



## The Power of LGBT Travel: Anecdotal Insights from Successful LGBT Tourism Ventures

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*A note about methodology: For this article, I spoke with 13 leaders and experts of the LGBT travel industry: Matthew Breen, Editor-in-Chief of The Advocate; Ylan Chrem, US Sales Representative at Lima Tours; Nathan DePetris, COO of Pride Travel; Chad Intrachooto, Marketing Executive at the Tourism Authority of Thailand; Merryn Jones, Editor-in-Chief of Curve Magazine; Donovan Kaneshiro, Creative Strategy Manager for Gay Vegas Travel; Jerry Portwood, Executive Editor of Out Magazine; Mya Reyes, former Director of Diversity Marketing at the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority; Sandi Robinson, Senior Event Manager at The Godfrey Hotel Chicago; Ed Salvato, Editor-in-Chief of Man About World; John Tanzella, President of the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association; Don Tuthill, Publisher of Passport Magazine; and Bob Witeck, President and Founder of Witeck Communications.*

Based on survey results from over 40,000 respondents, Out Now Marketing estimated the 2013 international LGBT<sup>i</sup> travel market size at over \$180 billion.<sup>ii</sup> This article provides anecdotal evidence supporting the claim that active engagement with LGBT travellers generates economic benefits for both public and private entities. This article further highlights three particular insights drawn from these interviews that are relevant to policymakers: (1) Economic justifications have created space to integrate LGBT perspectives into the tourism industry; (2) Efforts to reach out to LGBT travellers have spearheaded work to make destinations more LGBT friendly; and (3) The public sector plays a significant role in developing LGBT travel markets. In order to sketch out these three ideas more vividly, this article shares the experiences of Mya Reyes, Chad Intrachooto, and Ylan Chrem. Further research in this arena should focus on how the public sector engages with the LGBT travel industry, and how the LGBT travel industry shapes public policy.

## **Mya Reyes**

### *Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (Public-Private Partnership)<sup>iii</sup>*

In 2004, the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority (“LVCVA”) hired Mya Reyes to target minority communities as part of the City’s broader marketing initiatives. Prior to Reyes, the LVCVA—a public-private partnership between the City of Las Vegas and local commercial enterprises—placed little emphasis on diversity programming or outreach. In bringing on Reyes, the LVCVA set its sights on tapping into new markets that would boost hotel bookings in Las Vegas and thereby generate tax revenue for the city government.

Before working for the LVCVA, Reyes had no prior associations with the LGBT community. At tourism and hospitality conferences, she solicited advice on best practices for LGBT marketing and outreach. According to Reyes, she was “happily surprised” by the positive feedback she received for spearheading this outreach in Las Vegas. This lack of pushback from the hospitality industry is congruous with Sandi Robinson’s analysis of the LGBT travel industry after over 10 years working in hotel administration. Robinson, who currently serves as the Senior Event Manager at the Godfrey Hotel Chicago, attributes the general acceptance of LGBT marketing campaigns due to the large presence of LGBT people within the industry itself: “I think we’re at the frontline of LGBT marketing because so many people who work in the hospitality industry are themselves LGBT.”

Reyes’s outreach to the LGBT community proved so economically successful that the LVCVA shifted her focus from broad diversity engagement to a portfolio that focused entirely on LGBT marketing from 2009 to 2012. In one example of her success, Reyes points to an LGBT outreach trip in Washington, DC where she “met a gentleman who gave me one of the largest single bookings of my career: 6,000 room nights at the Caesars.” In 2010 alone, Reyes booked over 83,000 room nights for LGBT meetings and conventions in Las Vegas.

Reyes believes her proactive approach was a defining factor in the LCVA’s success in its LGBT outreach efforts. Reyes often travelled around the US to attend the events of LGBT NGOs and interest groups. Reyes also invited leaders of the LGBT community to visit Las Vegas for a few days, and she would take them out and show

them around the city in person. To ensure that LGBT guests were welcomed and understood, Reyes also spearheaded LGBT diversity-training programs for hotel staff in Las Vegas.<sup>iv</sup>

### **Chad Intrachooto**

Since the first Asian Symposium on Gay and Lesbian Tourism in 2011, Community Marketing Inc.—an LGBT travel marketing consulting firm—has ranked Thailand the “most desired” Asian destination for LGBT travellers.<sup>v</sup> Chad Intrachooto, Marketing Executive at the Tourism Authority of Thailand (“TAT”), attributes Thailand’s popularity among LGBT travellers to the TAT’s proactive LGBT marketing strategy. The roots of LGBT-targeted marketing in Thailand trace back to 2010, when Intrachooto successfully persuaded TAT management to pilot his proposal to reach out to LGBT foreigners. “It took a fair amount of push to convince my boss,” Intrachooto explained, “because some people are still conservative in Thailand.” Intrachooto responded to the TAT management’s initial resistance by presenting Community Marketing Inc.’s estimates of the LGBT travel market potential.

