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## As Global Tourism Rebounds, Who Controls the Narrative for LGBTQ+ Travel?

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Copenhagen Pride (2018) (Source:Tobias Jørgensen)

For 10 days this month, Copenhagen is the center of the LGBTQ+ universe. The Danish capital is co-hosting both WorldPride and the EuroGames as the "**Copenhagen 2021**" celebration, August 10-22. It may seem like the famously progressive, LGBTQ-friendly destination is a natural fit for such an undertaking.

But the city devoted years of planning to build the massive event. For years, local leaders put in "a lot of thought and soul searching" even to consider bidding on WorldPride and EuroGames, says Steve Taylor, Copenhagen 2021's Director of Communications & Marketing.

A tipping point — not only for Copenhagen but its co-hosting city of Malmö, Sweden, across the Oresund strait — was the opportunity to celebrate and share their local cultures with the world. Attendees can immerse themselves in a breadth of LGBTQ+ experiences from human-rights forums, sports competitions and cultural exhibitions, to Pride festivities and local queer history. The global events prove that the worldwide LGBTQ+ community is both united and also exhibits other intersectional identities.

But on the nitty-gritty practical side, some may wonder if the destinations are out to build community, or build tourist traffic and some kroner. It's a complex question, and in the case of Denmark and Sweden, all of the above. After all, tourism is a massive economic engine.

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Many hotel, airline, cruise, and tourism companies already know this and use it for niche marketing. [Alaska Airlines](#) recently revealed its Pride-themed livery, while Marriott International's former CEO, the late Arne Sorenson, was known industry wide for his [LGBTQ+ and equality initiatives](#). But destinations don't always get it. Some believe that Pride is a holiday that comes once a year, after which their local rainbow banners and LGBTQ+ support vanish as quickly as Christmas carols on December 26.

It's undeniable that LGBTQ+ travelers are avid and adventurous. In a recent [LGBTQ+ post-COVID travel survey](#) by the International LGBTQ+ Tourism Association (IGLTA), 73 percent of LGBTQ+ travelers said that they were planning to dive back into travel with major vacations in 2021.

They're as eager to visit a beloved queer locale as a not-so-gay-friendly place that's home to world wonders, according to a 2017 World Tourism Organization report. And whether or not they are affluent, they will spend money for the right trip. A [2019 report by Out Now Consulting](#) showed that LGBTQ+ Americans spent \$63.1 billion on travel in 2018, a figure that also was high in the United Kingdom and Brazil.

Destinations that welcome LGBTQ+ travelers may be pursuing the "pink dollar." What many don't realize is that the smarter investment is in authenticity, and the real payout is long-term loyalty among one of the [fastest-growing markets](#) in the global travel industry. The challenge of authenticity, however, depends on whether LGBTQ+ inclusivity is intrinsic to a destination's culture — and if equality is reflected on local, state or national levels.

## Who Decides Where to Go





The magic of travel starts with the obvious: Figure out where you want to go, then make plans. But there's an ecosystem of tourism and hospitality that's likely swaying each part of your decision-making process, especially for LGBTQ+ travelers.

And those travel choices are plentiful. Cities like [San Francisco](#), [Miami](#) and [New York City](#) beckon as queer hotspots because of their high concentration of LGBTQ+ locals and nightlife. There are attractions with special "[Gay Days](#)," and locations with niche theme weeks (think [Carnival in Provincetown](#)). There are timeless destinations where majestic sights outweigh risk of prejudice. And of course, there are Pride celebrations that transform a city into a premier LGBTQ+ destination — at least for a weekend.

LGBTQ-specific travel companies like Out Adventures, Olivia Travel, and [VACAYA](#) serve as an easy way to travel pod-like among fellow queers to predetermined locales, whether in small or large groups. For some, they can offer safety, community, and freedom in a way solo trips cannot.

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These are just a few examples of the tendrils of tourism that inevitably impact your travel planning. Only, who's pulling the strings? Should you care if local officials genuinely support the LGBTQ+ community, or if the larger government opposes or even outlaws LGBTQ+ civil liberties?

In today's volatile political climates, even the safest destinations are making some LGBTQ+ travelers wary. Earlier this year, Mexican police in Tulum [arrested a vacationing gay couple](#) for kissing on the beach, while in Sacramento (which boasts an [LGBTQ+ landing page](#) on its tourism site), a guest at the Kimpton Sawyer hotel [verbally harassed](#) two women kissing in the pool.

