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# ROAD TRIP PRIDE ACROSS AMERICA

by Jason A. Heidemann

Photo: Andres Casallas



Orlando Pride

I am marching in formation through the languid June streets of Key West while bearing the weight of the LGBTQ+ movement on my shoulders—literally. This is because I’ve joined an army of volunteers, and we are hoisting a 100-foot version of the Pride flag as high as we can while being cheered on by throngs of townies and tourists during the annual Key West Pride Parade. It’s a scorcher of an afternoon, the entire island is hotter than a lit match and steamier than a gay sauna at 2 A.M. on a Sunday. If I could snatch this colossal flag from my fellow volunteers and use it as a hanky to wipe my forehead, believe me I would. But nothing is more rewarding than taking it to the streets in the name of queer liberation, and beads of sweat be damned, I wouldn’t spend my last afternoon in the Conch Republic any other way.

I love Key West. I love its neatly trimmed clapboard homes that have mostly been transformed into small inns. I love that the city’s eternally sun-burnt residents somehow manage to balance their weekly groceries in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other while getting around town via bicycle. I love that Key West is overrun by chickens and roosters whose island origins are still disputed by locals. I love the town’s fawning reverence for Ernest Hemingway whose daughter was transgender, and that a visit to **The Hemingway Home and Museum** ([hemingwayhome.com](http://hemingwayhome.com)), where the best docents in Florida spin tall tales of the famous writer while surrounded by dozens of polydactyl kitties, is an island must. And I love that there’s no better meal to be had for seafaring sightseers than a bowl of conch chowder chased with a sublime slice of Key lime pie. (Try one at waterfront hang-out **Pepe’s Café** [[pepeskeywest.com](http://pepeskeywest.com)], the oldest continuously operating restaurant in the Keys.)

Most of all I love that the city still cleaves to queerness. Even though the LGBTQ+ scene long ago migrated northward, first to South Beach then onward to Wilton Manors, Key West is still a town where homos join their hetero counterparts in stumbling awkwardly back to their hotels after emerging from a Duval Street bar at 3 A.M., where a gentleman can expect to have an intimate collision with a fellow traveler at legendary **Island House** ([islandhousekeywest.com](http://islandhousekeywest.com)), the best gay men’s resort in the world, and where every New Year’s Eve a drag queen parrots the Times Square ball drop by descending into a crowd via a giant high heel at clothing-optional queer bar **Bourbon St Pub** ([bourbonstpub.com](http://bourbonstpub.com)).

Tomorrow I will rise and shine and once again take it to the streets (this time in the comfort of an air-conditioned SUV) and trek more than 5,000 miles across America during Pride Month, while along the way hitting up historic celebrations in Denver and Seattle and discovering queer life in even the most MAGA corners of the country.

## KEY WEST TO MIAMI

Like the listless tropical heat, Pride is still stuck to my brain as I pick up my rental car at Key West International Airport. While in line to collect my SUV, two lesbian counter agents at Avis are recapping the Sunday parade and subsequent tea dance that happened afterward at hotel, restaurant, and cabaret **La Te Da** ([lateda.com](http://lateda.com)). If female impersonator Randy Roberts is performing there while you’re in town, don’t miss him!

I hit the road, but not before making a point to stop and snap a photo at the U.S. Route 1 Mile 0 marker—the official start of my journey.

Florida has the lowest elevation in the country. The entire state looks like it’s been flattened by a spatula, so it helps that the bridges that connect one key to the next offer tiny ripples of elevation, kind of like a kid-

die coaster at an amusement park. There are more than 800 keys in total and many of them have funny names like Ramrod, Sugarloaf, and Little Torch.

I pass a billboard that says **SIZE MATTERS** in big block letters, a reference to Florida’s largest personal injury law firm, but most signs point to family-friendly attractions like mini golf, reef adventures, and dolphin encounters. On both sides of the Overseas Highway there are ramshackle marinas with boat slips, dense mangroves, uniform RV resorts, and the occasional palapa-style hut promising “the world’s best piña colada.” The azure waters are sparkling today like the sequined costume of a chorus line dancer, and high above me are large, shape-shifting clouds that stretch and break apart like taffy pulled too thin. Near Marathon Key, I nearly drive into a bait shop after passing two hunky shirtless joggers in matching tangerine short shorts.

In Key Largo I have lunch at **Mrs. Mac’s Kitchen** ([mrsmacskitchen.com](http://mrsmacskitchen.com)), a true Old Florida diner featuring wrap-around counter seating, vintage license plates that cover practically every square inch of the restaurant (even the lampshades are constructed of bent plates), and a menu tailored to Sunshine State tourists, including alligator bites, crab cake sandwiches, and Key lime pie. When I reach suburban Homestead, I stop at quirky-named **Robert Is Here Fruit Stand** ([robertishere.com](http://robertishere.com)) and stock up on snack foods like dried mango chili, chocolate oat bites, and alligator jerky.

“It’s a nice day to be nude,” says Eric, a bearded and half-submerged Brazilian bear who floats right up to me in the balmy Atlantic Ocean. It sure is. My final stop for the day is at **Haulover Beach** ([miamiandbeaches.com](http://miamiandbeaches.com)), a famous clothing-optional strand in North Miami and Eric and I are among a dozen dudes bobbing up and down in the water like naked buoys. “I like the flirting and cruising culture better in Brazil,” Eric says. “But here you don’t get mugged as much.” I take a moment to survey the beach and notice new lifeguard towers that are white with teal trim. I miss the old pink ones which were more emblematic of South Florida, and a lot gayer. I don’t have a towel, so I walk the beach in the buff and let the sun dry me naturally. In this heat it’s not a problem.