In May 2012, Intrachooto spearheaded the TAT’s launch of a new website for LGBT travellers called Go Thai Be Free (separate from the TAT’s [tourismthailand.org](http://tourismthailand.org) website).<sup>vi</sup> The website provides background information on LGBT life in Thailand, travel stories, reviews, and resources on LGBT-specific travel agents, events, venues, and hotels. The TAT promoted the website through ads (like the example shown above) in LGBT blogs and magazines (e.g. Passport Magazine and [carlosmeliablog.com](http://carlosmeliablog.com)),

sponsored press trips, and presentations at conferences such as the annual IGLTA convention.

Though Intrachooto was not at liberty to share the TAT's specific calculations of their LGBT marketing return on investment, he confirmed the TAT received a positive and healthy profit on its investments. At the same time, Intrachooto acknowledged the limitations of the TAT's existing estimations: "Without directly asking all travellers entering Thailand if they are gay or straight, it is difficult to provide specific numbers on the impact of our LGBT-specific marketing campaigns." To circumvent these challenges, Intrachooto has harnessed data from the TAT's private partners, including qualitative anecdotes from hotels, in order to estimate the size of Thailand's existing LGBT travel market.<sup>vii</sup> According to Intrachooto, the TAT has trusted his estimates, and accordingly increased the funding allocated to LGBT marketing every year since they began targeting LGBT populations in 2010. Today, two out of the eight total employees in the TAT's New York office work on LGBT marketing full time.

## **Ylan Chrem**

### *Lima Tours (Private)*

Ylan Chrem has worked with Lima Tours—one of the largest private tour companies in Peru—for over 15 years. The company is one of the first pioneers of LGBT travel, helping to bring "male only groups" to Machu Picchu as early as 1972. In this early work, Chrem explains, Lima Tours would rent out entire hotels and charter private boats in order to provide safe and private space for gay men to visit Machu

Picchu. Lima Tours formalized an LGBT marketing strategy in 2000. Today, Chrem estimates over 500 LGBT-identified travellers visited Peru with Lima Tours in 2013, with each visitor spending an average of \$3000 per week.

Despite these successes, Chrem explains that the Peruvian government has consistently ignored his attempts to establish a public-private partnership, which would jointly work towards expanding Peru's LGBT tourism market. According to Chrem, Peru is a Catholic country with few LGBT legal protections. In order to make Peru accessible for LGBT travellers without any partnerships with the Peruvian public sector, Chrem explains that private companies had to expand the Peruvian LGBT tourism market alone. In other words, whereas private LGBT tourism businesses like Gay Vegas Travel can build off of and expand upon foundations set by the LVCVA, Lima Tours had to set Peru's LGBT friendly infrastructure (e.g. running diversity-training programs for hotel staff) and build Peru's reputation as an LGBT friendly destination without public partnerships. The Peruvian government's hesitance to engage directly with the LGBT travel market, Chrem suggests, explains why the Argentinian and Brazilian slices of the LGBT tourism market are growing faster than Peru's.<sup>viii</sup>

## **Lessons learned**

Mya Reyes, Chad Intrachooto, and Ylan Chrem's stories elucidate the dynamics behind how private companies and public governments have successfully engaged with LGBT travellers. Their experiences also highlight three critical insights into the LGBT tourism industry that reflected the understandings of many of the other 13 interviewees from this study, and that are particularly relevant for questions concerning public policy.

First, the tourism industry's focus on the bottom line has created spaces for LGBT perspectives to be pulled into the tourism industry. The 13 interviewees of this study generally agree that high returns on investment are the fundamental priority of decision-makers in the travel industry. Both public bureaus like the TAT and private companies like Lima Tours continue to target outreach to LGBT travellers because they have found that their LGBT marketing yields positive economic benefits.

