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RUFKIN

Eastern Turkey

"I was happy I'd seen what I'd seen and happy to return to the bustling streets of Istanbul where Afran and I, far from his hometown, enjoyed Turkish coffees and baklava, our knees pressed together under a café table..."

BY WILLIAM BORDEN
SPECIAL TO THE SGN

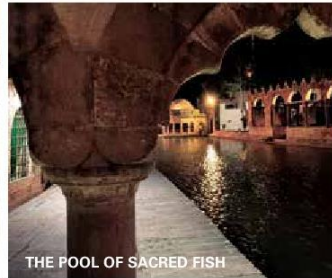
PHOTOS BY WILLIAM BORDEN



A MARKET IN SANLIURFA



THE POOL OF SACRED FISH



THE POOL OF SACRED FISH



FOOD IN SANLIURFA

I fell in love in Turkey with a Kurdish man three-quarters my height but, like so many Turks, solid as a bull. We met in Istanbul — “the city of the world’s desire” — which is so far away from anything American or even Western European.

Raucous, 24/7 Istanbul straddles two continents, Europe and Asia, which is not surprising given that the city covers some 2,000 square miles. Compared with Seattle’s 6,300-square-mile metro area, you might think, “No big deal.” But there is another factor: people. Whereas Seattle and vicinity is home to just over 4 million residents, Istanbul, with one quarter the space, crams in over 15 million.

And somehow — well, it wasn’t a big mystery: Grindr! — Afran and I found each other.

Although Afran works most of the year in Istanbul and the resort town of Marmaris on the Turkish Riviera during the summer, his family maintains a large farm in a tiny village outside Şanlıurfa, a smaller city in eastern Turkey. Raising many tourists’ anxiety but also piquing my own sense of adventure, it lies closer to the more dangerous borders of Syria, Iran, and Iraq than it does to insane but safe Istanbul almost 800 miles northwest. Turkey is a big country. (Just around the proverbial corner from Şanlıurfa, to my immense pleasure, is the city of Batman — I kid you not, but that is neither here nor there.)

Being Queer in Turkey

Outside of Istanbul, and even in most parts of that great city, Turkey is not a place to outwardly celebrate queerness. The culture is so different from ours in the US that it took me a while to realize that the status we take for granted in the West — although in 2024’s political climate, all of us seem to be at risk — is just not a reality in so many places around the world.

That does not mean that Queer Turks aren’t happy or don’t feel free. Different values and different norms create different best-case scenarios. In Afran’s case, it is not possible for him to talk openly with his family or his Şanlıurfa community about his sexual orientation. It’s just not done — but also, a general community respect of privacy allows him to live unfettered by nosy questions about his private life. Far more freedom is afforded him in Istanbul and also in Marmaris, both influenced by international tourism, but he’s not unhappy, and he is loved by his family.

Afran and I never displayed any romantic affection while in public, but we did walk

arm in arm. “What?!” you might ask. Well, in Turkey it is very common for men of all ages to walk together holding hands or one with his arm around the other one’s shoulder. This happens between older folks, among teenagers, between a son and his father, or maybe a grandfather being led lovingly down the street by his stronger and more capable grandson. America and Western Europe could take a good lesson from this practice. It would make men happier to be able to support one another physically and to demonstrate their platonic affection.

A visit to Şanlıurfa

Afran and I left Istanbul to spend a week in Şanlıurfa, and I was changed for life. The city, founded in 303 BCE (can you imagine what something 23 centuries old feels like?), is provincial and proud, majorly conservative and not at all international, like bustling Istanbul. Tourists are an unusual sight. In fact, over and over again at no-frills tiny restaurants (more like home kitchens), as we dined on grilled, spiced chicken or lamb skewers and roasted peppers, onions, and tomatoes blackened on a bed of hot coals, along with bulghur salad and hot kelane flatbread, the waiter would invariably speak quietly to Afran while eyeing me and whisper in Turkish, “What is he doing here?”

But in my mind, as our appetizer was set before us, the bigger question was, “What is this stuff?” Turns out it was çığ köfte, a famous local dish made with raw beef or lamb minced into a paste with onions and spices and served at room temperature. I was not excited, but believing the adage “when in Şanlıurfa...,” I scooped some up in a lettuce leaf and well, it was okay. I’m not making it at home though!

Afran loves Şanlıurfa and showed me why. Along with its gentle people — many dressed in traditional dark top coats meeting drop-crotch pants reminiscent of MC Hammer (but not as flashy) — it features ancient buildings, winding alleyways, and bustling marketplaces that are active from dawn until long into the night.

In the center of town, however, lies the inner-city sanctum of Balıklıgöl (The Pool of Sacred Fish), where the Biblical Abraham is said to have been strung up on a fiery pyre by Nimrod (grandson of Noah). However, God changed the firewood into water and the flames into the carp that today swim in the pool (built in 1211 CE), thus saving Abraham and creating this must-see site.

Surrounding the pool are ornate arches and three domes demanding your attention, part of the Rizvaniye Mosque. We visited

it late one day. The sun cast long shadows and caught on the scales of the carp as they swam near us — perhaps sensing another imminent fiery demise or, more likely, because they know that most tourists buy a cup of fish food from the vendor nearby.

Looking back in time

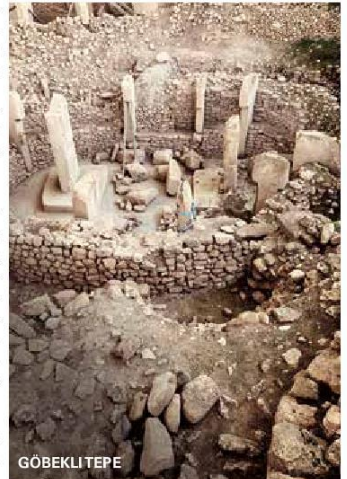
Afran surprised me the next day and got us on a rickety old bus leaving from a parking lot, Şanlıurfa’s bus station. He didn’t tell me where we were going, and there were only two other passengers. An hour later, after rolling up and down country roads surrounded by pistachio trees and limestone quarries, long after the other two riders had left us, I caught sight of a huge white flying saucer resting on the horizon. It turned out to be the roof of the modern exhibition and educational center for Göbekli Tepe, a Stone Age sanctuary built sometime in the tenth millennium BCE. That’s 12,000 years ago!

The site itself is a hodgepodge of fascinating architectural remains, including what are believed to be the world’s oldest megaliths adorned with drawings of long-necked cranes and hefty boars. The pale orange stone structures are surrounded by a circular platform that allows viewing from all sides. I fell into a meditative state as I took in this expression of human existence from such an unimaginably long time ago.

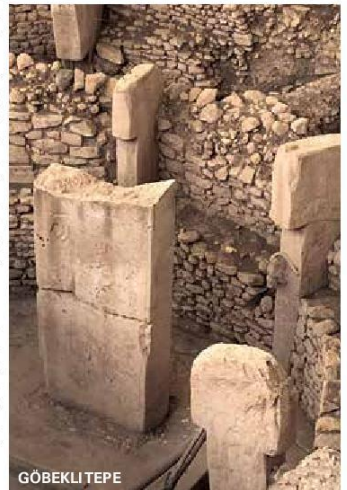
Before our bus ride back to Şanlıurfa, we toured the visitors’ center, learned about the site, and enjoyed an amazing immersive projection experience called “Zero Point in Time,” referring to Göbekli Tepe being the earliest site of human settlement discovered to date.

Our bus ride back to Şanlıurfa was contemplative for me. I’ve been around for what seems like a long time. Afran and I spent so many hours chatting across the distance between us and as many hours as we could when visits brought us together. But after being at the site of the beginning of recorded history, I realized just how insignificant my long and seemingly complicated journey has been — a blip in time with respect to millennia of human presence on earth.

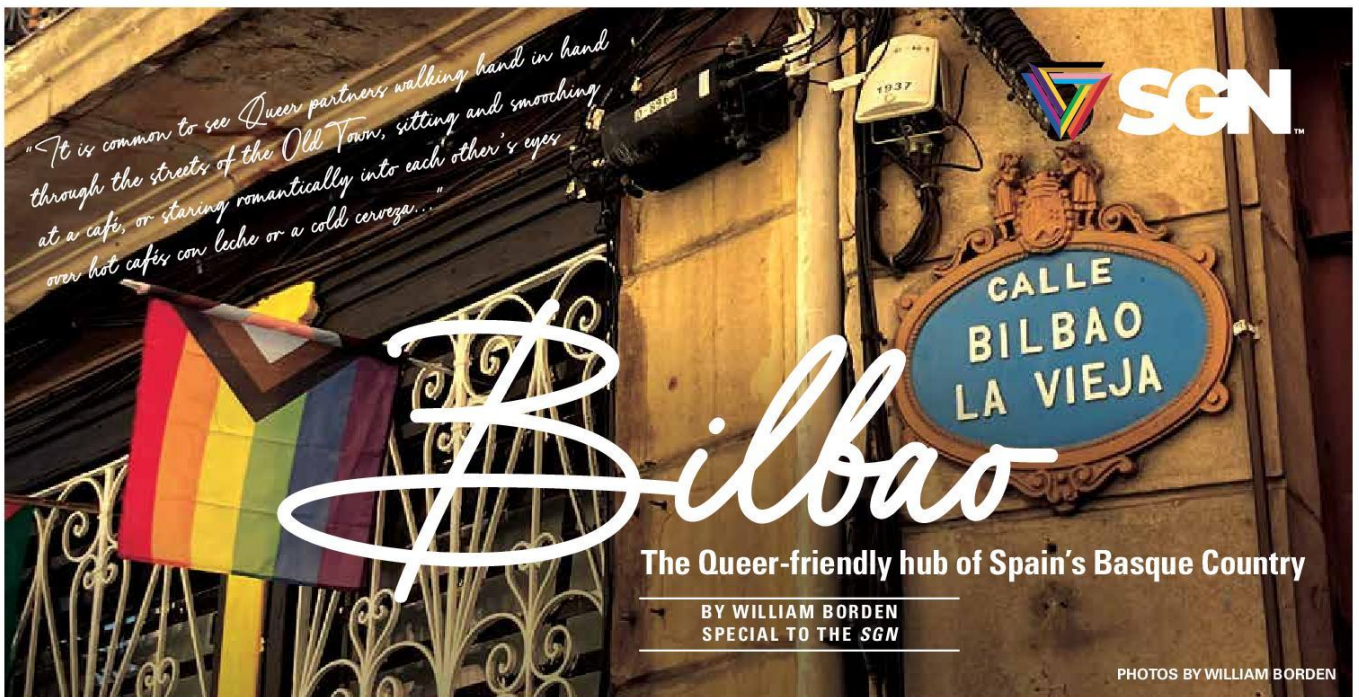
I wonder how we kicked back then, when Queer art was drawn in caves and Pride signs were surely etched into tablets of stone. I was happy I’d seen the site, but also happy to return to the bustling streets of Istanbul, where Afran and I, far from his hometown, enjoyed Turkish coffees and baklava, our knees pressed together under a café table.



