

It's no secret Portland is jam-packed with queer people. Its warm social climate offsets the rain and the occasional political storm that blows through every few Novembers. The 2000 census ranked the Rose City with the 13th-highest number of same-sex couples in the nation, and *Girlfriends* magazine celebrated it as the fourth-best place for lesbians to live in 2002.

All of these things combined inspired the Portland Oregon Visitors Association to launch a *Gay Portland* campaign in March to attract more queer visitors. "We really see Portland as a welcoming place for GLBT travelers, and we think it's a perfect match," cultural tourism director Barbara Steinfeld says.

The campaign, whose brochure and Web site bend into bait and resource guide, is packed full of information for queer visitors. The sections highlight nearly every aspect of Portland's glorious sexual minorities community: shopping, eating, drinking, the arts, festivals and events.

"When I came up with the idea," Steinfeld says, "I thought I was groundbreaking." But as her staff began their research, they realized Portland wasn't the first city to toot its rainbow horn.

And even though a small handful of others have taken a swing before POVA, Steinfeld believes it's a novel idea. "The demographic of the cultural tourist fits in very nicely with what we believe the demographic of the GLBT traveler is: high income, high education, interested in the arts, participating in many activities and staying in hotels," she says, explaining why *Gay Portland* landed on her plate.

In addition to attracting more queers to Portland for a shits 'n' giggles weekend, POVA has joined forces with its advertising and conventions departments in hopes of roping in larger groups. Last year Portland played host to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change conference as well as the Gay Softball World Series. Groups similar to these will be targeted, and Steinfeld says she's "excited to be the one who gets to go after this new market."

Hotels are the driving force behind this campaign because they buy into the program. Considering POVA's budget is based on lodging taxes, Steinfeld was thrilled when 15 hotels wanted to come on board for *Gay Portland*, offering special deals and rates for the queer visitor. "It was so encouraging for me to see that they all support this campaign and see this as a viable market," she says.

These hotels aren't Motel 6s, either. Most of Portland's landmark hotels have jumped on board—the Benson, the Hilton, the Paramount, 5th Avenue Suites and the Westin.

And it's no wonder. Portland has much to offer the queer visitor. "Tax-free shopping, boutique hotels, excellent dining, wonderful

## GAY MECCA

Campaign promotes Portland to queer tourists

by Gina Daggett



Travel agent Joan Sher is excited about the Portland Oregon Visitors Association's strategy for drawing queer tourists to the Rose City

theater and music, art galleries and Portland's edgy, quirky character," Steinfeld says.

*Gay Portland* snapshots all of these local hallmarks. One branch of the campaign highlights the various neighborhoods where the rainbow flags outnumber the American flags—where folks don't take second look at two men snuggling in a booth and smile at a lesbian couple walking arm in arm with their dog. These parts of town might seem obvious to locals: Southeast Hawthorne, Northeast Broadway, Northwest Trendy-Third, the Pearl and the newly coined Burnside Triangle.

Portland's night life is broken into accurate, user-friendly categories for men and women or those looking for a mixed bar. The arts community is also well represented and used to entice visitors. From the galleries to the museum to the performing arts center to the east vs. west art battles on the first and last Thursdays of each month, POVA's got it covered.

Also not left out are queer-friendly stores where tourists can pick up a book, a new sex toy

or a sticker for the left wing of their bumper. Queer businessman Charles Boucher, owner of the erotica emporium CounterMedia, believes that even though Portland doesn't have specific "gay attractions" like other major cities—San Francisco, Provincetown, Amsterdam or New York City—it instead pulls on different strings.

"Maybe Portland's real attraction is that it doesn't need them," he says. "Its natural beauty and its progressive solutions to urban living transcend orientation."

Boucher thinks POVA deserves all the praise in the world for tackling this. "I'm impressed that they would embark on this campaign and think that it can only do good" for the sexual minorities community, he says. "There can be no negatives to it, and whether it actually brings people to the city or not, it shows that POVA's heart is in the right place."

The Web site also offers useful information for queer visitors once they've arrived in Portland. Its sections range from congregations and

recreation to publications and transportation; even a calendar of upcoming events is included, noting more than just Portland Pride and Peacock in the Park.

POVA seems to have it all for our queer travelers unless you're a gay man looking for a little action. The campaign does fail to mention Portland's bathhouses—and it wasn't an oversight that these steamy locations were omitted. Steinfeld says that in addition to space constraints, bathhouses were left out because they "didn't seem to fit the image of Portland we were portraying with our cultural tour brochure series."

POVA met with leaders in the queer community for advice and direction every step of the way. "We'd say: 'How are we doing? Are we doing the right thing?'" Steinfeld says. "We wanted to bounce our ideas off groups that were in the know [including *Just Out* and Basic Rights Oregon] so that we wouldn't be writing anything offensive or insensitive."

Even heterosexual business owners are excited about the campaign and think it will be effective. Joan Sher, a travel consultant at GK Travel, believes *Gay Portland* could serve the community even better if POVA partnered with the Portland Area Business Association, the queer chamber of commerce.

"They could work together to promote gay tourism...and reach more business in the area," she says. Sher, who's been a member of PABA for the past eight years and POVA for nine years, hopes to help queer visitors with travel arrangements.

Steinfeld wants to build a foundation for *Gay Portland* through this archetypal campaign. "I hope the results will be enough to get this started on an annual basis," she says.

POVA is eager to get the brochures—which can be picked up at the Pioneer Courthouse Square visitors center, the mayor's office and many queer businesses—in people's hands. Although the organization's budget doesn't allow it to ship large quantities of the pamphlets out to other markets, people can pick them up at its office downtown.

Even though it will be difficult to measure the campaign's success, Steinfeld hopes POVA will continue to go after the queer market. With edgy campaign slogans like "Indulge Your Need for Art (or Bob, or Jim or Roger)," it not only is blazing the way for queer tourism but no doubt will set the mark for other cities to follow suit and draw droves to Portland's little Gay Mecca. **J**

For more information about GAY PORTLAND visit [www.travelportland.com/glb](http://www.travelportland.com/glb).

GINA DAGGETT is a Portland free-lance writer who can be reached at [gdaggett@aol.com](mailto:gdaggett@aol.com).



## Dignity in Drag!

Community philanthropist Gary Maffei saw the stage production of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* last summer and fell head over heels in love! He knew many of his friends at Equity Foundation would too. Leveraging their Equity Foundation donor-advised funds, they joined together to sponsor the return of *Hedwig* this June at Theater! Theatre!

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