Around dusk I arrive at the **Hotel Gaythering** ([gaythering.com](http://gaythering.com)) where Adirondack chairs adorn a small courtyard. I love this little gay-owned lodging which sits on the sleepy causeway side of Lincoln Road in South Beach. Etched into the glass front door of the hotel lobby is a sign that reads: If you are sexist, racist, homophobic or an assh\*le, DON’T COME IN! I’m none of the above and enter confidently. While waiting to check in I peruse the merch cabinet which includes a t-shirt with the name Gaythering written in the same typeface as the TV sitcom “Cheers,” but with a switched-up tagline that reads: Where everybody’s seen your nudes. There’s also a Lazy Susan turntable featuring a revolving display of poppers (I mean video head cleaners). I throw down my luggage in my petite king room and reassemble my wardrobe for an evening on the town.

When I slide up to the bar at **Bodega Taqueria Y Tequila** ([bodegataqueria.com](http://bodegataqueria.com)), a tiny little walkup eatery with a sprawling hidden speakeasy in back, Will Smith’s “Miami” is playing. How perfect. At happy hour you can get well fed here for \$15. I order two al pastor tacos, chips and salsa, and a blood orange margarita to drink. Service is stupidly bad, as in a bartender who pays me no attention at all, charges me for a thimble of salsa that arrives after my basket of chips is empty, and pre-adds her tip—for a table of one, really? Lousy service sucks harder when you’re dining alone.



Celebrating Pride in Key West

Photo: Rob O'Neal/Florida Keys News Bureau/HO

*I will trek more than 5,000 miles across America during Pride Month, while along the way hitting up historic celebrations in Denver and Seattle, and discovering queer life in even the most MAGA corners of the country.*

You would be hard-pressed to find a wall in Wynwood not covered in mural art. Miami's mainland arts district has exploded in popularity in recent years and the 'hood boasts plenty of queer cred, albeit not so much on a Monday. Both LGBTQ-owned restaurant **R House** ([rhousewynwood.com](http://rhousewynwood.com)) and gay taproom **Willy's Neighborhood Bar** ([willyswynwood.com](http://willyswynwood.com)) are closed tonight. The silver lining is after hours bakery **Night Owl Cookies** ([nightowlcookieco.com](http://nightowlcookieco.com)) where "Spill tea, not milk" is the motto. This gay-owned dessert shop boasts a Pride Month cookie among other sweet temptations. I go with a classic chocolate chip served warm and gooey. At one point I extend my leg toward my face like I'm crunching my abs to lick a melted chip off my knee, an act you would find less repellant if you tried this cookie yourself.

Back in South Beach, I bypass the hotel's charming Bar Gaythering and instead make a beeline for the onsite sauna which attracts visitors and locals alike. It has been completely renovated since my last visit in 2021. Gone is the steam room and in its place are more "play" spaces. There are also TV screens offering a continuous loop of adult videos filmed onsite, presumably to inspire good times. The locals are feeling it tonight and thanks to a multi-racial assortment of attractive men sharing the hot tub with me, I am feeling it too...several of them in fact.

#### MIAMI TO ST. PETE

As the steel and glass towers of Miami recede into the distance so too does queer life, though I do spot a digital billboard on the outskirts of the city that reads "Secure your load, it's the law." A tropical storm is soaking Florida this morning and I get caught in it exactly as I enter the Everglades. I white knuckle it for most of my drive across swampy Rte. 41 and worry the rental car company is going to penalize me for leaving permanent indentations in the steering wheel.

I pass through **Big Cypress National Preserve** ([nps.gov/bicy](http://nps.gov/bicy)), the finest expression of the tropics in the US. This forest consists of dwarf pond cypresses, thick mangroves, and protected swampland inhabited by alligators, manatees, poisonous snakes, and the elusive Florida panther. I stop to snap a photo at the **Ochopee Post Office** ([facts.usps.com/smallest-post-office](http://facts.usps.com/smallest-post-office)), which at just 61 square feet is the world's smallest, and grab a coffee at **Joanie's Blue Crab Cafe** ([facebook.com/joaniesbluecrabcafe](http://facebook.com/joaniesbluecrabcafe)) where bathrooms feature wall-to-wall pictures of nude women snapped on the premises. (I'm guessing the photographer was a "Florida man.")

Grinding traffic in Sarasota slows me down an hour, but as I drive the Sunshine Skyway across magnificent Tampa Bay the clouds dissipate practically on cue, signaling the end to this torrential downpour

and triumphantly heralding my arrival into sunny St. Pete. Pride flags are everywhere, another harbinger of good times ahead.

In the second-floor lobby of the **Mari Jean Hotel** ([marijeanhotel.com](http://marijeanhotel.com)), there is a gold-foiled heart etched onto the wall and in white typeface the phrase “The Gayest Place in Town” written within it. This is no overstatement. Taking up a city block along the quieter side of St. Pete’s terrific and trending Central Avenue, gay owned and adults only Mari Jean is the reimagining of a 54-room historic property that first opened in 1926 and whose name offers a nod to original owner Harry Jean’s drag alter ego. Jean is said to have traipsed around the hotel in his late mother’s jewelry and lime-green ball gown, hence the hotel’s “brat” color scheme.

I lean against the check-in desk, which has the word COCK written across the front of it in block neon lettering, and wait patiently while the desk agent artfully arranges several wine bottles and cheese and crackers for the complimentary happy hour. Behind me there is a piece of sculpture art featuring about a dozen erect and veiny phalluses painted gold and I imagine an army of angry Oscar statuettes storming the hotel lobby and demanding their manhood back.

At restaurant **LALA** ([lalakaraoke.com](http://lalakaraoke.com)) across the street from the Mari Jean I order the vodka-forward Pretty Woman (because that’s just how I’m feeling tonight). Adjacent to me at the bar sits a trio of gay retirees each wearing collared shirts in different citrus colors, and I wonder if they’re a septuagenarian throuple. LALA specializes in private karaoke rooms (hence the name) and elaborate charcuterie boards. I order the duck linguini (an item they’ve twice brought back due to popular demand) at the encouragement of my hot, ginger server named Eric who I later learn was the general manager for eight years at queer nightlife fixture X Bar in Denver.

