



PURPLE LIGHT VACATIONS: TIPS FOR THE FIRST-TIME LGBT VACATION TRAVELER.

INTRODUCTION

It was not all that long ago (1985), that the first well-known LGBT travel company in the United States was established. Since that time, the companies and offerings for LGBT travelers have multiplied, offering many choices to LGBT travelers. Perhaps the best piece of advice we can offer the person seeking to go on their first LGBT trip is, don't go in with any preconceptions or believe everything you have heard about these vacations. There are LGBT vacations for people of every age, size, body type, interest, gender and even sexual orientation (as all LGBT-friendly travelers are welcomed). There are varied choices as to destination and price-range. New travel companies are sprouting up. They offer even more options including special interest LGBT vacations such as diving or biking vacations, bear events, and others. Vacation choices include cruises both on sea and river whether LGBT-friendly, an LGBT group, or an all-gay charter. Land vacations options include an all-gay week at a resort in Mexico or Hawaii, exploring exciting places like Machu Picchu, Africa, or Eastern Europe with an LGBT group, or simply exploring LGBT-friendly destinations on your own. How do you decide which option is right for you? Here are some things to consider:

LAND VACATIONS

Traveling On Your Own, or With Friends to An LGBT-Friendly Destination

The world has generally become much more LGBT friendly over the past few years and some travelers enjoy touring and exploring cities and towns on their own. This allows you to tour a place whether it be Amsterdam, Barcelona, Provincetown or Cape Town at your own pace, spending time at the sites that are interesting to you without being rushed or pressured. If you travel with friends you will enjoy the trip more if you are the kind of person who likes to be sociable and spend time in a group. If you want to explore destinations on your own, or with friends, you would greatly benefit from the insight of a knowledgeable travel agency, like Purple Light Vacations, to find the hotels that are truly LGBT friendly and to assist you with other aspects of your vacation.

LGBT Exclusive Resort

Another option is to spend a week at an all-inclusive resort that has been booked exclusively by an LGBT travel company. Our travel partners such as Atlantis, Olivia and Brand G take over a Hard Rock, Club Med or similar resort on private beaches in places like Puerto Vallarta and Cancun Mexico for a week. They bring in their own entertainment, DJ's and party themes. This allows you to experience LGBT cruise festiveness on land. These vacations are economical because they are all-inclusive. Not only are all meals, including dinners at specialty restaurants included, but so are all beverages including house alcoholic drinks. These resorts also provide some water sports gear at no charge (like Kayaks, snorkel masks etc.) and offer jet skis and other equipment at a reasonable additional charge. Your days can be filled with swimming and other sports activities or simply reading and relaxing in a gay environment.

LGBT Exclusive Land Tour

Finally, some of the travel companies we work with (such as Source Events and Brand G) organize land tours for small groups (group size varies but generally around 25) of LGBT travelers to places of interest. These trips can allow you to explore and experience memorable travel destinations with a group of like-minded individuals. Some of these trips feature exotic locales and luxurious accommodations, while others focus on active touring such as hiking or biking tours. Some of the places gay groups have gone to include Machu Picchu, African safaris, exploring the Galapagos, or touring in Europe.

CRUISES

Because you are reading this, it is safe to assume you are interested in an LGBT vacation, or at least, one that is LGBT-friendly. Some LGBT travelers choose to book a cabin on one of their cruises without considering if there will be other LGBT travelers on board. Doing so will certainly give you maximum options in terms of scheduling and pricing. But, it is important to make sure that you book on a line and itinerary where you will be compatible. Otherwise, you may have to share the ship with groups of people that you may not wish to spend time with though the passenger profile varies depending on the particular cruise line and itinerary. Most, if not all, of the cruise lines cater to passengers that will not care whom you sleep with. However, our experience is that there are some notable differences between various cruise lines and from cruise to cruise as to how accepting other passengers will be of LGBT travelers that are open about their orientation. This is particularly the case when a same sex couple wants to dance together or show affection in public. Many cruise lines, now list "Friends of Dorothy" meetings in their daily cruise guide to allow LGBT travelers to meet one another. The extent to which other passengers will show up to "Friends of Dorothy" meetings and/or their desire to meet and get to know other LGBT passengers varies widely. In short, these cruises, while often economical and enjoyable, are as Forrest Gump would say "like a box of chocolates".

All LGBT or Not?

