With the growing acceptance of the LGBT+ community around the world, travel and hospitality brands are recognising the opportunity to create safer, more inclusive destinations.

Market Snapshot

- The LGBT+ travel segment annual spending now exceeds £169bn ($218bn, €191bn) (source: Out Now)
- By 2030, there will be 180m LGBT+ travellers worldwide (source: WTM)
- More than 11m adults in the US – or 4.7% of the population – identify as LGBT (source: Gallup)

‘Destinations focusing on targeting LGBT+ travellers have primarily focused on cis, white gay men or DINKs (Double Income, No Kids), rendering the rest of the rainbow invisible by creating a skewed perception of what the LGBT+ traveller really is,’ says Anita Dolce Vita, editor-in-chief of queer lifestyle site dapperQ.

With 35% of Generation Z respondents in the US knowing someone who prefers others to use gender-neutral pronouns to refer to them, according to Pew Research Center, the mainstream future of travel looks to be increasingly queer. ‘In 10 years’ time, LGBT+ holidaymakers will be almost fully integrated with the mainstream traveller,’ says Richard Gray, head of Fort Lauderdale’s LGBT+ tourism bureau division.
New destinations

The growth of equal rights and recognition for the LGBT+ community across the globe is changing the possibilities for travellers and travel operators, with new or previously inaccessible destinations emerging.

In 2018, India passed a landmark law that decriminalises gay sex, marking a major victory for the LGBT+ community. Mumbai, with its already thriving queer, transgender and hijra communities embedded in the city’s nightlife, is set to benefit hugely from this. ‘The recent removal of anti-gay laws saw India’s market demonstrating the strongest annual growth rate in 2018 of more than 7% over the past 12 months,’ says Ian Johnson, CEO of Out Now.

China’s LGBT+ community is supported by a variety of dating apps, including Blued, which has more than 40m users worldwide. Together with local lesbian dating apps Lesdo, LesPark and the L, these apps are making it easy for LGBT+ travellers to make new connections. ‘We are trying to push forward the LGBT movement and change things for the better,’ explains Ma Baoli, CEO of gay dating app Blued.

‘I see many gay Chinese couples walking hand in hand [in Chengdu]. I’ve never seen that in Beijing, Shanghai or even in Hong Kong.’

— Kurt Macher, general manager, Temple House Hotel

Chengdu has been crowned the unofficial LGBT+ capital of China thanks to its inclusive attitude, popular queer venues and openness to same-sex marriages, although these are not recognised by the state. ‘I see many gay Chinese couples walking hand in hand,’ says Kurt Macher, the openly gay general manager of Temple House luxury hotel. ‘I’ve never seen that in Beijing, Shanghai or even in Hong Kong.’

Elsewhere in East Asia, South Korea’s increasing queer visibility led to Seoul celebrating its first drag parade in 2018, an event that could lead the way for inbound LGBT+ travel. ‘A lot of times, the queer community is ignored by the government… This march is to show that the community exists, and it's here. It's very hard to ignore a drag queen,’ says Heezy Yang, organiser of the parade, which took place through Itaewon’s famed Homo Hill district.
Safer connections

Inclusive accommodation and travel providers remain attractive for queer consumers, with LGBT-friendliness remaining the fourth most important criterion for LGBT+ customers booking a hotel, and the second most important when choosing a destination, according to LGBT+ research specialists Community Marketing & Insights (CMI). Nevertheless, 37% of LGBT+ travellers worldwide have experienced some form of discrimination while on holiday, with 6% experiencing a threat of physical violence due to their sexuality (source: Virgin Holidays). Furthermore, homosexuality remains illegal in 74 countries, including popular tourist destinations such as Jamaica, Kenya and the UAE.

In a bid to make travel and connecting with local communities safer, GeoSure, an app that assists travellers by providing quantifiable, personalised travel security content, last year expanded its services to provide an LGBT+ safety rating for more than 30,000 global destinations. ‘We’ve tried to standardise safety as it relates to individuals and organisations, creating a global understanding of safety that takes into consideration cultural, political and religious views of people in the region,’ says GeoSure co-founder and CEO Michael Becker. While there are no specific safety scores for transgender people, who are most likely to face assault on the street, the app’s creators say the data is as granular as possible, and they aim to make it even more informative in the future.

An alternative to popular home-sharing platforms, Mister B&B assesses both hosts and travellers to ensure they are part of the LGBT+ community and to ensure greater safety during stays, while the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA) helps emerging LGBT+ destinations – such as Uganda – operate in difficult social contexts.
Inclusive hospitality

With 180m LGBT+ travellers expected worldwide by 2030, brands and tourist boards are actively exploring how to better connect with and understand this rapidly growing consumer segment (source: WTM).

Global airline Virgin Atlantic will operate its first **Pride flight** to New York in June 2019, hosted by Netflix star Tituss Burgess, and with an LGBT+ crew and pilots. The already sold-out flight will feature an onboard DJ, drag queen bingo, Judy Garland sing-along, inter-seat speed dating and live acts. ‘We take our commitments to diversity and inclusion seriously, but you can rest assured we have a lot of fun along the way,’ says Mark Anderson, executive vice-president of Virgin Atlantic and global LGBT lead for Virgin Group.

‘Readiness at the grassroots level can make or break plans to enhance the LGBT+ market.’

— Lax Junnel Mendoza, president, Association of Travel and Tour Agencies, the Philippines

Elsewhere, the quest for more inclusive hospitality is extending to local government and travel organisations. Thailand’s Tourism Authority recently pledged support for an increased focus on LGBT+ travellers, as shown by its inaugural **LGBT+ Travel Symposium** 2018 and Open to the New Shades advertising campaign, while Malta Tourism Authority worked with **ITB Berlin** for last year’s LGBT+ Tourism Summit.

Inspired by such summits, the Philippines has created its first LGBT+ symposium, and has plans to create a training programme to assist local businesses to become queer-friendly. This includes training relating to the correct use of pronouns, ensuring services such as toilets and accommodation are LGBT-friendly, and general advice on health, safety and wellness. ‘Readiness at the grassroots level can make or break the plan to enhance the LGBT+ market,’ explains Lax Junnel Mendoza, the symposium’s organiser and president of the Association of Travel and Tour Agencies in the Calabarzon region.
Lab Notes

1. The travel sector is moving beyond recognising only the gay male segment of the LGBT+ market with new destinations and more inclusive travel services that make it safer and simpler for queer consumers to explore the world.

2. Laws on LGBT+ equality vary from country to country. For travel brands and platforms, it remains crucial to monitor local news and governmental shifts to understand the opportunities or challenges that exist in a particular market.

3. Local dating apps and dedicated property-sharing platforms are becoming personal travel guides for the LGBT+ community, organically connecting travellers with local stays and queer communities.

4. Hotels and airlines are recognising the high spending and wanderlust of the LGBT+ community, and the potential for a new network of influencers that will help to shape and recommend popular new destinations.

5. For travel operators there is a chance to attend the growing number of LGBT+ travel symposiums, with opportunities to support grassroots initiatives designed to cater better for this growing community.