

Great Destinations for Gay Families

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Also indicative of the family-travel movement is the growth of vacation rentals, more suitable for families, thanks to one-to-five bedroom properties that give greater control over vacations with convenience for larger parties. According to the 2011 US Census Data, an estimated one-quarter of all same-sex households are raising children, providing one of the first portraits of gay American families. Like any other family, gay couples with children like to travel, and spend money (almost \$65 billion according to a recent study). In fact, gay travel is so popular and common these days, The US State Department added a LGBT section on its website.

Gay-specific family travel is hot in the United States. Destinations that have already had a positive reputation for hosting gay visitors are further amping up amenities to attract more gay families and accepting them unconditionally.

In a survey conducted by Community Marketing, approximately three percent of gay men and 19 percent of lesbians have children under 18 who live at home. Once gay men and lesbians have children, child-friendly travel options become more important. In fact, when the same group surveyed was asked what's more important when visiting a destination, a whopping 68 percent answered "child-friendly destination" over "LGBT-friendly destination," which garnered 32 percent. While "gay" and "family" will eventually be the perfect marriage, it's the acceptance of both that really counts.



Amy Ballard and Fee Johnson, who live in Vancouver, are a married gay couple who travel often with their son, Bodhi. "When we travel as a family, it is important for us to feel completely accepted in our surroundings," says Amy. "We choose destinations that openly express support of the gay and lesbian community, whether it is political expression, as in San Francisco and Boston, or through reputation like P-Town, LA, and British Columbia." The family recently visited Los Angeles with Bodhi. "We love the choice of beaches. Venice is wonderful for keeping kids busy. We ride the longboard down the promenade, watch the skateboarders at the park, and build sand castles. We can hike Runyon Canyon in the morning with our dogs, have lunch in West Hollywood, and take a surf lesson in the afternoon. We vacation in LA every year."

Some cities stand out more than others, and I highlight here just some of the top destinations in the United States that exceed expectations when it comes to gay-family travels.

ATLANTA, GEORGIA

Atlanta is the ultimate destination for gay families in the South thanks to the positive reputation it's fostered from gay icons who hail from the area like Indigo Girls, RuPaul, and Elton John. There's also a wealth of history, attractions, and all-around discoveries for families to explore. Children will leave their vacations knowing everything there is to know about Margaret Mitchell, Martin Luther King, Jr., and even CNN. Visitors of all ages enjoy the **Center for Puppetry Arts**, an institution in Atlanta where kids can design their own puppets. Another must-visit is the **Georgia Aquarium**, the largest aquarium in the world with more than eight million gallons of water comprising fascinating marine life.

While there are specific neighborhoods that have strong gay presence like East Point/Jefferson Park, Midtown, and Decatur, the entire city is practically a hot zone for the LGBT community. What families especially love about Atlanta is the multitude of outdoor spaces, like the gay-friendly **Piedmont Park**, home to the annual Atlanta Pride. Nearby **Stone Mountain Park** is perfect for outdoor adventures with walking trails, a Summit Skyride, and, at night, the world's longest running laser light show. Speaking of outdoors, grab lunch at the **Atlanta Food Truck Park** where there's a playground for kids and often live music.

While there are three W Hotels, stay at **W Midtown**, which is close to all the action. The 466 guest rooms are hip and stylish. I'd recommend the Fantastic Suite, which has commanding views of the city and plenty of space. There's also an outdoor pool for those hot summer days.

BLOOMINGTON, INDIANA

It might come across as a shocker, but Bloomington, Indiana, is known as the gay capital of the Midwest. This city is home to the nation's fifth largest per capita population of same-sex households. Many couples continue to choose Bloomington, thanks to its laid-back, gay-friendly communities. The city offers health benefits to domestic partnerships, regardless of gender, and there's a gay radio show, the only one in Indiana, called bloomingOut. It's also one of the friendliest cities in the nation, and one of the most welcoming for the LGBT community. In fact, Indiana University had the first student-sponsored drag competition held on any campus and its **MISS GAY IU**, which has been a tradition for more than 20 years. Oh, and if you know Kinsey (and we all do), the **Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction** is based here. For art lovers: mark this summer on your calendar for their annual **Juried Art Show**, which is best for mature teens...or prolific toddlers!

Outdoor enthusiasts will want to take the whole family to **Lake Monroe**, Indiana's largest lake: for hiking, boating, fishing, and picnics. Expect terrific views thanks to the surrounding Hoosier National Forest.

For connoisseurs of culture, including music, theater, ballet, and opera, head to the famous **IU Jacobs School of Music**. There are more than 1,000 live musical performances here every year, including *The Nutcracker*, which is a favorite for both locals and visitors. There's also a terrific and diverse restaurant scene, from Thai to Tibetan, Irish to Indian, so options are endless. The Dixie Chicken Sandwich is a favorite at **Sweet Grass Restaurant**. This popular joint uses local ingredients for great American feasting.