Assuming that you prefer and feel more comfortable on a ship where you know you will not be the only gay person or same-sex couple aboard, the first question is whether an all-gay charter group or non-exclusive gay group is more suited to your needs and desires. An all gay charter such as Atlantis, RSVP, Olivia, Brand G, or Source Vacations is where the cruise line books the entire ship and offers it to the LGBT community and their friends and family. These cruises provide you with an environment in which you know everyone on-board will be gay or gay-friendly. You can be affectionate and dance together in public and not worry about it. No one will question your wanting a romantic table for two. Some LGBT travelers love these gay charters because they can avoid noisy children and some of the other traveler types that tend to book cabins on some cruise lines. The gay charter company will bring on their own entertainment, which on the larger ships usually includes a headliner plus first-rate cabaret, drag performers and comedians. Headliners on these LGBT cruises in the past few years include Kathy Griffin, Wanda Sykes, Jennifer Hudson, Andy Bell (Erasure) and Bernadette Peters not to mention notable speakers like Suze Orman, Armistead Maupin, or Maya Angelou. If you like to dance, you may select a cruise with some of the best DJ's and laser shows in the world. On the other hand, a gay group on a straight cruise will be more economical, provide you with more options in terms of itinerary, and allow you to sail with a wider population of cruise passengers. That may appeal to couples not wanting to dance and party their vacation away. You will not however have the kind of entertainment and freedom that an LGBT charter offers. Nonetheless, some travel companies like Source and Brand G arrange for their own excursions, parties and/or entertainment on mainstream ships for their gay group cruises.

Size Can Be Important In Selecting a Ship

Once you decide whether an LGBT charter or group is more your style, you still will have to decide on how large and what kind of ship you want to travel. There are, for example, all LGBT charters on ships accommodating anywhere from 50 to over 3,000 passengers. The larger ships generally offer more amenities and options. These amenities on larger ships may be everything from rock-climbing to an ice rink at sea and even a surfing or sports car simulator. The large ships will also offer you more choice in passengers to meet as friends, or more. However, these ships are sometimes so big, that unless you exchange contact information immediately, you may never see the same person on the rest of the trip. The large cruise ships often have longer lines for meals and events and cannot dock at smaller ports. Therefore, you may have to take tender boats into some or all of the cruise ports. Mid-size ships provide many, but not all of the amenities of the larger ships, but generally have shorter lines at meals, and allow you a better opportunity to meet and keep in touch with people. The small ships often offer the most intimate and luxurious experience. A windjammer or yacht style ship will offer a crew that will soon call you by name and know how you take your coffee and/or cocktail. A small ship cruise experience can be active or elegant, or both at the same time. The smaller the ship, the more likely it will be able to dock right in port. In fact, the smaller ships are sometimes able to go into ports that are simply not accessible to larger cruise ships.

Length is an Equally Important Criteria

You also need to decide where and for how long you wish to travel. Cruises generally are anywhere from 7 to 12 days, though Source Events has a gay group cruise each year from Miami that is only 4 days long. If you select a cruise such as one in Europe, South America or Asia you will want to add at least a day or two before and possibly after the cruise to recover from jet lag and to better experience the starting and ending ports.

Cruises are Available for Every Budget

There are cruises that are right for just about any budget. Remember in looking at the cruise prices that they include all meals and entertainment and often provide a remarkable value. While the LGBT charter cruises are definitely more expensive, you get what you pay for if you are seeking the kind of parties, headliner entertainment, or just the freedom to be who you are and meet other like-minded people that these cruises provide. The prices depend on the length of the cruise, the quality of the ship, and the itinerary. A fare for a 4 day LGBT group cruise that has taken place each year starts at just \$469! LGBT exclusive 7 day cruises start from as little as \$699 per person for an inside cabin and can go up to over \$3,500 per person for the most inexpensive cabin for a 10 day Asian cruise aboard an ultra-luxury all-suites ship such as the Seabourn.

Remember also that the entire fare is generally not payable all at once. If you book a cruise a year in advance a deposit of about \$300-\$800 is all that is generally due at the time of booking with the exact deposit amount and payment schedule being dependent on the charter company as well as the particular ship and itinerary involved.

The Lure of a River Boat Cruise

While large ocean cruise ships offer non-stop activities and facilities, a river cruise can be more intimate, and provide a better way to see foreign countries and experience foreign cultures while meeting like-minded LGBT passengers.

