

Where the Boys Are

South Florida's Gay Beaches Draw Tourists and Locals

By Ian Drew

While gay beaches from California's Laguna Beach to New York's Fire Island offer a seasonal respite for locals and visitors, South Florida has a diverse array of gay populated beaches that are popular all year long.

Dr. Stephen Leatherman, Director of Florida International University's Laboratory for Coastal Research and creator of a popular website, drbeach.org, says that Florida has more recreational beaches than any other state, and beaches are the number one destination here for tourists.

"These beaches are some of the most perfect beaches in the United States," says Leatherman. "The water is incredibly clear and great for swimming, with the water temperature normally only going as low as 72 degrees. The sand and air quality is tremendous. It is almost always sunny, and there are plenty of amenities and world-class hotels."

He says that beaches are a particularly popular spot for gay Floridians and tourists because they offer a natural, serene environment to socialize and relax in without harassment.

Paul Stalbaum, a travel specialist with Fort Lauderdale's Rita Olwell Travel, agrees.

According to Stalbaum, there are many reasons that gays choose to go to beaches frequented by other gays. "First of all, there is a comfort level that people feel when surrounded by their own kind," he says. "They can wear what they want and even be outrageous without driving straight guys nuts. The beach is also a good place to meet other people and to share information about other places to go."

Stalbaum says that the variety of gay beaches in South Florida is astounding. "Some offer nearby businesses and eateries, while others have natural woods and outdoor activities. There is really something for everybody here."

Fort Lauderdale Beach A1A and Sebastian Street

Stalbaum says that Fort Lauderdale has become one of the top gay tourist destinations because of the beaches and the weather.

"Fort Lauderdale is now a gay Mecca, and many feel that they are missing out if they don't go to the gay beach," he says. "It is socially acceptable, and they don't have

beaches in many other gay tourist destinations, like San Francisco and New York."

At the heart of the action is the section of Fort Lauderdale beach at A1A and Sebastian Street.

The beach first became a popular gay hangout due to the popularity of the Marlin Beach Hotel, which was located across the street. The Marlin was the largest and most popular exclusively gay resort in its time.

Although the resort closed 10 years ago, Sebastian St. still remains popular with its mostly gay male crowd.

"It is the place to be for the whole community," says Kyle Hammer, resident of nearby Victoria Park. "I go because my friends come and I always know someone."

Stalbaum says that the beach is a crowded pick-up scene where there is a lot of "standing and looking pretty."

For a more humble alternative, many gays and lesbians opt for the sun and surf at the other end of Fort Lauderdale beach on A1A and 18 Street.

"The beach at 18 Street is an alternative to the overwhelmingly big, gay crowd of Sebastian," says Stalbaum. "It is also more popular with lesbians and couples."

The beach offers a quiet, non-pick-up scene with free parking along A1A.

Dania Beach John Lloyd State Park

In Dania Beach, the north end beach inside John Lloyd State Park is well known for its secluded gay section.

Joseph Van Eron is the owner of the Liberty Apartments and Suites, which is located just five minutes from the park.

"John Lloyd is the Florida version of Fire Island or Provincetown," he says. "It is a beautiful and unspoiled state park with no apartment buildings."

Van Eron says that 75 percent of vacationing tourists who stay at Liberty Suites mention that they like the resort because of its close proximity to John Lloyd. "It's not as free as Haulover Beach because it isn't nude," says Fort Lauderdale resident Richard Featherstone, a frequent beachgoer. "But it is still isolated and just as relaxed. I can be myself here. Nobody chastises me for carrying a hot pink umbrella and reading my Danielle Steele book."



Dr. Stephen Leatherman



Miami Haulover Beach

Located on Collins Avenue just north of Bal Harbour, Haulover Beach also offers plenty of unspoiled beachfront, as it is a sanctioned Dade County park. It is also the only legal nude beach in the state of Florida.

Of the nude section, more than half of the beachgoers are gays and lesbians.

Kendall Resident Jamie Bryant often drives 45 minutes from his home just to go to the beach.

"I loved it so much the first time I went

Richard Schindler, the owner and general manager of Island House, a gay guesthouse located close to the beach, says that South Beach is the perfect spot for gays.

"Everybody goes down to the beach here. They like the fact that they can be comfortable and be themselves," he says. "This is the predominant gay beach in South Florida. The hotels, stores and restaurants are all in walking distance, and it is an overall gay atmosphere. It's really a whole combination of things that make it a convenient, easy destination for gay travelers."



that now I only go there," he says. "You can always find parking, and it is cheap at only \$4. There are no lines and there is an overall feeling of hospitality there. It is also not crowded by tourism concessions and the other frustrating parts of South Beach."

Bradley*, another nearby resident, says he enjoys the cruisy nature of the beach, although he does not engage in sexual acts because of occasional police patrols. "It is about meeting people," he says. "I like looking at beautiful people, and the privacy here is incredible."

According to one recent visitor to the popular gay website Cruisingforsex.com, "The culture of the place lends itself to encounters. It just means you have to be discreet, or meet and go elsewhere."

Miami Beach

Collins Avenue and 12th Street

South Beach's trendy Collins Avenue and 12 Street beach has become a gay landmark, even hosting circuit parties and numerous gay events throughout the year. It is considered the place to see and be seen by many Miami residents and European and Latin American tourists.

Leatherman's drbeach.org rates it as the top city beach in the southeast with its fine promenades, wide sandy beach and trademark hotels.

Stalbaum says that the beach is "Sebastian times two. They are even more body conscious and it is more of a party scene. The bars are in close proximity, and people can go to lunch in their bikinis."

Key Biscayne

Virginia Beach at Crandon Park

While this beach used to be the predominant gay beach in South Florida, its popularity among gays has declined in recent years.

"The police cleaned it up because of cruising, so now people don't really go there anymore," says Stalbaum. "It used to be the place to go and pick somebody up to play in the woods."

Leatherman says the beach still has its merits because of its small town feel.

"It is part of a much larger park with ample parking and volleyball nets," he says. "The water is great for bathing, and the beach offers a great view of the cruise ships. It now seems to be frequented by mostly kids and families, but it is still a really nice beach."

West Palm Beach

Macarthur State Park at Singer Island

For South Florida's northernmost county, Macarthur State Park, located on West Palm Beach's Singer Island, offers 317 pristine acres where gay beachgoers congregate.

One lesbian beachgoer appreciates its beautiful and friendly atmosphere.

"First of all, it is hidden away and very private," she says. "It also has the most amazing untouched beachfront. The beach is ultra clean, and the reef is full of a multitude of fish, corals, and shells. I would say that this park is a great atmosphere and depicts the best of natural Florida extremely well."

