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GAY MEN'S HOLIDAYS

PROFIT, SEX, AND IDENTITY

Howard L. Hughes

In this paper the significance of the holiday for gay men is approached from several perspectives. It is often claimed that gay men are a potentially profitable market segment to target with holiday products and there are currently many commercial enterprises seeking to exploit that possibility. Many tourist boards and visitor bureaux are also recognising the possibility of extending their marketing strategies to encourage gay visitors to their cities and towns, states, provinces, and countries. It is important to recognise, however, that there is an underlying significance of tourism for gay men and lesbians, which may be greater than the significance for other people. Holidays perform useful functions for most people in providing change and escape but, for gay men, holidays provide an essential role in identity creation in a way that is not necessary for others. In order to have a clearer focus, this paper considers only the particular case of gay men.

A PROFITABLE MARKET?

There is considerable interest in targeting gay men as a market segment for tourism as they are regarded as a high-income group with few dependants and a lifestyle that is highly leisure-focused. "With more leisure and disposable income than the average person, gays have been represented as the marketing department's dream consumer" (MAPS, 1998 : 5). Gays are also often characterised as being free-thinking and at the "cutting edge" of life, and as individualistic and style-conscious. Their propensity to go on holiday is considered to be high. Various surveys in the USA and UK report an above-average proportion of gays as being in "upper" social groups, earning above-average incomes, and being more likely than others to have additional holidays (Clark, 1997; MAPS, 1998). It is claimed, for instance, that gay men in the USA take more overseas trips than do other US travellers (Jefferies, 1999; Wood, 1999). It is relatively uncontested that few gay men have

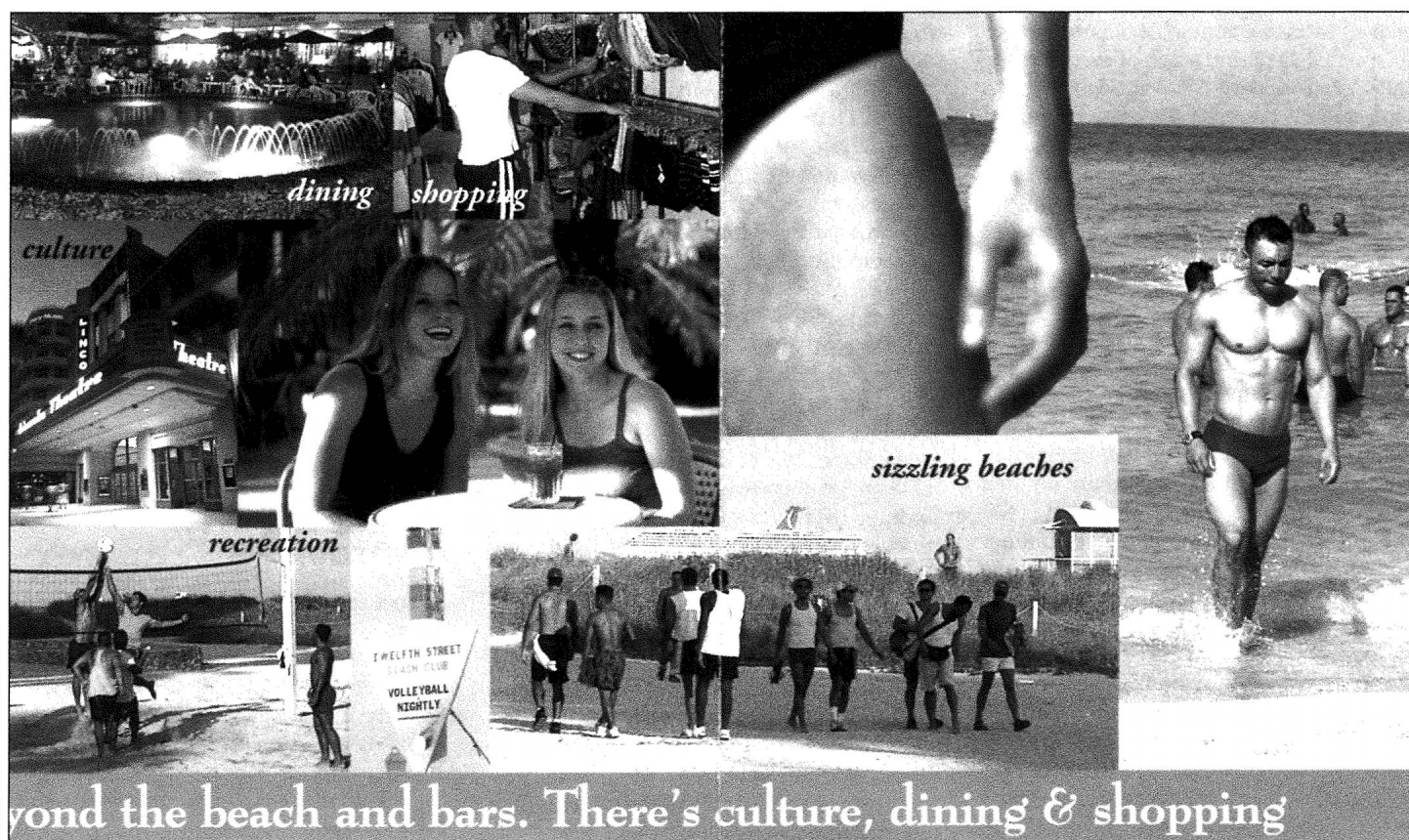
children; consequently, their discretionary incomes are likely to be higher than other people's of similar ages. It is undoubtedly true that the financial burden of family life is not borne by most gays, but gays are not homogeneous in terms of employment and income, and not all gays have high incomes and are able to take a holiday. (The single most important reason for not having a holiday, amongst the population as a whole, is limited income.)