As a result of these economic benefits, the tourism global tourism industry itself has become more LGBT friendly over the years. In the Lima Tours, for example, we also see how the goal of gaining economic benefits from LGBT travellers in Peru prompted the private sector to fill gaps in public services for LGBT people. Chrem explains that Lima Tours not only ran diversity-training workshops for hotel staff throughout Peru, but also convinced many hotels to implement non-discrimination policies for their staff before the government passed any anti-discrimination laws in employment for LGBT people.<sup>ix</sup>

Second, efforts to reach out to LGBT travellers have in turn spurred some cultural shifts by making certain destinations more LGBT friendly. According to Ed Salvato, the editor-in-chief of *Man About World*, the creation of the magazine *Out and About* in 1992 was a "game changer," as it began to rate the gay travel industry through editorials rather than just take advertisements from hotels that pasted a rainbow flag next to their name. Salvato explains that after *Out and About*, LGBT travel magazines increasingly pressured travel destinations to actually follow through with their claims of being LGBT-friendly.<sup>x</sup> Knowing that they could not lie about their destinations as LGBT

friendly, Reyes, Intrachooto, and Chrem have each conducted diversity-trainings for hotel staff and other venues.

Interestingly, the Thai government began funding LGBT marketing for the TAT in 2010 before passing any LGBT hate crime or LGBT civil rights laws. Though there are certainly multitudes of factors involved with public policy decisions, this chronology suggests that pulling LGBT perspectives into Thai public policy was spurred on by the power of the pink dollar.

Third, the LGBT travel industry has benefited significantly from public sector engagement. As we see with the LVCVA and the TAT, public tourism bureaus have taken on important roles in creating some of today's top LGBT travel destinations. Other notable public tourism bureaus that have successfully expanded new LGBT travel markets include the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau<sup>xi</sup> and Tourisme Montreal.<sup>xii</sup> Though the Lima Tours example shows us that government partnerships are not a prerequisite to expanding LGBT travel markets, Chrem's experiences suggest that an earlier partnership with the Peruvian government could have greatly increased the number of LGBT tourists in Peru today.

### **A Call for Further Research**

The anecdotal evidence provided here suggests that the tourism industry's engagement with LGBT consumers has generated economic benefits for both public tourism bureaus and private companies. With LGBT international human rights concerns in Russia, Uganda, and elsewhere, however, this discussion about LGBT international travel suggests a number of important directions for future research.



Descriptively, what are the dynamics behind the intertwined relationships between private companies and public tourism bureaus in the LGBT travel industry? More generally, how does this profit-driven engagement with LGBT customers shape public policy? Prescriptively, how do LGBT activists leverage the power of the pink travel dollar to advocate for LGBT rights and protections at local, national, and international levels of government? Answering these questions will help policymakers leverage the power of the pink dollar to forward LGBT rights internationally.

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<sup>i</sup> Though the LGBT acronym is used throughout this article, most of the insights drawn from this article are focused on gay men and lesbian women. Several of my interviewees pointed to the travel industry's lack of engagement with bisexual or transgender travellers.

<sup>ii</sup> Out Now Consulting, *Out Now Global LGBT2020*, <http://www.outnowconsulting.com/>.

<sup>iii</sup> For more on the LVCVA: <http://www.lvcva.com/who-we-are/funding-and-finance/>

<sup>iv</sup> Mya Reyes, conversation, 12 Jan. 2014.

<sup>v</sup> Community Marketing, Inc., *CMI's 18<sup>th</sup> Annual LGBT Travel Survey November 2013*, [http://www.communitymarketinginc.com/documents/CMI\\_Research2013/CMI\\_18th\\_LGBT\\_TravelSurvey2013.pdf](http://www.communitymarketinginc.com/documents/CMI_Research2013/CMI_18th_LGBT_TravelSurvey2013.pdf) (accessed January 15, 2014).

<sup>vi</sup> For more on Go Thai Be Free: <http://gothaibefree.com/>

<sup>vii</sup> Chad Intrachooto, conversation, 11 Jan. 2014.

<sup>viii</sup> Ylan Chrem, conversation, 18 Jan. 2014.

<sup>ix</sup> Today, neither Thailand nor Peru has anti-discrimination laws that protect LGBT employees.

<sup>x</sup> Ed Salvato, conversation, 16 Jan. 2014.

<sup>xi</sup> For more on the Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention and Visitors Bureau: <http://www.sunny.org/lgbt/>

<sup>xii</sup> For more on Tourisme Montreal: <http://www.tourisme-montreal.org/Accueil/>