

INTERVIEW

TRAVELING MAINSTREAM

Random House's Fodor's imprint enters the gay guidebook fray

by Daniel Vaillancourt

Make room on your bookshelf for *Fodor's Gay Guide to the USA*. Slip it between your Damrons, your Ferraris, and your *Betty and Pansy's Severe Queer Reviews*.

Or stand it against your more conventional primers to great North American cities. For this book boasts the best of both genres.

"Fodor's has guidebooks packed with details that are only of interest to parents traveling with

Books

their kids, guidebooks that provide specifics for people with disabilities, guidebooks for Spanish-speakers, and guidebooks for skiers," states Fodor's editorial director Karen Cure. "How could we not have a guidebook for people who are gay?"

Written by 27-year-old former Fodor's editor Andrew Collins—who traveled coast to coast for 20 months, and interviewed between three and four hundred locals during his pilgrimage—*Fodor's Gay Guide to the USA* marks the first outing into the world of gay travel by a colossal mainstream publisher. (Fodor's is a division of Random House.)

Not to be confused with George Hobic's *Gay USA*, released last fall by First Books, Collins' text covers 40 destinations, from major metropolises such as New York and Los Angeles to resorts such as Key West and Fire Island.

In addition to visiting the gay meccas, Collins investigates areas where gay men and lesbians are apt to go on business, if not for pure pleasure. Each chapter, devoted to one spot, begins with an insightful, entertaining introduction. Collins then gives the reader "the lay of the land," and proposes best bets as far as "getting around," "sleeps," "eats," "scenes"—and in some cases, even "sleaze"—are concerned. Detailed maps round out the survey of each locale.

I caught up with Collins—who is currently homeless, with only a post office box and a voice-mail number to his name—in Los Angeles, where he is already at work on pocket-size editions of future Fodor's gay guides.

Vaillancourt: Tell me about the genesis of this project.

Collins: I was an editor for Fodor's for a couple of years, and in September of 1993 I left to go freelance and pursue a career from a writing standpoint as opposed to editing. At that time I decided that there really wasn't something out there in terms of a good travel guide for gays and lesbians that not only listed things—such as the Damrons and Ferraris do—but also told you a lot about what places are like when you get there. So I proposed to Fodor's that I write a book like that. After a few months or so of going back and forth and agreeing on the format and how we really wanted to do this, I began working on it.

How did you select which places to include?

I started off with a list of about 50 destinations. Probably 35 of them were cities, and 15 of them were smaller resort towns. Eventually we whittled it down to a shorter list, just because of space.

How did you get "the lay of the land"?

I had to do it the way that anybody would do it: You show up, and you snoop around a little bit. In some cases I knew people to call ahead of time, or had friends of friends in cities. Other times it was just a matter of driving around. There was a lot of serendipity, sort of turning corners and finding good areas. The first thing that I do in any city—and this is probably what I would recommend somebody do—is try to find a gay bookstore and go there. If that's not an option, then try to find a fairly popular bar. Go there and see if there's a gay newspaper. That is always a good start.

One criticism I've heard is that your book is not gay enough, that you spend too much time on "mainstream" establishments and attractions. Any comment?

I would say about a third of the information in this book is very specific to gays and lesbians. There is virtually nothing that's of interest to gay men and lesbians in any of these destinations that's not covered. Then the other two-thirds is the kind of information that—true—you could call mainstream, or could find anywhere. My reason for doing that is twofold: One, a number of gay and lesbian travelers today are looking for a very gay vacation, are looking to go

somewhere and really immerse themselves in gay culture. You can use this book to do that. Certainly you can find things that are exclusively gay.

But I think more and more travelers are also just looking for places to go where they'll be welcome, where they'll feel comfortable, where they'll feel that they can walk around with their lover or perhaps meet somebody if they're on their travels and they're single. And that's where this book is very handy because it does tell you what there is to do in a city—where to go. It tells you as much about the mainstream chain hotels and the big restaurants that are popular with everybody. And yet it's keeping in mind what the flavor is of those establishments, how welcoming they are toward gays and lesbians.

What do you think is the significance of Fodor's being the first mainstream travel guide company to create a gay guide to the USA?

It's a feather in Fodor's hat, and I think that's why they wanted to do it. I think it will probably inspire others to do it. I think it's a good thing. It's one more sign of a mainstream business going after the gay market. And I know a lot of people, when they hear me say that, say, "Well, I'm a little leery of mainstream people quote unquote cashing in." I definitely defend that, and I don't see that as the case.

Fodor's Gay Guide to the USA by Andrew Collins. 1996; \$19.50 paper.

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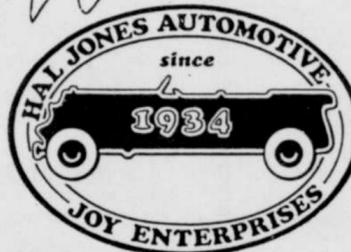
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