It is not too certain, however, that gay men are a viable market segment. Problems arise as it is not easy to define "homosexuality" or "being gay." There is a common assumption that homosexuality is defined by sexual activity. There is though a distinction between homosexual *activity* and homosexual *orientation*, and the former is probably more widespread than the latter. Some men may occasionally have "same-sex sex," but may not identify as gay, and may as well have opposite-sex partners or spouses. Others may identify as gay but not have sexual activity.

Sexuality is a very fluid concept and being homosexual is ultimately a self-defined category. The invisibility of the gay population creates difficulties in ascertaining its exact size and composition. It is relatively easy to segment markets by geography or demographics, but not so by sexuality (MAPS, 1998).

A MARKET SEGMENT?

Fugate (1993) refers to the four criteria necessary for effective market segmentation—being identifiable, sufficient, stable, and accessible—and concludes that the segment is not viable. Pritchard and Morgan (1996 : 12) consider that "it is widely recognised that it [the gay market] includes a potentially large market of upscale, well-educated professionals," and these characteristics and others, such as having "an entertainment menu," distinguish them from the mainstream. There is a fundamental problem with this however in that these *distinctive* characteristics are identified through surveys. Being homosexual is a characteristic that many people will not admit to and will conceal. The distinguishing characteristics are no more than a reflection of the readership of certain magazines and the likelihood of response to surveys. The respondents are self-selecting. The reality is that it is unwise to assume that gays are anything else but a mirror of the rest of society in terms of age, class, ethnicity, and income. There are dangers in regarding the gay market as a homogeneous entity exclusively identified by sexual orientation. On the contrary, there are great differences defined by demographic, attitudinal, and ideological factors (MAPS, 1998). There are many niches



The diversification of gay and lesbian travel options...

within the market, and the distinctions are increasing so that the gay market is fragmenting, thus making it less identifiable. There is no such thing as a "typical homosexual" though there may well be a certain identifiable segment within that overall classification: "out," young, fashion-conscious, etc., and it may be at a particular *sub-segment* that products are targeted.

In terms of sufficiency, the estimates of numbers vary widely but there could well be a sizeable gay and lesbian population—perhaps 10% of the population. Not all are open about their sexuality and therefore cannot be targeted as part of the market. Nevertheless, the experience of some companies that have ventured into the market does point to sufficiency in some cases.

Pritchard and Morgan (1996) regard the market as being accessible in that it is one that can be reached in an economical way. The market can be reached through the many gay publications as well as through straight media. The market is accessible too, in the sense that high proportions are allegedly urban dwellers. For many rea-

sons there are undoubtedly a number of obvious concentrations of gay people in places such as London, Brighton, and Manchester (UK), New York and San Francisco (USA), and Toronto (Canada). Achieving brand loyalty may be a matter of targeted advertising in gay media and or sponsorship of gay events. It is believed that the market shows a high degree of brand loyalty and relies heavily on word of mouth recommendations (Wood, 1999). Direct marketing is also regarded as being particularly effective.

