



IGLTA
FOUNDATION

Responsible Tourism Through the Lens of LGBTQ+ Travel

**A 2019 International LGBTQ+
Travel Association Foundation White Paper**

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Executive Summary

This white paper—produced by the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association Foundation—began with identifying the need for and the value of a number of industry leaders coming together to discuss current issues affecting the industry and to share some of their strategies. The result was a Leadership Think Tank, held on April 25 at the Google offices in New York City, which produced a number of interesting insights. This white paper describes those insights for individuals and organizations that want to keep growing in this industry.

During the discussion, five key challenges to clear thinking about responsible tourism were discussed, and three industry issues were examined. The five challenges that have constrained clear thinking about industry issues and trends include:

- Language used in discussing visitors as tourists or travelers
- The negative connotations of overtourism as a term
- Multiple meanings of authenticity
- Perceptions of safety and security
- Metrics used to measure success

The three major issues identified and examined during the Leadership Think Tank include:

- Overabundance of visitors in some locations and under attendance in others
- Increasing interest in mainstream destinations or destinations new to the LGBTQ+ population
- Cultural perceptions of LGBTQ+ visitors to some destinations.

The bulk of this white paper provides insights about the nature of these issues, ways they are encouraging various organizations to lead the industry or respond to local conditions, and the dimensions of the continuing challenges that they pose. Some of the insights concern ways to manage demand through scheduling, promoting other times and locations, and working with tour operators to visit less well-known sites or destinations. Mainstream destinations can benefit from expanding images of acceptance, promoting LGBTQ+ visitors, encouraging welcoming activities and starting new activities. Recognizing that some LGBTQ+ visitors want to enjoy destinations that are not welcoming or safe triggered insights about ways to advocate for accepting and celebrating LGBTQ+ visitors and businesses.

At the end of this white paper are the names and titles of the persons involved in the Leadership Think Tank; none of them have been quoted personally since the purpose was to generate discussion and forward thinking and to produce a white paper that shared key insights across the industry.

I encourage you to read the rest of this document and share your comments with your colleagues and me so that we can continue to improve our analysis and understanding of tourism issues and better serve our members and the industry at large.

Cordially,

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Photo by Rachel Covello, Outcoast Photography

Introduction

This white paper incorporates the reflections of a number of thoughtful industry leaders and findings from a number of published research reports. While primarily based on the discussions held during a Leadership Think Tank prior to the 2019 IGLTA Annual Global Convention in New York City, the original agenda for the Leadership Think Tank included five central topics: overtourism, niche and mainstream tourism destinations, negative cultural perspectives as they affect LGBTQ+ visitors, challenges of running LGBTQ+ travel businesses in emerging destinations and diversity in products and services. Not surprisingly, the discussion ranged widely and produced a number of insights about ways industry members think about issues and also the issues themselves. Not all topics were fully addressed; future think tanks may continue the discussion.

In analyzing industry issues affecting LGBTQ+ tourists and travelers, a number of obstacles were identified that make it more challenging to think clearly and creatively about the future of destinations and LGBTQ+ visitors. The major areas that restrain good thinking include:

- Language used in discussing LGBTQ+ visitors
- Connotations of “overtourism”
- Multiple meanings of authenticity
- Perceptions about safety
- Metrics used to measure success

The rest of this introduction reports on these items.

The language used in discussing tourism has often combined “tourists” and “travelers” as if they are synonymous terms. Discussion on tourism issues has focused on clients as tourists even though many LGBTQ+ visitors are more often travelers. The concept of “tourist” connotes a common approach to visiting a destination and the ways in which visitors consume that destination. Tourists typically visit the major monuments in a city—all the places that tour groups emphasize and then these tourists feel satisfied that they have “done” the city or the destination. On the other hand, travelers want to investigate smaller and unknown neighborhoods rather than just focusing on the most public monuments; they want to experience the destination in ways closer to how residents see their location without becoming residents. While many visitors do not want to become locals, 90% of visitors want a special or significant experience. Tourists do it one way and travelers another.