“We just bought a home in Largo,” says a bearded boy named Reed. “It’s a mobile home, but it’s something.” I’m now at **Lucky Star Lounge** ([luckystarloungefl.com](http://luckystarloungefl.com)), a gayborhood dive bar that’s easy to find thanks to its exterior mural of Madonna that replicates her iconic “True Blue” album cover. Reed’s boyfriend Nick talks my ear off like I’m his therapist and shares his two loves: Olive Garden and Taylor Dayne. Nick also shows me a video of himself getting thrown from a mechanical bull. Our conversation suddenly gets interrupted by a drunken dude who clumsily pinches my neck with his thumb and forefinger. Our visibly annoyed and burly bar-

tender, who has tattoos, a nose ring, and a tight tee that says DADDY, intercedes. “Dennis, leave him alone!” Unfortunately, Dennis is a menace and though he backs off initially, he advances again this time clasp my wrist like a handcuff. The bartender finally throws him out of the bar and tells him to never come back.

### ST. PETE TO ORLANDO

It’s a stunning Florida morning and, because my drive to Orlando this afternoon is a short one, I have plenty of time to stop and smell the roses, or in this case stop and admire the rainbow-hued storm drains and gayborhood crosswalks painted the colors of the Pride Progress flag.

**Black Crow Coffee** ([blackcrowcoffeeco.com](http://blackcrowcoffeeco.com)) is a funky little café featuring a garage door that opens onto a large, sun-drenched courtyard. Thanks to its assorted antiques, eclectic furniture, and whimsical tchotchkes like *Golden Girls* shot glasses, vintage album covers, and letter press “We’re Here, We’re Queer” poster, Black Crow looks like it could’ve been a stunt double for Central Perk from the sitcom *Friends*. But my new obsession turns out to be nearby **Pete’s Bagels** ([petesbagels.com](http://petesbagels.com)), a hip bakery, mercantile, and all-day hangout featuring chewy and delicious scratch-made bagels.

St. Petersburg has a handsome downtown featuring a historic and gridded core boasting marquee attractions like the loopy **Dali Museum** ([thedali.org](http://thedali.org)) and the glassy **Chihuly Collection** ([moreanartscenter.org/chihuly-collection-location](http://moreanartscenter.org/chihuly-collection-location)). Its Grand Central District is a mile-long hub of bona fide Gulf Coast cool fronted by pretty brick storefronts and peek-a-boo arcades hosting breweries, dog bakeries, assorted ateliers, and gift shops. Brutique ([centralbrutique.com](http://centralbrutique.com)), for example, is a hybrid bar and clothing store that hosts drag bingo and occasional Pride events. Immaculately curated gift shop **ZaZoo’d** ([zazood.com](http://zazood.com)) is gay owned and boasts a swimsuit and undies-focused outpost (The Back Room by ZaZoo’d) at the Mari Jean. Then there’s Best of the Bay winner **Atlas Body + Home** ([facebook.com/atlasbodyandhome](http://facebook.com/atlasbodyandhome)), another gay-owned gem offering beach towels, booty shorts, sequined Pride merch, manly scented candles, and more.

It’s noon and I’m back at the Mari Jean where my toes are curled around the edges of the swimming pool at the aptly named WET SPOT Pool Bar & Day Club. I’m staring at a sea of Tom of Finland inner tubes that are bobbing up and down across the pool like a fryer full of donuts,

Photos: Jason A. Heidemann



while protectively cradling a large pink penis in my arms. This phallus is a flotation device and, in my head, I'm imagining it's a mandatory item in every stateroom on an Atlantis cruise in case the ship goes down. I'm feeling as serene as the potted palms surrounding the pool, but it's also time to go. Front desk agent Grayson checks me out and checks me out. "How is your day going," I ask. "I got to see you in a swimsuit," he says, "so no complaints." I like St. Petersburg.

On the way out of town I stop at the **Salty Nun** (saltynun.com), an old service station with upgraded garage doors, astroturf, sunshades, and an outdoor bar which keeps the vibe focused on al fresco drinking and dining. I order the bourbon burger featuring two smash patties and barbecue sauce that winds up all over my face and is scrubbed off only with the help of many napkins.

In Tampa, I stop at venerable entertainment and nightlife neighborhood Ybor City for a caffeinated refreshment with an unexpected shot of queer history. I order a café con leche (a drink synonymous with the factory workers who once rolled Cuban cigars in the neighborhood) at Café Quiquiriquí, a leafy coffee shop housed inside the **Hotel Haya** (hotelhaya.com). What I find out while wandering around the 178-room boutique property is that its ballroom once housed a queer nightclub called El Goya that boasted a legendary female impersonator revue. A marker out front commemorates the bar's historic role in the city's LGBTQ+ community.

The two-hour drive to Orlando will be one of the shortest of my trip and my arrival coincides on the day of the 8th anniversary of the Pulse Nightclub shooting, which resulted in the death of 49 LGBTQ+ people and the wounding of 53 others. The City of Orlando has purchased the Pulse site and as of this writing is working with the families to establish a permanent memorial.

At gay-owned **Bites and Bubbles** (bitesbubbles.com), a restaurant and wine bar with a rooftop terrace, I sit inside to escape the potent Central Florida heat and order a fried warmed goat cheese salad with berry compote and a snapper piccata with an arugula salad. My efficient server Trevor sports a bleach blonde quaff and a cross tattoo behind his ear "to signify his Christian faith," he says.