GÖBEKLITEPE



GÖBEKLITEPE



"It is common to see Queer partners walking hand in hand through the streets of the Old Town, sitting and smooching at a café, or staring romantically into each other's eyes over hot cafés con leche or a cold cerveza..."

Bilbao

The Queer-friendly hub of Spain's Basque Country

BY WILLIAM BORDEN
SPECIAL TO THE SGN

PHOTOS BY WILLIAM BORDEN



CASCO VIEJO



MERCADO RIBERA



TEATRO ARRIAGA



PINTXOS

You won't find a "gayborhood" in Bilbao, but then again you won't need one. The Queer-friendly Basque Country in northern Spain, with its progressive culture and affirming laws, offers a respite in the often politically tumultuous world we live in. Queer life here is integrated into all aspects of the city.

Bilbao extends a welcoming embrace to Queer travelers and offers a supportive home to LGBTQ+ residents. It is common to see Queer partners walking hand in hand through the streets of the Old Town, sitting and smooching at a café, or staring romantically into each other's eyes over hot *cafés con leche* or a cold *cerveza*.

Much like the cultural tolerance and open doors the Queer community generally enjoys in the Seattle area, we celebrate and live freely in the Basque Country as well. As you enjoy Bilbao (or Bilbo as it's known in Euskera, the Basque language), do not hesitate to be yourself and show love in the ways that suit you.

Bilbao highlights

Meander through the streets of the Casco Viejo neighborhood, the ancient center of Bilbao, which was built over 700 years ago, and take it all in. The Old Town branches out from the Siete Calles (Seven Streets), now pedestrian-only lanes except for morning deliveries of produce or perhaps a side of beef being carried on the shoulder of a deliveryman. You'll pass by ancient stone buildings with flower-bedecked balconies and a variety of street-level cafés, restaurants, and garden and clothes shops, plus a few tattoo parlors (so Seattle!).

The streets in the district were originally for specific commercial purposes and still bear those names, including Calle Carnicería Vieja (Old Butchery Street) and Calle Tendería (Merchant Street). Now the entire area is a tourist's dream, with friendly places to shop and eat — and many Gay establishments in the mix. My favorite Queer establishment — for its name alone — has to be the bar El Balcón de la Lola, Lola's Balcony. Who is Lola? No idea, but I'm sure she knows Mary.

The Nervión River, which cuts the city in half and makes its way through countless neighborhoods all the way out to the Bay of

Biscay, borders the Old Town and passes by the Mercado de la Ribera, the biggest covered market in Europe, and the stately Iglesia de San Antón (Church of Saint Anthony the Great) built in the 15th century. Flowing around the Old Town, the river leads to the grand and glorious Teatro Arriaga, Bilbao's opera house, built in 1890.

Walk away from the river and you'll end up at Plaza Miguel de Unamuno, a public square with more lively outdoor cafés, a central fountain offering drinkable water from the mouth of some sort of lion-man creature, and the metro station, whose modern trains can take riders to points all over the city and as far out as the beach communities along the bay. As a bonus, on the old stairs above the Unamuno station, you will frequently hear a young Basque rapper spit out rhymes in Euskera.

If a lively and rapper-rich plaza is not your cup of tea, head a few blocks over to Plaza Nueva, an enclosed and much more serene public square ringed by stately apartments above and several cafés and bars below. While you drink and have one of the famous Basque appetizers, *pintxos* — little pieces of food art — you can watch children play ball or exchange their football trading cards in the center of the square, while their parents watch on from the table next to you, beers in hand. One thing the Basques have done really well is to provide recreation areas for children in view of the places their parents can enjoy a refreshment. Smart, huh? Everyone is happy.

After your pintxos and libations, hop on the green tram and ride several stops along the river until you reach the enterprise that transformed Bilbao from an ailing and soot-covered industrial center to the sparkling cultural gem that it is today: the Guggenheim Museum. Designed by Frank Gehry (of Seattle's Museum of Pop Culture fame), the building doesn't boast MoPOP's exterior of bright colors and raucous curves but instead, true to the stately Spanish vibe, has slow-motion arcs and angles in monotone gold titanium. The exterior is a treat unto itself, each side of the building bringing an entirely different shape. On the street side, visitors are met by Jeff Koons's massive floral *Puppy* (which the locals refer to as "Poopy," following pronunciation conventions in Spanish). It's a 43-foot

statue whose "fur" changes with the seasons. Take your selfies and then head inside the Guggenheim, where you will enjoy Richard Serra's stunning "Matter of Time" permanent installation (his work is also in the Olympic Sculpture Garden), as well as whichever temporary exhibition is on display at the time of your visit.

A rewarding move

Bilbao has been my home for over a decade. A Seattle native, I met Carlos, a Bilbao, while he was working an international contract at Boeing. Our first outing was a watch party the night Obama was elected in 2008. Poor Carlos didn't quite understand why all these people glued to a television in an apartment on Capitol Hill burst into both cheers and tears at that historic moment, but I will always be happy to remember that as our first date.

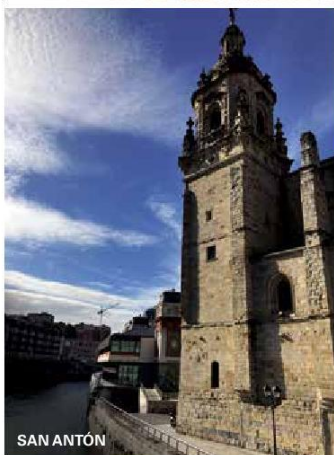
After 10 months of dating, Carlos's work contract ended and he was required to depart the US. Wanting to stay together, we took advantage of Spain's liberal Gay marriage laws and, after a bit of red tape, got married in the lushly appointed, neo-Arab ceremonial room at Bilbao's City Hall. This Gay Seattleite was moving to Spain!

I love living here. As a Gay man and ex-pat, my life here is comfortable, pleasant, and secure. I'm still taken by the city's touristic charm, but I have also settled in as a long-term resident. Walking is my mode of transportation, taking me daily through amazing ancient streets and regal palm tree-filled parks.

There are Queer people visible wherever I go. Groups of friends are easily mixed, with no one concerned about anyone's particular sexual or gender identity, each person respected and appreciated.

I've developed my own teaching practice that allows me to work less than half time but still qualifies me for high-quality, comprehensive healthcare coverage, for which there are no deductibles for routine appointments or complex hospital stays. That alone is a reason to live in Spain!

The lifestyle here is a good one. I am welcomed and supported for exactly who I am. This Capitol Hill Queer is living proof that exploring the world can bring huge rewards.



SAN ANTÓN



PLAZA UNAMUNO

"And, if your curiosity gets the best of you, tuk-tuk operators are notorious for taking you directly to the red-light districts or naughty remote alleyways, where everything from ping-pong shows to other debauchery awaits."

Bangkok

for beginners

What to know before trekking to this bucket-list destination

BY ALBERT RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE SGN

STREETS OF BANGKOK — INGO JOSEPH / PEXELS

Thailand is far, far away. It's a journey just getting there. With no direct or nonstop flights from anywhere in the United States to this Southeast Asian kingdom, it will take American travelers at least two flights and about 20–36 hours before they even step foot on Thai soil.

Once you arrive, however, all the planning, saving, anticipating, and trekking will have been all worth it.

If you've never been to Thailand, start in Bangkok, its capital. From there, you can easily — and rather affordably — explore other regions, such as the lush and world-famous islands down south.

Getting there and entry requirements

From Seattle, plan on taking two flights — one trans-Pacific (8–12 hours) and a shorter connecting flight (4–6 hours) — to Suvarnabhumi Airport (BKK); this is Bangkok's main international airport, but it does also have a domestic/intra-Asia one named Don Mueang (DMK). A valid US passport with at least six months before its expiration is all you'll need to enter Thailand. Currently, no visas or vaccines are needed for short-term American visitors.

Thailand is 14 hours ahead of PST, a whole half day, so I suggest landing at evening or night, allowing you to retrieve your checked bags, take a shuttle to your hotel, and go straight to bed for a full overnight rest. Try to avoid early-morning arrivals (e.g., 5:00 a.m.), because they set you back two days: the day of travel and the remainder of the day you land — because your hotel room will probably not be ready until mid-afternoon, and by the time you settle into your accommodations, the exhaustion and jet lag will make you succumb to sleep until the next morning.

Look for red-eye flights departing Seattle around midnight, like EVA Air, putting you in Taipei about 5:30 a.m. with a connecting flight into Bangkok in early afternoon, or choose a later connecting flight out of Taiwan that arrives in mid- to late afternoon — perfect timing to check into your hotel room and giving you the evening to step out for dinner before retiring for the night.

Shuttles to your hotel can be prebooked through Booking.com or Viator, or by downloading a car-share app to your phone. Typical time from the airport to central Bangkok is around 30–45 minutes during slow hours (evening, night, early morning) and 90–120 minutes during daytime traffic.



ON BOARD A RIVER BOAT IN BANGKOK, PART OF THE CITY'S PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION — ALBERT RODRIGUEZ

I actually don't prebook a ride to my hotel; instead I go directly from baggage claim to the arrival hall and reserve a shuttle in person. AOT Limousine provides a quick transport, whisking me away just a few minutes after I approach the counter; I paid \$31 USD for a private SUV transfer on my last trip in November. The arrival hall is packed with dozens of car-share employees holding up signs with passengers' names, which is chaotic and confusing, so save time by going directly to AOT Limousine and booking a ride in person.