One can find cruises traveling down most of the world's most well-known rivers. Some of the more memorable ones travel down the Danube, the Rhine, and through the Amazon. The Danube cruise while take you through the countries of Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Hungary (and provides an easy opportunity to go to Prague in the Czech Republic). A Rhine cruise will usually take you from Amsterdam through Germany, France and to Basel Switzerland. An Amazon cruise will allow you to see the nature and wildlife in Brazil and Peru. A new and exciting river boat itinerary for GLBT travelers has been added this year on Asia's Mekong River through Cambodia and Vietnam.

Some river cruise itineraries are relaxing because depending on the itinerary, you can see a great deal from the deck of the ship. The experience of passing Medieval castles on the banks of a river while savoring a glass of wine or a cocktail is a memorable one. It is also romantic. Is anyone planning a honeymoon? The ride is smooth and sea sickness is no longer a concern. The river ships are usually able to dock downtown in very convenient locations to cities so that exploring the city on your own or

through an organized tour is easy and requires no tender ride. The ships are smaller and generally accommodate between 100-200 passengers. This allows LGBT travelers to get to know their fellow passengers better and form some meaningful friendships. For those looking for romance or a hook-up, there is less competition but of course, fewer to choose from.

The river cruise ships generally have quite comfortable cabins and limited but pleasant amenities such as fitness centers with spas, a small pool and/or hot tub, bars, and piano bars. When a GLBT cruise company charters the ships they bring on their own entertainers, usually cabaret type singers and/or a comedian but the on ship entertainment is more limited than on the ocean cruises and there will probably be no costume/theme parties. However if you pick a river cruise with an interesting itinerary, you can experience the nightlife and culture of some of the World's most vibrant cities. For example, on a Danube cruise that berths overnight in Vienna, one can see an opera at the Vienna opera and then, change clothes to go out dancing at the clubs or meet the leather community at the Vienna Eagle. While one can choose to have meals in the ports, the river cruise companies provide meals that are generally quite good. The riverboat cruises generally also include wine with dinner and sometimes lunch. This provides you with an easy opportunity to sample local wines.

QUESTIONS ASKED BY FIRST TIME GAY VACATIONERS

Is a Gay Cruise or Land Vacation Like a Bathhouse?

Gay male cruises have the reputation of being a place of non-stop sexual activity between singles and couples. This reputation is significantly, but not completely, undeserved. On virtually every cruise there will be singles and committed couples who just want to travel with other LGBT travelers and make friends. They spend their days reading books, seeing the ports and entertainment and just relaxing or talking with others, though some certainly strut their stuff on the dance floor. They have no interest in hooking up and that is in no way an issue. While someone may approach them during the cruise and suggest something, a polite no thank you is almost always sufficient. At the same time, should you be looking for a hook up or a long term romance, on just about every gay cruise there will be singles and couples looking for the same thing. Your options include (depending on the ship), essentially anonymous encounters on the top deck of the ship late at night or in the sauna during the day, or meeting other couples and singles at dinners that the ship organizes. The level of sexual tension, on board depends on the cruise you select and where you hang out on the ship. There will be more tension for example on the dance floor when you have your shirt off then there will be in the dining room during brunch. You should feel comfortable regardless of what you are (or are not) looking for unless you are easily offended.

Is an LGBT Cruise or Land Vacation Filled With People Doing Drugs/Drinking?

Gay male cruises also have the reputation of attracting druggies or alcoholics. This reputation is also largely unfounded. On most cruises, you certainly will not see heavier drinking or drug use than occurs elsewhere in the gay community, such as at gay bars in various cities. Nevertheless, the level of

“partying” on board depends to some extent on the cruise charter company and the cruise itinerary. Contact Purple Light or another knowledgeable LGBT travel company if you have questions or concerns. The larger cruises have “Friends of Bill W.” and other such meetings. Some of the LGBT travel companies, like Source, actually focus part of their trip on wellness and holistic health.

Is It a Problem If I am Single and Don’t Have a Traveling Partner?

Most of these cruises and land vacations attract a good mix of singles and couples. The prices quoted for these vacations are always based on double occupancy. If you do not currently have someone a travel partner, you still have several options. First, the charter companies usually have a system whereby they will pair single travelers together (usually just based on smoking preference). Some people have found this program to have worked well for them. Another option is to book your cruise and post on the Facebook pages for the LGBT travel company and even the one for the particular cruise and try to find someone with whom you would travel well. Your travel agent may also know of other people looking to room with someone on that cruise or land vacation. You of course, can pay the single supplement and have your own room. While in past years, the single supplement was double, some charter companies have reduced the percentage somewhat; having a private room will certainly make you “popular” in some circles. Finally, you can pay the single supplement and select a travel partner at some date closer to the vacation.

