



LGBT travel spend may be considerable but the market is still being under-served by the travel agent community, reports **Geri Bain**

FEW WOULD DENY that the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) travel market is huge. This was recently confirmed in the 16th Annual LGBT Tourism Study by Community Marketing Inc. (CMI), which estimates the LGBT market spend at more than \$65bn a year.

On the surface, it's an attractive market for travel agents to tap into. According to the study, more than 85% of gay men and 77% of lesbians own a valid passport, with over 50% using their passport in the last year.

But how much of this business is booked with travel agents and how do they approach it? On the whole, the LGBT market is very wired, notes the CMI survey. More than 70% of gay men and 62% of lesbians own a smartphone, while 60% use their mobile devices to locate tourism resources while on the road. This number is even higher (82%) for LGBT travelers under 35.

Tapping into a plugged-in population presents both a challenge and an opportunity for agents. Most (64.5% of men; 58.8% of women) buy directly from supplier websites, with around 34% of men and women purchasing through an online travel agency, the survey reports.

Moreover, only 4.8% of men and 5.6% of women currently buy their trips through a retail travel agent, while about 2.9% of men and 2.5% of women purchase travel from a retail agency website. This in itself is not a paltry market, but industry watchers say there are ways agents can add value to serve the online shoppers as well.

"There is definitely more potential for travel agents who want to serve this market," says Ed Salvato, managing director of OutThink Partners, which specializes in both LGBT and tourism marketing.

While the LGBT markets tend to turn to travel agents for research-intensive, high-end purchases, smart travel agents can also market their ability to provide counsel and cut through the online clutter. Agents who have reliable and working knowledge of gay-friendly products and suppliers can offer LGBT clients something they can't find elsewhere.

"Agents new to the market can work with reputable LGBT suppliers to establish win/win synergies, just as we do for any market," says LGBT travel agent, consultant, wedding planner and group packager Carlos Melia. ►

SELLING TIPS

- **UNDERSTAND CONCERNS:** "Don't ghettoize in your head," cautions marketer Ed Salvato. Learn common LGBT concerns, but treat every client as an individual.
- **THINK GROUPS:** This community loves to travel together so put together your own group trips to known and new destinations, suggests Gregg Kaminsky, CEO of R Family Vacations.
- **BE SENSITIVE:** At hotel check-in, for example, clerks often assume that same-sex couples want two beds, not one. A note in the reservation that Mr X and Mr Y want one bed can prevent embarrassment, says Salvato.
- **CONNECTING CLIENTS:** Helping LGBT travelers connect with the local gay community is a great value-add.
- **KNOW THE LAW:** Just over 30% of LGBT couples traveled to get married last year. Know where same-sex couples can wed and which hospitality companies welcome gay weddings.



Hospitality companies have gay-friendly packages

The most popular destinations for US LGBT travelers are New York City, San Francisco and Las Vegas, while smaller locales such as Provincetown, Key West and Palm Springs are also popular

Pink power

The aviation industry has long recognized the power of this market. American Airlines, a pioneer in LGBT travel, introduced its 'Rainbow Team' in 1994 to create gay-friendly policies both internally and for the public. Its dedicated website has been updated in Spanish and Portuguese for the Latin American market. Delta, Lufthansa and many other airlines have jumped on the bandwagon with dedicated websites, deals and information on LGBT events around the world.

Hospitality companies have likewise made major commitments. For example, the lesbian and gay travel site of Marriott International, Inc. (www.marriott.com/gaytravel) combines welcoming imagery and messaging with packages for LGBT events and gay-friendly cities, as well as wedding and honeymoon planning. Targeted campaigns for African-American and Latino gay audiences are also in the works.

Destinations, too, are widely promoting LGBT travel. Convention and visitors bureaus, such as New York, San Francisco, Las Vegas, Amsterdam, Berlin and Sao Paulo, have numerous gay pride events and dedicated LGBT web pages.

The most popular destinations for US LGBT travelers, according to the CMI survey, are New York City, San Francisco and Las Vegas, while some smaller locales such as Provincetown, Key West and Palm Springs attract a high ratio of LGBT travelers to room counts.

Most of the top spots have LGBT-friendly policies and reputations, and LGBT travelers understandably tend to avoid destinations tainted by anti-gay violence, notes the survey. Amsterdam, for example, the top-ranked gay-friendly international destination, has a long history of tolerance. Its Homomonument, one of the first gay monuments in the world, sits next to Pink Point, a gay and lesbian information

booth. London, Paris and Italy are among other top overseas choices.

Dedicated LGBT group events and trips often motivate travel, according to the CMI study. From those surveyed, gay pride events alone draw about 25% of those under 35, as well as nearly 20% of the overall gay market. Many lesbians also travel for dedicated lesbian events (11%), as well as general women's events (8%). Family travel is also an important gay segment, says the CMI study, with about 3% of gay men and 19% of lesbians having children under 18 living at home.

Agents certainly don't have to be gay to tap into the LGBT travel market, just empathetic and good researchers, says LGBT marketing consultant Bob Witeck. As with any specialized market, engender trust and loyalty follows. "An agent who can say 'I know what you like' and provide concierge level, consultative service can find a loyal clientele in this market," concludes Salvato. ■

WHAT'S NEW

■ **NEW PORTS:** Atlantis Events, the largest firm offering LGBT cruises, now has a Mexican Riviera Halloween cruise, plus Australia and Asia sailings. Its annual Caribbean cruise out of Ft Lauderdale on Royal Caribbean's *Independence of the Seas*, from February 2-10, 2013, is priced from \$1,199 per person. www.atlantisevents.com

■ **LOCAL LIFE:** Brand G Vacations is featuring LGBT trips, designed to integrate connections with local LGBT communities into a sophisticated travel experience. Its eight-day Dublin &

Countryside tour, from May 12-19, 2013, costs \$1,799 double, \$2,274 single, plus return Dublin airfare. www.brandgvacations.com

■ **SIN CITY:** Rfamily Vacations, which specializes in summer cruise and resort vacations for LGBT families, is adding a Las Vegas weekend in April at Red Rock Resort with full kids' programs. Also new is a Club Med week in Provence, its first overseas non-cruise trip. www.rfamilyvacations.com

■ **CHARTER CONTROL:** Lesbian travel company Olivia charts an entire ship, or buys out a resort,

with nightly dances and other entertainment. New fall offerings include a Hard Rock Hotel Vallarta all-inclusive vacation from October 27-November 3, 2012, from \$1,699 per person. www.olivia.com

■ **MARDI GRAS:** RSVP Vacations, specializing in LGBT cruises offering LGBT-focused activities, is offering a Mardi Gras cruise from February 9-16, 2013 from Fort Lauderdale on Holland America's *Eurodam*, spending two days in New Orleans. It's priced from \$999 per person double, plus port fees. www.rsvpvacations.com