

Gays attracting attention of mainstream travel industry

By Kenneth Kiesnoski, Travel Weekly

The story of the growth of the lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) travel market in recent years is a tale of two seemingly contradictory – but, in reality, complementary – trends: occasional spurts in the launch of novel, LGBT-specific tourism products and promotions tailored for gay and lesbian consumers.

Those trends have been accompanied by a slow but steady mainstreaming of both LGBT travelers and travel products.

A once neglected, all but invisible and even persecuted market segment, LGBT leisure travelers now find themselves increasingly courted and cajoled by mainstream travel suppliers, destinations and, in some cases, travel agencies, as well as by a growing raft of travel firms and hotels owned and operated by gays and lesbians.

What's the appeal? First, by one estimate, the LGBT demographic spends some \$65 billion a year on vacations.

Gay couple in LondonMoreover, industry players note that LGBT consumers have gained a reputation, deserved or not, over the past two decades as "Teflon travelers," less prone to cancel in the wake of geopolitical or natural disasters and more willing to part with a bigger portion of their disposable income on vacations than the general population is.

Jonathan Klein, owner of Now, Voyager World Wide Travel in San Francisco, said he heard the first such whispers as far back as 1990 and 1991. At the time, the first Persian Gulf War in Kuwait and Iraq was depressing mainstream international bookings, but LGBT travelers apparently kept on trekking. (For

more from Klein, see “LGBT specialist talks market’s needs, nuances.”)

John Tanzella, president of the Fort Lauderdale-based International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA), said the havoc the 9/11 terror attacks wreaked a decade later on global travel only furthered this reputation for LGBT hardiness.

“We noted an interesting trend after 9/11 of mainstream companies – whether it was major corporations or smaller, mom-and-pop tour operators – courting LGBT travelers and trying to be more welcoming with their products,” he said. “There was just so much press about gay travelers being more resilient.”

Not even LGBT consumers, with their legendary largess, could maintain spending levels in the face of the Great Recession that began in 2008; according to San Francisco-based research firm Community Marketing, spending by gay and lesbian travelers dipped in both 2009 and 2010 for the first time in nearly 20 years. Even so, David Paisley, Community Marketing’s senior projects director, said the drop was less severe in LGBT circles than in the population at large, redeeming the segment’s reputation for resiliency.

“The question is, did [LGBT travel spending] go down as much as the mainstream numbers did? A lot of people would say that no, it didn’t,” he said. “We have seen a bounce-back finally, although we’re probably seeing one in mainstream spending, too.”

To wit, in the 12 months leading up to the conclusion of Community Marketing’s 16th Annual LGBT Tourism Survey on Oct. 31, 2011, LGBT travel spending did indeed rebound, with growth of 1 percent to 3 percent reported by self-described “gay-friendly” destinations. In the same report, gay and bisexual men reported taking nearly four leisure trips, 2.4 business trips and 3.8 airline flights annually. Lesbians and bisexual

women took 3.3 leisure trips, 1.6 business trips and 2.6 flights a year.

The appeal of LGBT travelers as a market segment has grown hand-in-hand over the last two decades with an increased societal acceptance, in the U.S. and other Western countries, of what used to be termed “alternative lifestyles.”

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