### The Taxonomy of Travel Funding



(Source: Getty Images)

The U.S. tourism industry has layers, which sometimes overlap. On the smallest scale, a neighborhood, attraction, or business association might want to draw tourists. Next up are city convention and visitor bureaus (CVBs), which exist to attract big-dollar conventions, though they also pursue individual and group travelers.

States, and sometimes regions, promote their attractions and cities, especially cities that don't have their own CVBs or tourism departments.

Counties and parishes can produce their own tourism marketing, too. Since 2009, America as a whole is promoted through a nationwide destination-marketing

organization called **Brand USA**.

Each tier is its own operation. At the city level, hotel taxes, sponsorships, and other resources usually fund CVBs and their initiatives. Some form of taxes funds most tourism organizations, though private partnerships and other public-private joint ventures can subsidize tourism promotions. In return, a hotel or attraction might pay additional promotional funds to showcase their properties within the general destination.

For every layer in the tourism hierarchy, decision-making gets more complex, especially when marketers narrow down their target audiences. Priorities of one department or bureau may not match another's. A new generation of influencers and digital creators are also making an impact, blurring the lines between destination coverage and paid social media placements to elevate destinations as LGBTQ-friendly, but also using their platforms for greater industry transparency and equality.



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But above all, when it comes to marketing to our community, LGBTQ+ travel experts say authenticity is everything.

"The LGBTQ+ travel market, of course, is huge financially. But we're part of the community," says John Tanzella, IGLTA president and CEO. "So supporting all the diversity in local communities is hugely important for the government and for a tourism office. Because there's a 'halo effect,' where you not only get LGBTQ+ travelers, but you get people who are open-minded and believe that diversity is important. That it is the world, it is reality. And it's the right thing to do. It's smart business, it's supporting local stakeholders and the community."

Tanzella believes that halo effect also works the opposite way, when cities, states, or nations pass restrictive or anti-LGBTQ+ laws. Travelers may intentionally or instinctively avoid destinations where they might suffer homophobia or safety risks.

Queer travelers may be inclined to boycott states that have passed anti-LGBTQ+ legislation; or nations where homosexuality is illegal. But while boycotts can serve as form of protest, they could disenfranchise those who are already getting left behind due to racism, economics, or identity.

"[IGLTA doesn't] condone boycotts, because we're a tourism association, and by boycotting a destination it typically hurts the community were trying to support," says Tanzella. "And I don't know that [travel] boycotts really make a difference. In the long run, I think it's better to be present, be visible, and be loud."

### American Cities: Blue Dots in Red States

Count on travel to be ever-changing. Its tides can turn with every shift of leadership. Remember the **devastating impacts** of the Trump administration on America's transgender rights?





(Source: gotolouisville.com)

Department announced plans to revise passport laws to include three different gender categories.

Other national equity and diversity policies are also **in the works** under U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg's leadership, including safety for LGBTQ+ travelers, more accessible public transportation, and removal of **discriminatory TSA policies** that in particular affect trans, intersex, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming travelers.

In America, various tourism layers often reflect the politics of city vs. state. In socially conservative Kentucky, LGBTQ+ travelers may be surprisingly comfortable in Louisville. The city hosts both a local Pride and Kentuckiana Pride, is home to several gay clubs, and is considered one of the **most underrated LGBTQ-friendly U.S. cities**.

Few Americans would consider the state of Kentucky a hotspot for queer travelers. Yet, Louisville's tourism arm runs an LGBTQ+ Hospitality Taskforce, hosts biannual LGBTQ-centric diversity-inclusivity trainings for local businesses, advertises in queer publications, and hosts its own **LGBTQ Louisville** page.

Atlanta, Kansas City, **Fort Lauderdale**, Salt Lake City, and other progressive cities within conservative states operate similarly to Louisville — often with larger tourism budgets than the entire state, a benefit of hotel "bed tax" structures and steady urban funding. It's not uncommon for those cities to market to LGBTQ+ travelers no matter their statewide politics, though they may find it harder to stand out as a gay-friendly destinations.

In Utah, Salt Lake City tourism has worked hard to redefine its community independent of the state's conservatism, even devoting resources to reposition the city's religious reputation.

