

# SGN



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## EXPLORING QUEER CULTURE IN COSTA RICA

BY JOEY AMATO, PUBLISHER OF *PRIDE JOURNEYS*



JOEY AMATO

Costa Rica may be known for its lush rainforests, pristine beaches, and ever-present “pura vida” (pure life) philosophy, but it’s also one of the most progressive and inclusive destinations in Central America when it comes to LGBTQ+ rights and culture. With legal same-sex marriage and a growing Queer community thriving in both urban and coastal regions, it offers a welcoming atmosphere that celebrates diversity amid natural beauty.

Costa Rica’s journey toward Queer equality has been marked by steady and meaningful progress. In 2020, it became the first country in Central America to legalize same-sex marriage, a landmark decision that followed years of advocacy and public dialogue. The government has also taken steps to strengthen antidiscrimination protections, support Trans rights, and incorporate LGBTQ+ education and awareness into public policy.

This progressive spirit resonates deeply

with locals and travelers alike. Whether in the cosmopolitan capital of San José or the relaxed coastal towns, visitors often remark on Costa Rica’s sense of openness and acceptance.

### Gay in San José

My journey began in San José, the cultural and social hub for the Queer community. The city’s vibrant nightlife scene includes popular bars and clubs such as Club El Teatro, which has hosted drag shows and Queer performances for decades; and La Avispa, one of the oldest Gay bars in Latin America.

In addition, San José’s art and cultural institutions also reflect Queer voices. Galleries frequently showcase works by LGBTQ+ artists, while community organizations such as Centro de Investigación y Promoción para América Central de Derechos Humanos play an important role in advocacy, education, and social support.

The city’s annual *Marcha de la Diversidad* (Pride March), typically held in June, attracts tens of thousands of participants from across Central America, filling the streets with color, music, and the unmistakable energy of solidarity and celebration.

### Lodging

I decided to stay at the Marriott Hotel Hacienda Belén, about 15 minutes from downtown. The property offers a luxurious escape that blends Old World charm with modern sophistication. The moment you arrive, you’re greeted by breathtaking views of the Central Valley and the scent of freshly roasted coffee drifting through the air — a fitting introduction to a resort built on a historic coffee plantation. The hotel’s elegant Spanish colonial architecture, with its arched corridors, terracotta tiles, and lush gardens, evokes a timeless sense of place, while the service is warm, genuine, and distinctly Costa Rican.

One of the highlights of the Hacienda Belén experience is its array of immersive, on-property activities. Guests can enjoy complimentary coffee tastings, art and cooking classes, and wellness experiences that reflect Costa Rica’s rich cultural heritage. The resort’s spa and outdoor pools offer peaceful havens for relaxation, surrounded by the sounds of tropical birds and rustling palms.

Dining at the Hacienda Belén is equally impressive. Each restaurant celebrates local flavors with international flair — whether you’re indulging in a traditional *gallo pinto* breakfast, a fabulous steak dinner at La Isabela Steakhouse, or a farm-to-table dinner at Hacienda Kitchen. Every meal is elevated by impeccable presentation and the resort’s warm hospitality.

What truly sets this hotel apart is its authentic Costa Rican soul. It’s luxurious without being pretentious, historic yet contemporary, and perfectly situated for exploring the capital’s museums and mar-

kets and taking day trips into the lush countryside. Whether you’re visiting for business, leisure, or a bit of both, the Costa Rica Marriott Hotel Hacienda Belén is the kind of place that makes you feel connected — to the culture, the landscape, and the *pura vida* lifestyle.

### Other destinations

If you are looking to venture outside of the city, Costa Rica’s coasts offer some of the most LGBTQ+-inclusive destinations in the region.

Manuel Antonio, on the Pacific coast, has become the country’s unofficial Gay beach town. With luxury resorts, boutique hotels, and beach bars that welcome Queer travelers year-round, it’s a place where diversity is embraced as part of daily life. Playa Espadilla and Playa Biesanz are particularly popular with Queer visitors, offering relaxed vibes, stunning sunsets, and a strong sense of community.

Other destinations, such as Tamarindo, Puerto Viejo, and Santa Teresa, are also becoming popular among LGBTQ+ travelers.

What truly makes Costa Rica unique is the way its *pura vida* lifestyle extends to acceptance and respect. The phrase is more than a slogan — it’s a reflection of how Costa Ricans approach life: with joy, empathy, and openness. This spirit is palpable in the way locals treat Queer visitors — not as outsiders but as travelers sharing in the beauty of their homeland.

From the bustling boulevards of San José to the quiet beaches of the Pacific coast, Costa Rica offers LGBTQ+ visitors the freedom to be themselves in a setting that’s as breathtaking as it is inclusive. Whether you’re watching the sunset over the ocean with your partner, exploring cloud forests teeming with life, or dancing at Pride in the heart of the capital, Costa Rica invites you to celebrate *pura vida con orgullo* — the pure life with pride.



JOEY AMATO



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## A CANADIAN SUMMER MINING CAMP MEMOIR

What my experiences taught me about gender, feminism, and intersectional struggle

BY MADISON JONES, SGN MANAGING EDITOR



MADISON JONES

*Dedicated to Kristy — may you rest peacefully my friend.*

Some years ago — almost five precisely — having little or no money and nothing in particular to interest me in the midst of pandemic lockdown, I thought I would traverse the sandy shores of Lake Athabasca in the wilderness of northern Saskatchewan to be a cook's assistant for a Canadian mining expedition. Little did I suspect then how much living and working there for the summer would put my newfound womanhood to the test and push me to both my physical and mental limits.

We set out from Fort McMurray, Alberta, on a cold July morning before the dawn. The town's surrounding alpine canopy was charred from the 2016 and subsequent wildfires. In the airport hangar — with COVID test results in hand and prepped for the long journey ahead — I was joined by four men. One was a tall and slender geologist from Nova Scotia, tasked by his company to map the region's topography in search of rare earth minerals (used to make electronics) that, if discovered, would aid Canada's strategic goal to rely less on Chinese imports. The three other men served as his assistants, two of which were young like me (and also incidentally served as my personal eye candy). The last was a typical, middle-aged bald guy from Toronto who detested "city women" that cared about progressive causes and wore Lululemon.

I had obtained my MA degree the previous month, having written my thesis on the intersection of Chinese cultural practices, environmentalism, and the sinophobia inspired by the coronavirus's outbreak in Wuhan. Though these gentlemen lost interest in what I did in grad school, it was quickly made up for after their next question: what was one dish I would scratch up for them once we got to camp?

"Spaghetti and meatballs," I told them after brief contemplation, which elicited nods of approval.

### Arrival

Life in a Canadian mining camp isn't glamorous, nor is it for the faint of heart. It's the kind of rugged, frontier-style work that attracts a myriad of characters in search of a job with good pay, and long stints of vacation between assignments. In the case of our camp, the people hailed from every corner of Canada (many were also from its First Nations) except me — the only American.

"Mornin', ducky" was how the camp's carpenter greeted me my first week there, while sipping on a cup of tea. He explained

that "ducky" was a term of endearment used for young women like myself in Newfoundland (pronounced *Noo-fn-land*), where he was from. I also watched him construct my bed frame out of leftover plywood, where I would sleep on a black polyurethane foam pad for the next four weeks.

I shared the women's tent most of my time with just one other person, Kristy, who was also an assistant cook. She was from the interior of British Columbia, with two kids and a Quebecois husband at home; she was also a beautiful Indigenous woman with long black hair, facial freckles, and a gap-toothed smile. Over the course of our working together, we bonded and became close friends through the struggles of feeding and cleaning up after everyone, as the domestic labor of a whole camp inhabited by men rested on us. For the first two and a half weeks, we were also the only two women there.

At first I was eager to make myself comfortable — or least the best I could with such limited resources. I created a table out of milk crates and broken plywood, where I set my mirror and cosmetics, while hidden underneath, I placed my secret vial of estradiol, needles, and syringes. In the humid

summer heat, I wore my frilly blue bikini and took my pink flamingo pool floaty out into the lake that our camp rested beside. I gave Kristy my phone and asked her to take a picture of me floating and smiling as we commemorated my first day there.

### Camp life

The novelty of my new surroundings wore off quickly as the lack of modern amenities and demands of the work began to set in. In a kitchen crew of 2-3 people max, we had to feed upward of 40+ in the camp at its peak, serving three meals a day plus snacks and beverages (often powdered tea and Gatorade). I was often left with the task of cleaning up all the dishes, canteen, and shower tents, not to mention the two outhouses, which were just plywood shacks placed over holes dug into the ground by an excavator.

The helicopter we all rode in on — and which also took the crews of drillers and geologists out to the field — additionally served as our sole means of getting supplies. The camp cook would write up a list that somebody back in Fort McMurray would grab at the town's local Save On Foods (a Canadian grocery chain). Once

the goods were brought and left by plane at the nearest airfield, the helicopter would drop a large net to the ground attached to a bungee cord. Supplies were bundled onto the net, which was then lifted and taken over to camp, suspended high in the air. The helicopter would lower the full net of goods just outside of the canteen tent, kicking up dirt as we hurried to unload it all.

The nature and wildlife around us were often a threat — or at the very least a nuisance. Mosquitos and horseflies were prevalent, which warranted the constant deployment of bug spray and citronella candles. The sky was often blacked out by biblically sized swarms of dragonflies — which, in mating season, did have their own bizarre sense of beauty. Smoke from distant wildfires burning in the Northwest Territories would also sometimes inundate the camp and fill the air.

But the biggest challenge Mother Nature decided to throw at us — an adolescent black bear that kept making its way into the camp, unfazed by the use of airhorns and spray — was sadly shot and killed to keep the workers safe. Thankfully, its carcass was donated to a local Chipewyan community, who made good use of the remains.

But alongside the numerous challenges of camp life, people also found joy. I would often go out to explore the wilderness with others from the camp, and we fostered our friendships. To escape the heat of July and August, the lake was our most valued respite. Kristy and I, after cleaning up from lunch, would go out to float together in the peaceful calm of its dark, sediment-filled waters. And sometimes I would sneak away on my own to sit in a lawn chair on its shoreline to read the only book I brought on my trip: *Between the World & Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

### A man's world

At a young age, I had formed a gendered consciousness. The uneven divide of domestic labor between my parents, the double standard of treatment between me and my AFAB peers pre-transition, and the heavy stigma that came with my multiple attempts to connect with my femininity and queerness growing up all culminated into the way I gravitated toward a strong feminist worldview.