Are Straight People Welcome on an LGBT Cruise and Can I Bring Straight Friends or Family with Me?

Straight but LGBT-friendly people are welcome on virtually all of these vacations, and frequently become the “celebrity stars” and have the best time. You can feel free to bring your LGBT friendly friends and family with you and they will probably have such a good time that they may never want to take a standard cruise again!

“MASQUERADE”-What Is This I Hear About Theme Party Costumes?

The LGBT charter companies on both their cruises and land vacations have theme parties and tea dances where passengers are encouraged to show up in theme party costumes. The specific themes vary depending on the travel company and the particular vacation. The themes may include military (dog tag), 70’s disco, White party, underwear and/or leather parties, costumes based on the ports for a particular cruise or location of the land resort, and a costume contest with real cash prizes. Olivia has had a “Shero party”, where women get dressed up as their favorite heroine. Some, but not all, people get dressed up. Some people go all out with costumes they design and build for themselves or their group of friends. Others buy costumes on the internet. Purple Light has partnered with costume designers that can help passengers stand out and make an impressive entrance at these parties. There is no requirement that anyone participate in these parties. Some people choose not to dress up and still have a great time at the parties. Others choose to pass on the dance parties altogether or just attend

one or two. There is so much going on during many of these cruises in terms of entertainment, port excursions, casino gambling and other options that no one can do everything so not to worry.

“CALL ME MAYBE”- Why do People Have Social Cards Printed?

One of the lures of going on an LGBT cruise or land vacation is the opportunity to meet and get to know other like-minded singles and couples from around the country, and often from around the world. One will frequently meet people with whom you want to keep in touch whether it is to talk about planning the next cruise or visiting each other when you get home. You can meet someone on a cruise that can be become a close friend or significant other. Some passengers also may want to have a card with their name and cabin number so that other passengers know how to get a hold of you while on board.

A number of cruise passengers print their own social cards with a photo and whatever personal contact information they care to include. Some people have cards printed for each cruise and have their cabin number printed on the card. Companies like Vista Print (among others) offer simple cards for \$25 or less so that one can certainly have a separate card for each cruise and not break the bank. However, more cost efficient and easier is to have an established card and write a cabin number on the back.

What is this I hear About People Decorating Their Cabin Doors?

If you have never been on a gay cruise, be aware that a good number of cruise passengers choose to decorate their cabin doors to let other cruisers know something about themselves. Guys on gay cruises will post photos of themselves (frequently but not always in sexy poses) as well as their names and cities on their cabin doors. They may put up a marker or board up where “gentlemen callers” may write them notes and may put up magnets, clippings, feathers and anything else you can think of to make their cabin door stand out and be more festive. Your cabin door can reflect your sense of humor, your personality or your interests as well as your physical assets. Some people put up photos or articles about their favorite performer. Others put up hot photos of models or porno stars together with photos of themselves creating confusion and or curiosity. If you are creative, let your wild side run wild. This is one of the many ways gay cruises bring out the “kid” in all of us.



Five Final Tips for First Time Olivia (and Other) LGBT Travelers by Purple and Poppy

Our friend Poppy Champlin, one of the funniest people we know and a frequent performer on Olivia (and other LGBT cruises) has helped us come up with a list of some final tips for first time LGBT travelers:

1. Whether you are going on a cruise or land vacation, find a way to leave your work at home. Poppy says “as soon as you get through check-in, leave your job life behind, and really let loose!”

2. Take the time when you get on board to learn the layout of the ship. Per Poppy “learn to get to know your port from your aft”! If you book with us, you will receive our ship overview which may help you to know some of your ship’s highlights
3. There will be lots of options on board. Do whatever makes you happy. Poppy says: “just do it! Get to it sooner rather than later in the week. The week goes by quickly”.
4. Go see the entertainers. They were selected for you and love to perform to the community. Of course, this includes our friend Poppy. Poppy says: “I love performing to 1200 lesbians who relate to what I am saying”
5. Be as you can be especially with the freedom you will have on an LGBT cruise.

We hope that this introduction to gay vacations has been useful. But, remember that every ship, hotel and destination has its own personality and secrets. Purple Light Vacations can provide you with the information you need to make the right choices and make the most of your vacation. When you travel with us you’ll be in the know.

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