A second issue surrounds the word “overtourism” which many leaders find unhelpful and which points in the wrong direction. In many destinations, the challenge is undertourism and not an overabundance of tourists. Using the term “overtourism” also places a negative connotation on visiting and discourages persons from travel to both well-known and less well-known locations. Avoiding the term or using alternative concepts will help improve the quality of thinking about tourism in general and increase the ways the industry can describe opportunities for visitors from the LGBTQ+ community.

Given the increased interest in experiences, visitors seem to want an “authentic” visiting experience, but it is not clear what that adjective connotes. Since there are so many meanings of the word and ways to experience authenticity, it becomes increasingly difficult to guide visitors to the right destinations or the right activities in cities, regions, and countries. Therefore, the industry can benefit from clarifying what authenticity means—is it a recreated simulation of what it was like to be in a historical period or in a particular activity (the activity element) or is it a visit to original facilities which have remained mostly unchanged (the historical element)? And what roles do interpretative activities and signage play in helping visitors both learn what they are visiting and recognize what is recreated and what is original.

Safety has always been an issue to members of the LGBTQ+ community; increasingly, both tourists and travelers recognize the importance of this factor in choosing places to visit. While the concern for physical safety has grown through the world as terrorists, extreme weather conditions, protests in public spaces, and general violence play a larger role in daily life; LGBTQ+ visitors also face other kinds of safety concerns. Some destinations do not welcome LGBTQ+ visitors, others seem to welcome them but visitors do not feel physically or psychologically safe. While that is slowly changing in some areas, the industry can benefit from recognizing the hierarchy of safety that influences the decisions of LGBTQ+ visitors, both when traveling to less well known destinations and in considering the contradictions between policies and practices in many locations.

Metrics have also become limiting factors to destinations as managers, marketers, and convention and visitor bureaus have long relied on the number of visitors as a key metric for success and not the amount of money spent or the increase in locations being visited. The focus on occupancy levels of hotels and other measures has prevented consideration of other measures of success and effectiveness. In the future, the industry can benefit from using the number of visitors and the number of local households affected by visitors in order to show the value and importance of tourists and travelers. Another metric can focus on the impact of visitors by demonstrating that their expenditures made certain things possible for that destination or region. Pointing out that that income for tourists made possible the expansion of a transportation system or renewal of public spaces can alter the perception of the value of tourists.

These challenges inform thinking about the industry and bear further discussion. However, the industry currently faces three issues critically relevant to LGBTQ+ visitors: overabundance of visitors in some locations and under attendance in others, an increasing interest in mainstream destinations or destinations new to the LGBTQ+ population, and cultural perceptions of some destinations.

Overabundance of Visitors in Some Locations and Under Attendance in Others

Many locations have seen a flood of visitors at certain times of the year and in certain spots. While there is resistance to calling it overtourism because of the negative connotations and erroneous aspects of that term, some destinations have been overwhelmed with visitors at certain times of year and in certain locations within those destinations. While this issue does not only concern LGBTQ+ tourists, many destinations are increasingly facing the challenges in providing authentic and interesting visiting opportunities for all visitors. At the same time, the challenge involves welcoming tourists while not destroying the social, historical and physical environments that are drawing increasing numbers of visitors. Some of the solutions for coping with this overabundance of visitors include:

- Encouraging visitors at other times of the year (seasonality solution)
- Promoting unknown or “undiscovered” areas within well-known destinations (dispersal of tourism solution)
- Scheduling visiting groups at less busy times of the day or week (technology solution)
- Managing waiting lines with new strategies (technology and social media solution)

Although *Coping With Success Managing Overcrowding In Tourism Destinations*, the 2017 World Travel and Tourism Council study, pointed out that overcrowding has alienated local residents, degraded tourist experiences, overloaded infrastructures in many locations, damaged natural settings, and threatened cultural and heritage sites, several destinations have found a range of ways to respond to these challenges effectively. Some of them have increased visiting hours to certain popular monuments or tourist sites but that cannot be a long-term solution. Others have promoted newer tourism sites to distribute visitors into other areas. In fact, there are a wide range of solutions, often dictated by local conditions and levels of financial and political support.