Perhaps the greatest potential threat I encountered while at the camp was in the behavior of the men toward me as a young woman. Two years into my gender transition, I got to experience for the first time what it was like to be at the center of (mostly unwanted) male attention. At that point, I had yet to experience sleeping with



MADISON JONES



a man. And although I was immensely cautious about anyone finding out about my hidden gender identity — even to the extent of angling my body in the showers so that my silhouette behind the curtain wouldn't give my anatomy away — the thrill of thinking about my first male sexual encounter at camp also kept me contemplating whether or not to take the risk.

However, just like in my day-to-day life now, the vast majority of looks and comments on my body I received from the men were unsolicited and discomfiting. One camp worker I befriended, a younger man with long hair and a shaggy beard, made comment on how I possessed “childbearing hips.” And despite going out of my way to explicitly wear more conservative clothing as to not “provoke” anyone, many of the guys continued to make passing glances that left me feeling self-conscious and on edge at all times.

Kristy warned me that she had found men trying to sneak into her tent at previous camps. Her advice in this harsh, “man’s world” of mining camp life was to toughen up my demeanor and push back against it or risk getting trampled. So when I had a dispute alone with a hungry driller at 5 a.m. one day — an older, grizzly guy with a bad temper, who blew up and threateningly got in my personal space because I refused to cook him a plate of eggs made to order — I set firm boundaries and placed a tape line in front of the kitchen area (like a school-teacher), barring non-cooking staff from entering for my own safety.

The remote environment of the camp also meant that the men there were all too comfortable with airing their beliefs on how things “ought to be” between men and women. The first conversation I had overheard while working in the canteen tent was how PC culture was everywhere these days, and how you can’t say anything anymore without getting canceled. One helicopter engineer told Kristy and me how he didn’t do any of his own laundry in camp or at home, because “what’s the point of having a wife if she doesn’t do all your laundry for you?”

#### Trans man incognito

Once the geology students from the University of Manitoba came to do their summer apprenticeships, the camp was legally obligated to have a medic present at all times — who happened to be a closeted Trans man. He talked with the head geologist about how he wanted to be regarded by a masculinized shorthand of his legal name, and although the bulk of the workers obliged, they also regarded him as a strange, gender-nonconforming person that made them feel uncomfortable.

After his arrival, the existence of Trans people suddenly became a hot-button topic of conversation. In a sense, it gave me the unique opportunity to be a fly on the wall, listening to what people had to say about

transness and talking with them about it without them knowing I was Trans. Kristy mentioned an “uncle” of hers that would get constantly drunk and cry to her about how they were meant to be a woman. One other lady I worked with in my last week, after Kristy left camp, said she had been trying to inform herself on the experiences of Trans people but had been struggling to understand it all. She admitted to me that she felt like the older a Trans woman was when she decides to transition, the less she saw that person truly as a woman. And the men of the camp were, unsurprisingly, much less open-minded on the topic.

The medic and I began to spend a lot of time together. Being the only other Trans person there, I eventually decided to confide in him, and it led us to become quite close. We shared with one another our stories of Trans self-discovery. He explained how growing up in northern Alberta, he had a fraught relationship with his mother, to the point where at 17 years old, he decided to run away from home to Montreal.

He described how special it felt at the time to finally be in a place that was full of other people like him, watching Queer couples walk down the street holding each other’s hands freely. He also shared his experience of first making love to a Trans woman, how beautiful she was, and how it felt like making love to a cis woman.

He also lamented about where he currently lived, in rural Alberta, where people were much more closed-minded. He told me how people madly honked at him on the highway for the Gay Superman and Batman stickers on his truck; one homophobic guy even chewed him out in a Wal-Mart parking lot because of it.

I talked to him about my life in grad school in Vancouver, BC, all my Queer friendships, and how accepting the city was to Trans people. I even offered to talk with my roommates about giving him a room to rent in our house if he ever decided to choose to leave Alberta.

But he also wasn’t always the most accepting. The friendship I formed with an older camp worker, an affable, hippy-grandpa kind of guy, not too far off in disposition to Tommy Chong, served as testament to this. The medic took me aside one evening to warn me that the man had ulterior motives, and would make suggestive looks toward me behind my back. He let me know that he thought I dressed too suggestively, and also insinuated I had been behaving too flippantly around the men in camp. His advice hurt my feelings at the time, because I felt like I was already trying everything I could not to “arouse” anyone’s attention. His reasoning had an air of victim blaming to it, but looking back now, I know that his intentions were probably only to protect me, and that also he was perhaps projecting some of his own traumatic experiences onto me.

He would talk to me about how bad his gender dysphoria was, and how much he wanted to have top surgery. He explained to me how watching me live freely and be seen by others as my authentic self inspired him. I have a distinct memory of him watching me swim in the lake from the boat we all rode in on, too uncomfortable to take off his shirt and swim with Kristy and me.

#### Departure

As we rode together in a taxi van back to the Fort McMurray airport, the men who left camp with me (the bald Toronto guy, a helicopter engineer, and a camp worker) chatted with the driver about how excited they were to get out again, and bragged that they should all celebrate by going out to the strip club together, while I awkwardly sat in silence in the back seat.

The helicopter engineer initially caught my attention in camp as being kind of cute, but once he started talking about himself, my impression of him immediately did a 180. He told me how much of a fan he was of Trump and wished that Canada had a great leader like him. He lived in Richmond, BC, but was planning to move to Alberta soon, because he was frustrated with how the city had changed recently (because many Chinese immigrants had settled there). His facial reaction at the airport bar was quite disgruntled after he asked me about my political beliefs,

because I told him that I was a progressive woman and a fan of Jagmeet Singh and the NDP (Canada’s most left-leaning party).

“It makes sense,” he said with a nod, in barely veiled disappointment. I tried to maintain my distance from him after that conversation, but in our shared layover in Calgary, he kept asking me multiple times in which specific neighborhood *and what street* in Vancouver I lived. I ultimately was able to remain vague and deflect the intrusive question each time he asked. And so we awkwardly sat one row from one another on the flight back to Vancouver International Airport, and after arrival, we never saw or spoke to each other ever again.

#### Postscript

At camp I once told Kristy about the book I was reading, and how much I enjoyed Ta-Nehisi Coates as an author.

“I think I might want to try and become a writer, or a journalist, once I get out of here,” I reflected while scrubbing the gunk off of a miner’s plate. She encouraged me, saying that I should go pursue my passions while I was still young and without any kids.

It took me two and a half years after that moment — and sadly my friend has since passed on — but finally, after having read a book called *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific* by Howard Chiang, I wrote an email to my local LGBTQIA+ newspaper back in Seattle to pitch my first article idea.



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## Ah, Thailand! A culture of reverence, reserve, and respect

BY NOVA BERGER

NOVA BERGER

The first time I realized I didn't understand Thailand, I was standing in a crowded bar, dancing alone. Music pulsed through the room, lights flashed across a sea of seated bodies. No one moved. No one cheered. No one sang along. They simply watched if the performance deserved reverence more than reaction. Meanwhile, I was on my feet, busting down and unsure whether I was the only one doing it wrong.

Just weeks earlier, I had arrived in Thailand to teach English. After a short orientation in Bangkok, I was sent to Khon Kaen, a city in the country's northeast. I came with expectations: lush jungles, bustling markets, constant motion. What I found instead was something quieter — and far more surprising.

The people of Khon Kaen were gentle in a way I hadn't experienced before: soft-spoken, kind, and deeply generous, yet reserved. Interactions were often brief but warm, carried out with a politeness that felt less performative and more ingrained — a natural extension of how people moved through the world through the practice of Buddhism.

And yet, within that quiet culture of respect, there was an openness I hadn't expected.

Many of my students came to school unapologetically themselves: boys with full faces of makeup, students openly identifying as Gay or Bisexual, expressions of iden-

tity that, in other places, might invite scrutiny or discomfort. Here, no one blinked. There was no spectacle made of it, no whispered judgment. It simply existed, woven into daily life.

It struck me that acceptance in Thailand didn't always look loud or declarative. It looked like indifference in the best way, like allowing people to be exactly who they were without question.

### A different pace

Some of my most meaningful connections happened without language at all. Almost every night, I took dance lessons from a former ballroom teacher. We shared no common tongue yet we understood each other completely through the voices of dance. Through movement, rhythm, and repetition, we built something resembling trust. It was the first time I had ever connected so deeply with someone without words, and it reshaped how I thought about communication altogether.

Life in Thailand moved at a different pace, guided less by urgency and more by intention. Each morning on my walk to school, I would pass Buddhist monks collecting alms. Locals would quietly place food into their bowls, bowing their heads in a moment of shared stillness before continuing on with their day. There was no rush, no impatience — just a quiet acknowledgment of something larger than themselves.

That same sense of reverence appeared everywhere. At live music events, people listened rather than danced. In daily life, respect seemed to take precedence over self-expression in ways that felt subtle but constant. At first, it made me feel out of place, as if my energy disrupted an unspoken rhythm. But over time, I began to understand that this stillness wasn't absence of productivity — it was presence.

Even my expectations of adventure shifted. I had imagined weekends filled with waterfalls and jungle treks, and while those moments existed — hidden beaches, mountain climbs, glimpses of the landscapes I had dreamed about — they weren't the center of life for most people around me. Instead, joy seemed to come from something simpler: shared meals, familiar routines, time spent together.

One of my favorite parts about Thailand was a common tourist joy: the American exchange rate. Traveling was ridiculously cheap and often very spontaneous. My friends and I would take overnight buses across the country, unsure if schedules would hold or plans would work out. We found ourselves in new places almost every weekend, chasing experiences more than destinations. From the busiest party streets in Pattaya to the local jazz dive bars (the whole world really does love Miss Amy Winehouse!), we did it all.

And yet, even those moments of move-

ment felt different from the kind of travel I was used to. They felt less like escape and more like extension.

### Success

What stayed with me most wasn't the places I saw but the way people lived.

In Thailand, daily life seemed rooted in a quiet set of values: kindness, respect, generosity. Work mattered, but it didn't eclipse everything else. There was a visible effort to do good — whether that meant helping someone, spending time with loved ones, or simply moving through the world with care.

It made me question the way I had always measured success. Back home, it often felt tied to productivity, to constant motion, to the pressure of always doing more. But in Thailand, I saw a different metric, one that had nothing to do with achievement and everything to do with presence.

Standing in that bar, dancing alone, I thought I didn't understand the culture around me. In some ways, I was right.

But slowly, I began to realize that Thailand wasn't asking me to understand it. It was asking me to slow down enough to feel it. And in doing so, it offered a quiet, lasting lesson:

A good life isn't built on how much you accomplish but on how gently and generously you move through the world. And that's a lesson I'll try to carry with me my whole life!