It's underwear night at **Barcodes Orlando** (facebook.com/barcodes-orlando), a neighborhood bar near Lake Fairview with an onsite store and leather-fetish vibes. Not one person has stripped down though, but that's all about to change.

"Must be nice to live down here," says a dude visiting from Cleveland who I find myself clustered with around a high boy table. I shrug my shoulders and tell him that I live in Los Angeles. "I'm sorry," he says. "Sounds like a dumpty city full of rude and shallow..." I whisk myself away from this ignorant fool before the final syllables spill from his lips.

Annoyed, I begin feeding dollar bills into the darts machine and decide to burn off my indignation with a solo game of Cricket when two gay Disney executives (one bearded and beefy, the other nerdy-cute) interrupt me mid-throw. I invite them to play, but up the stakes by challenging them to strip darts—it is underwear night after all. Bearded and beefy seems almost determined to lose and in no time is down to only his boxer shorts. With a booze-induced shrug he hooks the waistline of his undies, pushes them to his ankles and tosses a few rounds completely naked, much to the delight of the room. "As much as I'm enjoying this," says the bartender with a tap on his shoulder, "there are security cameras everywhere." I follow this hunky Disney exec to his car where he shows me more wood than an untruthful Pinocchio.

## ORLANDO TO ATLANTA

Time to rise, shine, and support a local LGBTQ+ business. At gay-owned bakery **Glass Knife** (theglassknife.com) I bend over like I'm bottoming and peruse the glass display full of fancy sweets, including petit macarons, lemon lavender cookies, oatmeal cream pies, and rainbow-colored Pride Month snack cakes. I order an extravagant strawberry milkshake donut and coffee and hit the road.

With speedy efficiency I reach Mt. Dora, a quaint lakeside village northwest of Orlando, in about 30 minutes. I walk the historic downtown where streetlamps are adorned with hanging Pride Month banners proclaiming, "Love is love." Sliding out of town I drive past **Van Gogh House** (facebook.com/vangoghmounddora), an entire lakefront home painted to resemble his luminous masterpiece "Starry Nights."

In a state where beach bums fan out among 1,300 miles of sun-drenched coastline while their thrill-seeking counterparts crowd the theme parks, I discover that driving through Florida's languorous interior paints a different picture. Much of the countryside is farmed for citrus, sugarcane, tomatoes, peanuts, watermelons, and snap beans, while Spanish Moss can be found hanging from large trees and draped across telephone wires as if Mother Nature has tee-peed the landscape. Most of the locals I pass along the road nod at me while wiping sweat from their brows. In collegiate Gainesville, I stop for a hoagie and park my car in front of a rainbow crosswalk.

As I drive across the state line into Georgia, I roll down the windows and decide to honor the Peach State by cranking up quirky queer homespun favorites the B-52s. "I'm heading down the Atlanta highway," sings a giddy Kate Pierson while I literally do the same thing.



Oz Campground in Georgia

When I arrive at **Oz Campground** ([ozcampground.com](http://ozcampground.com)), a resident calico cat is seeking shade under a poolside umbrella while meticulously grooming her left paw, seemingly unaware of all the nude men lounging around. Oz is one of several LGBTQ+ statewide campgrounds and I'm here for an afternoon sip 'n' dip before making the final two-hour trek to Atlanta.

Jeff and Ken, a couple of permanent Oz residents in their mid-fifties, tell me this is the calm before the storm and that weekenders from the city are on their way. They are not wrong. By happy hour the pool fills on cue with city boys dispensing of their clothing and tiptoeing into the refreshing water. In one corner of the pool is naked bartender Travis who is hanging with us guests before starting his nighttime shift. "I'm as sweet as Equal, and Equal is as bitter as f\*ck," he tells me while vigorously cooling himself with a splayed fan that reads: DAMN DADDY.

Later, I find myself in a culinary quandary. I've borne the worst of Atlanta's traffic and am now I'm perched on a barstool at lesbian-owned **JenChan's** ([jenchans.com](http://jenchans.com)), a funky and stylish Asian eatery in Cabbagetown. Neither the dude sitting next to me at the bar (who proclaims to be a regular), nor bartender Sam wants to offer menu suggestions because everything they insist is just that good. So, I settle on a duo of tasty egg rolls with a thick and crunchy dough that are not like any I've ever had before, and a chilled elote soup that offers a refreshing antidote to the stifling heat. Only the Brussels sprouts (overly pan-fried) are a miss. Bartender Sam and general manager Maximillian blow me air kisses on my way out the door and hint at seeing me out later at the bars.

How I manage to pull myself together and hit the town after such a long day on the road I'll never know, but inside a V-shaped shopping plaza in Midtown are numerous gay bars that are hopping tonight, including the **Atlanta Eagle** ([atlantaeagle.com](http://atlantaeagle.com)), **Oscar's** ([oscaratl.com](http://oscaratl.com)), **Felix's** ([felixatlanta.info](http://felixatlanta.info)), and fetish shop **Barking Leather** ([barkingleather.com](http://barkingleather.com)).

The Atlanta Eagle is a multi-level nightlife hub and the busiest on this strip. Among the dim lighting and haze of cigarette smoke out on the patio are a sea of shirtless studs, beefy bears, furry gingers, fetish-curious twinks, and of course the requisite guy fondling himself next to me at the urinal while I pee listlessly and gaze at the pornographic wallpaper in front of me.

#### ATLANTA TO GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK

After picking up breakfast the next morning at **Brooklyn Bagel** ([brooklynbagel-deli.com](http://brooklynbagel-deli.com)), a wrong turn dumps me onto the **Atlanta Beltline** ([beltline.org/visit](http://beltline.org/visit)), the 22-mile paved trail system that is the city's best attraction and which this morning is serving up a stream of dedicated joggers and happy dogs tethered to their people. Alas, the road beckons.