If you don't mind lugging your bags aboard the train and through the stations, you can save money by taking the BTS (Bangkok Train System) to your hotel and back to Suvarnabhumi. Personally, I prefer a shuttle because I'm an overpacker and bring back lots of goodies — and the heat is brutal.

What I appreciate about Suvarnabhumi Airport is its simplicity and efficiency; immediately behind customs and immigration is baggage claim, making it convenient to exit the terminal without going through a maze.

The Thai currency is called baht, and there are exchange booths or counters at baggage claim, but I exchange money through my local bank (with no fees) before I go. Try to use cash, as most credit card companies charge international transaction fees.

Hotels for every budget and type of traveler

There are thousands — yes, thousands

— of hotels scattered across the metropolis of Bangkok, from small, independently operated resorts to brand-name skyscrapers and everything in between. It's just a matter of finding accommodations that fit your budget and preference.

I use Booking.com, because its filtering system allows me to find hotels that won't take payment until I'm there; I don't pay a penny until I check in at the reception desk. I can also filter the site to find properties that include breakfast and have a swimming pool, two must-haves on my amenities list.

I prefer staying along the Chao Phraya River, which snakes its way through the city, lined with vibrant neighborhoods on either side. I adore the New Siam Riverside, because it's very reasonably priced, about \$600–700 USD for a nine-night stay (my usual vacation length), with daily breakfast included and easy access to a boat pier on the back side (riverside) of the hotel that conveniently transports you to other areas of town.

The New Siam Riverside is a no-frills hotel, nothing fancy, though it's one of the least expensive on the river, and the rooms are exceptionally clean, with modern amenities like complimentary Wi-Fi, flat-screen TVs and mini refrigerators, plus an intimate outdoor pool adjacent to its on-site patio café, where breakfast is served. Another reason I love this hotel is the location, a stone's throw from Khaosan Road, where the absolute cheapest massages and restaurants are, mainly because the district caters to back-

packers and student travelers, so it boasts a cluster of budget accommodations.

Another wallet-friendly hotel, also along the river, is the Ibis Riverside, with similar rates as the New Siam, but it has only one room type (standard). Ibis is bigger and visually more attractive, with better access to public transportation (BTS Kkytrain, boat pier), so it comes down to whether you prefer more or fewer fellow guests at your hotel.

Affordable public transportation and tuk-tuks

You only need to book a shuttle service between the airport and hotel; rely on the city's efficient and inexpensive public transportation for the remainder of your adventure.

Public transportation includes metro buses, the Skytrain, the subway, and river boats. You can purchase an all-day pass for \$4.50 USD at any station information booth or from an automated kiosk; the pass pays for itself if you're exploring various parts of Bangkok on the same day.

BTS maps are posted at each station, and it's a cinch getting from point A to B; your hotel and BTS information booths can provide you with a map, too.

Tuk-tuks are relatively inexpensive as well, and you can usually negotiate for a lower rate; try to have a digital snapshot or printed copy of your destination to show the driver — and agree on a price before you depart.

LGBTQ culture is not just tolerated, it's celebrated

I've visited Bangkok and other parts of Thailand multiple times and have never had an issue traveling there as a Gay person, whether with a group or by myself. It's a nonissue. I haven't experienced a glare, or stares from locals or fellow visitors; in fact, I've met people during my travels in Thailand on the airplane, hotels, boats and restaurants — married couples and solo travelers from other countries — with whom I've enjoyed long, wonderful conversations.

The city's LGBTQ nightlife is primarily found in the Silom district, specifically the alleys called Soi 2 and Soi 4. If you're not staying remotely close to these areas, ask your driver to be dropped anywhere on Soi 2, which is littered with energetic watering holes and bars with go-go boys. Soi 4, meanwhile, is more subtle, with pub-style joints and Gay bars that are less crowded. Drinks are cheap on either street; the atmosphere is lively and almost always attitude-free.

If exploring the ladyboy scene, primarily swarmed by straight male looky-loos, head to the world-famous Nana Plaza. Open to everybody, it offers a dozen dingy bars stacked on three levels, with ladyboys galore. If you don't want to step into the clubs but seek to experience the ambiance, park yourself in the beer garden, which places you in the center of the action, literally.

And, if your curiosity gets the best of you, tuk-tuk operators are notorious for taking you directly to the red-light districts or naughty remote alleyways, where everything from ping-pong shows to other debauchery awaits.

Politically, Thailand has inched closer to Gay marriage legalization, following a bill passed in the lower house that would recognize same-sex unions; the Senate and royal stamp of approval are the next steps.

A land of amazing food

Do you love Thai food? Do you pay \$20–25 at a Thai restaurant, or when you order takeout? Well, imagine this: thousands of authentic Thai food eateries, from upscale sit-down restaurants to modest indoor and outdoor cafés to streetside vendors, spread out across all of Bangkok and priced fairly (or downright cheap). Trust me, great food that'll barely make a dent in your pocketbook is everywhere.

For example, at one of my favorite spots, the Macaroni Club in the Khaosan district, a meal of homemade tom kha soup, steamed rice, Coke, and banana milkshake costs \$8.00 USD, which included a 7% value added tax (VAT); tipping isn't customary.

The Coffee Club is a chain of modern, cool cafés that feature local favorites, like curries and noodle dishes, but also a variety of Western fare, from burgers to pasta and all-day breakfasts. Try the grilled chicken breast with truffle gravy, served with potatoes and veggies, for about \$8.50 USD (easily a \$25 meal back here in the States). (For more recommendations, ask the locals.)

With the exception of street food, menus with prices are printed or posted in English by the entrance. There is no star system in Thailand; everything is made spicy. But if you prefer one or two stars, simply tell the server "no spicy" and they'll lower the heat to mild.

Speaking of street food, it's safe and authentic, and in many cases it's made to order, plus it's a steal. At the perimeter of the Grand Palace, I saw signs for freshly cooked pad thai for just \$1.30 USD.

Fast food is at every turn in the larger city neighborhoods, with American fare readily available, including McDonald's, Subway, Taco Bell, Dairy Queen, and KFC (where the chicken is much better quality and has a kick). Don't knock it, but on a very humid day, a cheap ice cream cone from McD's is a savior.

For snacks and refreshments to keep in your hotel room or in your mini fridge, I suggest a stop at any of the abundant 7-11 stores, which have built-in coffee stations called "All Café"; the iced honey black tea (made with real tea bags) is addictive.

I also make use of the Tops grocery store, where I stock up on fresh fruit, yogurt, milk, juice, and other essentials. Your hotel can point you to the nearest location, where you can also grab prepared



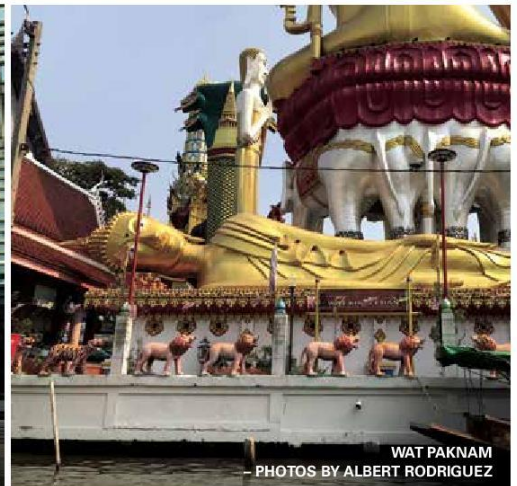
ATUK-TUK



TOMYUM SOUP, STEAMED RICE, COKE AND BANANA SHAKE FOR ABOUT \$8.00 USD, INCLUDING TAX (TIPPING NOT CUSTOMARY)



ICONSIAM



WAT PAKNAM

PHOTOS BY ALBERT RODRIGUEZ

food, frozen selections (if you have an in-room microwave), bottled water, and over-the-counter medications.

Malls, movies, and (floating) markets

You can find anything — even items you never knew you needed — at Bangkok's contemporary malls or outdoor flea markets. And the good news is it's all very affordable.

Iconsiam is a favorite among upscale residents and visitors, boasting multiple levels of designer-brand shops and trendy eateries. This massive mall sits on the banks of the Chao Phraya River, with a bevy of restaurants on the ground floor and in the basement, but the best views are on the upper tiers of the mall, with café terraces and a posh Starbucks facing the river.

Siam Paragon and centralwOrld are two monstrous shopping destinations within blocks of each other; you can enter either directly from the BTS platform (Siam station) via aboveground walkways without having to step foot on the street. Unlike Iconsiam, which caters to high-end customers, these two malls are chock-full of stores that you might recognize, such as Uniqlo, H&M, and Apple, to name a few. Siam Paragon includes the Sea Life Bangkok Ocean World Aquarium and an opera hall as well. Each of these shopping centers has ample food courts; Siam Paragon's is an entire lower level filled end to end with a multitude of choices, from chic bistros to a cluster of fast-food stalls.

Terminal 21 is a series of local malls designed almost identically, with several floors of moderately priced stores, spas, and coffee shops, like Starbucks and Café Amazon, but the best reason to visit is the food court on the top floor. You'll need a food card that you can load money onto, then you can order from about a dozen-plus stalls. You'll eat like a king or queen for about \$5 USD.

I know it sounds odd, but as a cinephile — and to escape the brutal heat — I always sneak into a movie when I'm in Bangkok, and you'll find cinemas on the highest floor of each shopping mall I just mentioned. If money is no object, treat yourself to VIP service with a first-class ticket, which includes entry to an exclusive lounge to enjoy refreshments prior to the screening

(amenities vary at each cinema). Theaters are immaculate in Bangkok, and movies are available in English, Thai, and Japanese. Don't forget to stand for the national anthem when the lights dim.

Floating markets are popular in Bangkok, though they're located on the outskirts or beyond the city proper, and they require effort and planning to get to. An alternative is markets in town, the largest and most accessible of which is Chatuchak, open on weekends. This enormous bazaar has hundreds of vendors selling new and used goods, including clothing, souvenirs, dishware, tote bags, luggage, and edible gifts (candy, cookies, spices, curry packets, etc.). You'll also come across massage stations and an array of food booths selling Thai dishes and other fare, plus ice cream and cold beverages, not to mention tiny nooks selling freshly brewed coffee.