While there's a shortage of luxury hotels, check into the **Hilton Garden Inn**, a fine option for the family. Located in downtown Bloomington, it offers 168 well-appointed rooms, a hospitality center with microwave and fridge, indoor pool, and the comfy Garden Sleep System bed for a good night's rest.

KEY WEST, FLORIDA

I'm confident your children will never want to leave this hedonistic island paradise known for sublime sunsets, so you may as well move here and join the number of gay couples who live on the island. Key West is a premiere destination for gay travelers. Tennessee Williams' visit in 1941 created a trend for several other artists and writers (many of whom were—surprise!—gay), to extend vacations on the island. Now, visitors will be hard-pressed to enter a restaurant, bar, or hotel without interacting with a gay staff member, and several gay-operated hotels and businesses have put the island on the map as a top gay-friendly destination.

Most gay families head to Fort Jefferson on the Yankee Freedom Ferry. It's a day trip to the largest brick structure in North America. **Fort Jefferson** was built by the Union pre-Civil War and is arguably the best place to snorkel and explore, both in and out of water. If you want to stay closer to home, head to the **Key West Aquarium**, built during the Great Depression, and the first "open air" aquarium using natural sunlight for exhibits. Children go wild here.

After working up an appetite, head to **Louie's Backyard** that offers oceanfront dining with a Caribbean-American menu for those who want fresh seafood. Expect everything from Key West pink shrimp to chorizo-stuffed Berkshire pork.

Accommodations are plentiful in Key West, and two great options include **Sheraton Key West**, across the street from Smathers Beach. It's a kid-friendly hotel with a pool that's tricked out with waterfalls. Best of all, a shuttle runs to Duval Street, making it convenient to get to all the hot spots.

If you're looking for something more intimate and luxurious, check out **Casa Marina, A Waldorf Astoria Resort**. The 311-guestroom, Mediterranean-style property recently underwent a \$43 million renovation, which makes the historic hotel feel oh-so new and tropical. Check into an oceanfront suite, spacious for the whole family, and spend your vacation time simply relaxing at one of the two outdoor pools, one of which has poolside movies with free popcorn for children. Make sure to take sunset strolls on the largest private beach on the island, just steps from your room.

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

All of Los Angeles is a family playground that woos both adults and children. From the beaches of Santa Monica to Universal Studios, Disneyland, and Six Flags, the entire family will have a memorable visit. LA, founded in 1781, has grown into a thrilling metropolis with its progressive flair, yet it still manages to retain decades-old cultural heritage. Best of all it's a diverse city, making it truly global. But the real deal is its Hollywood claim to fame. Both kids and parents get excited with the idea of spotting a celebrity, and it's not uncommon in these neck of the woods as LA is the entertainment capital of the world. Take your family straight to Hollywood Boulevard for the **Hollywood Walk of Fame**, where performers and celebrity impersonators (whether Transformers or Marilyn Monroe) keep tourists flash-happy with their cameras and visitors can admire the brass stars embedded in the sidewalks.

To get your celebrity bearings, hop on the **Movie Stars' Homes** bus with **LA City Tours**. The daily two-hour tour departs every half hour and takes fans throughout LA, and to more than 40 notable celebrity homes with highlights that include West Hollywood's Sunset Strip and Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. Your kids might be restless after sitting for two hours, so unleash them afterward at **Six Flags Magic Mountain** in Valencia. The 260-acre theme park features 18 world-class roller coasters and more than 100 rides, games and attractions for the whole family. Not for the faint of heart, the new Full Throttle coaster, to debut later this year, will traverse a record-setting vertical loop twice (once on the inside and again on the outside) and will be the tallest and fastest looping roller coaster in the world. Meanwhile, **Disneyland** in Anaheim is a no-brainer and is great for any age group, and they are always adding new attractions to the fun-filled Mickey Mouse-themed resort.

When it comes time to eat, you may notice that burgers have become a huge trend in Los Angeles, and there's no shortage of options for the family. If you need a quickie, the famed **In-N-Out Burger** is always dishing out some great fast-food burgers. In West Hollywood, **Hamburger Mary's** has attracted gay and straight families alike, and it's become an institution in the neighborhood. If you're gunning for gourmet, **Juicy Lucy** in Downtown LA knows how to prepare a premium burger with its celebrity chef in the kitchen. Not into beef? Head to the reasonably priced **Gaucha Chicken Cafe** in West Hollywood, serving up free-range, locally grown chicken plates.

