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CHECKING IN

Hotels create romance packages for LGBT visitors



ROCHELLE LASH

A rainbow is rising over Florida, just in time for Valentine's Day. Florida legalized same-sex marriage in January, and hotels and resorts in the Sunshine State have responded with creative offerings for their LGBT guests. Fort Lauderdale and Key West are famous as hot spots for gay travellers and patrician Palm Beach also is coming out with wedding packages galore for the new legal lovers. The sun, sand and the Atlantic Ocean are quintessential Florida draws for everyone, in any of these towns. Of course, you don't have to be gay: These creative hotel deals are designed for all lovers who are celebrating weddings, renewal of vows, anniversaries and honeymoons.

POSH PALM BEACH
Home to sophisticated shopping, American castles and inter-

national polo tournaments, Palm Beach is a posh destination along Florida's Gold Coast. The tasteful Chesterfield Palm Beach, in an exclusive residential neighbourhood two blocks from fancy Worth Avenue, has the gracious air of a grand British manor house. Arriving guests are greeted with sherry. Afternoon tea is the real deal — served with scones, clotted cream and silver pots of Earl Grey. The 55 rooms and suites, many recently renovated, are dressed in opulent fabrics, with elegant floral motifs and pastel colour schemes. I adore the special attention of evening turn-down and fresh flowers. The new Pride Package for LGBT couples — or anyone else — is an absolute steal, an indulgent visit that costs less than regular winter rates. It includes welcome drinks, dinner with wine, breakfast in bed and an afternoon treat of champagne with strawberries. The Chesterfield is a peaceful, discreet hotel where you can fritter away the day at the pool or in the library. But after dark, this baby swings. The swish Leopard Lounge and Restaurant is on the must-do list of Vogue and Vanity Fair for its upbeat live music,



W Hotel Fort Lauderdale faces the Atlantic.

entertaining bartenders and signature dishes like crab cakes, curried chicken and veal chops.

LAUDERDALE LOVERS
Fort Lauderdale is the No. 1 LGBT resort destination in the U.S., with 16 gay hotels and hundreds of LGBT-owned businesses serving the United States' highest concentration of same-sex couples (2.8 per cent). The Greater Fort Lauderdale Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce publishes a gay-travel guide (954-523-3500, gogayfortlauderdale.com). Magic Johnson cut the opening-day ribbon at the new-in-2014 World AIDS Museum. And the rainbow spirit will peak during Pride Fort Lauderdale, June 12 to 14, when streets will close for all-day entertainment plus a kids' zone. Several mainstream hotels even have dedicated gay-wedding specialists. The new Love is Love package at W Ft. Lauderdale Hotel is a generous, pampering offer that includes a romantic dinner on your private balcony, plus salon and spa services, a wedding gift and transfers to and from Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport, about 12 kilometres away.

The W — two curved glass towers that make up the world's largest hotel of this brand — is a chichi slice of life. Across the street from the beach, W has 517 stylish rooms and suites, two swimming pools, a Bliss Spa and such cool happenings as seaside yoga. After dark, W rocks at the sexy Whiskey Blue bar. The contemporary dining spot Steak 954 features colourful cocktails, a raw bar, Florida seafood and luscious aged steaks from a filet mignon to a 24-ounce porterhouse. Crab cakes and butter-poached lobster are classics; one over-the-top rich dish is the wagyu rib-eye with truffled cheese and foie gras, served on a brioche.

KEY WEST WHIRL
Key West's gay scene is as much a part of town as Ernest Hemingway's Home and Museum. The just-announced Gay Key West Same-Sex Wedding Expo is set for March 11 at the Marriott Beachside Hotel and will showcase wedding services including creative ceremonies, resort offerings, flowers, music, rings, catering and cakes, photographers and videographers, decorations and attire. Several small hotels always

have served the LGBT crowd. Alexander's Guesthouse has a friendly, inclusive air that welcomes gay men and women and gay-friendly straights. It's a laid-back, romantic gathering place for travellers from many parts of the world, of almost all ages — as long as they are over 18. With 17 guest rooms, one secluded suite and one apartment, Alexander's is gradually renovating, changing from cosy bed and breakfast decor to a more modern boutique look. Dani Gilbert is Alexander's event producer and his favourite venue for celebrations is the hotel's rooftop, especially at sunset. Happy Hour is gala on any day, with wine and cocktails free from 5 p.m. to 6 p.m. and half-price from 6 to 7 p.m. Alexander's has two pools and clothing-optional sun decks. Bikes are available for the two-kilometre ride to the beach, and the front desk can set up boat cruises or jet-skiing on the Atlantic, restaurant reservations along buzzy Duval Street and visits to the Key West Aquarium.

IF YOU GO

Visit Florida: 888-735-2872, www.visitflorida.com; The Palm Beaches: 800-833-5733, 561-233-3000, palm-beachfl.com; Greater Fort Lauderdale: 800-22-SUNNY/800-227-8669 or 800-928-7583, www.sunny.org. The Florida Keys: 800-352-5397/800-FLA-KEYS, fla-keys.com. **The Chesterfield Palm Beach:** 561-659-5800, chesterfieldpb.com; pet-friendly. Pride Package, \$275.75 U.S. per night; regular winter room rate, \$395 U.S. (or \$195 from June-Sept.). **W Fort Lauderdale Hotel:** 877-822-0000, 954-414-8200, WFortLauderdaleHotel.com; Love is Love starts at \$650 U.S. for three nights, for two people, using the promo code LISLPKG; winter room rates start at \$450; also see blissworld.com and steak954.com. **Alexander's Guest House:** Key West, 305-294-9919, alexanderskeywest.com; winter rates, \$220-\$360 U.S. for two, or \$515 for a one-bedroom apartment for four, incl. breakfast, two pools and hot tub open 24-hours, Happy Hour.

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