Lastly, something unique in Bangkok is Asiaticque, a riverside evening market with souvenirs at low prices and handcrafted keepsakes by local artisans, plus eateries representing every Asian cuisine. This landmark features a Ferris wheel, a carousel, and spectacular waterside views.

Temples, rooftop bars, and massages

Temples, or *wat* in Thai, are some of the most visited sites in Thailand. Within the grounds of the Grand Palace, perhaps the most important landmark in the kingdom and formerly the king's residence, rests Wat Phra Kaew, or "Temple of the Emerald Buddha," viewed by thousands of tourists daily.

All guests must cover their legs, and women are required to also cover their arms (this goes for all temples). Remember to pack a pair of light trousers and/or shawl; however, you can rent appropriate clothing on-site, or buy it cheaply at the markets.

A personal favorite, because it is located riverside, is Wat Arun; I beg you to take a cheap sunset riverboat ride (about 60 cents one-way) and see this temple illuminated. You don't have to get off; just stay on the boat and admire the scenery and have your camera ready for amazing photos. Wat Pho, or "Temple of the Reclining Buddha," is another must-see for your itinerary.

Lumpini Park is the city's version of Central Park, with a man-made lake, walk-

ing and biking trails, benches, and beautiful vistas throughout. Keep an eye out for the harmless lizards roaming the grounds. This is a public park, so admission is free.

Rooftop bars are a thing in Bangkok, as you might have witnessed in Hollywood movies like *The Hangover III*. Many of them allow visitors even if they're not guests of the hotel. I really like Sky Bar, Lebua at State Tower's al fresco lounge perched 63 stories aboveground. Vertigo, at the Banyan Tree Bangkok, is a 61-floor ascent from street level, with equally stunning views, and Octave Rooftop Bar at the Marriott Hotel Sukhumvit is 45 floors high.

If you prefer something closer to the ground, head to Three-Sixty at the Millennium Hilton Bangkok, an enclosed riverside lounge on the 32nd floor, or drop by 342 Bar at Baan Wanglang, which is just a five-story elevator ride from the lobby.

Massage parlors are as common as coffee houses in Seattle. With one-hour massages going for about \$7.00–10 USD on average, you can indulge in a foot or body treatment every day during your vacation; parlors have service menus with rates outside their doors. If your budget allows and you don't mind a short commute, I highly recommend zipping to Perception Massage, a five-minute walk from the Chong Nonsi station. Here, the therapists are blind and exceptionally skilled. I've made three trips to Perception and have left feeling revitalized each time, and I feel proud to contribute to their community. Although tips are not customary in Thailand, here's where I buck the trend and slip extra baht into my therapist's hands.

Similarly, the aforementioned Café Amazon hires baristas who are deaf. They prefer to read lips, so order your lattes, mochas, or other coffee and tea drinks slowly. The service is always kind and appreciative.

Finally, for a splurge, treat yourself to a lunch or dinner cruise up and down the Chao Phraya River. Meal service is buffet-style, with live entertainment. Your hotel can book a cruise for you, which typically depart at 5:00–5:30 p.m. and last for about 3–4 hours.



Songkran

Thailand's extreme water festival

"I had done extensive research, but I somehow missed the part where I would be part of a water-based war zone."

BY CAMERON MARTINEZ
SGN CONTRIBUTING WRITER

PHOTO BY CHALINEE THIRASUPA / REUTERS

Hello (or สวัสดี) from a drenched 23-year-old sitting in their Bangkok hotel room in the year 2567 BE!

If you're anything like I was before coming to Thailand, you're probably wondering why in the world I'm currently trying to dry all the water that has been dumped on me and how I'm able to write from the future. That, my dear reader, is because the people of Thailand are currently celebrating Songkran.

What is Songkran?

Songkran is Thailand's New Year's holiday (April 13–15), but the festivities take place the entire week surrounding it.

The reason Songkran celebrates the beginning of 2567 BE (Buddhist Era) is because Thailand uses the Thai solar calendar, which started when Buddha attained parinibbāna (nirvana after death). This places Thailand 543 years ahead of the Gregorian calendar used in the United States and elsewhere.

The holiday is traditionally celebrated by visiting local temples and cleaning Buddha statues, which can be found in every single building in the country (even fast-food chains). Pouring water on the Buddha represents purification and ridding oneself of sins and bad luck. It is also common for Thai people to take time off from work to visit loved ones and elders.

Modern Songkran

Like holidays back in the United States, the Thai people have used the festivities as opportunity for concerts, shows, and special sales.

The main way to celebrate, however, is through a massive water fight. Participants, of every age and from every country, take



PHOTO BY CAMERON MARTINEZ

to the streets with water guns, hoses, and buckets for the most insane battle I've ever witnessed.

In the days leading up to the celebration, vendors line the streets with waterproof bags, hats, and glasses, and water guns of all shapes and sizes. I even saw a few vendors selling \$30 water guns (very expensive for Thailand) with crazy accuracy.

In addition, people (typically children) with buckets of *din sor pong*, a type of whitish powder mixed with water, line the streets, covering people's faces with the mud. It is a tradition that symbolizes good luck, but it is also used to protect against

the harsh Thai sun.

This happens on every major street in Bangkok every day. Some, like the infamous backpacker area Khao San Road, have gone as far as to shut down to traffic.

My experience

While preparing for my trip to Thailand, I had done extensive research, but I somehow missed the part where I would be part of a water-based war zone. Sure, I heard murmurs about the event when I landed in the country, but no one was able to articulate the sheer intensity of it.

When I say it's insane, I mean it's impos-

sible for me to walk down the street or take a tuk-tuk without having a bucket of water dumped on me. Given that the temperature is 100 degrees every day, I'm generally fine with it. But there are several people who aim toward your eyes and/or will drench you in ice-cold water. I've found this is especially prevalent when passing bars or clubs filled with drunk and/or high patrons.

That being said, the energy of the event has been incredible, as Bangkok has essentially turned into a perpetual party of happy, wet people. While this event was not on my bucket list, I think it should be on yours!

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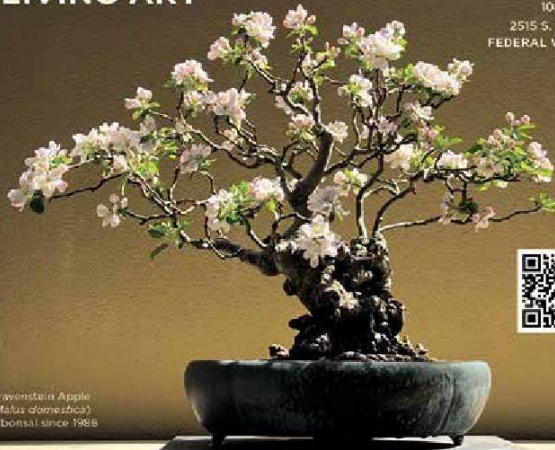


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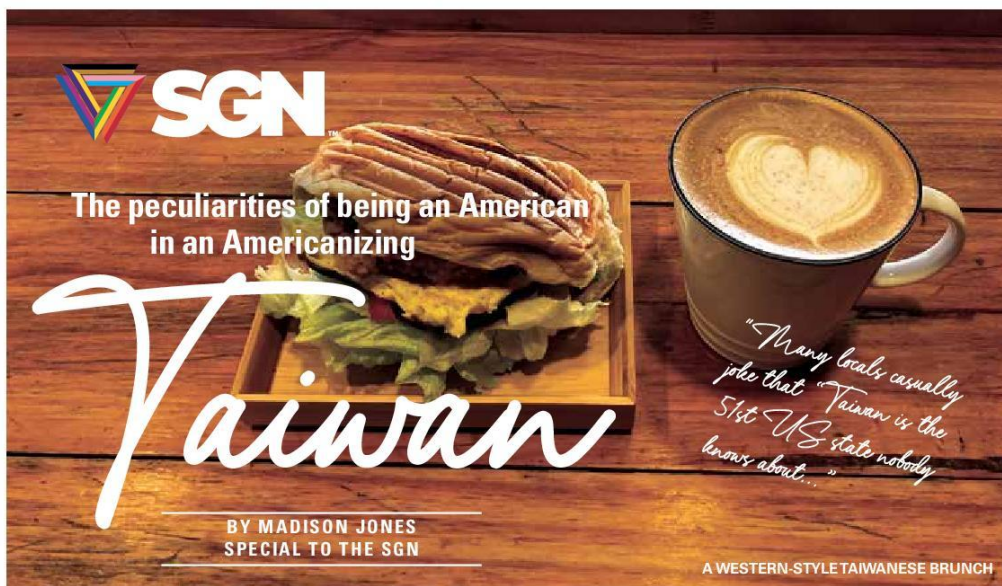
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SGN

The peculiarities of being an American in an Americanizing

Taiwan

BY MADISON JONES
SPECIAL TO THE SGN

A WESTERN-STYLE TAIWANESE BRUNCH

Last August, I decided to leave my life struggles behind in Seattle and embarked on a journey halfway around the world to live in the small island nation of Taiwan. After a grueling wait of two long years, my eagerly anticipated facial feminization surgery had finally been completed. Suddenly, there was no longer a sufficient enough reason to stick around at my crummy, abusive custodial job for its health insurance — I had finally been uplifted, like a bird released from its cage, free to spread its wings, then promptly flying onto greener pastures.

Not even two weeks post-op, still swollen and numb in the face, I took off for a 12-hour direct flight straight to Taipei. Little did I realize then the numerous discoveries and difficulties of the US expat lifestyle here that would be in store.

Certainly among the LGBT expat community, Taiwan has fostered quite the reputation of being a “Gay paradise in Asia.” In my experience, the Taipei Queer scene and nightlife has mostly lived up to its reputation so far.

And yet, outside of a few well-known, ubiquitous things, like bubble tea or beef noodles, many compatriots back home would probably not know the difference between Taiwan and Thailand. I certainly had to correct some friends and relatives about it a couple of times before moving. However, the past several decades have seen many aspects of Taiwanese life slowly become more “Americanized,” and if given the opportunity to experience it, I believe that American visitors would most likely find it eerily familiar.

