



Gettyimages

# Lessons From The Road: The Gay Traveler's Guide to An Authentic Vacation



By Kwin Mosby • Jun 9, 2021

The restaurant hostess – dressed in a crisp all-white linen ensemble and a hijab – walks over to me and I have a feeling our light-hearted verbal tango is about to continue.

“How’s your food?” Aagilia asks.

I’m halfway into my stay at a private-island resort in the [Maldives](#), yet I still can’t tell whether she’s being friendly or cleverly trying to assess whether I’m gay.

I smile and respond, “It’s really good.”

She smiles back and says, “Just admit it; you love me! I’m the reason why you keep coming back!”

I laugh nervously, trying to avoid choking on my curry.

In the U.S., I wouldn’t have hesitated to out myself. But I’m in a Muslim country for the first time, and have no idea how she’ll react to an honest proclamation. So I decide to take the safe route. “You’re awesome,” I say with a nod and wink, never revealing that I’m a rainbow card-carrying gay man.

Truth is, I’m a very private person, and sharing my sexuality isn’t something I typically feel a need to do. But it’s always my intention to find destinations where I feel seen and comfortable. So I knew that having a good time in the Maldives would depend on doing extra research in advance to understand the customs of this conservative Muslim country. (Using common sense, I would not use dating apps to meet locals in a country where same-sex hook-ups are illegal.) Taking those initial steps are important. But beyond that, my travel planning really isn’t much different from straight travelers’. I want to explore new places, and if that includes meeting new “friends of Dorothy,” that’s an added value. I’ve not always been this confident in my approach. But my trip planning has evolved as I’ve grown older and more comfortable with my identity, resulting in love affairs with countless destinations.

**Read More: [Tripadvisor's SUMMER OF LOVE](#)**



The Maldives; Gettyimages

My first international trip, a road trip around [Costa Rica](#), provided an opportunity to satiate my curiosity about international LGBTQI+ experiences. Not only did I join [Gaydar](#) (a predecessor to current dating apps) but I also consulted my trusty [Damron Men's Travel Guide](#), a compact but comprehensive guide with listings of gay-owned and gay-friendly hotels; bed-and-breakfasts; clothing stores; bars; clubs; and popular cruising spots. In [San Jose](#), Costa Rica’s capital, I left my straight travel companion at the B&B and ventured out on my own. Eventually, at Club El Teatro, I met up with a virtual acquaintance, who introduced me to his friends. Together we set off on a bar crawl of popular gay-friendly venues that were unknown to most tourists at the time. That experience taught me the power of immersing yourself in local culture, and, over time, I’ve come to really appreciate the value of maintaining those friendships.

I’ve also learned the importance of having a community you trust. Word-of-mouth recommendations from fellow gay travelers have been invaluable when planning domestic weekend getaways or longer international jaunts. Miami, Palm Springs, Provincetown and New York City became go-to vacation spots, each city had its own LGBTQI+ community where I could meet others and feel comfortable being out of the closet.

Within the safety net of a gay-friendly destination I’m free to hone in on travel interests that lie beyond my sexuality. So if I’m visiting [Palm Springs](#), I’ll also plan a hike in nearby Joshua Tree National Park. A weekend in New York City gives me the opportunity to explore Brooklyn on a street art tour. And, pre-COVID, I learned to appreciate a low-key beach getaway in [Fort Lauderdale](#), decompressing at my favorite gay, clothing-optional hotel, [Grand Resort & Spa](#).

In the LGBTQI+ community, your chosen family – in my case a group of close gay friends – are often your companions on event-inspired trips. Some of my most memorable travel experiences have been group trips to a city that was hosting an LGBTQI+ party or event. I’m convinced that it’s impossible to form a deeper bond than you do after experiencing International Male Leather (IML) Weekend in Chicago or [Bears Week](#) in [Sitges, Spain](#). These trips are like huge international happy hours during which you meet people who, down the road, often become travel companions and/or good friends.

Today, Facebook groups, LGBTQI+ travel advisors and websites such as [GayCities.com](#) are useful tools for finding the “gayborhoods” in big cities, as well as gay-friendly or gay-owned accommodations, restaurants, shops and nightlife. Cross-referencing their recommendations with non-LGBTQI+ travel resources will help you find a destination or activities that match your interests and where you can be confident you’ll be welcome and comfortable.



A Walking the Spirits tour in Paris

Of course, being an African-American man adds another layer to my travel experiences. I’m intrigued by cultural activities that speak to my heritage, so on a recent trip to Paris, I went beyond [Le Marais](#) (a hip LGBTQI+ neighborhood) to seek out the Black side of the City of Light. Julia Browne, owner of [Walking the Spirit Tours](#), led me on a tour that focused on how the city has transformed the lives of Black artists including Josephine Baker and James Baldwin. It was a transformative experience that profoundly affected me.

And isn’t that the point of travel? To leave a city or country a more informed traveler? Despite my awkward banter with Aagilia, I enjoyed my trip to the Maldives and I’ll definitely return. But I think I – and other LGBTQI+ travelers – will always have to do the extra legwork to determine which destinations suit our interests and allow us to be our most authentic selves.

Over the years, I’ve become secure in who I am as a Black gay man. And with that confidence has come a shift in the places I want to travel to and the things I want to do when I get there. But my travel mantra has remained the same: Respect the local culture, use common sense, and knowledge is power. If I keep those things in mind, I’ll always return with amazing stories to tell about the sights, food, culture and connections I’ve made along the way.



**Kwin Mosby**

Kwin Mosby is a freelance travel and lifestyle journalist and editor based in Washington, D.C. His work has been featured in Travel + Leisure, AFAR, Condé Nast Traveler, Marriott Bonvoy Traveler, Passport Magazine, Newsweek, and others.

