

Where the Boys Are

By Arnold Wayne Jones - Staff Writer
Jan 31, 2008 - 6:27:00 PM

With sun and sand every season, Fort Lauderdale is a fabulous gay oasis

Even in the winter, Fort Lauderdale is a sunny place. Step off an airplane in the morning, and you'll likely be greeted with a warm breeze and fairly low humidity.

But constant exposure to beautiful weather, a thriving gay scene and a cosmopolitan atmosphere must get boring.

You're kidding, right?

Ever since the 1960 film in which George Hamilton and Yvette Mimieux told us "Where the Boys Are," Fort Lauderdale has been flocked-to by college-aged spring breakers and sun worshippers of all stripes. And naturally, the gay community has blossomed.

Less than an hour from Miami and the colorful dynamism of South Beach, Lauderdale (resident population in the metro area: 1 million) seems tame by comparison — but only by comparison. The style is leisurely but exciting, visitor-friendly and fun to explore.

Gay guesthouses galore

First up is the abundance of queer accommodations. For travelers (especially men) who seek out gay and gay-friendly guesthouses, Greater Fort Lauderdale is an oceanside mecca. A quick informal survey indicates that no fewer than 20 gay inns (and possibly many more) dot the metropolitan area, representing fully 25 percent of all high-end small lodgings (those with 30 or fewer rooms).

Many are clustered near North Atlantic Boulevard, "The Strip" that abuts the Atlantic Ocean and buzzes with activities day and night.

The Royal Palms Resort, run by gregarious British transplant Richard Gray, racks up accolades like the New England Patriots rack up Super Bowl bids. OutTraveler's "best gay resort" of 2007 — and they mean anywhere — it's a charmer within a quick walk of the beach, but like most of its sister accommodations, why would you want to leave? A cozy 12-room facility, it offers small queen-sized beds to double-king to suites, all with convenient access to the pool and spa. Mixed drinks are available every afternoon, and guests can get day-passes to Main Street Gym.

The Elysium Resort across the street boasts a mid-century modern architectural style, huge hot tubs and skyline view — but, as with all the guesthouses, high walls allow privacy. Other accommodations in the immediate area include the 15-room Flamingo and the Grand Resort and Spa.

You'll have to take a short car ride to get to the beach if you stay at Pineapple Point, but it's definitely worth the trek. This off-the-beaten-path oasis is secluded in a residential area, away from the roar of the city streets. From inside, you'd be hard-pressed to detect being in the middle of a bustling metropolis.

Small, classy touches (apothecary jars in the bathrooms, Gilcrest & Soames toiletries) accent the rooms, while pineapples — the international symbol of hospitality — appoint everything from pillows to dishes to doorknockers. And what could be more hospitable than a friendly staff in a clothing optional environment?

For those trapped in the undertow of true luxury, the Hotel St. Regis is a new and modern skyscraper with Cero, a large oceanfront restaurant, for an elegant Sunday brunch, plus spacious pool and spa facilities. The always gay-friendly W Hotel is in development right now and promises some whiz-bang elements, including a glass-bottom pool looking down over the entrance driveway.

Fun in the sun

The region is awash in beaches, but if you're looking for the cruise-y area populated mostly by gay men, the fulcrum of queer sea life is near the intersection of Atlantic Boulevard and Sebastian Street.

Once you've settled on a hotel and have had enough timing lying by the pool or on the beach, there are countless other activities to engage in.

Coming off the Sebastian Street Beach, try grabbing a bite at Casablanca Café. This piano bar and restaurant is populated by locals and tourists, both gay and straight.

Check out the old stucco design and the narrow spiral staircase leading upstairs to an atmospheric dining room.

The kitchen serves lots of seasonal seafood, like ahi sashimi with seaweed salad, or tropical mahi mahi with rich lemon cream sauce and fruit compote over rice.

Lauderdale recently landed a branch of Season 52, the Florida-based restaurant chain specializing in luscious-but-lite entrees (never more than 700 calories) and decadent "mini-indulgence" desserts (300 calories). Enjoy it there until Texas gets its own.

In addition to its sizeable gay population, Fort Lauderdale is also where many of the nation's wealthiest call home (or at least "vacation home"). A Water Taxi Tour is an excellent way to get as close most of us will ever get to the kind of money — old and new — floating around here.