NOVA BERGER



NOVA BERGER



NOVA BERGER



## Manchester, England

### A vibrant tapestry of culture, history, and Pride

BY JOEY AMATO, PUBLISHER OF *PRIDE JOURNEYS*

GAY VILLAGE MURAL JOEY AMATO

Manchester, England, is not only famous for its industrial heritage, music scene, and football clubs, it's also home to one of the most vibrant and historically significant LGBTQ+ communities in the UK. Often referred to as the "Gay capital of the North," it has been a pioneer in Queer rights, visibility, and celebration, cultivating a culture of inclusivity that continues to thrive today.

The roots of Manchester's LGBTQ+ history stretch back centuries, but it was during the 19th and 20th that the city truly became a hub for activism and progress. In 1880, a scandal known as "the Manchester Drag Ball" brought national attention when police raided a fancy dress ball attended by men in drag. Though the incident was used to stigmatize the community, it also marked one of the first widely publicized moments of Queer expression in Manchester.

Manchester is home to several institutions that preserve and celebrate Queer history, including the LGBT Foundation, one of the UK's leading Queer charities, providing health and support services as well as educational resources.

The city is also immortalized in pop culture as the backdrop for *Queer as Folk*, the groundbreaking 1999 television series created by Russell T Davies. The show, set in Manchester's Gay Village, helped bring the realities of LGBTQ+ life to mainstream audiences and played a pivotal role in shaping public attitudes.

#### The hotel

Manchester lives and breathes resilience. It's a place where cobblestone streets echo with the voices of industrial workers, punk rockers, activists, and proud members of the LGBTQ+ community. I came here seeking stories — some hidden in old libraries, others pulsing through neon-lit

streets — and left with a sense of belonging I hadn't expected.

My base for this journey was the magnificent Kimpton Clocktower Hotel. Located in a former insurance building dating back to the 1890s, it seamlessly marries historic grandeur with modern luxury. Walking through its doors felt like entering a different era. The soaring ceilings, intricate tilework, and dramatic staircases told stories of old Manchester, while the in-room record players spinning tracks by Oasis made sure I knew exactly where I was.

The heart of the hotel is The Refuge, a restaurant and bar that buzzes with energy. Whether sipping cocktails beneath the Winter Garden's lush greenery or sharing small plates that borrow flavors from around the world, I felt immersed in the city's welcoming vibe. Even in its luxury, the Kimpton feels like a place for everyone, especially when there is a DJ spinning some cool, jazzy beats. Its central location also places guests within walking distance of Manchester's vibrant cultural scene, including the Palace Theatre, Canal Street, and various shopping and dining options.

#### History and nightlife

My first stop was the John Rylands Library, an architectural marvel of neo-Gothic design. I was there specifically to view "The Secret Public" exhibition, including flyers, magazines, and photographs tracing Manchester's underground art scene, especially its ties to Queer culture and punk resistance.

And while we are on the topic of LGBTQ history, the best way to understand Manchester's Queer roots is by talking to the locals. Free Manchester Walking Tours offers a Queer history tour, led by passionate guides who have in-depth knowledge of the city's LGBTQ history and culture. We began in Sackville Gardens, home to the

Alan Turing Memorial and the Beacon of Hope, a tribute to those affected by HIV/AIDS. It's a space for reflection, nestled just beside Canal Street's constant thrum.

For those not familiar with Alan Turing, he was a pioneering mathematician and computer scientist, best known for his role in cracking the German Enigma code during World War II, a breakthrough that helped shorten the war and save countless lives. Often regarded as the father of modern computing, Turing laid the theoretical foundation for artificial intelligence. Despite his monumental contributions, he was persecuted for being Gay, ultimately leading to his tragic death in 1954. Today, he is celebrated as both a scientific genius and a symbol of the ongoing struggle for LGBTQ+ rights.

No trip to Manchester would be complete without a night — or three — in the Gay Village. Centered around Canal Street, it radiates warmth and freedom. What once was a hidden, underground scene in the 1980s has become a global symbol of LGBTQ+ pride.

During the day, you'll find people sipping coffee along the canal; by night, the rainbow flags light up the street. Spaces like Via and The Eagle pulse with music and laughter, while Cruz 101 remains a sacred institution for dance floor devotees. This is more than a party district — it's a cultural hub, one that has helped shape national conversations and lead by example.

#### Other highlights and events

Manchester's Gay scene is more than just nightlife, though. In the Northern Quarter, I stumbled into Feel Good Club, a Queer-owned café that quickly became one of my favorite stops. The space also hosts workshops and mental wellness events, not to mention spontaneous conversations with strangers who somehow feel like old

friends. I ordered a bowl of apple-soaked oats, and I have to say, it was one of the most delicious and inexpensive things I ate during my entire trip. I should have asked for the recipe!

A few blocks away sits Queer Lit, an LGBTQ+ bookstore filled to the brim with stories I wish I'd had growing up. From Queer romance and fiction to books on Trans identity and intersectionality, the shop is both revolutionary and cozy — even though it claims to have the largest selection of LGBTQ+ books in all of Europe. The store also hosts events such as workshops, live readings, and book clubs, providing a safe and inclusive space to celebrate Queer literature. There is also a variety of beverages for sale — I would definitely recommend trying one of the hot chocolate drinks.

Though my trip didn't coincide with Manchester Pride, visitors can expect tens of thousands each August. Pride here features a blend of celebration and activism. From glitter-filled marches to thoughtful panel discussions, it's a reflection of the city itself: joyful, inclusive, and unafraid to speak truth to power. Importantly, the money raised goes straight back into the community, funding LGBTQ+ health initiatives, charities, and support services.

Also in August is SCENE, the Manchester LGBTQ+ Film & TV Festival, which consists of a week of new and classic Queer cinema and TV screenings, panels, and other events.

#### Dining

All this touring and learning about Queer history made me hungry, so for dinner, I ventured to Maray, a Middle Eastern-inspired gem in the city center. The food, like Manchester, defied expectations. It was spicy, complex and comforting. Its signature "Disco Cauliflower" — roasted whole



ROOM AT THE KIMPTON CLOCKTOWER HOTEL JOEY AMATO

and topped with tahini, pomegranate, and harissa — was a revelation. I would also recommend trying the crispy sea bass with broccoli slaw. Maray's vibe is relaxed yet refined, a perfect place to unwind after a day of exploration. Its inclusive, welcoming spirit felt aligned with everything I'd experienced in Manchester so far.

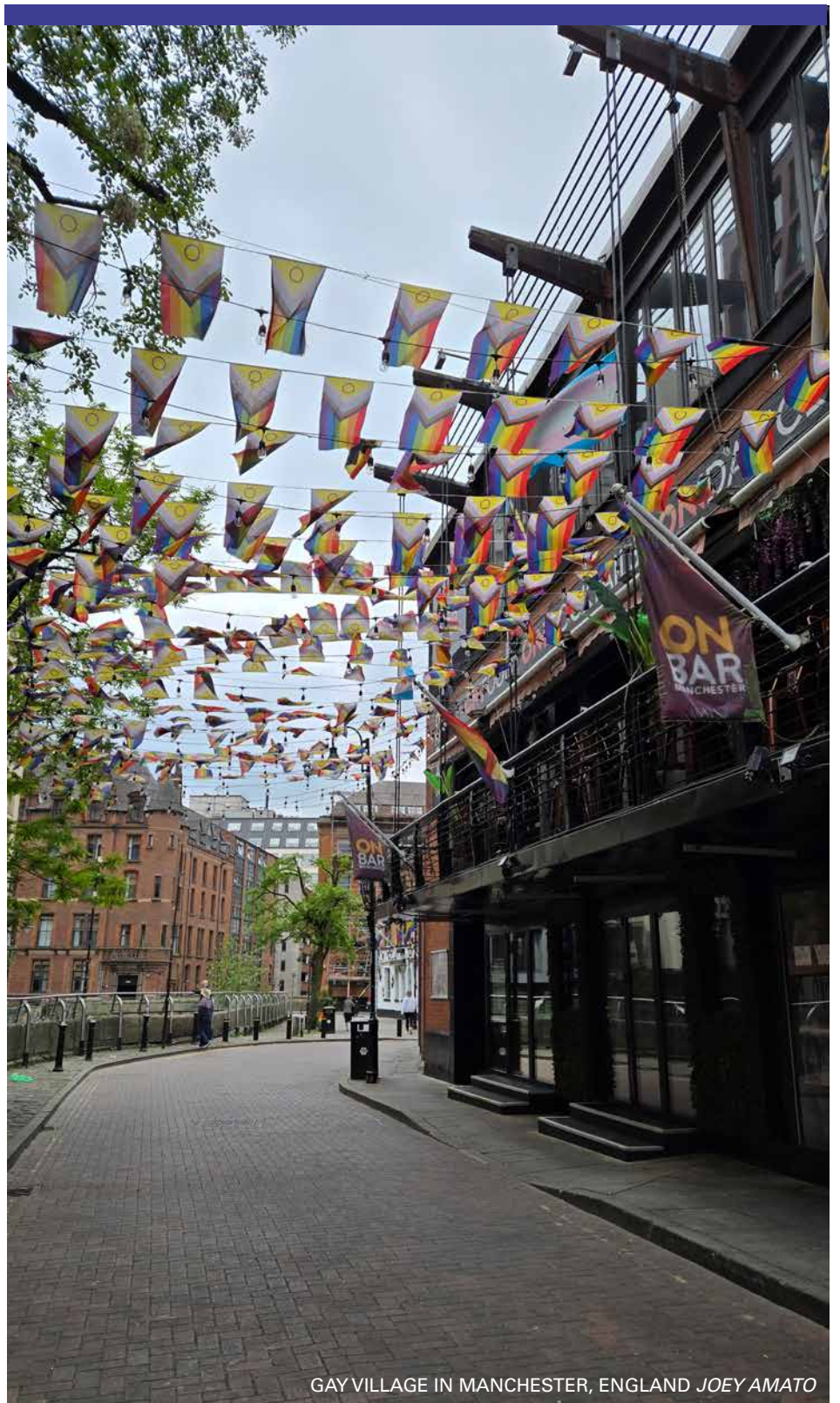
For a more casual dining experience, head over to Freight Island, a unique food hall and entertainment venue located near Piccadilly Station. The venue features a variety of locally owned food stalls, including Mia's Arepas, Ornella's Little Kitchen, and Mega Gyros. It's a great place to grab a quick bite or cocktail after work with

friends.

Manchester may not be as polished as London, but that adds to its charm and intrigue. I tend to enjoy cities like this over their larger neighbors. During my entire stay, I was able to walk to every attraction, and by experience, the best way to see a city is on foot. It's also a great way to burn off those extra calories.

Whether you're wandering Canal Street at sunset or simply sipping hot chocolate at Queer Lit, Manchester is a place where you can be yourself and belong.

Enjoy the journey!