American foods make inroads

Taiwan is home to many culinary delights, but in recent times, the concept of “American-style” brunch has been taking the island’s breakfast culture by storm. On any given drearily gray and oppressively humid Taipei morning, motorbike commuters will line the capital city’s narrow streets and dingy alleyways wearing their rain-glazed helmets and plastic ponchos, eagerly awaiting a quick bite at their local mom-and-pop brunch shop (早餐店 zǎowǎn cāndiàn).

Functioning as de facto community hubs, these storefronts serve patrons with unique spins on greasy US diner-food classics such as peanut butter fried-egg burgers, corn and canned tuna-stuffed omelets, chocolate and cheese sandwiches with triangular white bread slices, and so on. The simultaneous concoction of these disparate foods cooked together emit a most unique and potent aroma.

Taiwanese brunch shops also serve their meals with those fast-food-style, ovalular hash brown patties and a nice tall cup of either soy milk (豆漿 dòujiāng) or instant coffee with milk powder (奶粉 nǎifěn). If one craves something a little more polished, perhaps real coffee with fresh milk (鮮奶 xiānnǎi), then there are also plenty of “Western-style” cafés and bookstores offering upscale versions of the same delicacies.

Taiwanese branches of American global



A “CRAM SCHOOL” – PHOTOS BY MADISON JONES

pizza chains have also been sites of a creative culinary renaissance. The country’s print and online media abound with flashy adverts from the likes of Pizza Hut or Domino’s for hot deals on specialty pizzas like cilantro blood cake (a spin on the popular traditional street food 血米糕 xuè mǐ gāo), Japanese grilled squid, or even bubble tea, to name a few.

If one individual could be credited for sowing the seeds of this major boom in pizza’s popularity and success here, then it would be no other than former Domino’s CEO Scott Oelkers. (Yes, that same person in the 2014 Japanese Domino’s commercial with Hatsune Miku.) Decades before WWE superstar John Cena would attempt to court Chinese-speaking audiences on social media by telling them that he loves ice cream, Oelkers was pioneering Domino’s commercials on Taiwanese cable television.

Once a missionary in Taiwan during the waning days of the Guómíndǎng dictatorship, when he learned Mandarin Chinese, he returned to the island in 1986 to act as the lone proprietor of Domino’s Taiwan. Braving a totally new market, he cultivated his zany television persona by sporting funky costumes like James Bond and Elvis Presley in order to popularize pizza among the public. All these commercials would end in his signature catchphrase: “達美樂·打了沒·2882-5252!” The first part translates as “Domino’s hasn’t been beat yet!” with the phone number in Mandarin Chinese sounding phonetically similar to the phrase: “Dad, I’m hungry, I’m hungry!”

Learning English

Outside of the realms of food, there is a strong emphasis on teaching American vernacular English (英語 měiyǔ) at numerous “cram schools” (補習班 bùxíbān) around the country. Cram schools are like a Sylvan Learning Center and afterschool daycare program mixed together — and put on steroids. Taiwanese families fortunate enough to have the funds send their children to study there; the kids are assigned homework in addition to the public-school curriculum they receive during the day. Often

these children do not return home until late in the evening (after 7 p.m.).

Although most Taiwanese public schools cover English at a rudimentary level, these cram schools are where much of the population learns the bulk of its English. Cram schools advertise themselves with American iconography — bald eagles, cowboys, and US flags — to sell an even more convincing service to parents. American and other foreign expats often end up signing contracts and working in these establishments in the evenings and on weekends.

Those who decide to stick around in Taiwan long-term or exhibit stronger credentials switch to working in either the Taiwanese public school system or an international private school for the elite. My current position of English teaching assistant (ETA) is broadly part of a new experimental bilingual education program run by the Taipei city government. The country’s ruling Democratic Progressive Party (DDP, or 進步黨 jìnbùdǎng) has been spearheading efforts to introduce more native-English-speaking foreign nationals (like yours truly) into its public school system. The administration is hoping this will help to achieve its “Bilingual Taiwan by 2030” vision, since, over the past few decades, Taiwan (like most other places around the globe) has felt increasing pressure to assimilate to anglophone globalization.

More Americanization

This phenomenon of assimilation is also noticeable through the adoption of US holidays into Taiwanese public life. It first occurred to me when I received a simple request from a coworker: “For next week’s second-grade lesson, can you cover the US Thanksgiving holiday, please?”

As my elementary school’s first-ever foreign English teacher (in the affluent Neihu District of Taipei, near the de facto US embassy, the American Institute in Taiwan), I have been eager these past several months to make a proper impression among the school’s staff and students. So without any reservations, I gave her a resounding: “Yes, of course!”

My Taiwanese local English teacher (LET for short) and I then briefly discussed a potential lesson plan on the major foods, celebration activities, the concept of “gratefulness,” and of course everybody’s favorite: a hand-turkey drawing activity.

But within this Thanksgiving lesson of sharing “American culture” with the second- and third-grade students lay my first set of internal difficulties: was I inadvertently contributing to the further “Americanization” of Taiwanese society?

Taiwanese people themselves are certainly aware of this continuous “Americanization” of their own culture. When my Taiwanese roommate and good friend and I were out late one summer evening, on our way home from drinking at a Japanese style izakaya, they told me that, among themselves, many locals casually joke that “Taiwan is the 51st US state nobody knows about.”

That certainly was the serious contention of the inebriated, middle-aged aristocratic woman who later that year decided to come over and crash the Christmas dinner party I attended with other expat friends at the Grand Hotel Taipei. The lobby functioned as the perfect backdrop for societal conflict: grandiose, traditional Chinese architecture of red and white lacquered furnishings and intricate paintings yet also adorned with bedazzling Christmas decor.

After several moments of giving the lavish table a contemptuous side glance from afar, the woman finally built up the gumption to waltz over. Sporting a luxurious white fur coat and a dazzling red, form-fitting traditional dress (qipao 旗袍), she regaled us with her woes in fluent English. She worked in Taipei’s financial sector, constantly interacting with US and other foreign financiers. She lamented in a slightly accusatory tone how Taiwan has gone too far in adopting US and other Western customs.

The Queer community

But this adoption of US customs is not always for the worst, or even at the total expense of local culture. Taiwan Pride is held every year on Halloween. The reasoning behind this is due precisely to the LGBT community’s historical struggle against Guómíndǎng dictatorial rule.

Back in the day, drag performers in Taipei’s historical Queer and nightlife district, Ximen, were constantly subject to police raids and brutality. Taiwanese drag performers, like US ones, used to be bound by public indecency laws when it came to “cross-dressing” and “lewd conduct.” Halloween, then, would be used by LGBT Taiwanese people as a form of plausible deniability against the cops, i.e., “It’s just a costume for Halloween, officer!”

Continuing its authoritarian legacy by opposing legislation like marriage equality, the Guómíndǎng has never recovered from its fraught relationship with the LGBT community here. Conservative political factions in countries like Taiwan often accuse LGBT culture of being a corrupting, foreign cultural export of the United States and/or other Western places. After the end of martial law, many members of the Taiwanese Queer and feminist communities became gravitated to the rival political party, the DPP.

Overall, I believe what could be best learned from the relationship between Taiwan and the United States is that, within every power imbalance, there still lies agency among the weaker party to adapt and use the dominant culture how they so choose. There is an admirably subversive method to the way Taiwanese have taken the parts of US culture they enjoy and tailored them to fit to their own liking, to the point where Americans looking in aren’t even able to recognize it as “American.”

I have grown incredibly fond of the resiliency exhibited by Taiwanese people, who for decades have been placed into the perilous situation of being between the two regional juggernauts, China and the United States. Despite these dire circumstances, their communities have been able to craft something wholly unique and magnificent for themselves, and I am immensely grateful to have been given the opportunity to witness and partake in it, albeit as just a Queer American playing an expat English teacher.

Fort Lauderdale

"...A haven for travelers seeking an unforgettable escape..."

BY JOEY AMATO
SPECIAL TO THE SGN

THE VIEW FROM THE PELICAN GRAND

Looking Back in SGN History

2011

Why we love Palm Springs

SEATTLE GAY NEWS
VOLUME 39, ISSUE 24
JUNE 17, 2011

BY DAVID LUC NGUYEN

Visiting Palm Springs makes you feel like Edward and Jacob from the *Twilight* movies have teamed up, ditched that whiny Bella girl, married each other, and retired in a chic '70s retro home in the California desert. The *Twilight* theme is also fitting because the stereotype of older Gay men migrating here isn't exaggerated — they come to live out their twilight years with their significant other. With so much to do, it's no wonder that Gay and straight alike flock to visit and end up staying.

The warm reception we get here isn't just from the desert winds. According to many different sources, the LGBTQ population outnumber the heteros in this desert paradise. With such an overwhelming number of fruity citizens, it's no wonder that the city offers a refreshing and wide range of options for visitors and residents alike. [...]

The Hyatt Regency is the most decadent and lavish hotel in Palm Springs. It's a far cry from what many Gay couples choose as accommodations (as Palm Springs is known for having many clothing-optional resorts), but we chose to accentuate the glamour rather than our love handles. The Hyatt Regency was so fabulous, we ran into the prima donnas from Logo TV's *A-List*.

As the elevator closed, we heard a high, screechy voice whine, "OMG [the actual letters, not the words], they don't have an upgrade? Do they know who we are? They don't have the presidential suite?"

All I can say to that is, "Honey, you don't need the presidential suite. You need the princess suite with extra-insulated walls and an extra room for your big egos and oversized Gucci man purses." [...]

The hotel oozes urbane sophistication and is fresh from a \$15 million transformation. Its giant oversized atrium-style ceilings inspire a feeling of greatness. The modern and opulent resort-like hotel offers the city's best views of the surrounding mountains and cityscape from six floors of expansive balconies and terraces.

The rooms are luxurious and decorated with rich dark chocolate, coffee bean, and

Why we love Palm Springs



Dive into the SGN archives!

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creamy vanilla walls encasing an inviting white suede designer sectional and chaise lounge. Orange accented chairs bring punches of bold color to a tranquil earth-tone palette. [...]