Another industry challenge includes providing authentic experiences to visitors when the experience involves crowds, lines, and long wait times. It diminishes the value and excitement of the visit and exhausts the ability of the location to handle the crowds of visitors. Even crowd control strategies like programs playing on television monitors for persons waiting in lines, activities during wait times, and timed tickets—excellent short-term solutions—will not make enough of a difference in the presence of increasing numbers of tourists. A second challenge derives from the publicity about common and popular sites at various destinations. Brochures, travel operators and destination marketing activities often focus on the most famous sites—such as the Eiffel Tower or Notre Dame in Paris, the Angkor Wat temple in Cambodia, Westminster Abbey in London, Ayers Rock in Australia, or La Sagrada Familia in Barcelona when there are plenty of other fascinating sites in their cities to visit. Solutions can include identifying and promoting less well known sites and activities in a city or region and encouraging tour operators to visit them.

Destinations can spread newer information about all the possibilities for visiting their regions and experiencing an authentic visit. Promoting secondary cities—often less popular and

visited—and redefining the season or time of year to visit a location can alleviate overcrowding in central locations. While some destinations are busy all year long, other locations have a busy season, a quieter season, and shoulder seasons and can benefit from the promotion of visits in less busy times. In fact, even busy locations can encourage visitors at non-peak times such as early in the morning or later in the afternoon, provide time alert applications that notify visitors when lines are shorter, and encourage famous sites to provide discount rates at less popular times. Considering ways to open unusual day parts will allow sites to accommodate more visitors with less stress on the facilities. Designing visits to various sections of a city can also assist tour operators to try these options, which some visitors might prefer. Other solutions can include encouraging tour operators to expand the locations they visit by providing them with a different commission and incentive structures for less well-known cities or areas outside of cities. Since some countries only have visitors in some cities, encouraging visits to lesser-known cities opens up the country to more visitors and often more authentic and less crowded locations. Changing the images of various locations can also encourage visitors to expand their seasons of visits. Other suggestions involve creating new ways to move people around various destinations so that they did not exacerbate an already busy public transportation system and improving on infrastructure, city mobility, and hotel development.

At the same time, other destinations have plenty of room to accommodate visitors; sometimes, they are less well known or have space during off seasons. Working to increase visitations at certain times of year or certain times of day may be some of the most popular current solutions, but long-term solutions will be needed as the number and interests of LGBTQ+ visitors grow and their desire to travel to new places increases.

Increasing Interest in Mainstream Destinations or Destinations New to the LGBTQ+ Population

The success of many destinations that draw LGBTQ+ travelers has led to increasing numbers of LGBTQ+ visitors to “gay destinations” like Copenhagen, Denmark; Toronto, Canada; Palm Springs, California; Berlin, Germany; Skiathos and Mykonos, Greece; New York City, New York; Reykjavik, Iceland; and Montevideo, Uruguay. (Lonely Planet’s *The Most Gay-Friendly Places on the Planet, 2014*). However, many LGBTQ+ travelers are interested in other locations and especially ones open to a wider population.

As the interest in more mainstream destinations has increased, destinations can benefit from ensuring that these locations are welcoming and safe for LGBTQ+ visitors. In fact, gay people want what straight people want and to do similar things so long as they feel welcomed. The *23rd Annual LGBTQ Tourism & Hospitality Survey* by Community Marketing and Insights found that LGBTQ+ visitors were most attracted to: (in priority order): big city/urban destinations, destinations with many historical attractions, beach resorts or communities, places known for outdoor adventure or activities, destinations known to be LGBTQ popular, warm weather destinations, mountain resorts or communities, Island destinations, and theme park destinations.

LGBTQ+ visitors want to visit international locations open to all tourists and experience destinations from a broader perspective. There is less need to travel in same-sex groups and less interest in being segregated while traveling. While still being concerned about their safety, the LGBTQ+ travelers are expanding their interest in locations and activities beyond the regular locations and visiting family and friends.

