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WHAT LGBTQIA+ TRAVELERS WANT FROM A GROUP TOUR

LGBTQIA+ travelers are looking for unique places to explore with their peers. Here's how to jump in on the group tour industry.

WORDS / LOLA MÉNDEZ



A Ladies Touch travel group gathers in Brazil.

Since 2018, the LGBTQIA+ travel market has exceeded \$218 billion annually. As it continues to grow, travel advisors like Laticia Jacobs, a lesbian and CEO of Travel Concierge Partners and member of the American Society of Travel Advisors, are noticing an increase in bookings for LGBTQIA+ group travel.

"As society becomes more inclusive and accepting, individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community feel more comfortable and empowered to explore the world together. This growing demand for group travel reflects the desire for shared experiences while discovering diverse destinations," she said.

Travelers who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community aren't a monolith: They each have their own dream destinations to visit, travel

styles and bucket-list adventures. Queer travelers do have one thing in common, though: a unique set of needs that must be addressed to ensure they feel safe and welcome wherever they travel.

PRIORITIZING SAFETY

"LGBTQIA+ travelers are conscious that many places around the world aren't safe for them," said Vivian Perez, owner of Ladies Touch and member of International LGBTQ+ Travel Association (IGLTA). "With a group trip, people trust the destination and suppliers are safe and that leaders have vetted everything before putting the trip on the market."

Not only do queer travelers who join LGBTQIA+ trips need to be able to trust that the destination is safe, but also that the suppliers and hosts have been trained on LGBTQIA+ inclusivity. "Joining a group



A wine tasting with EveryQueer.

tour run by an operator experienced with LGBTQIA+ clients can take the fear out of visiting destinations that might seem daunting if you're a solo queer traveler," said John Tanzella, president and CEO of IGLTA.

Travel companies that offer such group tours should have ongoing training programs for guides to ensure they're well-versed in the community's sensitivities, which will help create a safe group tour environment for LGBTQIA+ travelers.

"TRAVEL ADVISORS SHOULD IDENTIFY TOUR OPERATORS THAT HAVE EXPERIENCE WITH PROVIDING GREAT EXPERIENCES TO LGBTQIA+ GUESTS," TANZELLA SAID. "TOUR LEADERS SHOULD:

- Create itineraries and tips that make LGBTQIA+ travelers feel included, safe, and informed;
- Encourage everyone to share pronouns at the beginning of the tour to avoid misgendering;
- Ensure there's access to gender-neutral bathrooms throughout the tour;
- And work with guides and suppliers that include members of the LGBTQIA+ community or have been vetted in advance for their allyship."

ENSURING REPRESENTATION

Though safety is a critical first step to planning a successful group trip, ensuring LGBTQIA+ representation throughout is

crucial to ensure an authentic experience.

Tanzella has been impressed with the commitment to DEI shown by the Travel Corporation — an IGLTA global partner — because it hires LGBTQIA+ ambassadors for its Contiki brand to represent them. The social travel company appointed activist Aisha Shaibu-Lenoir as the 2023 LGBTQIA+ Ambassador to help it stay attuned to the needs and desires of LGBTQIA+ travelers. Shaibu-Lenoir provides valuable insights, collaborates with Contiki on product development and represents the interests of LGBTQIA+ travelers in trip activities.

"When big tour companies hire LGBTQIA+ ambassadors, it addresses the crucial need for representation and visibility within the travel industry," said lesbian travel expert Christine Diaz. "By having diverse LGBTQIA+ ambassadors, these companies show they value all of the intersections of the LGBTQIA+ community. This representation fosters trust and relatability, allowing LGBTQIA+ travelers to see themselves reflected in the ambassadors and to feel confident that their needs, concerns and interests will be understood and respected."

Her partner, Kristie Pike, added, "LGBTQIA+ group trips provide unique opportunities to explore new destinations while connecting with like-minded people who share similar identities and experiences. These trips are so special because they give us a sense of belonging, acceptance and are a celebration of diversity."

Ideally, the tours would be led by com-

LGBTQIA+ GROUP TRAVEL RESOURCES FOR TRAVEL ADVISORS

Four ways to stay informed about the LGBTQIA+ community to ensure safe, personalized trips.