The boat-taxis weave around the many inlets of the Intercoastal Waterway that make up the toniest areas of Lauderdale's elite where a quarter-acre vacant lot runs a cool mil. There are 160 miles of yachts and mansions to pant over, all connected through a series of canals and small bridges. A good guide will be able to point out the "Where the Boys Are" locale, or the house where Cher used to live (surprisingly small and low-key, by the way).

If you don't like being on the water, consider touring the waterway from terra firm through Birch Park, which runs along it. There's no cooler way to get around than with a Segway rental, which effortlessly scoots you along in eye-catching fashion. The Segway Beach Tours shop also rents bicycles for those who prefer to peddle.

Venturing out

For a day excursion, plan a trip to Butterfly World in Broward County. If it sounds like a dull butterfly sanctuary, it's not — at least, it's not dull. You've never seen so many moths and butterflies in flight, but there's more to the park, with all forms of flora and wildlife to enjoy, including macaws and iconic flamingos.

Also outside of town is Sawgrass Mills, the largest shopping complex in Florida with a mile of halls filled with retailers (mostly of the outlet kind) from Burberry and Escada to Brooks Brothers — there's even a Neiman Marcus shop for the homesick.

If you get hungry there, stop by Grand Luxe Café, another chain (there's one in the Galleria in Dallas) that prepares gigantic portions of contemporary standards like chicken parmesan and entree-sized salads, plus desserts big enough for two or more.

Head south to Hollywood, Fla., for the unexpected: a full-service casino and resort. Florida's Seminole Indians teamed up with the Hard Rock Café to open the enormous complex, which sticks out like Las Vegas in a cornfield. If the one-armed bandit pays off, treat yourself to a delicious meal at Council Oak, an elaborate, impressive steakhouse off the casino floor, serving mouth-watering filets and surf-and-turf delights. Close by is Tatu, a high energy bar and club that could have been birthed by the MGM Grand itself.

Mind your Manors

When the sun sets, it's time to seek out the abundant gay nightlife Fort Lauderdale has to offer.

Wilton Manors is the region's undisputed gay enclave. In these two square miles just north of downtown, about 40 percent of the homes are gay-owned, and countless gay-oriented businesses proudly fly their rainbow flags; The Shoppes of Wilton Manors is a nearly exclusively-queer strip mall in the center of town. (The one anomaly: It's also home to the local branch of the Social Security Administration.)

Here you'll find the Main Street Gym (which has a relationship with the Royal Palms), the Pride store called Gay Mart and Bottoms & Tops clothiers, as well as two big gay bars: Georgie's Alibi and Boom.

Perhaps no hangout is as popular and diversely attended as the Alibi. This video bar hosts all types and sizes — young and old, college and blue collar... it even holds political meetings at times. Easy-going and neighborhood-y, it's casual and abidingly friendly, and the Manchester Room offers comfy chairs. Next door is Boom, a two-level club with a large dance floor on the first story.

There are more gay clubs in Wilton Manors than just these two, however. Across the street is Bill's Filling Station, which attracts the bear and daddy type and holds a Sunday afternoon T-dance. Down the street is a sports bar run by lesbians, two-year-old SideLines, which welcomes an eclectic clientele. Come in and you'll hear rock music playing on the loudspeakers, see basketball and ESPN on the 16 flatscreen TVs and can partake in foosball and billiards at one of the tables lining the floor.

Nearby New Moon Bar caters to lesbians, while Scandals Saloon is the local country and western club. Just outside of Wilton Manors is Ramrod, a heavy Levi, leather and uniform scene with an outside patio bar that, on Saturday nights, features hunky men in cages.

Several worthwhile dinner and lunch spots also make Wilton Manors a must-visit destination. Galanga offers Thai cuisine, sushi and an extensive sake menu, and serves spicy concoctions

like tom kha soup and curry panang. For more casual fare, the famous hamburger joint Rosie's Bar & Grill is a busily attended by locals and tourists, and Humpy's Pizza is a perfect place to grab a slice. The Popcorn Café, a charming gourmet ice cream and popcorn shop, is a terrific stop for some sweets.

If South Florida has always struck you as God's waiting room, filled with elderly retirees and lacking youthful exuberance, think about this: The area supports at least three bathhouses. Club Fort Lauderdale — owned by the same company that operates Club Dallas — is an S&M scene ("stand and model," that is) with wonderful facilities, including cabanas, a pool, a large steam room that looks like a cave and gym facilities, in addition to private rooms. The more hardcore bathhouses Slammer and Clubhouse II also have their fans.