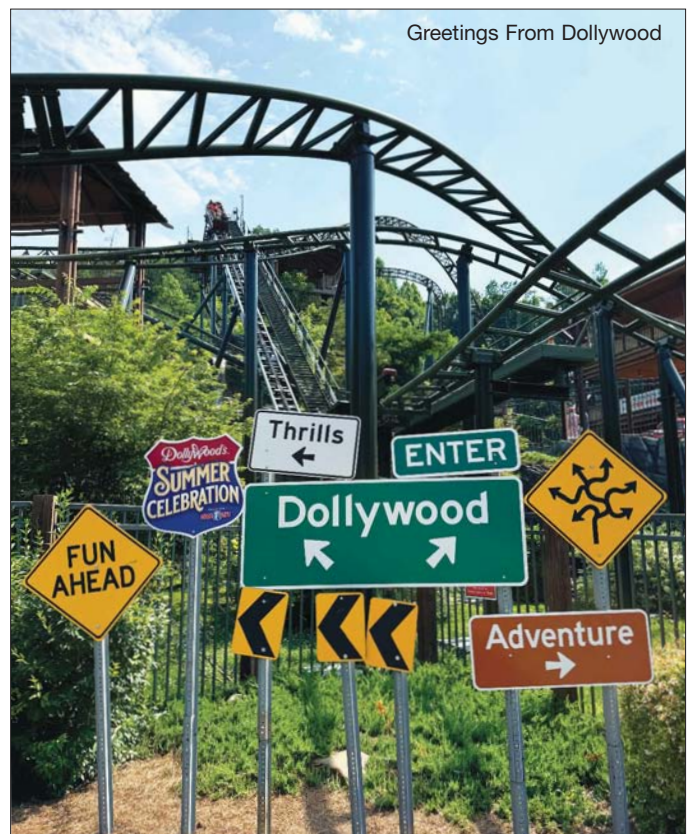
As I wind my way through northern Georgia's leafy terrain and narrow switchback roads, I pass a bounty of churches and make it a game to count which denomination dominates. In this deeply religious part of the state, it's not even close: Southern Baptist is the clear winner. The landscape is neatly divided. On the one hand there are densely forested areas like Amicalola Falls State Park and Chattahoochee Oconee National Forest, while on the other I see hilly farmland where tightly wound bales of hay lay scattered across the countryside. In Lumpkin County I pass through Dahlonega, a small-town charmer and tourist magnet featuring wineries, a butterfly farm, and a buffalo ranch.

The real find, however, is Helen, Georgia, a bratwurst-infused

Bavarian village where punctilious A-frame buildings with elaborate gingerbread trimmings and boisterous beer halls serving schnitzel and foamy pilsners line the Chattahoochee River. It's been two days since I've had a sausage in my mouth, so I order a wurst sandwich and spaetzle and dine *im freien* (outside) at the aptly named **Hofbrauhaus** ([hofbrauhauselenga.net](http://hofbrauhauselenga.net)). Below me, a crush of hot pink inner tubes supporting tipsy weekenders collide bumper-car style while floating at an unhurried pace down the river.

I enter Tennessee with the welcome discovery that every square mile of Great Smoky Mountains National Park is a jaw dropper. There are the tall trees that bend toward each other over the road like synchronized swimmers in one of those old MGM "aquamusicals," there are the unspooled ribbons of water flowing throughout the park and providing visitors with a soothing background soundtrack, and there are the views from high elevation points where visitors clamor to snap pics of mountain peaks and mist-filled valleys lined with hemlocks. Right at the entrance to the park I pass a trio of gophers who look up to greet me like a scene straight out of a Disney movie.

**Under Canvas Great Smoky Mountains** ([undercanvas.com/camps/great-smoky-mountains](http://undercanvas.com/camps/great-smoky-mountains)) offers chic tents inside the park for fancy families, city folk, and pseudo-outdoorsy types like me, and it's here where I unwind sans cellphone for the night. Around the campfire where s'mores kits are passed around, I strike up a conversation with a scruffy and bearded chauffeur named Luke who is driving around a father and son from Nashville. We keep enjoying long, awkward pauses where we catch ourselves staring at one another, but eventually he asks if I've met any "chicas" on my trip and now I'm not so sure about him. Around us, fireflies light up the camp like the insides of a diamond mine.



Photos: Jason A. Heidemann



## GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS TO KNOXVILLE

Hurray for **Dollywood** ([dollywood.com](http://dollywood.com))! The entire state of Tennessee is a shrine to Dolly Parton, and I'm hard pressed to find a hotel, restaurant, or boutique that doesn't pay tribute to the legendary country singer in some way, usually via amateur artwork and gift shop merch like t-shirts and mugs with her face airbrushed across them. But the finest expression of Dollymania is at her eponymous theme park in Pigeon Forge where I at last check off a bucket list item.

Family-friendly Dollywood attempts to capture the spirit of the Great Smoky Mountains via themed attractions and thrill rides like the triple spiral-looping Tennessee Tornado, the wet and wild River Rampage, Dolly's Tennessee Mountain Home (a replica of her childhood cabin), and the legitimately vertiginous Mystery Mine. This being the South, there's also a chapel offering Sunday church service and home-spun food offerings like fried catfish and warm biscuits.

In one area of the park, there is a temporary art exhibition, a hanging assemblage of rainbow-colored pool floaties called "Noodle Takeover." Though it's not explicitly stated, I'm certain it's a Pride Month hat tip. Because Dollywood walks a fine line between serious and campy, you don't have to squint too hard to see gay double entendres across the park like yesteryear signage promoting 'seed spittin' and 'pig hollerin.' In one labyrinthine line, I lock eyes with and repeatedly pass a gay couple in matching outfits with Mickey Pride lapels on them.