At the Azul Tapas Lounge, we were treated to a secret recipe that any establishment would envy... a perfect balance of two Palm Springs quintessential ingredients: a witty drag queen and a piano bar. [...]

Rudy de la Mor, the evening's hostess, was a joy to watch while we enjoyed great service and excellent food... She entertained the crowd with Gershwin's "Swanee" and a rousing version of "Mame." [...]

There is so much more to do in Palm Springs than I ever imagined. Before I had the opportunity to see the sights, I only thought that Palm Springs was good for hosting the annual White Party (which is a must-do), golfing, and finding a sugar daddy. Thank goodness I was wrong. [...]

While visiting Palm Springs during White Party, it isn't a secret we got high. We even have pictures!

Get your mind out of the gutter, people; this isn't a Kate Moss snorting cocaine incident. We literally got high up in the mountains! We [took the Aerial Tramway] starting at 2,643 feet and went all the way to the top at Mountain Station (8,516 feet). The views on the way up are incredible as you enjoy the sheer cliffs of Chino Canyon in the 360-degree rotating compartment, but they are positively spectacular at the top. [...]

Palm Springs has the personality and charm that we love in the Northwest, without that Southern California attitude we often hear about... Most importantly, make some time to sit by one of the many pools and work on your tan, because we North-westerners are vitamin D deficient (aka pasty and pale after our sunless winter).

This article was edited for length. To view the article in full, visit https://issuu.com/sgn.org/docs/section_3_travel_06-17-11

Nestled along the pristine shores of Fort Lauderdale, the Pelican Grand Beach Resort stands as a beacon of luxury and relaxation. This exquisite property, with its timeless charm and breathtaking oceanfront views, has become a haven for travelers seeking an unforgettable escape.

The Pelican Grand is a beachfront retreat that seamlessly blends Old World elegance with modern comforts. Located on the famous A1A Highway, its prime location offers guests direct access to the golden sands of the Atlantic Ocean. The moment you step into the grand lobby, you are greeted by a sense of opulence that sets the tone for your stay.

The resort boasts a range of accommodation options, from well-appointed guest rooms to spacious suites, each designed with meticulous attention to detail. The rooms are adorned with coastal-inspired decor, creating a serene ambiance that complements the natural beauty just outside the window. Private balconies provide panoramic views of the ocean, allowing guests to soak in the breathtaking sunrises and sunsets that define the Fort Lauderdale experience.

One of the standout features of the Pelican Grand is the exceptional dining. Ocean2000, the signature restaurant, offers a culinary journey that showcases the freshest seafood and locally sourced ingredients. Guests can savor their meals while enjoying the soothing sound of waves and the gentle ocean breeze.

I visited the restaurant for breakfast and dinner during my stay, and the food was top-notch. Breakfast items include a variety of elevated Benedict options as well as more traditional selections, including avocado toast, steel-cut oatmeal, and a fun spin on huevos rancheros.

For dinner, my partner and I began our meal with the ahi tuna tartare as well as a crab-and-lobster cake. The tuna especially was so fresh and was accompanied by a citrus-ginger soy sauce with house-made potato chips. The entrees were just as special. The seafood risotto was creamy and perfectly cooked, served with lobster, scallops, and shrimp. It is a bit heavy, though, so I would recommend sharing this dish with a guest. The cedar plank salmon was a favorite, served with a Vermont maple syrup-soy glaze, stir-fried grains, sweet peas, and corn.

For those seeking relaxation, the Pelican Grand offers a full-service spa where guests can indulge in a range of rejuvenating treatments. The oceanfront pool provides a refreshing oasis, surrounded by lush landscaping and comfortable loungers. Exercise enthusiasts can maintain their workout routine at the state-of-the-art fitness center, ensuring a well-rounded experience for all guests.

Exploring

Beyond the confines of the resort, guests can explore the vibrant city of Fort Lauderdale. The Pelican Grand's strategic location allows easy access to popular attractions such as boutiques and art galleries on Las Olas Boulevard and the Bonnet House Museum & Gardens.

This enchanting estate, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, beckons visitors to step back in time and immerse themselves in the unique legacy of its former owners, artist Frederic Clay Bartlett, an accomplished artist who used it as his creative sanctuary, and his wife Evelyn Fortune Bartlett. The Bonnet House, built in 1920,



BONNET HOUSE



KAYAKING - PHOTOS BY JOEY AMATO

is a charming plantation-style home that served as the winter retreat for the Bartletts. Its design reflects a mix of Caribbean, plantation, and Art Deco influences, creating a visually captivating structure. (The house's name is derived from the bonnet lily, which flourishes in the estate's lush gardens.)

Visitors can explore the house's interior and marvel at the impressive collection of the Bartletts' artworks, including paintings, drawings, and sculptures. The house itself is a canvas, adorned with vibrant colors and intricate details that highlight the artist's unique vision.

The Bonnet House also boasts an extensive collection of decorative arts and personal artifacts belonging to the Bartletts. Each room tells a story, offering a glimpse into the couple's passion for the arts and their love for travel.

If you prefer a more physical adventure, book a tour with Sunrise Paddleboards. Our knowledgeable and friendly guide led us on a two-hour tour of Wilton Manors, snaking us through mangroves on the Middle River. Although we chose to kayak, the company offers paddleboards as well as private lessons for those who may not have tried doing this before. It is a fun alternative to kayaking and a great core workout.

After your tour, head to The House on the River for a wonderful riverside dinner. Start your meal with an order of crispy brussels sprouts prepared with avocado honey and balsamic vinegar. This was one of my favorite takes on brussels sprouts ever. Needless to say, the plate was wiped clean. For our entrees, we ordered the snapper filet and shrimp-and-crab squid ink tagliatelle. Both items were prepared beautifully, although I did favor the snapper over the pasta. The House on the River is located just off downtown Fort Lauderdale's famed Las Olas Boulevard and within walking distance of the Broward Performing Arts Center, so it is the perfect place to catch dinner before a show.

Fort Lauderdale never disappoints. The destination offers something for everyone. Whether you are looking for some fun in the sun or reveling in LGBTQ nightlife in nearby Wilton Manors, Fort Lauderdale has it all.

Enjoy the journey!

Ashland



"Spending a week in Ashland is like attending an immersive theater camp for grownups."

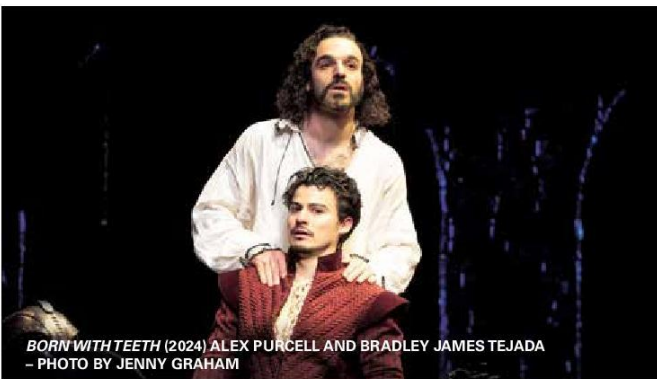
and its Oregon Shakespeare Festival prove well worth the all-day drive

ALICE IN WONDERLAND (2019)
IN THE OREGON SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL'S
ALLEN ELIZABETHAN THEATRE
- PHOTO BY KIM BUDD

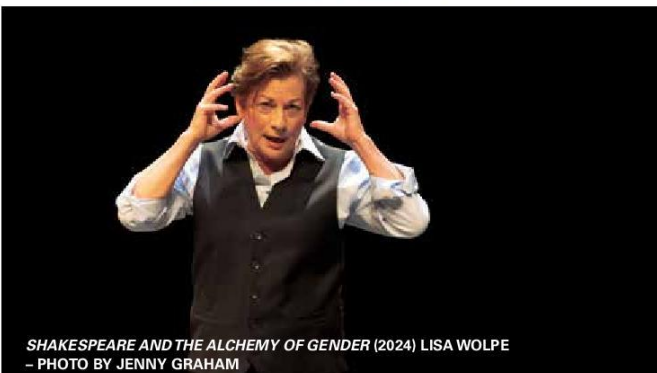
BY ALICE BLOCH
SGN CONTRIBUTING WRITER



MACBETH (2024) ERICA SULLIVAN AND KEVIN KENERLY - PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM



BORN WITH TEETH (2024) ALEX PURCELL AND BRADLEY JAMES TEJADA
- PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM



SHAKESPEARE AND THE ALCHEMY OF GENDER (2024) LISA WOLPE
- PHOTO BY JENNY GRAHAM

The drive from Seattle to Ashland, Oregon, takes one long day or two short days. I've made this journey nearly every June since 1998, usually carpooling with a friend or two.

But with perfectly good theater available right here in the Seattle area, why make this annual trek south? So many reasons!

First, spending a week in Ashland is like attending an immersive theater camp for grownups. Pre-pandemic, it was possible to see as many as 10 plays in a week, or, as the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) motto used to recommend, "Stay three days, see four plays."

The company has slowly been returning to a full-scale repertory schedule in its one outdoor and two indoor theaters, and this season (late March to mid-October), it will mount 10 plays, with six running concurrently. In addition, the festival offers pre-performance educational sessions and post-performance "talkbacks." During the summer, when the outdoor theater is open, a Green Show on the Courtyard Stage showcases Southern Oregon musical talent before each evening performance.

Second, the productions are top-notch, with superb direction, casting, and design. After a rough patch during the past few years, OSF is back on its feet. Tim Bond, who was associate artistic director from 1996 to 2007, has returned as artistic director. He lives in Ashland and has strong community ties, as well as good working relationships with many of the directors and actors who have made OSF such a great festival over the years.

For the current season, he has brought back some of the audience's favorite actors, including Kevin Kenerly, Erica Sullivan, Kate Hurster, David Kelly, Jennie Greenberry, Rodney Gardiner, Robin Goodrin Nordli, Rex Young, Vilma Silva, John Tufts, Barzin Akhavan, and Amy Kim Waschke. Seeing the same actor do an outstanding job in completely different roles is one of the joys of attending several plays at OSF.