The growing interest in new locations and new activities among LGBTQ+ tourists has produced a growing interest in adventure tourism—hiking, bicycling, fishing, camping, and sailing—not just cultural sites, nightclubs and shopping (without diminishing interest in other more common activities). As the *23rd Annual LGBTQ Tourism & Hospitality Survey* by Community Marketing and Insights found, the top activities of interest in 2018 were: interesting and unique tourist attractions, historical attractions, interesting city neighborhoods, outdoor activities (like hiking and biking), LGBTQ+ specific nightlife or neighborhoods, art museums or elements of a local arts scene, theater, concert or cultural performances, and, last, unique or luxury shopping. This pattern was true for 2017 as well.

At times, LGBTQ+ tourists open up new locations for other tourists, and sometimes, they visit well-known places where they know they will feel more comfortable. As John Tanzella, the President and CEO of the International LGBTQ+ Travel Association, has said recently, “The current trend in mature markets in LGBTQ+ travel is toward inclusivity in marketing efforts rather than all-gay advertising.”

Solutions for increasing LGBTQ+ visitors to mainstream destinations include increasing publicity and promotion activities, using images that show same-sex couples enjoying a local activity, expanding the range of activities at these locations, and encouraging media focused on LGBTQ+ visitors (whether tourists or travelers) to foster stories of more mainstream locations. Media campaigns that embrace diversity, that use pictures of everyone doing things together and that promote messages of acceptance and inclusion will bring more LGBTQ+ visitors. Ensuring that LGBTQ+ visitors are safe in less well-known locations and outside of central urban areas is another challenge the industry faces. Recognizing that local cultures are often not very accepting of LGBTQ+ visitors simply means that the industry needs to work harder to recognize the hierarchy of safety—physical safety as well as a feeling of membership and belonging. Luckily, many destinations have developed policies and practices that ensure a welcoming climate to this population and have become icons of welcome, tolerance, and celebration.

Cultural Perceptions of Some Destinations

LGBTQ+ individuals and couples that have traveled to many locations are interested in new locations and new adventures. The *23rd Annual LGBTQ Tourism & Hospitality Survey* found the following categories of activities preferred by LGBTQ+ tourists and travelers (listed in order of popularity): relaxation, local cuisine, traveling like a local, nature exploration, sightseeing, history sites, LGBTQ+ site visits, art & design events, shows, music events, extending a business trip, nightlife, excitement, luxury, traveling with children, and media buzz.

Some visitors are drawn to unusual cultures or sites that have not been visited by many travelers. Others like the unknown and the undiscovered destinations and do not worry about safety and security. The appeal of some locations includes the availability of alternative activities—ones not found in more popular places—and places to visit that require physical activities or complex travel arrangements. However, many LGBTQ+ travelers have visited destinations that were not very welcoming or safe even if they advertised their welcoming attitude to same-sex travelers. While some LGBTQ+ visitors may not be visiting the seven most dangerous (measured by homicides per 100,000 residents) cities – Fortaleza, Brazil; La Paz, Mexico; Tijuana, Mexico; Natal, Brazil; Acapulco, Mexico; Caracas, Venezuela; Los Cabos, Mexico—many LGBTQ+ travelers have, in fact, visited and will continue to travel to these locations. (*Travel Trivia* May 5, 2019)

Unfortunately, some regions and countries operate on fallacious assumptions and negative attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals and discourage, if not prohibit, them from visiting. While some locations have political structures and cultures that are critical of LGBTQ+ persons, that reality does not deter some sectors of the LGBTQ+ market. Few people make travel decisions based on the person at the head of the government. Instead, decisions are based on: perceptions and the record of safety and crime, attractiveness of the destination, range of possible activities or new experiences, and costs. In fact, LGBTQ+ travelers tend to be more moderate-price travelers, although there are some gender and generational differences. Few participants see themselves as pure luxury or budget travelers; however, larger percentages are willing to partially embrace those travel identities. There was no change in self-identified travel type since the 2017 report. (*The 23rd Annual LGBTQ Tourism & Hospitality Survey*) When these LGBTQ+ visitors are well treated, they can become positive ambassadors for destinations and bring friends and groups to places they like.