"Salt Lake City is a good example [of a city that's doing something different from the state]," says Tanzella. "They do some great marketing for our community. And what's the state of Utah? One of the most conservative states in the country. But the city's LGBTQ+ campaign now is very creative, and their advertising is provocative, even though they're in Utah."



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disabilities also have found the importance of dedicated diversity teams. In Atlanta, the Mayor's Office of Equity, Diversity & Inclusion actively works to build a "safe and welcoming city." It's helped score Atlanta a perfect 100 on the Human Rights Campaign [Municipal Equality Index](#), while earning the city hosting rights for the 2021 IGLTA convention this September despite the call for state boycotts due to Georgia's [new voting laws](#).

Many more U.S. cities dedicate staff to prioritize LGBTQ+ and other diversity issues, like Salt Lake City's three-person equity and inclusion team, and Fort Lauderdale's Vice President of Diversity, Equity & Inclusion, Richard Gray.

For Gray, elevating outreach and inclusion for all the letters of the LGBTQ+ acronym is vital. It's also central to Visit Lauderdale's initiatives welcoming transgender travelers specifically through tourism research, advertising, and events.

"We're a very progressive, diverse and inclusive county," says Gray. "We are very forward-thinking and aren't scared to push the envelope in our marketing initiatives. Greater Fort Lauderdale is dedicated to being a destination where all people are welcomed."

## Diversity Travels Abroad



Around the world, leadership changes also can lead to drastic reversals in politics, followed by painful ramifications to social progress.



in 2019, Brazil's national politics overshadowed the longstanding dedication to diversity on local and state levels. Bolsonaro even went so far **to declare**, "We can't let this place become known as a gay tourism paradise."

Yet Bolsonaro doesn't pull all the strings. In 2020, Brazil's top court **overturned** the ban on gay men donating blood. More recently, the **president stayed silent** as the country's Black, female and LGBTQ+ athletes brought home a record-breaking number of Olympic medals, proving to the world that Brazil is more than its conservative leader.

Still, Leandro Aragonez, IGLTA fulfillment coordinator in Brazil, believes that the current administration's anti-LGBTQ+ position has had adverse effects. "I was a consultant for the Brazilian Tourist Board under a previous government, and it is clear that the worldwide reputation of Brazil about being an LGBTQ-friendly place to visit has changed," he says.

Aragonez works with IGLTA Brazilian Membership Coordinator Clovis Casemiro, who says local tourism operators have spent more than two decades courting LGBTQ+ tourists, saying, "IGLTA members in Brazil are the second largest number of members in the world, showing our resilience and focus on our Brazilian LGBTQ+ tourists and the foreigners who visit us."

Casemiro says the on-the-ground work with Brazil's 26 states and several key cities ensure stability through federal changes in government, highlighting that the country boasts more than 250 LGBTQ+ Pride parades, with São Paulo attracting **hundreds of thousands of attendees**.



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Other countries are gradually making inroads in LGBTQ+ rights, too, including marriage equality in **Taiwan** and **Costa Rica**. But, similar to the American structure, some countries may operate more conservatively, while city and state governments create their own tourism platforms.

In Mexico, the state of Jalisco is committed to welcoming LGBTQ+ travelers to Puerto Vallarta, Guadalajara, and other cities. With the help of Jalisco's first Sexual Diversity Director Andres Treviño, the state offers an LGBTQ+ certification and service training for businesses, actively promotes local Prides and other LGBTQ+ events, and is working to host future international LGBTQ+ events.

Jalisco also collaborates with tourism boards in Oaxaca, Mexico City, Morelos, and Michoacan, and the national tourism office, even creating Mexico's first national LGBTQ+ guide.

"It's important for us to welcome LGBTQ+ travelers for many reasons. We want to continually evolve as a society," says Rocio Lancaster, Jalisco tourism undersecretary. "We want to have them experience Jalisco's living history; vast cultural scene and unique experiences surrounding tequila, mariachi, and charrería; and all the great attractions Jalisco has to offer."

Moving the needle on equality and civil rights may be slow, but it is inevitable. Travel is

vital to that process, inviting an exchange of cultures and understanding. Because when seeking authenticity, LGBTQ+ travelers continue to discover new favorite places, lending their visibility to the local and global social fabric.

Despite ever-swinging political and economic pendulums and the financial implications that accompany them, Casemiro believe the future of queer travel ultimately rests in one place: "The control of LGBTQ+ tourism is in the hands of the tourist."

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