- 01** Book tours with companies that are a part of the vetted IGLTA member network. IGLTA.org has travel and safety guides and lists of upcoming LGBTQIA+ tours.
- 02** Attend the annual IGLTA Global Convention to network with hundreds of LGBTQIA+ tourism businesses. It's the largest and longest-running LGBTQIA+ tourism conference.
- 03** Attend the annual PROUD Experiences conference exclusively for LGBTQIA+ travel to network with more than 100 travel suppliers (hotels, tour operators, tourism boards, etc.) from 40 countries, all of whom have set LGBTQIA+ policies and training and shown dedication to ensuring LGBTQIA+ travelers have a safe vacation.
- 04** Consult with queer travel influencers such as Freddy Rodriguez of Blue Perk and Courtney Vondran of Courtney the Explorer about what to look for when booking LGBTQIA+ clients on group tours. Jacobs recommends reading personal experiences shared by LGBTQIA+ travelers on Autostraddle and TAGG. "These sources provide insights into LGBTQIA+-friendly destinations, accommodations and activities," she said.

community members as well. Tanzella noted that engaging LGBTQIA+ guides is one way tour operators can create connections to the local community.

"If a queer group tour doesn't have someone in the community leading, then it runs the risk of being inauthentic," queer travel influencer Ravi Roth said. Pike agreed, noting that, "It's important to have trusted community tour leaders on LGBTQIA+ group tours because it creates a foundation of trust and understanding from the start of the trip as the travelers will feel comfortable bringing any concerns to the group leader."



Ladies Touch travels to the Acropolis.

DIVING DEEP: LGBTQIA+ GROUP TOURS

“Going on an LGBTQIA+ group trip is magical. Once you start to travel with other LGBTQIA+ folks, it’s hard to travel any other way. There’s something special about being able to travel with people who are like you,” Alysse Dalessandro said. She is planning an upcoming group trip to Cuba with ReRoot Travel which will include educational tours about LGBTQIA+ history and culture in Cuba led by local community members.

“As a host of LGBTQIA+ group tours, I work with tour operators that are safe, welcoming and affirming so LGBTQIA+ travelers have an immersive, culturally enriching experience in the safest way possible. I look for tour operators that serve as the connection point to the local LGBTQIA+ community,” Dalessandro said.

HERE ARE A FEW OTHER RESOURCES TO BE AWARE OF WHEN PLANNING YOUR NEXT GROUP TRIP:

- Out Adventures specializes in tours for the LGBTQIA+ community to destinations worldwide, including active adventures and cultural exploration. LGBTQIA+ guides lead the tours and personally understand the challenges faced by



EveryQueer organizes trips for family travel as well.

TOP: COURTESY OF LADIES TOUCH TRAVEL; BOTTOM: COURTESY OF EVERYQUEER

LGBTQIA+ travelers. The company collaborates with local LGBTQIA+-friendly businesses, accommodations and organizations. Employees go through training and practice policies to ensure LGBTQIA+ travelers feel welcome and safe. Out Adventures regularly fundraises for local causes; for every guest registered for a scheduled group tour, the company donates \$50 to Rainbow Railroad to help resettle LGBTQIA+ refugees.

- Perez reviews Equaldex to vet countries for their safety and visits destinations with her partner to see what the experience is like before planning group tours. Tours planned consist of 15 to 100 women-loving-women travelers to Puerto Vallarta, Mexico; Manuel Antonio, Costa Rica; and Mykonos, Greece. “I’m queer and understand the needs of our travelers, which include different types of LGBTQIA+ women — butch, trans, femme, non-binary, etc.,” she said.
- HE Travel has been leading group trips for gay men for four decades. The immersive experiences celebrate local LGBTQIA+ cultures by supporting LGBTQIA+-owned or LGBTQIA+-friendly establishments to offer tour guests genuine cultural exchanges. HE Travel is mindful of local laws and cultural sensitivities to ensure participants are safe and comfortable.
- EveryQueer, founded by 2019 Contiki LGBTQIA+ global ambassador Meg Ten Eyck, offers LGBTQIA+ group trips immersed in local culture and hosted by LGBTQIA+ influencers — including an upcoming trip to Mexico. “Most group tours are targeted at an older demographic and aren’t focused on younger queer women,” said Ten Eyck. She explained that EveryQueer provides professional development training to ensure partners, including hotels and tour guides, are aware of best practices for LGBTQIA+ guests.

THERE ARE MANY NICHE LGBTQIA+ GROUP TOURS TO EXPLORE AS WELL, SUCH AS:

- Oscar Wilde Tours’ LGBTQIA+ history and art-themed tours
- For gay male travelers, Outstanding Travel organizes trips around the MENA region
- Detours focuses on laid-back, relaxing group tours
- Source Journeys offers luxury group tours
- Dive N Ride Adventures hosts scuba diving and motorcycle tours for the LGBTQIA+ community. Lisa Malachowsky, a lesbian and founder of Dive N Ride, leads every tour and only takes groups to destinations that she’s previously visited and felt safe.