Third, the audiences are the best. I've attended co-productions between OSF and Seattle Rep, and found that the Seattle Rep audience was more impatient and less attentive. It makes sense: they live locally and need to get up early the next day for a job or household responsibilities. In Ashland, the audience is there for theater, period.

And even though the resident population is predominantly white, OSF's social justice initiatives (championed by Bond and others) have led to diversity in casting, which in turn has attracted a diverse audience.

Finally, even if you're not a theater nerd, Ashland is a delightful, queer-friendly town, the only place in notoriously right-wing Southern Oregon where most of us can feel comfortable.

If you stay in a hotel there, you can park your car for the duration of your stay and walk to performances, meals, shops, and galleries. There are a couple of beautiful parks right in town too, including Lithia Park adjacent to the festival grounds. If you prefer to camp, Emigrant Lake County Park is a lovely spot for your tent or RV.

What's in store for this season

In the medium-sized indoor Angus Bowmer Theatre, two plays are already running: William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, which requires no introduction, and *Born with Teeth*, a new comedy by Liz Duffy Adams that envisions a testy collaboration between Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe.

In the intimate Thomas Theatre, three one-person shows currently take turns: until May 4, Lisa Wolpe's *Shakespeare and the Alchemy of Gender*; until May 12, Rodney Gardiner's *Smote This: A Comedy about God and Other Serious SH*T*; and opening on May 16, Robin Goodrin Nordli's *Virgins to Villains: My Journey with Shakespeare's Women*.

In the large outdoor Allen Elizabethan Theatre, two plays will open in early June and run through mid-October: Shakespeare's comedy *Much Ado about Nothing* and a stage adaptation of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*.

Over the summer, three additional plays will open in the Thomas Theatre: the indie-rock musical *Lizard Boy*, starting on June 11; Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, beginning July 23 with an all-women cast; and Barzin Akhavan's one-person play *Behfarmaheen (if you please)*, about his experience immigrating to the US from Iran, opening July 31.

For more information and to purchase tickets to OSF performances, visit <http://osfashland.org>.

"Winter camping is not an activity for those who enjoy cleanliness, but the mud was a small price to pay for the peace and adventure I found hidden among the Pacific Northwest woods."

Winter trekking through Oregon's Trail of Ten Falls

BY LINDSEY ANDERSON
SGN STAFF WRITER

Anyone who has spent a consecutive 12 months living in Seattle knows that the winters can feel dreary. For 90 days, Seattleites trudge to and from work under dark, gray clouds and a constant drizzle. The chance to escape the cold for a warmer destination is often the goal of those with the means, but for people like me, who find travel expensive and daunting, there are still fun ways to escape the city and spruce up the winter.

During the "best" month for seasonal depression, February, I took a chance and booked a stay at Smith Creek Village. Just south of Portland and nestled along the famed Trail of Ten Falls, the site felt like a hidden gem, with grounds that included acres of pet-friendly hills, creeks, and sprawling mossy trees.

Though the weather matched the wet and cold of Seattle I'd been hoping to escape, there was a serenity to the rain. Sleeping in a wood cabin with no Wi-fi but only the sounds of trickling raindrops hitting the tin roof felt like a meditation practice. My dogs, usually content in our one-bedroom apartment, were overjoyed with the freedom to stomp around in puddles and slick grass without the limits of a leash and or concrete sidewalks.

The moment I stepped out of the car at Smith Village, a layer of mud coated my boots. Throughout my weekend stay, the mud crept up my hiking pants and eventually crusted in my hair. Winter camping is not an activity for those who enjoy cleanliness, but the mud was a small price to pay for the peace and adventure I found hidden among the Pacific Northwest woods.

Out and about

On our first day at the property, my partner Izy and I took our two dogs on a hike along the Trail of Ten Falls. We made it as far as we could before the winter sun began to set far too early. Though we hadn't yet stumbled upon any of the famed falls, we were delighted by the views of amber forests shimmering through the fog. It felt like taking a trip into the *Twilight* movies, and we laughed as we attempted to re-create some of the most cringy scenes we could remember.

The evening stroll was long enough to tire out my old Chihuahua, Petey. Luckily for us, our cabin, secured with a lock, had a comfy couch for him to rest on while we found food. Smith Creek Village is nestled in the wilderness — far from any Burger Kings or Denny's. However, the lodge provided a small café with vegan options for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

The café was a friendly dining experience. Inside, we mingled with other camping groups, mostly families, who were also hoping to grab a bite. We enjoyed large burgers and fries while playing a rousing game of checkers from the free game library.

After our meal, Izy and I hiked back to our cabin. As novice winter campers, we didn't consider how scary the trail to our cabin would be in the dark. From all angles, spindly branches reached out for us. With nothing more than our iPhone flashlights and a pocket knife, we scurried on the path as fast as we could. In the dark, the charming moss-covered trees resembled Samara Morgan from *The Ring*.

Despite our frightening walk back, we survived the night and woke up refreshed for a full day of hiking. Tired from the day before, Petey elected to stay behind in the cabin while Izy, our puppy Benji, and I headed out for an ambitious 5.5-mile hike along the Rim Trail.

Not all hiking trails are dog-friendly at Ten Falls, and unfortunately, the one that leads hikers underneath a gorgeous waterfall isn't. However, we still found stunning views as we explored the perimeter of the state park.

The first falls we came across were a half mile into the route. A beautiful viewing point gave us a glimpse of cascading water through evergreen trees. The trail then led us to a hidden red beach. Had it not been 40 degrees, Benji would have loved to dip in the crystal-clear waters, but due to the frigid temperatures, he was satisfied with just enjoying the red sand.

We passed gorgeous rock formations that hid smaller falls inside, narrow bridges, and plenty of muddy puddles before finally coming to the turnaround point at the top of one of the trail's most iconic falls.

Much to my terror, as I fished my phone out of my pocket for a photo of the raging waterfall, my adventurous puppy decided to jump onto the ledge separating the vertical current from the general public. Somehow, I managed to grab him before he had a chance to attempt a swim in the waterfall. Sometimes, hiking with a puppy is even scarier than hiking in the dark.

Our winter trip to the Trail of Ten Falls left me, Izy, and our dogs exhausted in the best way. As we drove back to Seattle, we had a new found appreciation for the beauty and power behind the water that makes our region so iconic.



PHOTOS BY LINDSEY ANDERSON

"Two birds, one stone."

A Golden State

BY BENNY LOY
SGN CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Honeymoon

PHOTOS BY BENNY LOY & LAUREN VASATKA

Being her usual spontaneous self, my fiancé proposed that we turn a planned California trip into a honeymoon three days before we left, by scheduling a marriage ceremony at the courthouse. She persuaded me with a "two birds, one stone" argument: we could stop procrastinating on our "I dos" and be wed just in time to file our taxes jointly. Her promise to have, to hold, and to file till death do us part was more than enough to convince me. We tied the knot in December, and the next day, my new wife and I headed out on our honeymoon.

Our travel plans were convoluted, but we aimed to enjoy the journey as much as the destinations. First, we took the Amtrak Coast Starlight train from Seattle to Los Angeles. I had always wanted to experience a train ride, and it is said that the scenery along this route is "unsurpassed."

Unfortunately, we did not see much of it. It takes about 35 hours to reach LA, and when we made it to the "stunning" coastal portion of the tracks, the pitch-black night made observing it impossible. If you are taking the train for the views, make it a part of your return trip to Seattle for a better chance to see the coast in the daylight.

After my train experience, I'm now a full-fledged fan, however. We had reserved a roomette, a tiny, closet-sized room that offers privacy, complimentary meals, and fold-out beds. We were prepared to spend our days in the observation car reading and our nights scrunched up in our roomette. But before settling in, we met our train car attendant, Monica, who made our ride unforgettable. She asked us about our trip, and my wife told her we were on our honeymoon. Monica went on her way and returned a few minutes later to inform us we had been upgraded to a first-class bedroom!

It was spacious compared to the roomette and had its own bathroom. Lounging on our room's sofa while the train gently swayed and rumbled along the tracks was tranquil. Monica had also left champagne and roses for us in our new accommodations.

Cell phone signals were not available for much of the trip, and taking a break from the pull of social media to read a book and talk to other riders was great. I recommend taking the train if you aren't in a hurry, want to be more environmentally conscious, and like to meet other travelers.

Los Angeles: Disneyland

We made it to LA and headed to the Moxy Hotel, which we learned was very understaffed. We were given our room key and a code for the supply closet — they had so few staff that they allowed guests free reign over the room supplies. Unfortunately, when we later searched for toothpaste, we learned that a group of dance moms had ransacked the supplies before we arrived. Honestly, with how much it



UNIVERSAL STUDIOS



ALCATRAZ



GOLDEN GATE PARK

costs to try to make your child a star now-days, can you really judge?

Yes, you can.

We woke up to a beautiful, smog-filled sunrise. LA's air is very polluted, but make any mention of it, and the locals will remind you that it used to be a lot worse. I'll take their word for it. I recommend packing headache medicine if you are sensitive to the lower air quality.

We made our way to Disneyland. The theme park was dressed to the nines with Christmas decor: ribbons, tinsel, and garlands wrapped around every street lamp, lights strung in every tree, and a giant Santa hat on the "It's a Small World" ride's famous clock face. The theme park was incredibly fun, and being there the week before Christmas break was perfect for avoiding crowds. It was so uncrowded that, by utilizing "fast passes," we managed to ride every single ride, including all those in California Land, over the course of two days. The rides were the perfect intensity for those of us who suffer from motion sickness. So, unless you get nauseous riding elevators, you can leave the Dramamine at home.

I recommend saving money by not buying food in the park, or at least not more than you need. I let my curiosity get the best of me several times, and I ordered food that did not taste nearly as good as it looked.

Overall, Disneyland will make you feel like a kid again. I'm not a Disney fanatic, but the magic there is contagious, and it won me over. I'm planning to go back one day.

Los Angeles: Universal Studios

Next, we went to Universal Studios. In retrospect, we should have gone to Universal first. Disney raised our expectations so high for overall quality and attention to even the smallest detail that Universal was sort of a flop for us. We were very excited about its new Super Nintendo World Park, however. When I got off the escalator, I genuinely felt like I had stepped into the world of Mario.

