



Gay and Green: St. Petersburg

Not your grandma's Florida resort town.

By Gillian Kendall

The moment I approach the city limits and pass the Welcome to St. Petersburg sign, an NPR reporter is talking about the other St. Petersburg, in Russia. Although homosexuality has been decriminalized there for the past 20 years, an anti-gay law banning "homosexual propaganda" has just gone into effect in St. Petersburg, the most European city in Russia. Consequently, the Canadian government has issued an advisory, warning openly gay travellers that they might encounter difficulties or discrimination. Meanwhile, in search of a gay, green good time, I'm driving into Sunshine City—glad to be in St. Pete, and glad to be in America.

This city of a quarter million, north of groovy Gulfport, west of tolerant Tampa, is an affordable beach destination with an artsy edge. The green wave of sustainable tourism is moving through the palmy, balmy suburbs and right into the bubbling, bayside downtown.

Let's get the nomenclature right: St. Petersburg (the city, often called "St. Pete" for short) faces Tampa Bay, while St. Pete Beach (a separate town, with an officially shortened name) is 10 miles away and faces the Gulf of Mexico. Beaches on the gulf are superior to those on the bay for

swimming, snorkelling and so on, but to get away from the flocks of snowbirds, it's best to stay in St. Petersburg (on the bay), which offers casual-chic accommodations, offbeat eateries and an amazing arts scene.

Two enhancements to St. Petersburg's sustainability status are the Saturday food and crafts market, and the motorized trolley that runs every 15 minutes around downtown. Drivers park free on the outskirts and use the trolley for errands or sightseeing, and at 50 cents a ride it's cheaper than gas.

One of Florida's most walkable neighborhoods, downtown St. Pete stretches from the recently relocated Dali Museum in the south to the hot-pink Vinoy Hotel in the north, and in between encompasses a waterfront park and a bevy of restaurants, cafes, showy shops and galleries. For a beach town, St. Pete has a very sophisticated arts scene, with three major museums: the world-class Dali; the Chihuly Collection, a permanent exhibit of Dale Chihuly's glasswork; and the Museum of Fine Arts.

On the waterfront are a number of pricey, dress-up restaurants, but for inexpensive, clean, green fare, head up Central Avenue (just south of 1st Avenue North) to the



Top: Old world charm at gay owned and operated Dickens House Bed and Breakfast; A suite stay at the Indigo Hotel

popular Café Bohemia, where owner and chef Matt Neal admits to being “kind of obsessed with ingredients,” or to vegetarian heaven, Leafy Greens Café.

A gay green traveller has many accommodation options, all of them good. The historic Beach Drive Inn offers breezy suites, luxurious breakfasts and genuine eco-credentials, including a certificate for its efforts toward sustainable tourism. The inn recycles and composts, uses solar lighting, offers bicycles for guests, and is listed as a green lodging facility. Furthermore, the prices are amazing, at least to those of us who are used to California and East Coast rates—about \$225 gets a sweet Jacuzzi suite plus breakfast for two.

Owner Heather Martino walks the recycling walk: She takes me to her favorite secondhand boutique, the fabulous Designer Exchange on Central Avenue, where I score a virgin pair of the Australian-made Blundstone boots that I could never afford when I lived in Oz. Next door is an organic day spa (see the sidebar on “Sugaring”).

The most clearly “family-friendly” B&B in the area is Dickens House. This gay-run historic home has been impeccably restored by the owner, Ed Caldwell; a chef, a

fine artist and an interior designer, he uses all his talents to produce beautiful meals and spaces. The living room has a fireplace, a big front porch offers rocking chairs and newspapers and the cozy bedrooms and suites prove size doesn’t matter. My third-floor Orange Belt room is tiny but perfectly formed. Not all his clients are gay. But, he says, “We get very few Republicans. I think it’s all the natural wood—it’s too warm. Republicans want center-hall Colonials with white paint, all structured and organized.” The GOP supporter who’s visiting at the time I’m there has been getting an earful at breakfast. Ed Caldwell hasn’t been running his own business for 17 years in order to preside over a dull dining room. The round table and the morning papers encourage conversation, and Ed encourages, um, debate.

A few blocks away is La Veranda, a sprawling, airy B&B decorated in funky turn-of-the-last-century elegance, with bi-level verandas bigger than your last apartment. Breakfast (made by the owner, Nancy Mayer) is served on the downstairs veranda: Enjoy the homemade biscuits, and be sure to sneak some eggs to Jack, the six-toed kitty.

None of these B&Bs has a pool, but all are within



easy reach of the Olympic-size pool at the North Shore Aquatic Complex on the waterfront. At \$5 admission for adults, and with a play pool and a slide for the kids, it's green, inexpensive entertainment—the only drawback is that you can't skinny dip.