LGBTQIA+ WALKING GROUP TOURS

If your LGBTQIA+ client isn’t joining a multi-day group tour, you can still find tours for them to join around the world.

- Globally, Viator offers hundreds of LGBTQIA+ history and sightseeing tours, including in Belfast, Melbourne and Berlin.
- In Israel, Rainbow Tour operates queer-friendly tours around Tel Aviv.
- In Pennsylvania, Beyond the Bell Tours’ Philly Gayborhood and LGBTQ History Walking Tour visits the gayborhood and the nation’s self-proclaimed longest continuously operating LGBTQIA+-focused bookstore, Giovanni’s Room.
- ExperienceFirst specializes in walking tours around the world with guides who are experts in the tour subject matter. Its UL-

COURTESY OF OUT ADVENTURES



An Out Adventures Kilimanjaro climbing journey.

LGBTQIA+ GROUP TOUR OPERATORS WHO WORK WITH TRAVEL ADVISORS

Your go-to operators for group trip planning.

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| <p>01 Contiki works with travel agents through the TTC Travel Agent Portal.</p> | <p>“Safety is their number one priority, and they know how to have fun.”</p> |
| <p>02 High End Journeys in Egypt was recommended by Perez, as they made her guests feel safe in what she says would normally be a taboo country for queer women to visit.</p> | <p>05 Argentina-based, queer-owned Lunfarda Travel, recommended by Ten Eyck.</p> |
| <p>03 Gaya Bali Travel, an LGBTQIA+-owned tour company, was also recommended by Perez.</p> | <p>06 Zoom Vacations “The operator has gained recognition within the LGBTQIA+ travel community for expertise, focus on inclusivity, positive customer feedback and commitment to providing safe and enjoyable experiences for LGBTQIA+ travelers,” Jacobs said.</p> |
| <p>04 Pride Tours Chile “They’re super knowledgeable about the queer community,” said Roth.</p> | |



COURTESY OF EVERYQUEER

Above and right: EveryQueer organizes trips to Argentina and Egypt.

imate LGBTQ Castro District Walking Tour in San Francisco pays tribute at the Pink Triangle Memorial to the LGBTQIA+ lives lost during fascist Europe; highlights the instrumental role Twin Peaks Tavern played in cementing the Castro as an LGBTQIA+ district; and includes a visit to Harvey Milk's old camera shop and campaign headquarters.

LGBTQIA+ CRUISES

If your clients are looking to hit the waves, here are a few resources to be aware of, too.

- Olivia Travel offers lesbian cruises that foster an inclusive environment for women-loving women. Cruises feature activities, wellness offerings, entertainment, speaker series, parties and workshops tailored to the interests of diverse passengers.
- Atlantis Events hosts all-gay and all-lesbian charters with LGBTQIA+-focused entertainment, activities and parties on luxury cruise lines, such as on a cruise from Athens to Venice.
- The luxurious Uniworld Boutique River Cruises, an IGLTA member, has tapped LGBTQIA+ tourism leaders, such as gay and lesbian travel veterans Gregg Kaminsky and Kelli Carpenter, to ensure queer guests feel welcome and safe onboard its ships. The brand has been partnering with LGBTQIA+ industry leaders for five years and hosts annual LGBTQIA+

sailings in Europe on the Out! On the Rivers limited-edition sailings. Special programming includes LGBTQIA+ performers, dance parties and themed events. Uniworld's staff receives sensitivity training to ensure personalized service is delivered to the community.

- GaySail and OUTbound also specialize in LGBTQIA+ cruises.
- VACAYA is a large-scale, LGBTQIA+ group travel operator offering cruises. "It's incredible to see queer folks take over a 3,000-passenger cruise ship for a week," Dalessandro said. "VACAYA brings in LGBTQIA+ team members, queer entertainers and community-centered programming, such as a one-woman show in the theater." Roth also loves VACAYA, noting that they've experienced how the company understands the needs and wants of queer travelers. "It has the party element, the tourist element. VACAYA celebrates women, kinks within the Queer community and sober events," he said.

Whether your LGBTQIA+ clients are looking to join a group trip for a day tour, a leisurely vacation or an educational adventure, many options offer queer travelers safe and immersive experiences around the globe. As the market expands and more companies launch LGBTQIA+ group tours, the world continues to open for queer folks who want to explore the planet in groups with like-minded passengers.