I bought a "Power-Up Band," used to activate interactive blocks around the park, to participate in the games for about \$60. Interacting with different parts of the park earns you points and collectible vir-

tual stamps. The ability to punch blocks like Mario is excellent, but all of them are child-height, and adults must lean over or crouch to activate them. I quickly realized that if I wanted to collect all the stamps, I would likely have to tell random children, "It's my turn to punch the block." I did not want to be that person, so I decided to forgo collecting all of the stamps.

I was hoping that there would have been some effort to cater to the nostalgia of adults while providing experiences for children. However, I suggest that childless adults steer clear. I could see a lot of parents having fun with their little ones, but for my fellow baby-free peeps, this is an awkward experience.

Half of the rides at Universal Studios are simulated coasters or simulated-motion types. These attractions trick your senses into making you feel like you are being thrown around the settings of various movie franchises. It was novel when I first rode Transformers: The Ride-3D and The Simpsons Ride but quickly became disappointing when we realized that seven of the twelve rides were simulation types. By the time we rode the others, we had gotten used to it, and most of the excitement they could have provided was gone. I loved the Jurassic World water ride, though, and the Universal Studios tour was a nice way to end our day at the park.

Is Universal a must-see? I think it's skipable until they add more variety to the attractions.

San Francisco:

Alcatraz, Pier 39, Golden Gate Park

The day after Universal, we drove from LA to San Francisco. Upon entering the city, we felt more comfortable. We settled for the night in our room at the Westin St. Francis Hotel, which treated us very well. They gave us complimentary trolley tickets, bike rental tickets, and meal vouchers for the restaurant. Its location in Union Square made for a perfect home base while we explored the piers, Golden Gate Park, and Chinatown.

First thing in the morning, we took the trolley to Pier 33 Alcatraz Landing. Experiencing the island prison is a must-do when in SF. Touring it is a haunting experience as you

imagine what daily life was like for prisoners and guards. The prison was designed to mentally weigh you down, to loom over you, to give you little opportunity to remember that a world outside exists. Many of the other buildings on the island have succumbed to time and the elements; for example, the crumbling concrete of the warden's house stands as a shell of its former self. Yet the prison remains, with its cells barely large enough to stretch one's arms.

Here are some tips: Take the earliest boat, since the self-guided tour, the audio tour, and listening to presentations from speakers will take longer than you think. We spent half the day there. Second, according to one of the tour guides, December is one of the best times of year to go. Turns out, not only does the island get crowded with people when temperatures rise, but also with hundreds of squawking birds.

Third, after Alcatraz, I advise heading to the Escape Game (downtown or at Fishermen's Wharf) to play the "Prison Break: Alcatraz" escape room, which starts with you and your partner in separate locked cells. You have to communicate through the bars to find your way out. My wife and I love escape rooms, and this was one of the best we've ever done.

We then went to Pier 39 to shop in the novelty stores and watch sea lions. We found a pair of rubber ducky brides getting married and had to have them. We watched the sunset while eating ice cream and then took the trolley back to the hotel.

On our final day, we biked around Golden Gate Park, walked through the Japanese Tea Gardens and the Conservatory of Flowers, and explored Chinatown.

Later that night, we boarded our flight and returned to Seattle. We sent the dog sitter home and crawled into bed, where our dogs (comforted to know that we'd safely returned) piled on us.

With train rides, Los Angeles, theme parks, San Francisco, prisons, piers, and gardens still in mind, we were glad to be back from our California honeymoon. After everything, all that was left to do was to prepare for tax season.

"For me, San Francisco was a step into adulthood..."

I left my heart
(and fear) in

San Francisco

BY LINDSEY ANDERSON
SGN STAFF WRITER

I was 24 years old but had never traveled on my own. Though affluent college friends may have taken the chance to study in Europe or South America, I hadn't so much as gone to the QFC down the street by myself, let alone stayed overnight in a brand-new city.

That all changed the day I received my acceptance letter into the Mutiny Radio Comedy Festival.

As an aspiring comedy writer, I was ecstatic to participate in the iconic festival, and I couldn't wait to practice my craft in San Francisco. However, as I began to work out the logistics of my trip, I realized there would be a catch: I'd have to travel alone.

After plenty of encouragement, I curated a plan to get myself to the Gayest city in the USA one way or another, booked a flight, and found a hotel. Despite my ADHD and severe anxiety around flying, I boarded the light rail in Capitol Hill with my carry-on and rode to the airport. I found my gate, got on the right plane, and before I knew it, was stepping foot in San Francisco.

I managed my time working remotely from my hotel room, rehearsing my sets, and performing in iconic venues each night. My first show was at the delightful Mars Bar, an indoor/outdoor bar and restaurant that reminded me of locations I'd visited in Ballard and Fremont. Following that show, I performed at The Bar on Dolores, an old spunky place with a sitcom vibe. The bartender laughed as comedians served up jokes, and outside, in front of the venue, old friends caught up with each other, and new friends were made over a shared joint.

The next night, I found myself at Club OMG, a vibrant LGBTQ+ dance club that happened to double as a showroom for comedy. Despite being on my own and far from home, I fit right in. The patrons of OMG could have been my neighbors on Capitol Hill; they gave off the same friendly, Queer joy I've come to recognize at home.

On my final night, I performed at Barbary Coast, the first dispensary bar I'd ever seen. Stepping in there was the first time I realized that San Francisco is just a bigger version of Seattle. The high-end weed shop scanned IDs at the door, allowed patrons to purchase a variety of items, and had a Prohibition-era back room full of games and comfy seating, as well as plenty of ventilation for patrons to smoke in.

Performing comedy in front of a bunch of Zenned-out stoners was a nightmare. I have never bombed as hard as I did in a crowded room of people forgetting to laugh outside their heads. That being said, I still enjoyed the energy of the room and the fact that San Francisco has a space where stoners can mingle, get high, and not laugh at comedy.

On my last day in San Francisco, I explored the city as a tourist before catching my flight home. I rode the historic street cars, made friends with sea lions at the pier, and purchased too much chocolate at the iconic Ghirardelli Chocolate Experience.

Locals informed me that I happened to catch the city at its best, during one of the last sunny weeks before the rainy season. The weather didn't matter to me, however. What made San Francisco beautiful wasn't the sunshine, the sparkling bay, the iconic bridge, or even the charming sea lions. The San Francisco I fell in love with was the underground full of raunchy comics and hidden talents just waiting to burst onto the main scene. At its best, it was a haven for Queer community, with rainbow flags in every venue I performed at. It was also the first place to recognize amazing women in comedy, like Ali Wong and Margaret Cho, welcoming them into its weird and wacky venues and cheering for them years before the world would tune in to their Netflix specials.

For me, San Francisco was a step into adulthood. The city was a risk worth taking, a scary place to venture into on my own, but once I stepped on stage, it felt just like home.



PHOTOS BY LINDSEY ANDERSON

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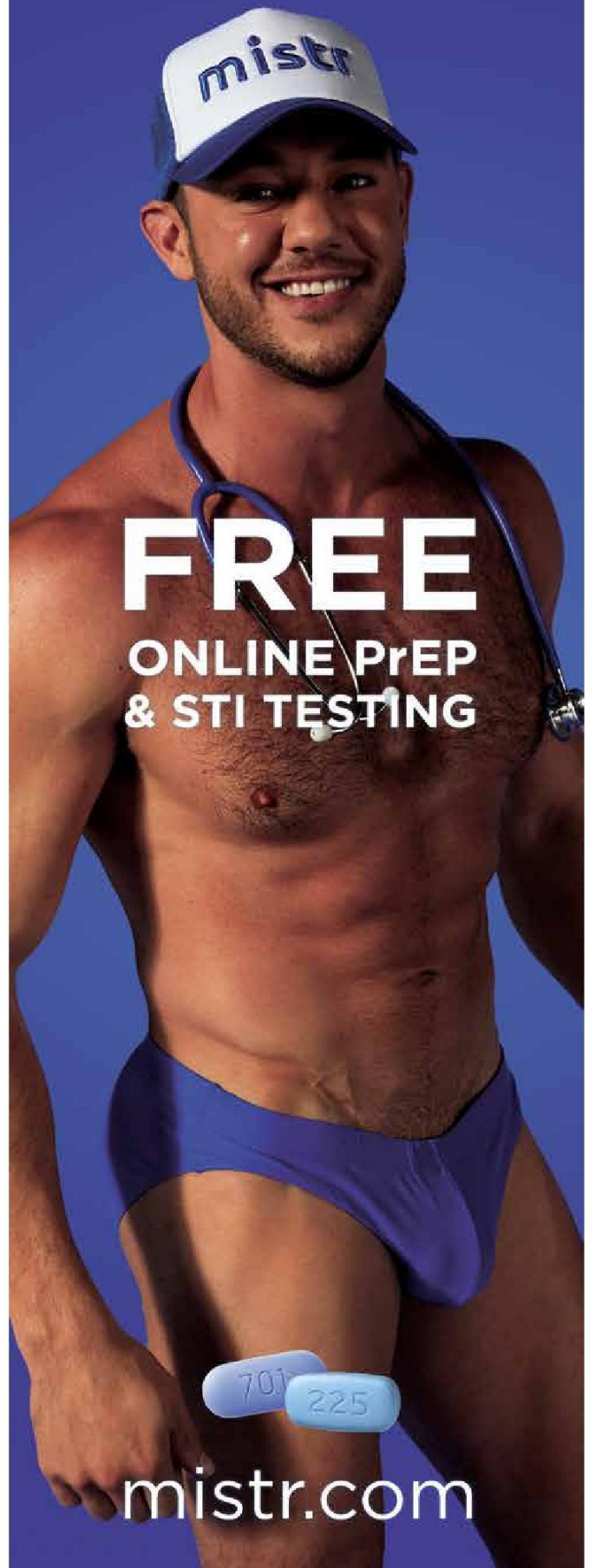


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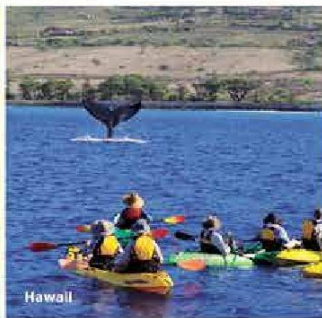
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