Fugate (1993) is less optimistic and fears that specialised advertising would need to be developed which would not be economical for such a relatively small market. There is a view too that the sexual content of many gay magazines and papers may inhibit the willingness of firms to place advertisements in them. In addition, advertisers of "straight" or "mainstream" products may be unwilling to target the gay market, because of fears of backlash from regular purchasers. It is also possible that there may be a gay backlash: gays themselves may resent being targeted and regard it as patronising or as an undesirable

exploitation of sexuality for commercial purposes (Field, 1995). Penaloza (1996) accepts that targeting of the gay and lesbian markets does at least serve to legitimise them as individuals though this is not adequate in itself.

When referring to the final criterion of stability, Fugate (1993) comments on the possibility of individuals moving into and out of the segment. At the ultimate (and unlikely) extreme, gays become fully integrated into society and no one considers them to be a distinct segment at all.

It also needs to be recognised that it is difficult, if not undesirable, to segment most products according to sexuality. For most goods and services, gays will purchase the same products as anyone else—washing machines, cat food, pens, coffee, clothes, CDs—and will not need to be targeted. It is conceivable, however that gays may be responsive and loyal to mainstream producers who promote their products in gay media or represent gay life in advertisements, etc. Nonetheless, there are certain products that may be reasonably targeted at the gay market—in particular those

relating to leisure activity, as it is within this sphere that gays find much of their identity and wish to be with "like-minded" people. This will be the case for bars, clubs and restaurants, and also for holidays in the sense of destinations chosen, but also possibly in the choice of intermediaries (travel agent, tour operator), etc.

HOLIDAYS

In the holiday market there is already evidence of products being developed and targeted at a gay market. There is a view that there are clearly identifiable market needs for this segment which are not met by the general provision of tourist products. In the UK, there is a small number of specialist tour operators such as the long-established Sensations (merged with Man Around in 1999), and the more recent Respect. Mainstream operators have entered the market also, but tentatively: Going Places launched Travel Unlimited in 1998 as a call centre booking operation. There are also a number of places that are identified as gay friendly destinations such as Brighton, Blackpool and Manchester in the UK, and foreign destinations such as the Spanish beach towns of Sitges, Ibiza and Gran Canaria, the Greek island of Mykonos, and the cities of New York and Amsterdam.

A casual glance at the gay press and its holiday advertisements suggests that gay men are interested very largely in sun, sea, sand, and sex when on holiday. There are few obvious holidays devoted to "special-interest" tourism such as heritage, arts, sport, ethnic tourism, adventure, and safari (Weiler and Hall, 1992). There are clear sexual images in advertisements and brochures as well as advice as to where casual sex encounters occur. This apparent preoccupation with sex may be more image than reality as "there are surprisingly few research studies concerned with gay men, travel and sexual behaviour" (Clift and Wilkins, 1995 : 44). There is, nonetheless, a strong body of opinion and some evidence to suggest that when on holiday, the sexual norms of heterosexuals are relaxed (Hall, 1994; Ryan and Kinder, 1996).

HOLIDAY MOTIVATIONS

There are particular difficulties in researching the holiday activities and motivations

of gay men. Issues to do with sexuality are areas of human behaviour about which there is a certain "sensitivity" (Binnie, 1994). There are also practical difficulties in obtaining data about activities, which are often marginalised. There is, therefore, a necessary reliance on anecdotal evidence, opportunistic and informal interviews, and participant observation.

General studies (unrelated to sexuality) of tourist motivation have interpreted it in terms of factors such as social interaction, regeneration, self-realisation, freedom, ego-enhancement, evaluation of self, prestige, and escape. The holiday gives a considerable opportunity to escape into fantasy and indulge in behaviour that is different from that at home. There is every reason to believe that these factors can be applied with equal validity to gays going on holiday but "motivations behind travel are constructed out of the social realities of the lives of those who participate... This implies that these motives are 'gendered' " (Kinnaid *et al.*, 1994). Equally, motives are sexualised. As these aspects of holiday motivation are unexplored, there may well be motives that are specific to gay men.

Clift and Forrest (1999) discovered that, for gay men, rest and relaxation, comfort and good food, and sunshine were the most important factors in choosing a holiday (fairly or very important to over 80% of gay men surveyed). This is probably no different from the average holidaymaker and opportunities to have sex were fairly or very important to a relatively low proportion: 64%. Significantly, more survey respondents considered it important to socialise with gay men and to access gay culture and venues (fairly or very important to 76.8% and 80.2% respectively). It would appear that many gay men do seek out "gay holidays." For the purposes of this paper a gay holiday is defined as one in a location where homosexuality is tolerated, where there is opportunity to meet similar others, and where there are gay-oriented bars, clubs, accommodation, and restaurants. This may be arranged, though not necessarily, through a specialist gay tour operator.

