki surged again during WW2 and the Atomic Age. The romance then faded with the late 60's counterculture (Tiki was for squares) and ended with the Vietnam War. Now we are in another existential crisis, and Tiki is booming again."

At heart, Tiki culture is light-hearted fun. "My friend and cocktail expert Robert Hess pegged Tiki as a mini-vacation," Berry said. "That combination of drinks, décor, and atmosphere is like an escape to the beach for an hour or two."

Miller embraces Tiki's "tribal" culture. "Tiki has given me a family of friends that I treasure to this day," he said. "The people, places, and history are part of me. Give me rum and happiness, throw in a beach and sunset, and I desire little more." ■



Jeff Beachbum Berry

Photo: Randy Schmidt

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