Knoxville is only about 45 minutes from the park and the short drive offers a landscape filled with green and mossy foliage that resemble giant topiaries hand-cut by a purse-lipped Edward Scissorhands. I check in at **The Oliver Hotel** ([theoliverhotel.com](http://theoliverhotel.com)) where small Pride flags dangle from pretty flower boxes. There are also Pride flags all over the lobby and across downtown storefronts and I learn later that in 2020 Knoxville went for Biden by margins as high as +50 in some areas. I snap a pic on the pedestrian-friendly **Gay Street Bridge** ([knoxvillehistoryproject.org](http://knoxvillehistoryproject.org)) which crosses the serpentine Tennessee River.

**A Dopo** ([adopopizza.com](http://adopopizza.com)) is dope. I walk into this hip little sourdough pizzeria tucked alongside the freeway at exactly 5:12 P.M. and snag the only seat in the house. A Dopo's tasty pies are puffy on the outside, cracker thin in the middle, and shaped like cinder cone volcanos. While tearing apart a calabrese pie, I see a planter in the middle of the kitchen with a Pride flag in it. A recurring thought during my short visit is that Knoxville is a cool little city stuck in the Bible Belt.

"You a local," says an older dude named Craig who pounds my shoulder with his fist. I tell him I'm just passing through. "Well, I'm heading out, but you look sexy." I'm now at **Club XYZ** ([facebook.com/clubxyz-knoxville](https://facebook.com/clubxyz-knoxville)), one of two queer bars in town. This matchstick slender joint is sleepy tonight, though the bartender tells me he makes good money so it must get busy during other days of the week.

On the back patio, which is also quiet, a young twink is talking with his friend while hauling garbage. "There's always trash around here," he says winkingly at me with a Southern drawl. His drag name is Lotza Minnailmi. On Instagram he calls himself Knoxville's dumbest secret.

## KNOXVILLE TO NASHVILLE

**Potchke** ([potchkedeli.com](http://potchkedeli.com)) describes itself as a modern deli, but really, it's a roguishly charming little eatery adorned with African artwork, a disco ball, and a photo of Groucho Marx behind the counter and



serves Jewish and Ukrainian delicacies like borscht and babkas. I get the breakfast-inspired potato blintzes stuffed with spuds, caramelized onion, cheese, and scrambled egg served with labna, chili oil, and avocado. The food in Knoxville is insanely good.

At **Nothing Too Fancy** ([nothingtoofancy.com](http://nothingtoofancy.com)), a charming gift shop next to my hotel specializing in locally made t-shirts, I again succumb to the siren call of Parton, this time in the form of an irresistible white crop top with blue and red lettering that reads: Dolly for President. When I take it to check out the cute ginger clerk says, "Aw man, you're getting a crop top, and you didn't try it on for me?"

Farewell foxy Knoxy! I'm taking back country roads to Music City and along the way blasting the Judybats, the Knoxville-based indie rock band from the '90s fronted by out singer Jeff Heiskill. While burning rubber around rural Crab Orchard, a town thick with dogwood, I stumble upon Ozone Falls, a single waterfall with a 110-foot drop that empties into a chilly pool full of idling teenagers on summer break. The rural countryside is dotted with tin roof shacks and galloping horses, but an abandoned truck draped in white canvas stops me dead in my tracks. It reads: LBGQT YOUR DECEIVED AND DESTROYING CHILDREN. GO BACK TO CLOSET BUT DON'T TAKE A KID WITH YOU. YOUR NOT WELCOME IN OUR TOWN. Visibly shaken I veer back onto the highway and try and tell myself that this probably the work of a single, hate-filled individual.

The main attraction at **White Limozen** ([hilton.com](http://hilton.com)), the Barbie pink indoor-outdoor cocktail bar and swimming pool atop the Graduate Hotel in Nashville, is an oversized and impressive bust of Dolly Parton crafted of pink netting. I suck down my buzz-free (i.e. non-alcoholic) Buckle Bunny and survey the room which consists of dressed-to-impress Millennial gals who look like they all have a gay



Photos: Jason A. Heidemann

On The Road in Rural Kansas

best friend. There is one dude besides me among these giddy girls and he's a burly fellow wearing a t-shirt that reads: SPREAD CHEEKS, NOT HATE. A message I endorse.

At **Frankie J's** ([frankiejsnashville.com](http://frankiejsnashville.com)), a cute new gay bar in a Germantown housed in a craftsman bungalow and boasting a sprawling backyard featuring cornhole games and Pride-colored picnic tables, I meet up with married couple Brian Riggenbach and Mikey Corona who co-own and operate **The Mockingbird** ([mockingbird-nashville.com](http://mockingbird-nashville.com)) in the trendy Gulch neighborhood. We are celebrating the opening of their newest venture **Tio Fun!**, a jubilant counter-service Mexican eatery where breakfast tacos, barrio bowls, mini pizzas,

*pochos* (loaded potatoes), and caramel-stuffed churros are served on paper plates. Bring in a framed photo of you and your tio and they'll display it in the restaurant!

Leave it to these two *Chopped* winners to eschew fine dining and instead take me to **Dino's** ([dinosnashville.com](http://dinosnashville.com)), a no-frills East Nashville roadhouse featuring killer burgers and chicken sandos. We end the evening at **The Lipstick Lounge** ([thelipsticklounge.com](http://thelipsticklounge.com)), a lesbian hangout that is one of the oldest in the nation and famous for its karaoke nights. It is suicidally hot outside and even at this late hour I'm sweating.

### NASHVILLE TO EUREKA SPRINGS

Brian and Mikey and I are downtown at an early AM hour searching for a historical marker commemorating two local queer bars, The Jungle and Juanitas, which served as important community hubs during the '50s. The sign was accidentally knocked down and will eventually be restored. Before hitting the road, the boys take me to breakfast at gay-owned bakery **D'Andrews Bakery & Café** ([dandrewsbakery.com](http://dandrewsbakery.com)), a James Beard Award semifinalist which this morning is being prepped for a photo shoot for some fancy magazine. We share a handful of sweet and savory items, including a breakfast sandwich, chocolate croissant, pop tart, and Pride macaron. Everything is wonderful.