Some of the reasons why gay men may be keen holidaymakers are fairly obvious. Given that a holiday has become part of the "good life," it is a form of consumption to which most of the population at large aspires. The consumption of a holiday

is one aspect of the process of forming and consolidating identity—identity through consumption (Featherstone, 1987), which applies to all, regardless of sexuality.

Holiday products, however, as seen in tour operators' brochures, and destination promotions are very much a reflection of heterosexual society and values (especially couples and families) and, as such, will be alienating to many gay men. These may therefore choose deliberately to go on a gay holiday, as defined above. This preference for a gay holiday can be interpreted by reference to the nature of sexual identity.

SEXUAL IDENTITY AND TOURISM

Sexual identity is less a biological issue than a social construction located in particular historical contexts. It was during the nineteenth century that a homosexual identity was first constructed and homosexuality became a source of identity rather than a sexual act (Weeks, 1992). There may (or may not) be a genetic predisposition towards same-sex attraction, but adopting a homosexual identity is essentially a matter of choice.

A sexual identity is partly an individual construct but it has to be "validated" by others, both homosexual and heterosexual. An individual gay man may recognise his difference from the "norm," but there are several stages involving contact with others before full acceptance of the "homosexual" identity (Weeks, 1992). The ability to establish and confirm identity usually necessitates relationships with other gay men (and ultimately confirmation through relationships with non-gay people). There are a number of "push" factors that cause gay men to construct and validate that identity away from home. These include social censure and the desires to be oneself, to relate to "similar others," and to be anonymous.

There is the push of the exclusion from "normal" society and the consequent need for the reassurance of the open and secure company of other gay men; opportunities for this are limited. The gay man is, in large part, able to be himself only in gay space (Bell, 1991). Gay space is a "physical manifestation of gay community" (Hindle, 1994), usually in the form of a spatially discrete concentration of pubs and clubs,

but also cafes, shops and residences, and public space. Its existence permits gay identity to be validated by relationships with others as it offers havens for gay self-expression (Binnie, 1995).

The gay space (essentially a leisure arena) has become representative of the gay community and may offer the most significant opportunity for confirming gay identity. This gay identity is a lifestyle that a gay buys into and only gays with the appropriate purchasing power can do that. Arguably, it reflects a particular middle class (and young) lifestyle (Field, 1995). This is an environment that is limited and "artificial," but is often the only one where the gay man can be himself. The heterosexual man has more opportunity to be himself at work, at home, and in leisure.

In addition, many gays will choose to travel in search of an anonymous environment in which to be gay. Gays may not frequent local gay space because of the fear of discovery and may choose to "be gay" elsewhere. Some who do frequent local gay space may choose to travel for encounters they wish to conceal from others.

The gay space acts as the "pull" factor that meets the needs caused by these push factors. This gay space, however, is limited. The potential support to individual gays that exists within the gay space is more likely in larger urban areas. Gay pubs, clubs, and other facilities in anyone town exist in rough proportion to the total population but "it is clear that there are remarkably few gay venues in total...; most gays have to travel a long way to reach a gay venue" (Hindle, 1994). The lack of gay venues in rural areas may be compounded by more illiberal attitudes towards homosexuality (Kramer, 1995).

There is therefore a degree of congruence between homosexual identity and "tourism." The acceptance of a homosexual identity is often dependent upon the act of being "a tourist," at least in the sense of travel. Even in large urban areas, it is often necessary to seek out and travel some distance to gay venues. The fulfilment or achievement of gay identity often involves travel and the search for gay identity is conceptually a form of tourism (though not necessarily in the sense of a holiday). A man may live and work in what is a heterosexual society and visit "the tourist destination" of gay society in his leisure

time. Gay space and society, however close to home, are a tourist destination. Paradoxically, the gay man needs to be a tourist in order to be at home. "Being gay means being away."

