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national news

Travel broadens

The International Gay Travel Association grows from a handful of tiny businesses into a worldwide group

by Richard Shumate

Back in 1981, when what is today the International Gay Travel Association was founded in South Florida, most of its 25 members were what could be termed "Ma and Pa" and "Pa and Pa" businesses—primarily bed and breakfasts and small travel agencies dedicated to finding safe vacation space for gay and lesbian clients.

What a difference 15 years have made. Today, IGTA has more than 1,200 members in 30 countries, including cruise lines, large tour operators, at least four major airlines, several hotel chains and a host of agencies that promote tourism. The number of members has increased 150 percent in just the last four years.

"Our membership [in IGTA] is not only a statement. It's a commitment," says Conrad van Tigglen, North American marketing manager for the Netherlands Board of Tourism. "We not only appreciate [gay visitors], but we are committed to that market."

When IGTA held a press conference in Miami recently to celebrate its 15th anniversary, the keenness of interest in the lesbian and gay travel market was very much on display. American Airlines sent a marketing manager to tout the fact that the company now has a staff of five people who do nothing but work with the identifiable gay market. Van Tigglen was joined by an official of the Greater Miami Convention and Visitors Bureau, who talked of trips the bureau had planned to host gay travel journalists from Europe and Latin America.

Even the location of the meeting, the Hyatt Regency hotel, was significant, as Hyatt is one of those major hotel chains that have signed on as IGTA members.

The explosion of interest in the lesbian and gay travel market is being fueled primarily by economics. The IGTA estimates that gay men and lesbians in North America spend \$17 billion annually on travel, making more than 35 million vacation trips.

That total figure is based upon the somewhat-contested premise that gay men and lesbians make up 10 percent of the population and, therefore, would amount to 10 percent of the total travel market, which is estimated to be \$170 billion. But John D'Allesandro, IGTA's president, says he believes the \$17 billion estimate is conservative because gay men and lesbians, most of whom have double incomes and no kids, have more freedom and ability to travel than do heterosexuals.

Whatever the exact figure, the gay and lesbian travel market is unarguably lucrative. For instance, IGTA's members, about 60 percent of whom are travel agents and agencies, booked \$1 billion in airline ticket sales in 1995 and more than \$35 million in accommodations. And the organization estimates that only about 15 percent of gay and lesbian travel dollars are spent with its members.

Despite the fact that greater tolerance toward gay men and lesbians would seem to make the need for "safe space" less pressing than it was back in 1981, D'Allesandro says specifically gay- and lesbian-friendly travel entities are still necessary outside major cities.

"In Podunk, Iowa, you still can't [vacation openly as a gay person]. You still can't do that in a lot of cities in this country and around the world," he says. "Collectively, we are making a difference for the gay and lesbian traveler."

Clinton signs DOMA

Bill Clinton put pen to paper at 12:50 am on Saturday, Sept. 21, to sign the Defense of Marriage Act. In so doing he completed the process of codifying into federal law for the first time this major form of discrimination against lesbians and gay men.

In a written statement regarding the signing Clinton said, "Discrimination... violate[s] the principle of equal protection under the law and has no place in American society." However, he wrote, he has "long opposed governmental recognition of same-gender marriages." He said the bill "clarifies for purposes of federal law the operative meaning of the terms 'marriage' and 'spouse.'" And makes the partners of lesbians and gay men ineligible for health insurance coverage, Social Security survivors benefits, and dozens of other federal benefits and protections.

The president took the opportunity "to urge Congress to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act." He came late to that position. When the bill was introduced in the Senate in 1994, when Democrats controlled Congress, he prevented Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights Deval Patrick from testifying on its behalf. Instead Patrick sent a letter supporting the general principle of nondiscrimination, but not ENDA itself. It took more than a year for Clinton to sign on.

"It's sort of typical of Clinton double-speak," said Bob Barr (R-Georgia), a leading proponent of DOMA, of Clinton's statement. "It leaves the country wondering whether he's really committed to it."

"I'm angry," said Elizabeth Birch, executive

director of the Human Rights Campaign. "I wanted President Clinton to act with the highest moral leadership, and he has not. It is an unheroic move."

HRC endorsed Clinton for re-election in February and has said it will not reconsider that endorsement.

"Remember the day the lesbian and gay Americans were singled out for second-class citizenship," said the Rev. Mel White, justice minister with the Metropolitan Community Church.

He led a fast and vigil against DOMA and was one of nine people arrested in front of the White House the previous week in protest.

"For the first time in U.S. history, the legislative and executive branches have used their combined powers to legalize discrimination against lesbian and gay citizens," White said. "President Clinton has enshrined into law the false and inflammatory rhetoric of Pat Robertson and other religious extremists. We must not go silently into the dark night of intolerance and discrimination."

Evan Wolfson, with the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund and co-counsel in the Hawaii legal challenge to same-sex marriage, called DOMA "the creation of a federal caste system for marriage [second-class citizens, second-class marriages]. DOMA is appalling, it is radical, it is unconstitutional, it is disgusting. Politicians who voted for it should be ashamed of themselves."

Protests to Clinton's signing were muted. A handful of protesters greeted Clinton as he left church in Washington, D.C., on Sunday morning. About 50 gathered that evening in San Francisco.

Bob Roehr



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