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Hotels Seeing Green In Gay Marriages

By Nadra Kareem - 9/1/2008

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When the California Supreme Court overturned the state's ban on same sex marriage in May, it created an opportunity for California to further capitalize on the gay tourism market.

The Los Angeles area in particular is among the Top 10 cities visited by gay travelers, according to the Travel Industry Association.

Accordingly, while it is still possible for gays and lesbians to marry in the state – the court's ruling may be reversed in November – the Los Angeles Convention and Visitors' Bureau has highlighted some of the city's most "gay friendly" establishments, including many in the San Fernando Valley.

Of the six hotels the bureau, also known as LA Inc., considers ideal for gay and lesbian wedding parties, two – the Sheraton Universal and the Warner Center Marriott – are in the Valley. Both hotels have been approved by the Travel Alternatives Group, which means that they actively seek gay travel revenues, in addition to creating hiring policies, services and support specifically for gays and lesbians.

At the Sheraton Universal, Richard Reeves is director of transient sales. The position requires him to handle all of the hotel's business contracts and leisure programs. Under his leadership, the Sheraton Universal became TAG-approved roughly four years ago. Reeves formerly worked at a Sheraton on the Westside that already had TAG approval. This allowed him to use the knowledge he gained there at the Sheraton Universal. Reeves feels that because of the Sheraton Universal's location – "we're a Hollywood landmark" – it was especially important that the hotel be gay friendly.

"Being TAG-approved gives us a lot of opportunity in terms of showcasing our product," Reeves said. "I think a lot of companies don't look at how large and important that amount of discretionary income can be to you."

Reeves said that the hotel keeps no records of the amount of revenues it gains from gay travelers, but he said that he has recently noticed an increase of what he perceives to be as gay travelers in the hotel. Though, "I've never broken it down to saying, 'How have you found out about it? Why are you here?'"

The Sheraton just completed \$25 million in renovations. Reeves, who is gay himself, believes that the changes the property has undergone makes it more appealing to gay travelers. Whereas before, the interior color scheme was beige on beige, the Sheraton now features blues, browns and chocolates. "It's very striking when we walk into the lobby," Reeves said. The Sheraton also recently opened a new bar called "In the Mix," which offers 51 types of vodka. The goal is to create an atmosphere where guests feel comfortable gathering.

"I do think ... the look of the property is more appealing than what we were before," Reeves said. "We're more stylish."

Diverse staff

The diversity of the Sheraton Universal's staff also makes travelers, be they gay or otherwise, feel comfortable, Reeves believes. "Our staff is so diverse – where they're from, what they like, what their preferences are – anyone who walks through the door feels like a part of the family," he said. "Everyone gets along so well, regardless of who you are and where you come from."

Largely due to the California Supreme Court's May ruling, Glen Fishman, project director for San Francisco-based Community Marketing Inc., of which Travel Alternatives Group is a division, said that he has fielded a number of calls this summer from hotels inquiring about providing same-sex weddings and ceremony events. "Any good property with a sales force that is at all savvy is aware of this," he said.

Fishman expects California hotels to continue reaching out to the gay community even if the state Supreme Court's decision is reversed. "These properties survived without performing ceremonies in the past. That's not their bread and butter. It's a nice added service for their customers."

Fishman said that in years past, same-sex couples would report feeling uncomfortable asking for a room with one bed. Today, fewer and fewer gay couples experience such anxiety in hotels, Fishman believes.

"More and more properties are becoming gay friendly and welcoming and offering better diversity training for their staff," he said.

Supporting properties

Now, the issue for gay travelers isn't anxiety but taking advantage of the opportunity to spend money on hotels that they know have are gay friendly, Fishman said. "Every hotel offers Internet access and nice 600 thread count sheets," he continued. "It's become more than that. It's more about putting their revenue with the properties that support their community."

In addition to hotels, LA Inc. has also highlighted places of worship and outdoor venues that are supportive of the gay community. Two of the four religious institutions it listed on its website as being receptive to gay marriage ceremonies are in the Valley – Temple Beth Hillel in Valley Village and First Christian Church of North Hollywood. At the temple, described as an inclusive Jewish community affiliated with the Reform movement, social responsibility is a priority. With a reputation for being more of an activist hub than a religious one, its leader, Rabbi Jim Kaufman, has performed same-sex marriages for three decades. Meanwhile, First Christian Church offers its patrons the opportunity to have an intimate wedding ceremony. Its redwood chapel can accommodate 65 guests, and its colonial sanctuary can hold 350. As for outdoor venues for gay and lesbian marriages in the Valley, LA Inc. recommends the Japanese Garden in Van Nuys and Descanso Gardens in La Canada Flintridge.

While resources abound for gay and lesbian travelers to the San Fernando Valley, Jay Aldrich, a tourism and hospitality professor at California State University, Northridge, said that it's still too early to tell what kind of economic impact the state supreme court's reversal of the ban on same-sex marriage has had. He expects those figures to come in by late this year. For now, Aldrich is hopeful that the court's decision is upheld in November.

"It's opening California to a lot of businesses, both local market and international," Aldrich said. "It's big business for Southern California right now."

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