GAY VILLAGE IN MANCHESTER, ENGLAND JOEY AMATO

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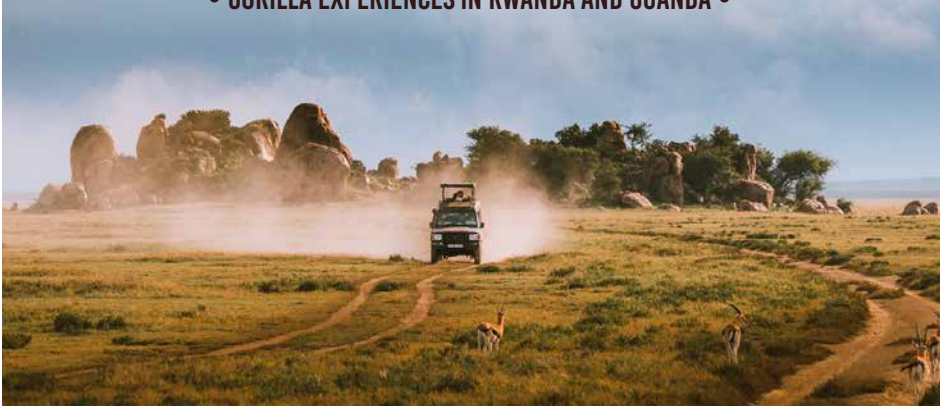
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## From Le Marais to the Seine, why Gay Paris is always a good idea

BY FRANK GAIMARI

FRANK GAIMARI

Paris has a way of making you feel like the main character in your own romantic film. It invites you to be seen, to be bold, and to fall in love — not just with its iconic landmarks but with yourself. For Gay travelers, this feeling is even more profound. Here, rainbow flags fly above bustling cafés, and same-sex couples stroll hand in hand along the Seine. In Paris, queerness isn't just an accepted part of the scenery — it's joyfully celebrated.

While the entire city exudes an air of inclusivity, the heart of its Gay culture beats loudest in Le Marais. Spanning the 3rd and 4th arrondissements, this vibrant district is a captivating blend of history and modernity. Its centuries-old mansions have been transformed into contemporary art galleries, and chic boutiques double as art installations.

It's also far from being a tucked-away "gayborhood." Instead, it's one of Paris's

most stylish and sought-after areas, where medieval streets like Rue des Archives and Rue du Temple invite you to wander and discover what unfolds. The energy is unmistakable. Queer couples hold hands openly and share kisses on street corners without hesitation.

Staying in Le Marais puts you at the center of it all, surrounded by the best of Paris's inclusive spirit. It's a district where anyone can sit at a sidewalk café, order a café crème or perhaps a glass of red wine, and people-watch for hours.

### Museums

Beyond its lively streets, Paris's cultural soul beckons. For LGBTQIA+ travelers, the city's museums offer more than just celebrated masterpieces; they provide a connection to a Queer history that has long thrived here. A visit to the Louvre is essen-

tial. While the *Mona Lisa* might surprise you with its modest size, the Denon Wing surrounds visitors with Greek and Roman statues that honored the male form, quietly affirming that the appreciation of beauty is as old as civilization itself.

The Musée d'Orsay, housed in a stunning Beaux-Arts railway station, feels more intimate. Standing before Impressionist canvases that revolutionized the depiction of light and color, you are reminded that Paris has always welcomed artists, outcasts, and those who see the world differently.

For deeper insight, a private Queer history tour comes highly recommended. Expert guides reveal layers of the city hidden from standard guidebooks, sharing the secret lives of kings; the stories of writers who found freedom here, like Oscar Wilde and Gertrude Stein; and the moments that shaped Paris's reputation as a Queer sanctuary.

### Nightlife

Parisian nightlife is legendary, with a Gay scene that caters to every mood — from casual drinks to exuberant dancing. Back in Le Marais, Cox stands out as a must-visit institution, always filled with a lively crowd spilling onto the sidewalk, drinks in hand, turning the street into a nightly celebration. The atmosphere is energetic and welcoming, the perfect place to meet locals and fellow travelers. There's no pretension — just great music and infectious joy.

For those seeking something a bit spicier, Le Raïdd Bar is iconic, famous for its "shower show," a spectacle that balances performance art with unapologetic fun. The

bar is often crowded, sweaty, and unabashedly Gay.

Yet nightlife in Paris isn't only about raucous bars. It's also about quieter, meaningful moments. Escape the noise and wander down to the banks of the Seine. As illuminated monuments reflect on the water and *bateaux mouches* glide by, you'll find friends sharing wine and lovers whispering on benches, connecting you to every romantic soul who has come before.

What truly distinguishes Paris is its inclusivity. LGBTQ+ couples feel it when they check into their hotel, and the concierge doesn't blink at a request for a double bed. They sense it while dining in candlelit bistros, where waiters treat them with the same respect as any other couple.

Paris invites every traveler to become the protagonist of their own story. It encourages dressing a little sharper, eating a little slower, and loving a little louder. The city doesn't ask anyone to tone themselves down — it asks them to embrace their fullest selves.

So, the advice is clear: don't just dream about Paris; make the trip. See the *Mona Lisa*, dance until dawn in Le Marais, indulge in too many croissants, and stroll along the Seine until your feet ache. Let the city seduce you. Discover that romance isn't just for the movies — it's real and waiting right here in Paris.

*Frank Gaimari is an author and film reviewer in Seattle, where he lives with his husband and their two golden retrievers. You can learn more about his work at [www.FrankGaimari.com](http://www.FrankGaimari.com).*



FRANK GAIMARI



FRANK GAIMARI



FRANK GAIMARI



FRANK GAIMARI



## NEW YORK CITY

Broadway and beyond

BY MK SCOTT

MK SCOTT

New York City doesn't unfold — it performs. From the neon pulse of Times Square to the intimate cabaret glow of 54 Below, Gotham feels less like a destination and more like a rotating stage where fashion, theater, nightlife, and memory all collide. Whether you're here for the spectacle or something more underground, the city rewards curiosity.

### Arrival: Icons that still deliver

Even if you've been before, you still start in Times Square. You just do. It's crowded, over-the-top, and completely commercial — but it works. Broadway marquee flash above you, LED screens take over entire buildings, and for a moment, it really does feel like the center of everything.

Downtown, SoHo has a different energy. There's still the draw of live TV tapings — *The View*, *Tamron Hall*, *Live with Kelly and Mark*, and more — but mostly it's about the look of the place. Cast-iron buildings, clean storefronts, people who somehow look styled without trying.

From there, it's a short walk to the 9/11 Memorial. The shift in tone is immediate.

The reflecting pools sit quietly where the towers once stood, and the noise of the city seems to pull back just enough. It's one of those places that resets you.

### The theater capital: Broadway and beyond

Theater is the language of New York. *Chicago* is still packing houses with its rotating roster of stars, while newer shows like *Oh, Mary!* prove that downtown weirdness can still break through in a big way.

And *Oh, Mary!* has some strong Pacific Northwest roots. Cole Escola, born and raised in Clatskanie, Oregon, wrote the show and originated the role of Mary, then took home a Tony. Jinkx Monsoon, from Seattle and Portland, stepped in for two sold-out runs, and Cheyenne Jackson, who got his start in Seattle, has also made his mark in the production. It's one of those shows that feels very "New York" but still connected to home.

If you want context, the Broadway Museum is worth the stop. It's immersive without being overwhelming, and seeing the costumes and props up close gives you a better sense of just how much work goes into what you see on stage.

### Broadway after dark

And once the shows let out, the night keeps going.

New York nightlife doesn't really stick to one thing — it shifts depending on where you land.

Voss Events leans all the way into spectacle. Their shows — *Santa's Secret* in December and *Cupid's Secret* in February — are big, glossy, and unapologetically over-the-top. Think drag, dance, fashion, and a crowd that's there to participate as much as watch.

54 Below is where things loosen up. Tucked under Studio 54, it's part cabaret, part hangout, and very much a place where Broadway people go when they're off the clock.

The night I went, the theme was "*Queer Musicals*." Lee Roy Reams and Charles Busch were headlining, but what stood out were the Pacific Northwest connections: Jerry Dixon from Village Theatre and Wade McCollum from Triangle Productions in Portland. It felt small in the best way, like you were in on something.

That's kind of the magic of 54 Below: it doesn't feel like a big production. It feels like a room full of people who love what they do.

### Hell's Kitchen: NYC's new gayborhood

Just west of Times Square, Hell's Kitchen has really come into its own. What used to be rough around the edges is now one of the city's most active LGBTQ+ neighborhoods.

It makes sense: it's close to Broadway, so a lot of performers live and hang out here. There's always the chance you'll end up sitting next to someone who just got off stage.

You'll find bars like 9th Avenue Saloon mixed in with restaurants and late-night spots that are busy well past midnight.

Food-wise, it's one of the better areas to land before or after a show. Galaxy and 5 Napkin Burger are solid go-tos, but honestly, you can just wander and find something good. And places like Don't Tell Mama keep that classic piano bar energy alive.

### Fashion capital energy

Fashion in New York isn't just runway — it's everywhere.

SoHo is obvious, but Chelsea has its own thing going on. Galleries, public art, design shops — they all blend together.



MK SCOTT



MK SCOTT



MK SCOTT

You're close to the High Line, Hudson Yards, and a constant stream of people who look like they're either going somewhere important or just came from it.

It's one of the best neighborhoods to stay in if you want to feel plugged into that side of the city.

**Diners, classics, and comfort food**

You can't skip diners in New York. They're still one of the few places where everyone ends up at some point.

Carnegie Diner is an easy option with multiple locations. Remedy Diner on the Lower East Side has that classic feel, and Chelsea Square is a solid stop if you're staying nearby. I made it to Elmo for lunch too, though it closed not long after. That's New York — things change fast.

Between that and Restaurant Row in Hell's Kitchen, you can cover everything from pancakes to late-night pasta without trying too hard.

**Beyond Manhattan: Staten Island escape**

If you need a break, take the Staten Island Ferry, especially from spring through fall. It's free, the skyline views

are worth it, and once you get there, things slow down: there are parks, waterfront spaces, and fewer crowds. It's an easy reset without leaving the city entirely.

**Where to stay**

If you want to stay close to Broadway, the CIVILIAN Hotel makes sense. It leans fully into theater: design details, atmosphere, even the crowd. It feels like an extension of the shows nearby. It's best for being in the middle of everything, especially if theater is the reason you're here.

**The city as stage**

New York isn't really about checking things off a list. It's about how the moments stack up: A morning at the 9/11 Memorial, an afternoon in SoHo, dinner in Hell's Kitchen, a Broadway show, then something unexpected after.

That's the rhythm.

And whether you're just watching it all happen or jumping into it yourself, New York always has room for one more act.