For a seamless, no-frills, elegant stay, check into the **London West Hollywood**. The 223-room, all-suite hotel is a member of IGLTA and tucked away just below Sunset Boulevard. It's pet-friendly to boot, should your kids need to bring Fido along. Gordon Ramsey, who has kicked up some great kids menus, spearheads the restaurant here, and there's a relaxing rooftop with commanding views and a heated pool to refresh.

Of course, you will likely spend time on the beach. A great option by the ocean is to shack up at **Loews Santa Monica Beach Hotel**, one of the few hotels that sits right on the beach along the coast of California. There's always great family programming, including a family fitness class with Hoopnotica (using hula hoops) and kids yoga. The 342-room hotel is also just steps away from Santa Monica Pier.

NEW YORK CITY, NEW YORK

New York City is one of the friendliest cities in the United States for family travel. The activities are endless: **Central Park, Broadway, Times Square**, top restaurants, and the world-famous **Gay Pride**. In fact, with NYC Gay Pride happening on Sunday, June 30, 2013, now is the best time to start planning. This year's Pride theme, Rain to Rainbows, highlights positive changes that have occurred despite the struggles the LGBT community still endures. The pride march is the perfect way to have your family experience a movement that started with the Stonewall riots, celebrating all things LGBTQ. More than 300 groups participate in the march, and close to 1.5 million spectators line the streets for the festivities.

And what NYC trip would be complete without an educational museum visit? While there's the iconic **MoMA** and the **MET**, kids might have a fun afternoon at the brand-new **Museum of Mathematics** in the historic Flatiron District. MoMath offers interactive and often physically engaging math-based exhibits designed primarily for 4th to 8th graders, but suitable for inquisitive minds of all ages. Opened in January, the museum resembles a Seuss-inspired playground, so kids will be attracted to its playfulness.

Theater is one of New York City's claims to fame. Head on over to the Theater District for some family-friendly Broadway shows, like *The Lion King*, *Wicked*, and *Spider Man: Turn off the Dark*. The new *Motown*, which first ran this past April, is also a super-hot ticket. It chronicles Berry Gordy's journey from featherweight boxer to heavyweight music mogul who launched the careers of Diana Ross, Michael Jackson and The Jackson 5, Stevie Wonder and more. Afterward, take a stroll through Times Square and catch the energy of this phenomenal tourist destination.

Kimpton Hotels has long been known as a gay-friendly establishment, and its **The Muse hotel** in Times Square is no exception. The 200-room sanctuary is stylish and contemporary with a knack for eye-pleasing design. Not only is The Muse gay-friendly but it's seemingly *everything*-friendly, from pets to kids. The hotel sets up cribs and/or childproofs a room at no extra charge. Also, upon arrival, little ones receive a welcome gift and, just like their parents, are introduced to a child-size, animal-print robe available to use at the hotel.

Those who truly want to pamper their children head to **Four Seasons New York** in Midtown. Kids under 18 stay free and receive welcome amenities. The restaurant has special kids menus (talk about a fancy highbrow meal for your child!) and rooms can be childproofed with cribs, strollers, and bottle warmers free to use.

OAHU, HAWAII

There's nothing as magical as taking your family to Hawaii. The South Pacific destination is exotic and sunny with myriad activities for children. All of the islands are gay-friendly, though, Oahu takes the crown as the friendliest with unlimited options for the gay family. In fact, there's hardly a time of day where your kids might find themselves "bored." Start your vacation by checking into **Hilton Hawaiian Village**, situated right on the beach and the largest hotel within the Hilton brand with 3,386 rooms and seven towers. In fact, it's the 17th largest hotel in the world, spanning more than 22 acres! It's home to several pools, more than 22 restaurants, exotic wildlife, and gardens. Camp Penguin is the hotel's year-

round kids program that includes fun activities like arts and crafts, nature walks, wildlife feedings, and more.

A visit to Hawaii isn't complete without visiting the ocean. Take your family kayaking, snorkeling, or set them up with surf lessons at **Hans Hedemann Surf**, which has lessons for all ages. Cowabunga, dudes! If your kids missed all the wildlife action in the ocean, take them to **Waikiki Aquarium** where they can experience the unique reef systems of the world on display. There's more than 3,500 species of sea life here, especially those of the Hawaiian islands.

Little ones can take in a lot of history at **Pearl Harbor**, a family-friendly activity that allows visitors to tour and view the memorial, with WWII-era military equipment children can climb on. Kids will also get a thrill from the 1940's submarine docked next door to the USS Arizona complex. After working up an appetite, head to **Tiki's Grill & Bar**. Kids get a trip out of this campy, lively restaurant with live music every night. The coconut shrimp is a favorite, (while the stiff, fruity cocktails are much-needed parent pleasers!), and everyone goes nuts over the tiki torches.

SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

San Francisco stands as the prototype of a gay-friendly city. In fact, it measures the gayness of other cities in comparison. Can any city be gayer than San Francisco? The LGBT community sprawls throughout the Bay Area, whether in North Beach, the Haight, the Mission, or the Castro, and there's no city that can duplicate its allure with cable cars, the Golden Gate Bridge, and nearby wine country. It's also a nurturing place for gay families. Just ask President and CEO of San Francisco Travel Association, Joe D'Alessandro. He's a resident of the city, along with his husband and two children.

The best way to explore is with the **CityPASS**, which offers entrance to both the **California Academy of Sciences** that features interactive exhibits and the **Aquarium of the Bay**, always a favorite. Another great attraction is the **Exploratorium** that opened its new home on the Embarcadero in April. The hands-on museum is perfect for anyone, with nearly 600 interactive exhibits and 150 new experiences. Best of all? The new breathtaking city and bay views from the glass-and-steel Bay Observatory.

Golden Gate Park (which is actually larger than Central Park) is the perfect outing for a sunny afternoon, whether you take a rowboat ride on Stowe Lake or visit the Japanese Tea Garden. Another great option, with baseball season in full swing is a Giants game at MetLife Stadium.

When it comes to food, you'll find a wealth of ethnic cuisine in San Francisco that is exciting for discerning palates. You and your family will enjoy the range of offerings, from great Vietnamese to unforgettable Mexican. Check out the new **M.Y. China**, which has a full exhibition kitchen so your kids can watch all the action, from hand-pulled noodles to woks being fired up. For brunch the ever so popular **The Grove**, which has four locations, is a great choice. It's an independent, family-owned operation using only fresh ingredients for classic American cuisine.

The grand **Fairmont San Francisco** is one of the top hotels for gay families. With 591 guest rooms and suites, and three dining facilities and lounges, guests sometimes make no attempt at leaving. The hotel boasts panoramic views of the city and the Bay, and the famous **Tonga Room** restaurant, a super-kitsch local haunt that has "rain" fall every 30 minutes, live entertainment, and dancing, is an adventure in itself. Kids love it here, as well as the "kids only" menu options. They also get excited with the honeybee program on the rooftop garden and children's bathrobes in the rooms.

Palace Hotel, a member of Starwood's Luxury Collection, is conveniently located in Union Square. It's the perfect launching pad for the buzzing streets, cool shopping and famous cable cars. Kids are in awe of the hotel's stained-glass dome in the Garden Court, the perfect place to start the day with buffet breakfast. There's 553 guest rooms, and an indoor, heated swimming pool, one of only a few in San Francisco!

SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO

As Jack so enthusiastically sang in Newsies: "Dreams come true, yes they do, in Santa Fe." And gay families will feel like they found the perfect destination. This artsy, bohemian hot spot has the seventh most same-sex households per capita in the country (D.C. has the most).

Furthermore, Santa Fe is home to the largest (and first) LGBT retirement community in North America, called **Rainbow Vision Sante Fe** (www.rainbowvisionsantafe.com), and a very active Santa Fe Human Rights Alliance. There's a number of TAG-approved hotels in the city, it's one of the most romantic places for stargazing, and you couldn't ask for better Tex-Mex your kids will love.

Santa Fe's gay roots go back to the early 20th century with the migration of artists looking for new subject matter, atmosphere, and inspiration. It's one of the most open-minded cities in the world, thanks to the origin of imaginative and free-thinking new settlers. Here, it's all about cultivating family time in a creative, non-judgmental environment. The popular **Santa Fe Pride Festival** (which happens June 23, 2013) continues to grow, as well as the number of other festivals like the **International Art Fair** and annual **Santa Fe Indian Market** that's great for the whole family.

The best thing about Santa Fe is the abundant outdoor space, from parks and hiking trails to two skateboard parks. Great museums also abound. Check into **Bradbury Science Museum** in nearby Los Alamos, where older kids and teens can engage in 40 interactive exhibits and learn about the history of the atomic bomb (believe me, it's a hit). The popular Santa Fe Children's Museum offers interactive features, diverse programs and even an outdoor garden where you can bond with your children in an educational environment. A great resource guide for families and what to do while visiting is the comprehensive website santafefChildren.com.

Four Seasons brand-loyal guests will also have something to cheer about: the company signed a long-term management agreement with acclaimed resort Encantado, which is now **Four Seasons Resort Rancho Encantado Santa Fe**. It's Four Seasons' first New Mexico property, sprawling 57 acres with 65 casita guest rooms, each with a private terrace

and fireplace. Children get a special welcome amenity, child-sized robe, children's toiletries, and a specific menu in the restaurants.