It's an *Amazing Race* kind of day on the road as I make a mad dash to the Ozark Mountains via five U.S. states. Right out of the gate I spy a trip (yes, that's the term) of goats nibbling on grass along I-24. In Kentucky, I pull over at a rest stop and accidentally march right into the women's restroom to relieve myself. (I do find it peculiar that there



Photos: Jason A. Heidemann

Equality House in Topeka, Kansas

are no urinals.) Bluegrass billboards, meanwhile, promise boozy distillery tours and I'm tempted to see seek one out (a bourbon buzz sounds nice about now), but instead I follow backcountry roads into distressed Cairo, Illinois, a town whose population peaked at 15,000, but thanks to racial unrest in the '60s and the decline of the steamboat industry has dwindled to 1,600. Downtown is almost completely shuttered, but surrounding farmlands offer a glimpse into Land of Lincoln beauty, including peak season stalks of corn standing taller than most NBA players. I stop for lunch in Poplar Bluff, Missouri before gliding into the Ozarks, home to one of my favorite queer meccas.

Check-in agent Charlie greets me fully nude (well, he's wearing tennis shoes and a cock ring) at **Magnetic Valley Resort** ([magneticvalleyresort.com](http://magneticvalleyresort.com)), a men's only clothing-optional lodge and campground just outside downtown Eureka Springs, Arkansas. It's midweek so I'm just one of a few guests staying at the hotel tonight, not counting resident cats Queenie, Pickles, and Judy. Charlie walks me around the swimming pool, where a statue of a cherub is peeing into the water, and into my off-pool guestroom. "This is a play sheet in case you want to do some stuff," he says while ticking off a list of house rules. "Don't mess up the comforter."

There's a t-shirt for sale at trans-owned **Wanderoo Lodge** ([wanderoolodge.com](http://wanderoolodge.com)) where I'm having dinner tonight that perfectly sums up Eureka Springs. It reads: Homos & Hippies & Harleys & Hillbillies & Holy Rollers. This is no joke. Nestled in the heart of the Ozarks (which could easily be renamed the MAGA Mountains), this hilly little LGBTQ+ village is a true oddity. It was built during the Victorian era and anyone who proclaims it the San Francisco of the Ozarks is right on the money. There's not a single stoplight or right-angled road in the entire town (she's curvy and proud of it!) and several of its hotels are said to be haunted. Eureka Springs is a longtime haven for the queer community and allied heteros, but also attracts Bible Belters thanks to an Evangelical campus built into the top of the mountain that includes the Passion Play and a totem-like statue of Jesus overlooking the valley below known as **Christ of the Ozarks** ([greatpassionplay.org](http://greatpassionplay.org)).

At Wanderoo Lodge I dine at Gravel Bar where it's also karaoke night and a couple are dueting "Jackson" by Johnny and June Carter Cash. On the way out the door I seriously consider buying a t-shirt that reads: Okay I'll come in for one drink and maybe sex, but that's it.

## EUREKA SPRINGS TO KANSAS CITY

After waking myself up with a cup of mediocre hotel coffee and a nude swim, I head into town for breakfast at **Main St Café** ([visiteurekasprings.com/main-street-cafe](http://visiteurekasprings.com/main-street-cafe)), which offers no-frills omelets, waffles, and country-fried steaks, and is exactly the kind of place I seek out when traveling the open road. Think red-and-white checker tablecloths, waitresses who call you honey, bottomless cups of coffee, and gruff locals. Size queens will love the giant portions. Even on a weekday this little place fills up fast.

On my way out of town I stop to admire **Thorncrow Chapel** ([thorncrow.com](http://thorncrow.com)), a glass church tucked into the woods and designed by Frank Lloyd Wright protégé E. Fay Jones. I drive across **Little Golden Gate Bridge** ([visiteurekasprings.com/beaver-bridge](http://visiteurekasprings.com/beaver-bridge)), a photogenic suspension bridge spanning the White River, and pass a Pride Progress mailbox about 15 miles outside of Eureka where I narrowly dodge an armadillo carcass. As the South turns into the Midwest, I blast the power-pop-meets-country stylings of Trixie Mattel. (I love her slowed down largely acoustic version of "Vacation" by the Goo's.)



In Springfield, Missouri I snap a photo of **The World's Largest Fork** ([springfieldmo.org](http://springfieldmo.org)), (technically the world's second largest after the one in Fairview, Oregon), and my timing couldn't be better as the 35-foot-tall utensil is currently gaydar worthy thanks to its frequent appearance in the Chapell Roan video "HOT TO GO!" In **Red Oak II** ([redoakiimissouri.com](http://redoakiimissouri.com)), because every small-town deserves a sequel, I wander a grassy campus full of retired service stations, shotgun cottages, a functioning outhouse, and other authentic prairie buildings that recall the golden age of driving Route 66. This is the brainchild of artist Lowell Davis.

A roadside littered with purple, white, and orange wildflowers takes me right to Kansas City, Missouri. Gregory Boulevard is lined with stately Tudor homes while a turn onto Ward Parkway reveals one of the city's grand fountains (KC boasts more than 200 of them). At this moment, Kansas City is also the land of eternal summer as today is the solstice.

At the original **Joe's Kansas City Bar-B-Que** ([joeskc.com](http://joeskc.com)), a star in the city's culinary scene, I order the Rocket Pig sandwich (pulled pork with bacon, pepper jack cheese, fried jalapeño, BBQ mayo, and BBQ glaze), a side of creamy mac, and a tall of glass of soda fountain Pepsi.