MK SCOTT



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# Stonewall National Monument Visitor Center

See History, Be History

BY JOEY AMATO, PUBLISHER OF PRIDE JOURNEYS

JOEY AMATO



JOEY AMATO

As I stepped into the Stonewall National Monument Visitor Center, the first thing that greeted me was my reflection framed by the words “*See History, Be History.*” It felt like both a welcome and an invitation. As part of the Wall of Solidarity — a lively exhibit celebrating love, community, and Queer joy — the frame establishes the mood for what comes next. It’s not just a space to learn about history, but a place where you feel yourself become part of it.

Located at 51 Christopher Street in New York City’s Greenwich Village, the visitor center occupies part of the original Stonewall Inn bar. Though much of the original interior had been lost, one architectural detail, the archway, was able to be preserved.

Privately operated by cofounders Ann Marie Gothard and Diana Rodriguez, the visitor center is the result of six years of dedication to returning this historic site to the LGBTQ+ community. For Rodriguez, the project is especially meaningful. She comes from four generations of military service members, including her Uncle Tony, a Vietnam veteran who returned home seriously ill but continued serving others as an administrator at the Veterans Administration in New York City. When he passed away at just 47, his family learned he had died of AIDS. No colleagues from his military unit or the VA attended his funeral. Today, the flag laid on his coffin, along with his medals and dog tags, are displayed inside the center. The tribute honors him — and countless members of a generation lost to HIV/AIDS whose stories often went unrecognized.

**Exhibits**

Inside the 2,100 square foot space, 57 years of Queer history have been carefully curated into a series of immersive exhibits. “The Stories of Stonewall” grounds visitors in the evolution of the building, the neigh-

borhood, and the uprising that reshaped LGBTQ+ activism. The exhibit also honors Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, two revolutionary figures in Trans history whose courage and advocacy helped drive the movement forward.

One of the most powerful add-ons comes from Mark Segal, who was at Stonewall on the night the rebellion began. As curator of the exhibit’s historical context, he shares firsthand memories of the events leading up to, during, and after June 28, 1969. His experience brings a personal immediacy that turns history into something vividly alive.

A particularly memorable touch is a fully functioning 1967 Rowe AMI jukebox featuring a playlist curated by DJ Honey Dijon. Marsha P. Johnson recalled that “*I Heard It Through the Grapevine*” by Marvin Gaye was playing during the police raid. Hearing it now deepens its symbolism. In an era when Queer spaces couldn’t advertise their existence and gathering openly could be dangerous, people often found places like Stonewall through whispers and quiet networks — you genuinely “heard it through the grapevine.”

As you explore the photographs, stories, and music, the night of the Stonewall Rebellion feels closer than expected. The space pulls you into the emotions of that moment when frustration, courage, and unity combined to spark a movement that changed Queer history.

That sense of continuity carries into the Stonewall National Monument Theater and the “Stonewall Generations” exhibit. Visitors can watch videos and listen to reflections from activists and allies — including Johnson, Rivera, Mark Segal, Adam Lambert, and Chelsea Clinton — who speak about the ongoing struggle for LGBTQ+ equality and how the legacy of Stonewall shapes the activism of today. Their voices form a bridge between past and present.



JOEY AMATO

The Visitor Center encourages participation through two interactive exhibits created in partnership with the Parsons School of Design: “(We)ave Made History” and “Setting the Table.” The former highlights young activists shaping the future of the movement. It represents where LGBTQ+ advocacy is headed, complementing the rest of the center’s focus on where the community has been.

The latter exhibit reimagines the dinner table as a symbol of Queer gathering, chosen family, and connection. Visitors are invited to answer a simple question: “Who would you invite to dinner?” Responses are written on napkins and placed at a setting on the table. Some are heartfelt — such as “My Bubi, because she passed when I was young and I wanted more time with her.” Others bring humor and joy, like “RuPaul

and the last dinosaur before the meteor hit.” Yet the feeling that stayed with me most wasn’t tied to a single artifact. It was the overall atmosphere. Even surrounded by strangers, I felt connected, safe, and free to absorb the experience without hesitation. The center radiates the same spirit of community and courage that Stonewall has come to symbolize.

No matter how you identify, the Stonewall National Monument Visitor Center welcomes everyone. Its message — rooted in belonging, support, and love — is universal. And that makes it an essential and unforgettable stop on any trip to New York City.

To learn more and to plan your visit, go to [www.stonewallvisitorcenter.org](http://www.stonewallvisitorcenter.org).



BILL MALCOLM

I was in Palm Springs for the International Gay Lesbian Travel Association Global Convention back in October 2025. Over 750 attendees from 32 countries attended — a new record. And this is despite the drop in large corporate sponsorship support (as has also been seen at Pride events).

A highlight was the IGLTA Foundation fundraiser at the Dinah Shore estate (owned by Leonardo DiCaprio). It sleeps 16 and has six bathrooms and can be yours for around \$5,000 a night.

**What to do**

See the new “Section 14: The Untold Story” at the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum and Cultural Plaza downtown (140 N. Indian Canyon). This and other exhibits give a frank assessment of the Coachella Valley’s Indigenous population’s fight to hold onto their land and culture. They also have a spa and casino.

Swim at the Palm Springs Swim Center. The \$16 nonresident fee is steep but worth it.

Walk with the Frontrunners at 8 a.m. daily (meet at the Mizell Center parking lot). They go through the new Prescott Reserve, formerly a golf course.

Thursday night is Village Fest downtown. It’s a farmers market, art show, and more. The Art Museum is also free that night.

Rent a bike at Bike Palm Springs ([www.bikePSrentals.com](http://www.bikePSrentals.com)) and ride on the new

CVLink trail all the way to Cathedral City and beyond.

**What to eat**

Townie Bagels (650 E. Sunny Dunes) has soft bagels and a cult following. Try to build your own sandwich on a pumpernickel bagel with an americano to wash it down.

Peninsula Pastries (611 S. Palm Canyon Dr.) has great French pastries, including a lemon tart that is to die for. In the same plaza (south of downtown, across from Motel 6), try freshly squeezed carrot juice and a teriyaki bowl with salmon at the Palm Greens Café.

Bongo Johnny’s has good burgers and salads (301 N. Palm Canyon Dr.).

**Where to stay**

I always stay at the Motel 6 Palm Springs downtown (660 S. Palm Canyon Dr.). Catch the #2 bus from City Hall across the street from the airport. The room rates are lower than the resort fees at some other hotels and lower during the week (as the LA crowd comes over on the weekend).

It is located across the street from a French bakery, a health foods café, a wrap restaurant, and the Revolution Theater. Around the corner are the Townie Bagel shop and Tool Shed bar. If you get hungry, the Jack in the Box is two doors down. And you can walk downtown and the bars on Arenas.

I also checked out the Hilton downtown,

which has a great pool scene. The Renaissance (where IGLTA was held) was also nice.

Twin Palms is my favorite resort, and I also like the Descanso. Both offer a fun pool scene and free bikes. But check (and avoid) hotels and resorts with junk fees (aka resort fees).

**Nightlife**

Most of the bars are on Arenas Road downtown. Do check the prices at all the bars: one wanted \$14 for a glass of wine.

Check out the Monday happy hour at my favorite, Hunters (302 E Arenas), of Wilton Manors/Fort Lauderdale fame. The V Wine Lounge & Martini Bar (600 E. Tahquitz Canyon Way) is a lot of fun.

**Getting there**

I took Southwest, which now charges for bags and is about to charge for and assign seats. No more checking 24 hours in advance to get an A group boarding pass, which assures a window seat at no extra charge. Worse, it has now outsourced its staffing to a third party at Palm Springs, so what remains of the Southwest spirit (and great customer service) is long gone. I also connected through noisy and expensive Las Vegas International Airport (\$5.50 for a Diet Coke).

I might also author a book: *How to Destroy a Brand and Alienate Your Loyal Passenger Base: The Demise of Southwest Airlines*. Southwest founder Herb Kelleher

must be rolling into his grave. It’s now a race to the bottom for the carrier that once was the model of transparent pricing, on-time departures, extremely low fares, and service to less congested airports.

**Insider tips and more information**

Fly directly into Palm Springs Airport. It’s super cute, and you can sit outside and work on your tan before boarding. Skip LAX at all costs: you’ll need a rental car to get to Palm Springs, and the trip out on I-10 can be congested (not to mention the endless sprawl).

Before you book a hotel, check for junk fees (resort fees, destination fees, amenity fees, energy surcharges, and more). About half the hotels seem to have them, and they often are hidden under “government taxes and fees” or are otherwise not transparent.

You won’t need a rental car if you stay in downtown Palm Springs. Rely on Uber or Sunline Transit instead. Or walk or bike.

*GED Magazine* ([www.gedmag.com](http://www.gedmag.com)) is the monthly publication, and the *Coachella Valley Independent* is the weekly alternative voice; both have ideas (including hikes) and community event listings.

*Bill Malcolm is North America’s only LGBT, syndicated, value-travel columnist. He pays his own way and avoids hotels that charge resort or related junk fees (aka amenity fees, destination fees, etc.). His opinions are his own.*



Combine a college town with a diverse economy, sprinkle in 35,000 LGBTQ residents and two gayborhoods (Short North and German Village), plus several good museums and some affordable hotels, and you are talking about Columbus, Ohio, a Midwest gem.

Pride is every day in Columbus (the largest city in Ohio) and so matter-of-fact, which is amazing for the Midwest. The city boasts a happy, fun-loving crowd — and more bars than any other city I have been to!

#### What to do

The Franklin Park Conservatory and Botanical Gardens is a must. Mingle with the butterflies, enjoy the native plants in bloom, or take in the topiaries and indoor gardens. The Conservancy has it all, even Lego sculptures!

Another highlight just west of downtown in the Center of Science and Industry (COSI). It's been named the best science museum in the country five times by *USA Today*. Right now, it's featuring "Unofficial Galaxies," an exhibit with one of the largest private *Star Wars* collections in the world.

The Columbus Museum of Art is free on Sundays. The Chihuly glass is interesting, and the "Queer/Modern" exhibit features artists from the early decades of the 20th century.

Explore the many unique historic neighborhoods, including Short North Arts District (home to the Stonewall Center, which has community events) and German Village.

Work out at Pro's Gym (9 E. Long, formerly a Powerhouse), in an old bank building, complete with vault. The \$20 daily fee was worth it.

#### Where to eat

The North Market in the Short North (just north of downtown) has 36 restaurants in this historic food hall. There's something for everyone at the North Market: I liked Lan Viet, my friend liked the Thai food at the sushi place, while another had Ethiopian. The next day I had salmon at the Moroccan spot. And for dessert, Jenni's Splendid Ice Cream was amazing.