It's that diversity which, ultimately, forms a large part of the appeal of Fort Lauderdale. From luxury accommodations to cozy guesthouses, shopping to sightseeing to club life, there's something for everyone, and enthusiastically so. All you need to have is a desire to enjoy the surf any time of year. And who wouldn't like a little warm sand between their toes in February?

WHILE YOU'RE THERE: WINTER PARTY

You might not think of a political group as being the most likely sponsor of a gay circuit party, but then again, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force has a unique mission as the country's oldest GLBT rights organization.

For the past 15 years, the task force has thrown the Winter Party Festival, a 10-day event including activities from picnics to fashion shows, cocktail receptions to civil rights exhibits and, of course, plenty of circuit fun.

The 15th annual festival comes to Miami Beach — a stone's throw from Fort Lauderdale — Feb. 23 through March 3, and features the 15th edition of the Winter Party Beach Party, with DJ Joe Gauthreaux, pictured below, spinning. Also adding their sound to the festival are DJs Randy Bettis, Alyson Calagna, Brett Henrichsen, David Knapp, Manny Lehman, Peter Rauhofer, Rosabel (Ralphie Rosario and Abel), Tony Moran, pictured right, and more.

If you're going to be in Fort Lauderdale over that period, you might want to swing by.

For more information, visit Winterparty.com.

LITTLE BLACK BOOK

Accommodations

The Elysium, 552 N. Birch Road; 954-564-9601; ElysiumResort.net. The Flamingo — Inn Amongst the Flowers, 2727 Terramar St.; 954-561-4658; TheFlamingoResort.com. Grand Resort and Spa, 539 N. Birch Road; 954-630-3000. Pineapple Point, 315 N.E. 16th Terrace; 954-527-0094; PineapplePoint.com. Royal Palms Resort, 2901 Terramar St.; 800-237-7256; RoyalPalms.com. Hotel St. Regis, 1 N. Fort Lauderdale Beach Blvd.; 954-2300. The W Hotel, 17 S. Fort Lauderdale Beach Blvd.; 954-760-9570.

Food & Drink

Casablanca Cafe, A1A and Alhambra streets; 954-764-3500; CasablancaCafeOnline.com. Cero, inside the Hotel St. Regis; 954-465-2300; CeroRestaurant.com. Council Oak at the Hard Rock Cafe and Resort, 1 Seminole Way, Hollywood, Fla.; 954-327-7501. Galanga Thai Kitchen & Sushi, 2389 Wilton Drive, Wilton Manors; 954-202-0000; GalangaRestaurant.com. Grand Luxe Cafe, 1780 Sawgrass Mills Circle, Sunrsie, Fla.; 954-838-9711. Humpy's Pizza, 2244 Wilton Drive, Wilton Manors; 954-566-2722; Humpyspizza.com. The Popcorn Cafe, 2376 Wilton Drive, Wilton Manors; 954-568-0321; ThePopcornCafe.com. Rosie's Bar & Grill, 2449 Wilton Drive, Wilton Manors; 954-563-0123. Seasons 52, 2428 E. Sunrise Blvd.; 954-537-1052;

Seasons52.com.

Bars & Clubs

Bill's Filling Station, 1243 N.E. 11th Ave., Wilton Manors; BillsFillingStation.com. Boom, 2232 Wilton Drive, Wilton Manors. Club Fort Lauderdale, 110 N.W. 5th Ave.; 954-525-3344. Georgie's Alibi, 2266 Wilton Drive, Wilton Manors; GeorgiesAlibi.com. New Moon Bar, 2440 Wilton Drive, Wilton Manors. Ramrod, 1508 N.E. 4th Ave.; Ramrodbar.com. Scandals Saloon, 2031 Wilton Drive, Wilton Manors; ScandalsFla.com. SideLines Sports Bar, 3038 Wilton Drive, Wilton Manors; Sidelinessports.com.

Attractions & Activities

Butterfly World, 3600 W. Sample Road, Coconut Creek, Fla.; 954-977-4400; ButterflyWorld.com. Sawgrass Mills, 12801 W. Sunrise Blvd., Sunrise, Fla.; 954-846-2300; SawgrassMillsMall.com. Segway Beach Tours, Birch State Park, 3109 E. Sunrise Blvd.; 954-235-5082. Water Taxi Tours, 111 N. Birch Road; 954-467-9639.