GAY HOLIDAYS

A holiday away from home is an extension of this gay man's need and desire to be away. The holiday provides a further opportunity to begay and provides extra opportunity to validate identity by living and playing, over a continuous period of time, in a gay place. Such environs are, by definition, more sympathetic to gay lifestyles and the more liberal atmosphere is one where the holidaymaker is able to be gay without fear of stigmatisation, harassment or arrest. For the gay man, the holiday provides an extended temporal opportunity to be gay. Gay men on holiday may feel more comfortable in the company of other gay men and the holiday maybe the only opportunity to express sexuality openly. This may be an extension of "domestic" behaviour or, more significantly for some, may be behaviour, which does not occur at home.

For some, the holiday may provide the only possibility of openly being gay and acting differently from when at home. Holidays provide opportunities for all to behave "out of character" and to do this away from those who may disapprove. Given that much gay activity is forced to be covert, the holiday is an ideal way of ensuring that covertness. Not all gay men are able to be gay in their "normal" lives, whether at work or in leisure. Given that society has discouraged openness about being gay, the holiday provides the perfect chance to come out, if only temporarily. The gay identity can be adopted and confirmed in "secret."

The holiday also includes the prospect of casual and anonymous sex, which is an extra opportunity for some gay men and a new opportunity for others.

The very act of taking a gay holiday can also be self-affirming, regardless of activities and behaviour whilst on holiday. It is a statement about "self" and a confirmation of gay identity. It reinforces self-confidence and self-esteem by demonstrating a willingness to go on a holiday that

is "openly" gay. It says "I'm out and proud."

Those who frequent the gay space at home may be expected to feel less need to have a gay holiday; nonetheless, many do have such holidays as they feel it is a further statement about identity. Much of their leisure may occur in gay space and the holiday provides an extended chance to confirm identity. During the holiday, the gay man can be gay all day and every day, a prospect which is unlikely at home. The gay man can be himself and feel more comfortable than holidaying in a non-gay environment where the gay identity has to be concealed.

Gay holidays do not though appeal to all gay men as they can be considered claustrophobic and insular. The inherent attraction of a holiday—change—may lead some gays to deliberately seek non-gay holidays. Also the range of gay holidays is limited and those who seek more than sea and sun may need to look into the mainstream holiday market. It is obvious that certain tourist pursuits, especially of a cultural and heritage tourism nature, have to be undertaken in mainstream destinations. Seeing the Coliseum or the Grand Canal has to be done in Rome and Venice, respectively. The opportunity to see polar bears may be limited to certain parts of Canada.

REACTIONS

As seen above, there are undoubtedly market activities geared towards gay men. Apart from the activities of tour operators, there are also tourist boards and visitor bureaux, which have considered this to be a market worth pursuing. The London Tourist Board (LTB) launched a major campaign in USA (New York, Washington, and San Francisco), in 1998, that was aimed at gays aged 30-50. It currently operates a "pink" phone line giving information on bars and clubs, cafes and restaurants, shops and stores. The British Tourist Authority (BTA) launched a campaign in 1999 aimed at the UK travel trade in order to raise their awareness of the potential of this market (Jefferies, 1999). It was felt that there is great potential for encouraging overseas visitors to the UK, and the BTA has published a number of brochures aimed at this gay market. One

of these claims that "Britain has a vibrant gay and lesbian culture and community just waiting to welcome you" (BTA, 1999). BTA and LTB research show that gays are as interested in the mainstream attractions of Britain as are other travellers, and that they probably eat out and visit theatres more. They are interested in visiting a gay friendly destination.

These campaigns have their opponents however. The city of Manchester (England), through its agency Marketing Manchester, launched a promotion during 1999 to establish the city as "one of the world's gay capitals." The particular purpose was to attract US gay visitors to the city. Reactions were not obviously homophobic, but included comments such as this from the Chair of the Civic Society: "We need to be tolerant of all sorts of people but we have to get the balance right. The decision to highlight the city's gay image is misleading and... could alienate other visitors Manchester wants to attract" (quoted in the Daily Telegraph, 24 July 1999). It was felt that the unique heritage of the city should have been given precedence in any tourism campaign. A prominent city councillor also expressed the view that "the priority is to market Manchester as a family friendly city and a place for new business. We welcome any spending tourists but gay tourism is not our priority" (quoted in the Manchester Metro News, 14 August 1999).