Those travelling with children, or for work, might prefer to stay in downtown St. Petersburg at Hotel Indigo, one of the boutique (read: small, chic) properties of the International Hotel Group. With some 75 rooms, a smallish pool, and free parking, the former hospital now offers a sophisticated, inexpensive alternative to the big chains, and one that's in the middle of everyplace you want to go downtown.

Nothing could be greener or gayer than B. Andrew Skin Care, a local brand of skin-care products made with

organic ingredients and love by a local couple, Brett Crandal and Andrew Guilfoil. After a struggle with ill health, Andrew became wary of anything containing chemicals and artificial ingredients, and his work to promote his healthy handmade products is paying off: Sales are spreading rapidly, and after just one treatment my skin feels oh-so-organic.

St. Petersburg, Fla., may not be the next San Francisco, or the potential P-Town of the South, but it is like an up-and-coming Oakland, Calif., or a warm, walkable Washington, D.C., minus the homophobes. With queer-friendly businesses, warm weather and cultural diversity, it's enough to make any visitor appreciate gay, green America. ■

That 'nowhere' has become an affordable beach destination with an artsy edge, and the green wave of sustainable tourism is moving through.

Sugar and Spice and Everything Nice

Sugaring is the new waxing, so dip me in honey and throw me to the lesbians. **By Gillian Kendall**

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“It hurts like hell.” So spoke my elegant, hairless friend Marie, as she stepped naked into her hot tub. I’d just told her I was about to get sugared, and she was sharing her experience, strength and hope in regard to hair removal. “At least, waxing does. You know that, right?”

“No,” I said. “I’ve never even had a leg wax.”

She shuddered delicately, sliding into the warm water. “I hate hair.” She told me about a friend, someone who regularly bathes in her pool, whose pubic region looks “like an old gnome, with a beard.”

My own unkempt bits probably struck her the same way. I wondered if many other lesbians were so negative about pubes *au naturel*, and if so, at what point in a new relationship they might bring it up.

At any rate, I was about to get the no-gnome look

myself. I’d been sweet-talked into it by the sweet-faced women of Inspire Natural Beauty, in St. Petersburg, Fla., when I’d gone to them a week earlier in search of cruelty-free makeup.

What I found—in addition to nice lash-conditioning brown mascara—was a green-certified spa owned and operated by gay-friendly women with luminous skin. Founder Lea Ann Barlas told me, “It was always hard for me to reconcile beauty with my concern for the environment, because of the chemicals and waste [in the cosmetics industry].” While working in a Santa Fe beauty shop, she thought, “Wouldn’t it be cool to have a makeup shop with all-natural products?” Now she runs one, stocked with her own selection of organic, chemical-free products, most of which are vegan.

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On the day of my sugaring experience, Lea Ann remarks, "Our entire spa is cruelty-free," as she leads me to the treatment room.

"You mean this won't hurt?" I ask, hopefully.

"It's *animal*-cruelty-free," she amends. "Come in."

This is the first place in the area to offer sugaring for hair removal, and Lea Ann has chosen it over waxing because the product is natural and biodegradable—and hurts less. While wax adheres to the skin, the warm, honeylike sugar simply sticks to the hair. When the sugar is removed, it takes the hair off but leaves the skin soft, supple—and, yes, sweet.

At least five friends, hearing that I was getting sugared, have asked, "Does that mean they lick it off you?" Lea Ann says the product, which she heats in a slow cooker, is wholly edible, so I taste a morsel. Not bad: I could imagine licking the residue of the process off someone I liked.

But no lezzo would put a tongue near a mess of used sugaring gel. After it has removed the hair from a few small sections of my leg, the sticky ball of pulled-off goop looks like dirty fur. Lea Ann uses fresh blobs of gel much more often than she has to, just for aesthetic reasons.

But the stuff feels warm and soft when it's being applied, and the short sting when it's pulled off hurts less than

I expected it to. To remove hair, the technician quickly rolls the blob of sugaring gel up and off, sort of the way we used to pull Silly Putty off a cartoon. The first pull-off, on my right shin, ranks on the discomfort scale somewhere between shaving without shaving cream and plucking out my eyebrows. Strangely, only the *first* strip on each shin or thigh hurts—subsequent removals in the same area don't bother me at all. The irritation is slightly worse at the bikini line, but nothing I wouldn't undergo every month or so to keep myself, uh, lickable.

Post-sugaring, I find out that I'm being treated to a facial, including a decadent massage. I'm draped in warm towels and breathing in scented, soothing steam. I think, drowsily, that I've never been massaged during a facial before... or maybe I have...there's something very familiar about being so cosseted and well treated...is this what it was like in the womb? My mind is fuzzy, my senses replete in a sweet, sugary daze.

The only fly in the sugar-ointment is that my hair grows back quickly. A week after the process I have nubs, and two weeks later the hair is nearly back to normal, though it seems a bit more sparse than before. Waxing may last longer, but it hurts more, too: Not being into pain, I'd stick to sugaring. (*inspire-natural-beauty.com*) ■