Grab a sandwich to go or more at United Dairy Farmers (900 N. High, in the Short North, among other locations), Ohio's version of a 7-11.

The Schokko Café inside the Columbus Museum of Art has a great salmon dish with rice and brussels sprouts. Yum! There is outdoor seating as well.

#### Bar scene

Columbus — like DC — didn't get the memo that Gay bars are dead. The city has three times the Gay bars that Detroit does but is half the size. In fact, Columbus has 15 bars in a region of over two million.

On Long Street downtown, you can have yummy pizza and sit outside at Slammers (202 E. Long). It is a women's bar but welcomes all. They had bingo the night I was there. Although it is known citywide for its pizza, I liked the chef salad.

Next door is the District West nightclub (145 N. 5<sup>th</sup>), with shows every night. The night I was there featured a star from *Drag*

*Race* plus local drag entertainers, who were amazing. The crowd was young and fun. The \$15 cover was worth it.

Both Slammers and District West are just north of downtown (and easy walking distance to my hotel, the Hyatt).

South of downtown (German Village/Brewery District) features Club Diversity (883 S. High), housed in a quaint old Victorian, with an outdoor patio and garden and good pizza. The Tremont (708 S. High) is a fun neighborhood bar nearby. Boscoe's (1224 S. High) is another option and features dancers. All three are south of downtown as is the Toolbox (744 Frebis Ave.).

North of downtown, dance the night away at the Axis (777 N. High), where they also have drag shows and more. Enjoy a meal or a drink at Union Café (782 N. High, just across the street), a classic video bar where everyone is welcome.

Other bars include AWOL, Bossy Grrl's Pin Up Joint, Southbend Tavern, the Go-Go, O'Connor's, and Rumours.

#### Where to stay

I stayed at the newly remodeled Hyatt Regency, which has quiet rooms that are cleaned every day, with magnificent views of the downtown high-rises. There's a big workout room and a handy convenience store. It has reasonable rates, no annoying resort fees, and great service. It's also easy to get to the Short North from there.

Other hotels I have stayed at include the Moxy in the Short North and the Red Roof Inn Plus (a bargain) downtown. The Canopy across the street has a great rooftop bar.

#### Getting there

Columbus is a short drive from Detroit, Cincinnati, and Cleveland. John Glenn Airport has lots of flights and carriers. I took Delta via Detroit. (Delta is my new fave, along with American, as I ditched Southwest, which stabbed loyal fans in the back with new bag and seat fees and other restrictive policies, coupled with high fares and inconvenient flight times.)

You can get around on the COTA bus, including to and from the airport and all the bars and museums, for just \$2. Download the mobile app.

#### Other tips

Columbus is one of the most LGBTQ-friendly communities in the country. In addition to Columbus Pride, there was a Westerville Pride the weekend I was there. The whole area is very accepting, and the TV news covered all the events.

Columbus is perfect for a weekend visit. It will surprise you. It's the most welcoming city I have ever visited, combining Midwestern friendliness with big-city amenities and an embracing, welcoming culture. Yes, Columbus is "the heart of it all"!

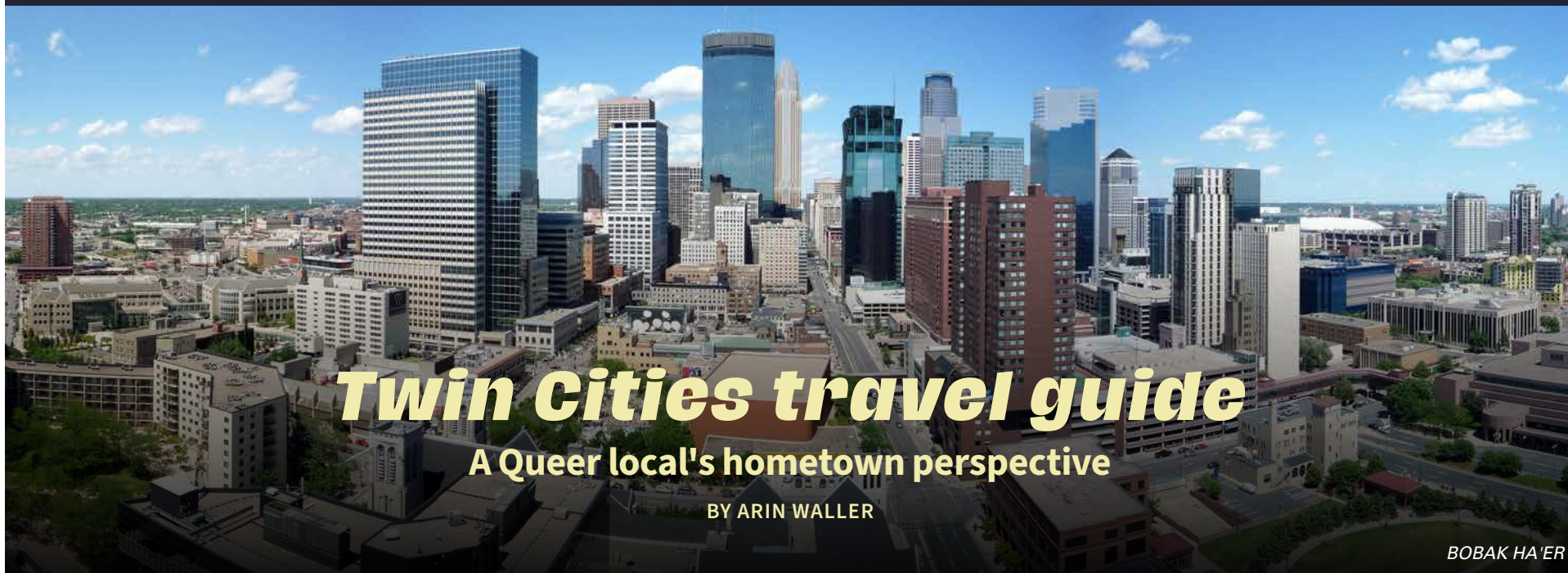
*Bill Malcolm, North America's only LGBTQ travel columnist, focuses on value and going local. And he boycotts hotels with resort fees, destination fees, amenity fees, and other junk charges. His opinions are his own. Special thanks to Experience Columbus for their hospitality and travel tips.*



TOPIARY FROM FRANKLIN CONSERVATORY BILL MALCOLM



NORTH MARKET FOOD HALL BILL MALCOLM



## Twin Cities travel guide

A Queer local's hometown perspective

BY ARIN WALLER

BOBAK HA'ER

The Twin Cities — St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minnesota — are known for their vibrant, hospitable culture and indomitable spirit of fighting injustice, similar to Seattle in many ways. Whether you're planning to make the move or going on a friendly visit, there is much to love about The Star of the North's two major cities.

Minnesota is considered one of the most Queer-friendly states in the US, with robust legal protections and human rights laws against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender. In 2023, it passed laws that protect access to gender-affirming care and prevent authorities from enforcing other states' laws on Minnesota soil, thus making Minnesota a Trans sanctuary.

### Queer spots

Though most of Minnesota is rural, the most Queer-friendly area is the Twin Cities. A majority of LGBTQIA+ businesses and spaces are located in or around Loring Park in downtown Minneapolis, the city's most prominent gayborhood, host to the annual Pride festival for over 40 years. Other gayborhoods include the neighboring North Loop and Uptown in South Minneapolis.

One cool LGBTQIA+ hangout spot in St. Paul is the Black Hart of Saint Paul, located on University Avenue. The Queer soccer bar has become popular with Trans people in the area, especially on Tuesday, karaoke night.

In Minneapolis, The 19 Bar in Loring Park was founded in 1952, making it the oldest Gay bar in Minneapolis and one of the oldest in the US. The 19 is also a very popular spot with Trans people.

Aside from bars, there are businesses such as Queermunity on Hennepin Avenue in Uptown. It's a café and gathering space that opened in 2023 and hosts community and mutual aid events.

### Arts

Loring Park and the vicinity also boast an established and lively art scene. The Walker Art Center and its famous sculpture garden are connected to Loring Park by the Irene Hixon Whitney Bridge, created by Iranian American sculptor Siah Armajani, who also commissioned a poem about the bridge by Pulitzer Prize-winning Queer poet John Ashbery. The bridge features two interlocking curved arches meant to resemble a handshake.

The Minneapolis Sculpture Garden, connected by the bridge, features more than 60 installations, including *Hahn/Cock*, a giant blue rooster sculpture by German artist Katharina Fritsch. The most well-known sculpture is the giant *Spoonbridge and Cherry*, depicting a bent metal spoon holding a cherry at its tip. The piece was created in 1985 by Coosje van Bruggen and her husband Claes Oldenburg.

The city itself has a rich history in pop culture. As the birthplace and home of R&B musician Prince, it proudly pays homage to the late singer. Prince performed regularly at the First Avenue music venue, which became

the site of his 1984 film *Purple Rain*. After he died in 2016, the club painted a gold star on the exterior to commemorate him.

Another beloved musician from Minnesota is folk singer Bob Dylan. Though he is from Duluth, his work is still celebrated as a part of Twin Cities culture. In downtown Minneapolis, at the intersection of South 15th Street and Hennepin Avenue, you can find a kaleidoscope mural depicting Dylan during three stages of his career, titled *The Times They Are A-Changin'* in reference to his 1964 hit song.

Aside from music, the iconic hat toss from the opening of *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was shot on Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis. The scene, symbolizing the character's independence, became a landmark television moment for 1970s feminism. It is immortalized not only on film but also bronze, with a statue of depicting the hat toss in the exact spot it was shot in.

A favorite recreational pastime of mine is listening to Broadway musicals. You can find various Broadway productions in the downtown Minneapolis theater district on Hennepin Avenue. Three major theaters are the Orpheum, the State, and the Pantages. There is also the Guthrie for those who enjoy classic plays.

### Attractions and events

When it comes to tourist attractions, the Mall of America is without a doubt one of the Twin Cities' most recognizable landmarks. Located in Bloomington, it is the largest shopping mall in North America, at 5.6 million square feet and over 500 stores. The mall features an indoor theme park and an aquarium. Additionally, it is home to one of 16 Rainforest Café locations across the United States.

Currently, all the major sports teams play at different arenas. For MLB, the Minnesota Twins play home games at Target Field in the North Loop — not to be confused with Target Center in downtown Minneapolis, home to the NBA team, the Minnesota Timberwolves. Outside of Minneapolis, there's the Grand Casino Center in downtown St.

Paul, home to the NHL team, the Minnesota Wild. Last but not least, we have the NFL's Minnesota Vikings at the US Bank Stadium.