Other LGBTQ+ visitors are drawn to support small businesses operated by LGBTQ+ persons or tour companies and businesses that welcome LGBTQ+ tourists and travelers. These visitors have even encouraged the development of certain activities as the increased visibility of family oriented LGBTQ+ resorts, cruise lines, and tours have demonstrated. Destination weddings for LGBTQ+ couples have also encouraged a number of visitors to less well-known locations. Some of the difficulties with these destinations include guaranteeing or at least working on safety of visitors. Whether the safety issue is physical, psychological, or political, no visitors want to travel for leisure if they do not feel protected and welcomed. The result is the loss of a significant sector of travelers who want to travel where they are unwelcome and often help to change the cultural landscape.

Solutions will involve encouraging destination management organizations, tour operators, and convention and visitor bureaus to stand up for equality whenever they can and make these destinations welcoming to LGBTQ+ groups. Other solutions include: building a fabric of respect for all peoples, regardless of their background or differences; building alliances with LGBTQ+ groups and businesses; using social media to talk to possible visitors as individuals and show images that appeal to LGBTQ+ visitors.

Conclusion

Increasing the appeal of various destinations poses a current challenge for the industry. This white paper has identified five challenges to thinking about responsible tourism: the language used in discussing LGBTQ+ visitors, connotations of “overtourism,” multiple meanings of authenticity, perceptions about safety, and the metrics used to measure success. It has also explained three of the most important and current industry issues: managing the abundance of visitors to some locations, increasing opportunities for LGBTQ+ visitors at mainstream locations, and overcoming negative attitudes and false welcomes at other destinations. The number of LGBTQ+ visitors is increasing and the interest in visiting well-known and investigating less well-known destinations will continue to grow. Destination management organizations, convention and visitor bureaus, tour operators, and national tourism bureaus face the challenges of responding to the demand while making the changes to accommodate and invite more LGBTQ+ visitors.

List of Participants in the Think Tank (in alphabetical order)

1. Rosa Bada, Head of Institutional Relations, Barcelona Tourism
2. Scott Beck, President & CEO, Visit Salt Lake City
3. Theresa Belpulsi, VP of Tourism, Sports & Visitor Services, Destination DC
4. Lynn Carpenter, Chief Marketing Officer, Visit California
5. Leah Chandler, Chief Marketing Officer, Discover Puerto Rico
6. Melissa Cherry, Chief Operating Officer, Destinations International
7. Kevin Dallas, CEO, Bermuda Tourism Authority
8. Fred Dixon, President & CEO, NYC & Company
9. Roger Dow, President & CEO, The U.S. Travel Association
10. Enver Duminy, CEO, Cape Town Tourism
11. Josef Forstmayr, Board Member, Jamaica Tourism Board
12. David Goldstein, President & CEO, Destination Canada
13. Steve Johnson, Marketing Director, Thailand Tourism
14. Rocio Lancaster, Tourism Promotion Director, Tourism Jalisco
15. Pilar Liguana, President & CEO of Guam Visitors Bureau
16. Luca Martinazzoli, CEO, Milano Smart City Association
17. Corinne Menegaux, Managing Director, Paris Convention & Visitors Bureau
18. John Percy, President & CEO, Destination Niagara USA
19. Stacy Ritter, President & CEO, Greater Fort Lauderdale Convention & Visitors Bureau
20. Francesco Brazzini, Marketing & Event Coordinator, Italian National Tourist Board
21. Don Skeoch, Chief Marketing Officer, LA Tourism & Convention Board
22. Miguel Sanz, President, Tourism Madrid
23. Gary Sanchez, Director of Public Affairs, VisitDallas
24. William Talbert, President & CEO, Greater Miami CVB
25. John Tanzella, President & CEO, IGLTA
26. Andrew Wilson, Chief Marketing Officer, Atlanta CVB

Facilitators for the April 25, 2019 Meeting

Daniela Wagner, Group Business Development Director, Jacobs Media Group

Dr. Frederic B. Mayo, Clinical Professor of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Jonathan M. Tisch Center of Hospitality, New York University

This White Paper was prepared by Dr. Frederic B. Mayo, New York University

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