Even in Amsterdam, there have been problems. The city is well-known for its liberal attitudes to drugs, sex, and alternative lifestyles and has a reputation for being particularly tolerant of homosexuality. The Netherlands have a more liberal approach to homosexuality than have many countries and there is, ostensibly, greater toleration of gay lifestyles. As a result, Amsterdam has "one of the most sophisticated and developed lesbian and gay communities and commercial scenes of any city of its size anywhere in the world" (Binnie, 1995). The city has been described as being "second only to San Francisco in its social acceptance of homosexuality" (Catling, 1991 : 151), and has been labelled the "Gay Capital of Europe" (Duyves, 1995). The city is identified by gays worldwide as a centre for gay life and, as a consequence, it strongly appeals to many from outside the country, and is a popular place to visit. Travel guides aimed at gay travellers invariably identify Amster-

dam as an important gay destination. Nearly half of gay men from the UK, in a 1996 survey, had visited Amsterdam during the previous five years (Clift and Forrest, 1999), and visitors from Great Britain and Ireland make up just over 20% of all gay visitors to the city (Hughes, 1998).

Despite Amsterdam's popularity, a Tourist Board campaign aimed at the US gay market in 1992 was not repeated largely because of reactions amongst the tourist trade in the city. It was considered to project an undesirable image, which would alienate other visitors to the city. Gay tourism remains a "hidden aspect of Amsterdam's tourism" (Hughes, 1998 : 177).

CONCLUSIONS

Although gay men as a market segment may seem a very attractive one to target, there is some doubt about whether, in reality, they can be a viable market segment. There are obvious difficulties in attempting to consolidate into one segment people who have only their sexuality in common. It may be that the association of being gay with a particular lifestyle centred on the leisure arena of bars and clubs could identify a particular sub-segment. Overall, however, it is likely that the majority of gay men do not frequent this "gay scene." Many gay men find the scene to be over-commercialised and youth-oriented, as well as a symbol of undesirable ghettoisation. Many openly gay men may choose not to frequent gay space and they confirm their identity in other ways.

Whilst there are grounds for believing that many gay men have the time and economic means to be tourists, it is apparent that the holiday can have a particular significance for all gay men. It is postulated that the holiday performs an invaluable function for gay men, whether in easily identifiable market segments or not. The holiday contributes significantly to the process of establishing homosexual identity and is more than sex-tourism. Being away from home gives an opportunity to be gay in a way that many people cannot experience at home or at work.

It is the contention of this paper that tourism and being gay are inextricably linked. Because of social disapproval of homosexuality, many gay men are forced to find

gay space. Gay space is limited and gays find it necessary to travel in order to enter that space. Others choose to travel away from local to other gay space because of a need to preserve anonymity. This travel may not be "a holiday," but it is analogous to tourism in as much as it involves movement from usual surroundings. The nature of society has been such that it has been difficult for gay men to be open about their sexuality and they have found their identity in the leisure sphere. The holiday is an extended opportunity within which to embrace a gay identity. Without the local gay space and the extended gay space in the form of the holiday, it is likely that gay men would not be in a position to construct that gay identity so successfully or easily.

Despite this highly significant role of the holiday, there is a risk of gay identity becoming distorted under these circumstances. The gay man finds himself in the situation of being authentic only in an artificial leisure and holiday situation, and he then returns to a reality where his opportunities to be authentic are restricted. It may well be difficult for an identity to develop fully when it is deemed by society to be an aberration and when it can only be authenticated at limited times and in limited circumstances.

It is also the case that because gay men feel the need to choose gay-oriented and gay friendly destinations, the range of destinations and tourist activities that is open to them is limited. The holiday decision would appear to be a more constrained process than it is for heterosexuals.

There are mixed reactions of the tourist industry to the prospect of holidays aimed at gay men. Many are seeking to encourage tourism by gay men and they do so largely, and understandably, for economic reasons. It would be naive to expect business people to respond solely to the argument that essential psychological and social functions are being performed by the holiday. Holidays for gay men that provide an opportunity to be gay are nonetheless of considerable importance and the industry, especially destination marketing agencies, should be encouraged to recognise the nature of that importance. The organisers of travel also need to recognise that sexuality does not necessarily, or always, mean sex, and the marketing message and the products developed should therefore reflect that. Gay men do not feel comfort-

able holidaying in all destinations or on all types of holiday. There are opportunities to develop other destinations and "special interest" holidays for gay men if they were gay friendlier.

The gay holiday can, of course, be regarded by some as contributing to the continuing ghettoisation of homosexuals and those who cater for it may be regarded as abetting this process in a self-interested and exploitative pursuit of the "pink pound." Nonetheless, until homosexuals become fully accepted by, and integrated into society, there will continue to be a demand from gay men for gay holidays and holidays in destinations that are known to be gay friendly.

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