If you plan on visiting the Twin Cities in the winter, first of all: good luck. Second, you should check out the Winter SKOLstice event, held every year in Eagan outside the Vikings' training facility. It entails outdoor activities such as ice skating, sledding, and pond hockey (a form of ice hockey played on a frozen pond or lake), as well as live music. If that's not your style, you could relax around the bonfire in a Warming Haus and enjoy a cup of hot cocoa. One of the coolest things about SKOLstice is the many ice art installations, such as sculptures and a large maze. The event is free of charge and worth checking out.

For those who can't brave the cold, the Minnesota State Fair may be your thing. It opens in Falcon Heights around August. You can expect fair food, roller coasters and other rides, and concerts. The fair also hosts the Minnesota Dairy Princess Program, a most Midwest beauty pageant, in which one lucky contestant will be crowned Princess Kay of the Milky Way. During her one-year term, she will serve as the official goodwill ambassador of the Minnesota dairy industry and will have a bust of her head sculpted from butter.

Also in Falcon Heights is the annual Oktoberfest. German ancestry is a large part of St. Paul's cultural identity, so it doesn't skimp when it comes to Oktoberfest. You'll find all the beer, food, live entertainment, and dancing that make this event one of the top five Oktoberfests in America.

### Food

Speaking of food, the Twin Cities have no shortage of great restaurants and cuisine. In the Diamond Lake neighborhood is a historic bar and grill known as the 5-8 Club, home of the Juicy Lucy, in which the cheese is stuffed in the center of the patty rather than on top — a contribution to American food culture worth trying at least once. (Another good

burger place is The Lowbrow in King Field.)

For excellent pizza, there is Fat Lorenzo's, Good Times, and Pizza Luce. For those looking for a classic Chicago-style deep-dish pizza, Wrecktangle is the spot. Carbone's is also worth dining at. Its Italian fries made from pizza crust brushed with garlic butter, topped with mozzarella and Italian seasoning, are to die for.

In the league of sandwiches, no one does it better than Caffrey's Deli & Subs. This independently owned sandwich shop is found on Lyndale Avenue near Wrecktangle. Its sandwiches are a little pricey, but you'll learn why as soon as you take your first bite. (Other good sandwiches include Victor's 1959 Café, a Cuban restaurant serving the best cubanos in town.)

If you're in search of Latin American dining experiences, I suggest going to Café Racer, Iconos Gastro Cantina, or Hola Arepa for authentic Venezuelan-style street food. If you want to experience the delicacies of Spain, there's an excellent tapas restaurant called Rincón 38.

In the mood for vegan? Try Trio Plant-Based and Reverie Café + Bar. Trio is a 100% plant-based soul food restaurant; Reverie is a vegan diner, located in a colorful brick building with comic-style murals.

Owamni by The Sioux Chef is another notable location worth dining at. It's an Indigenous restaurant with a unique menu that uses ingredients only sourced in the state. The bison is costly, but I have heard people say good things about it.

In terms of Japanese cuisine, Kiyatchi is the place for high-end sushi. My number 1 pick for ramen in the Twin Cities would be Kazuma: on top of serving authentic, hand-made, and (most importantly) tasty ramen, Matthew Kazama, the owner, is a cool and interesting dude. Before becoming a restaurateur, he was a punk rock drummer, formerly playing in the band The Birthday Suits. He also owns a burger place next door called Tokidoki. (Also next door is Ichigo's Tokyo Crepes, which makes the most amazing mille crepes, just the thing to top off a bowl of ramen.)

Other suggestions: The Hi-Lo is a 1950s-themed diner that is quite cozy and Queer-friendly. Dave the Pie Guy serves diner food and some of the best pies in the state. Pho 79 is a staple location for Vietnamese food. Pimento Jamaican Kitchen & Rum Bar has excellent Jamaican food. Mama Sheila's is a go-to spot for delicious soul food, but I wouldn't suggest going there on Sunday if you have religious trauma, as they play nonstop gospel music.

Ice cream is something Minnesota does well, as a dairy-country state. Milkjam Creamery offers unique flavors, giving patrons something new and a range of vegan options. The Waffle Bar serves Hong Kong-style ice cream in a bubble-style waffle cone made with an egg custard base.

Whether you're visiting Minneapolis and St. Paul for the food, the events, or sightseeing, you will find that, despite its cold exterior, it has a warm heart.



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## Windy City winter break

The Art Institute, striking architecture, fun neighborhoods, and delicious food

BY BILL MALCOLM

"CLOUD GATE" SCULPTURE ADOBE

Although the temperatures can reach -40 degrees (so cold that it is the same in both Celsius and Fahrenheit!), Chicago is still definitely worth a visit in the winter. The museums are terrific, hotels are more reasonably priced, and there is so much to do!

### What to do

The Art Institute of Chicago is an absolute must, with impressive works by Van Gogh, Warhol, Picasso, and many others, including lots of impressionist painters. You can spend two full days there. (Try the salmon salad in The Café. Get there when it opens (11 a.m.) to avoid the crowds.)

Other great museums include the Museum of Science and Industry and the Shedd Aquarium. The Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum and the Lincoln Park Zoo are both good options for a winter day.

Chicago has stunning architecture! (My favorite is the Wrigley Building along Michigan Avenue.) Take the Riverwalk or even an architectural tour.

Explore the shops on Broadway, including Cram at 3331 N. Broadway ([www.cramfashion.com](http://www.cramfashion.com)).

### Where to stay

I always stay at the Hotel Versey, now part of Hilton's Tapestry Collection. Located at 644 West Diversey Parkway, just south of the "gayborhood," it is full of shops and restaurants. The rates are lower during the week (and during the winter). You also get free use of the LA Fitness next door (with an indoor pool). Parking is available. Trader Joe's and Barnes and Noble are across the street, and the Fresh Market is steps away.

### Nightlife

Just up the street from the Hotel Versey is the gayborhood formerly known as Boys-town (now known as Northalsted).

Make your first stop at the iconic video megabar, Sidetrack (3349 N. Halsted). I like the show tunes, which run multiple

days, including 4 p.m. on Sunday.

You will find go-gos and dancing at Hydrate (3458 N. Halsted). Sunday Funday features \$4 wells.

Also fun is the Kit Kat Club (3524 N. Halsted).

The leather bar Cell Block (3702 N. Halsted) is very cruisy.

The Lucky Horseshoe (3169 N. Halsted) has dancers.

The Center on Halsted is the community center. A Whole Foods and senior housing is in the complex as well.

For bar ads and maps, pick up a copy of *Grab*, Chicago's monthly LGBTQ+ publication or read it online at [www.GRABChicago.com](http://www.GRABChicago.com). It is full of local happenings.

### Where and what to eat

Stan's Donuts (at the corner of Clark and Diversey) has terrific donuts, breakfast burritos, and more.

The new Lucky Cat coffee bar (2806 N. Clark) is just around the corner from the

Hotel Versey and has better coffee than both Starbucks and Stan's (which are also nearby).

I like the shrimp salad at Trader Joe's (667 W. Diversey).

Rosati's (953 W. Diversey, just east of the Diversey CTA station) has megaslices of pizza for just \$6.

The Fresh Market (2730 N. Halsted at Diversey) has hot food, a nice croissant breakfast sandwich, and even wine.

Tuk Tuk Thai Isan Street Food (2852 N. Clark, next to Century Plaza), my current favorite, features great curry and Thai dishes (including a jug of water to go with the spicy red curry).

### Getting there

I took the Amtrak from Milwaukee. There are six round trips a day, with only three stops, and it goes 90 mph. From Detroit, Indianapolis, St. Louis, DC, and even Seattle and SF, you can also take Amtrak to Chicago.

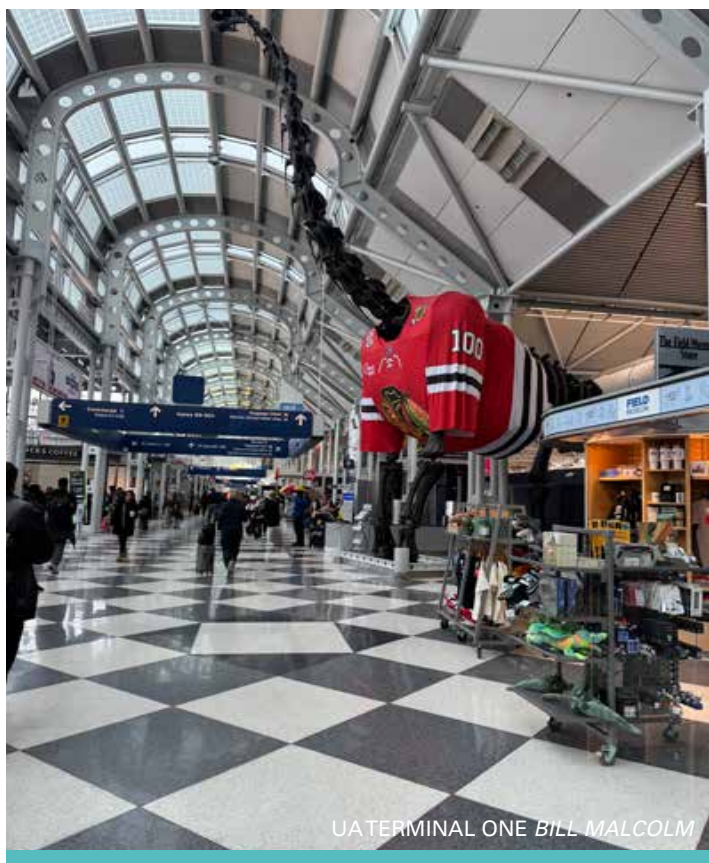
I flew United out of O'Hare back to Indy — a great airline, with new equipment, enjoyable entertainment, and professional staff, as well as being located in a beautiful terminal. Take the Blue Line CTA to O'Hare via the Diversey bus to Logan Square CTA.

### For more information

Grab *Chicago Magazine* (online at [www.chicagogmag.com](http://www.chicagogmag.com) and in print) for a good map of the bar scene areas. You can pick up a copy at Sidetrack and other locations.

Winter is a perfect time to visit Chicago: The crowds are gone. The hotel rates are reasonable. And you can see how the locals enjoy this top-rate American city.

