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GAY TRAVEL: Family-friendly vacations

BY LOANN HALDEN

More than 135,000 gays and lesbians are expected in Orlando for the annual Gay Days festivities, a weeklong series of events beginning Tuesday that sprouted from a small group trip to Disney World's Magic Kingdom in 1991. Activities for grown-up gay friends of Mickey are a staple, but this year marks the debut of a hotel and event package that targets gay families as well.

"A lot of people who went to Gay Day early on to party now have families," says Yesi Leon, who conceptualized Gay Day Family with Alison Burgos and Amy Alonso. "So many people told us that they wished they could bring their kids to Gay Day, but there were no events for kids to enjoy. Now there are. We want kids with two moms or two dads to feel like they belong and their families are accepted."

The South Florida event producers hope to tap into the expanding ranks of gay families contributing to the \$54 billion gay travel market -- like San Francisco-based journalist Gretchen Lee, filmmaker-media producer Evie Leder and their 3-year-old daughter, Rose Leder-Lee. The couple began traveling with Rose when she was only 4 months old.

"Rose is enrolled in three frequent flier programs," Lee says, adding that their daughter has already logged 13 cross-country trips.

STRIKING A BALANCE

According to a recent study by Witeck-Combs Communications and the research firm Packaged Facts, an estimated 1.8 million gay and lesbian households now include at least one child. But planning a gay-friendly family vacation isn't always as simple as heading to the nearest airport. It requires striking a balance between the gay and heterosexual travel worlds.

Many destinations known for catering to gay travelers -- such as Palm Springs, Fort Lauderdale and Key West -- focus their marketing on singles looking for a party atmosphere or romantic getaways. Gay guesthouses often have a no-kids policy.

Jennifer Chrisler, executive director of the national gay family advocacy organization Family Pride, is well versed in the push and pull between a location's appeal as gay hotspot and family attraction. The organization draws as many as 500 families to Provincetown, Mass., each summer for its Family Week activities.

"We've always really enjoyed being in Provincetown and for the most part have had great experiences, but I definitely know there's a little undertow from restaurant owners and shop owners who rely on a certain profile in terms of their businesses," she says. "They worry that a huge influx of families means they won't see the same bar receipts or the same nightclub activity."

Taking a mainstream approach to travel provides access to family-friendly amenities like homey hotels, restaurants with high chairs and playgrounds, but it can also attract unwanted attention.

"For dads in particular, it's a really sensitive issue," she says. "In this society people still don't expect to see

two men with a baby -- and particularly not traveling."

Minneapolis residents Tim Creagan and his life partner, Fred Bertron, say that when they adopted their son Thomas six years ago, it changed the way they looked at travel.

"Now we worry about what potential things our son might hear," Creagan says. "We were driving through the Carolinas and passed through some small town that all these Confederate flags flying. There was a time we would have probably stopped and still had lunch -- when we were just two guys. But when it's two guys and their baby, you definitely keep the gas pedal down and make your way through town. It's important that Thomas have a great time on vacation; we don't want to put ourselves in a position where we're going to feel uncomfortable."

POPULAR CHOICES

Major cities like New York, Miami, Chicago, and San Francisco are popular choices for gay parents who want to balance kid-friendly museums and attractions with hiring a babysitter and taking some couple time at night.

"Places where there are so many interesting people and walking around is an adventure are good for gay families," Leder says. "As gay travelers, we want to be appreciated. I would prefer that we be noticed as a two-mom family rather than misunderstood as being 'sisters' or 'friends.'"

Vacations marketed specifically to gay families used to be nonexistent, but that changed in 2004 with the launch of R Family Vacations, which brought national attention to this overlooked niche. The Rosie O'Donnell-backed company hosts cruises and land-based vacations that merge a gay-affirming environment with kid-friendly activities.

The rest of the travel world is slowly following. Olivia Cruises and Resorts has hosted family-oriented weeks at Florida Club Med, while Leon, Burgos, and Alonso took cues from R Family in planning their Gay Day events.

In Fort Lauderdale, where nearly 30 gay guesthouses cater predominantly to men, the gay-owned Sandra Lee Inn is building a word-of-mouth following as "the family alternative for alternative families."

This year, Family Pride celebrates the 12th anniversary of Family Week in Provincetown by partnering with R Family Vacations.

"The most important thing gay families look for when deciding on a destination is a safe environment," says Chrisler, who travels with her life partner and their 5-year-old twin boys. "I think that's why you've seen such tremendous growth and success with companies like R Family Vacations, while we've seen such incredible growth in the number of families that attend Family Week."

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