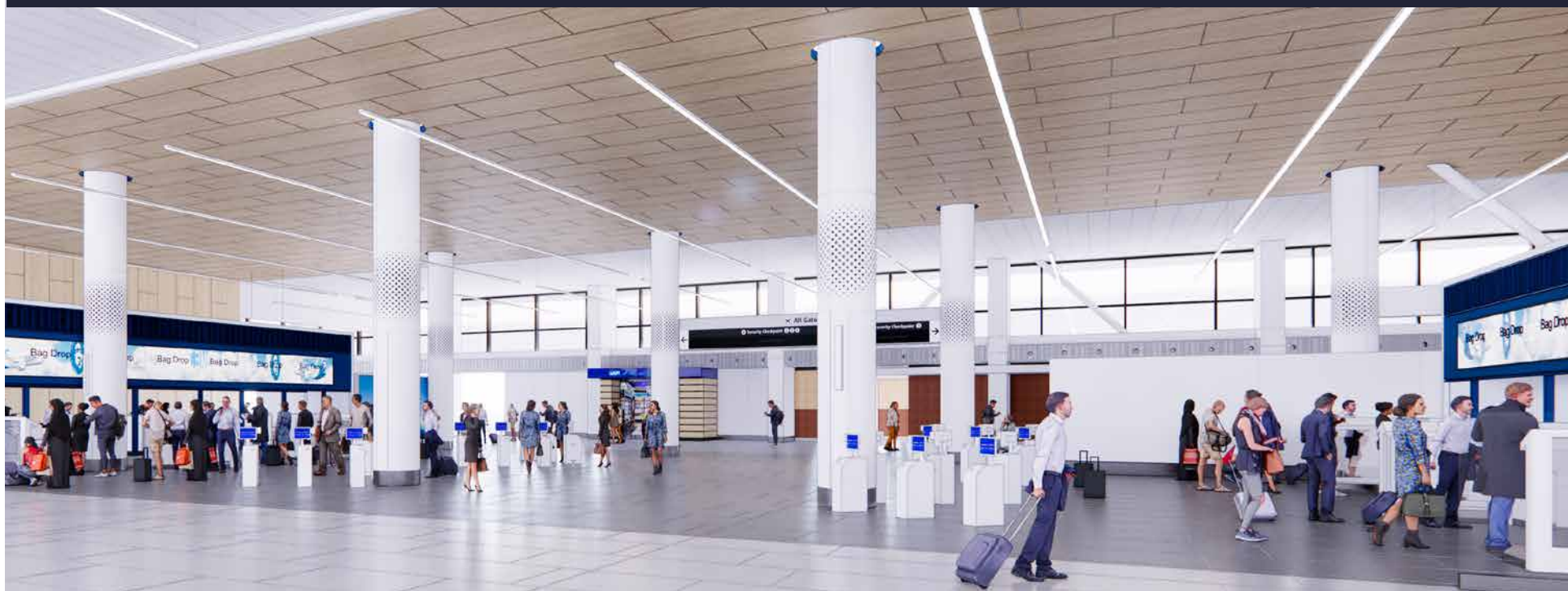
*Bill Malcolm, North America's only LGBTQ travel columnist, has written over a hundred columns over the last 10 years, which have run in LGBTQ publications, the IGLTA.org website, and other forums. He focuses on value and going local. And he boycotts hotels with resort fees, destination fees, amenity fees, and other junk charges. He pays his own way and received no compensation of any kind for this column.*



UATERMINAL ONE BILL MALCOLM



CHICAGO UNION STATION BILL MALCOLM



## WHO IS SEA-TAC'S NEW SHINE REALLY FOR?

An examination of the SEA Gateway Project

BY CALVIN JAY EMERSON, SGN ASSOCIATE EDITOR

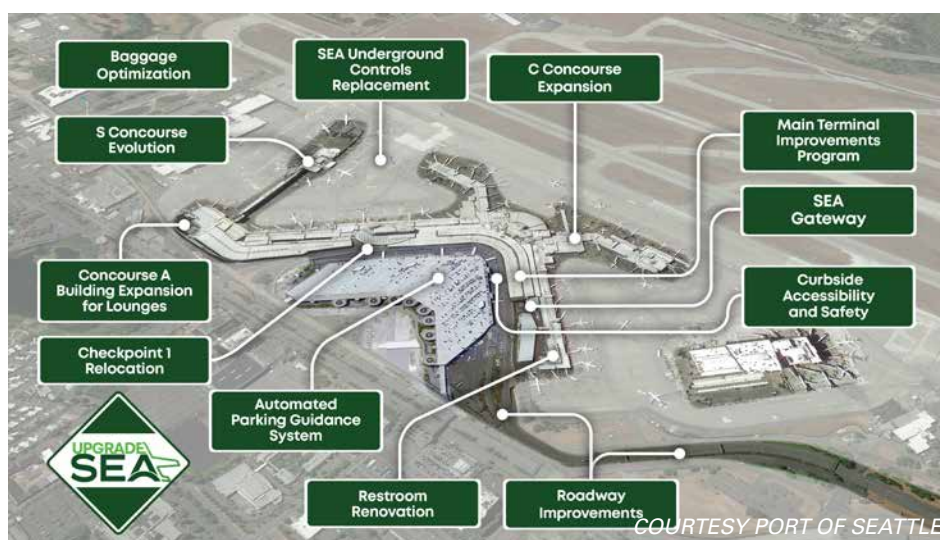
COURTESY PORT OF SEATTLE

If you arrive at the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport (Sea-Tac, or SEA) terminal via the skybridge from the parking garage, you'll be welcomed into a sleek, ultramodern space with wood paneling and white fluorescent lights. There's ample space to move about and vibrant artwork to draw your eyes. Everything feels cleaner, more spacious, and, for those in a wheelchair, more accessible.

If you're a passenger on Alaska Airlines, you're in the right place. However, those taking any other airline will notice that the bright lights sharply fade away as they move along and pass under a dark rectangle of metallic scaffolding left behind from opening day. They'll enter the tighter hallways, dated stylings, and long switchback lines of the 1970s. Passengers on Southwest, United, or Delta won't get all the perks of the new "SEA Gateway Project."

This disconnect in aesthetics and comfort, where some parts of an airport come with more benefits than others, is nothing out of the ordinary. Shutting down an airport in its entirety for construction doesn't make sense. Instead, they are renovated in bits and pieces, slowly, across decades.

What is extraordinary, however, is how the SEA Gateway Project was funded. It was built under a special partnership, which the airport calls a "tenant reimbursement effort." Alaska Airlines initially paid for the design and construction costs, then will be later reimbursed by the airport. The project's total cost is estimated to be \$546 million, though how the tab was split between the airport and Alaska remains unclear. Three years after the initial deal, on January 28, both SEA and Alaska officials cut the ribbon on the gateway.



### New changes

For Alaska passengers, checking in immediately got easier. There are dozens of spaces to print your bag tag and now "self-service bag drops." Rather than speaking with an employee, guests now sign in to a machine that scans their tagged luggage and delivers it to their destination, hands-free. Expansive restrooms and a nursing room are just steps away.

While this removes what the airline calls a "pain point," a space where a passenger has to anxiously wait before a flight, these machines spur the usual concerns of job loss that come with automation. The SGN asked Alaska about whether any of its employees were let go when these self-service machines were brought in.

"They're all here. This isn't a reduction in people," said Charu Jain, Alaska's senior VP of merchandise and innovation. "Instead, [former bag drop employees] now provide help more directly. Instead

of dealing with the monotony of a queue, they can support multiple people at a time. We're hopeful that the work can feel more creative and meaningful, as they help our guests figure out this new process."

Alaska Airlines has been a strong proponent of LGBTQIA+ inclusion in the past and even earned a score of 100 on the the Human Rights Campaign's 2023-2024 Corporate Equality Index. The company also has played an active part in supporting Seattle's Queer nonprofits and the GSBA, sponsoring events and helping raise funds.

As for passengers on different airlines, there are still smaller benefits. The reopening of an existing security lane, Checkpoint 6, will hopefully alleviate wait times for everyone. Baggage claim, fire safety systems, and ADA ramps have all been improved, and there's now a 7-11 on the ground floor. The number of toilets, urinals, and sinks has been expanded near check-in, part of a hygiene initiative that

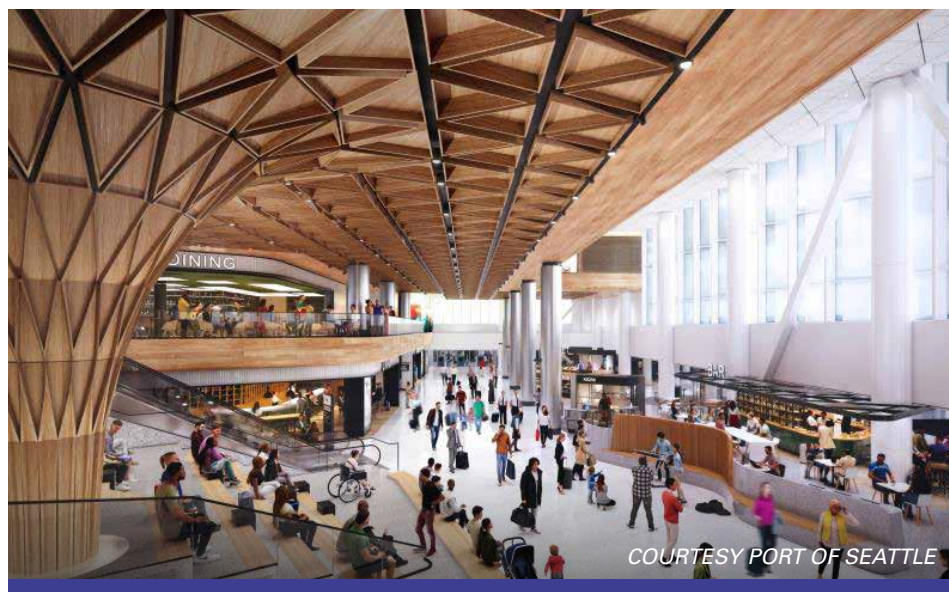
gave SEA its first-ever gender-neutral restroom in 2023.

There's also a lot of new public art. Highlights include *Rain Shadow* by Soo Sunny Park, a hovering mass of colorful ribbons that hangs over the new security line. There's also Barry Johnson's *Horizon*, a bronze-like relief of his family at peace in nature. At least two-thirds of the public art made for the Gateway project are by women and BIPOC artists. Almost all are King County residents.

"This project wouldn't be successful if we didn't have a spectrum of different folks in this process," said Tommy Gregory, senior manager of SEA's public arts program. "I've been proud to highlight artists whose works are capable of challenging people."

However, all things considered, the Gateway project was ultimately designed to benefit Alaska passengers first, everyone else second. Now, it's true that Alaska carries 52% of all passengers through SEA, so it makes economic sense to give it a bigger space. However, SEA allowed Alaska to choose the designer and build out the space however it liked. The Alaska zone now comes with more benefits than the other airlines, because those literally don't have enough space to provide them.

There are currently no announced plans to expand the other check-in spaces at SEA. Instead, the airport is pushing forward on plans to reopen an expanded, renovated C Concourse and offer overnight bus service before the World Cup arrives on June 15. It also hopes to begin building a second terminal by 2032 but has received legal push-back from the cities of Burien, SeaTac, and Des Moines.



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