Given that today marks the end of my journey across the eastern US and tomorrow begins my trek across the American West, it couldn't be more perfect that I'm staying at the **Crossroads Hotel** ([crossroadshotelkc.com](http://crossroadshotelkc.com)). A former Old Pabst brewery about a mile south of the Power and Light District, the Crossroads has been refashioned into a buzzy and expertly operated boutique hotel full of vintage brick, slanted wooden beams, and super-high ceilings. In the lobby I spy a queer cutie with green-tipped curly hair wearing short shorts and a collared shirt with a Basquiat print who is texting someone. After hitting send

he sashays away, and he does it with feeling.

Tristan and Austin, the queer owners of **West Bottoms Plant Co.** ([westbottomsplantcompany.com](http://westbottomsplantcompany.com)) are lovely. I am on the west side of town being guided around their cavernous and impressive warehouse which is a combination nursery and coffee shop and home to more than 100 artisan vendors hawking clothing, jewelry, mugs, and more. In one corner of the shop sits AdhDiy, a craft café that soon fills to capacity and where a helpful worker teaches me how to make a candle using cactus blossom as my scent. On the way out the door I nod a hello to resident turtle Frank.

“Excuse me, but you have nice hamstrings,” says a flirty senior with a gravelly voice, though it’s not clear to me how he can see them considering they are hidden beneath a highboy table at **Bistro 303** ([bistro303.com](http://bistro303.com)) where I’m cutting into chicken puttanesca. This combination gay bar and restaurant is a likeable little saloon offering tasty bar bites and, in the case of my entree, elevated fare as well. My heart-throb server Tyler has an irresistible smile and duly notes he’s “into daddies.” (Alas, when Tyler finds me on Instagram the following day and solicits a hotel hookup, I’m already hundreds of miles away.)

I return to Crossroads to celebrate the solstice in style. Parcheron is the hotel’s rooftop bar and named for the type of horse that used to haul beer carts around the city. Its entrance features gold-stenciled lettering displayed alphabet soup style across hard, concrete flooring while the outdoor seating area resembles a Bavarian beer hall minus the lederhosen. In a sudsy salute to the hotel’s Pabst past, I order a local brew and try to find a place to sit, though tonight Parcheron is packed. I huddle with a trio of stylish women who love my Hot Dad Summer shirt.

## KANSAS CITY TO DENVER

The staff at the Crossroads Hotel are upbeat and chipper when I check out at exactly 6:55 A.M. I have a long drive today across the prairie which is flatter than a SoCal smash burger. But I’ve never not had a good time road tripping around Kansas, and because the state is home to Dorothy, I’m pretending to follow the yellow brick road and see what discoveries await.

GOD HATES FAGS. There it is in red banner lettering posted across the front of the infamous Westboro Baptist Church on the corner of a tree-lined street in Topeka. I’m standing before the same church that has caused unspeakable pain to the LGBTQ+ community and feeling like a courtroom plaintiff at last confronting his attacker. But directly across the street sits **Equality House** ([plantingpeace.org/campaign/equality-house](http://plantingpeace.org/campaign/equality-house)), which is two adjacent ranch-style homes. The first is painted the color of the Pride flag and the second the pastel hues of the Transgender Flag, courtesy of Topeka Pride. I offer both homes a moment of quiet contemplation and the church my outstretched middle finger.

It’s a beautiful day to be traversing the Sunflower State. Blades of fresh-cut grass perfume the countryside, and it’s nearing peak growing season for local crops like wheat, corn, and soybeans, which dominate the landscape and will fill the bellies of millions come harvest season. Towns here are so small the entire state feels like a museum of miniatures, but some of them sure are charming. **Wamego** ([wamego.org](http://wamego.org)) has fashioned itself into a tourist attraction for Wizard of Oz fanatics complete with the kitschy OZ Museum, local businesses like Oz Winery, Emerald Salon, and Toto’s Tacos (boasting a Pride sticker in its

window), and a downtown alleyway renamed the Yellow Brick Road complete with pretty streetlamps and murals depicting characters from the movie. As I stroll through the alleyway, I keep thinking to myself: There’s no place like homo.

The mothership of all roadside attractions is the **World’s Largest Ball of Twine** ([kansastravel.org/balloftwine.htm](http://kansastravel.org/balloftwine.htm)) in Cawker City, and at last I’m standing in front of it. The on-hand docent even gives me a large spool and lets me circumnavigate the ball several times adding more sisal twine to it. I later learn other towns in the US have made the same claim, but Cawker boasts the largest community rolled version.

Rain falls harshly as I enter Colorado, but produces in its aftermath a big, fat, gay rainbow—a perfect symbol for Denver Pride.

The view of the Denver skyline from packed restaurant **El Five** ([ediblebeats.com/restaurants/el-five](http://ediblebeats.com/restaurants/el-five)) is breathtaking. The only thing missing is a rainbow-lit skyscraper or two. El Five serves elevated cuisine disguised as tapas in LoHi. Flavor combinations are thoughtful, and each dish is artfully presented. Think eggplant fries, matzo ball soup dumplings, chicken confit croquettes, and rabbit vol-au-vents. My friends and I love everything and engage in a vigorous fork war when our enticing desserts arrive.

It’s underwear night at the new and improved **Denver Eagle** ([instagram.com/denvereagle3.0](http://instagram.com/denvereagle3.0)) located on the outskirts of the city, and because it’s Pride weekend the house is full. I scan a sea of bulges held in place by taut waistbands and decide to make friends. First, I meet Spencer and Jimmy, two self-described “cock handlers” (meaning they own chickens) who live in South Denver. There’s also Brandon who I meet on the dance floor and asks how I’m liking Denver so far. “Friendly locals,” I tell him in between making out with him and cupping his bum as beams of light twirl around us.

The next morning, I rise and shine at my Misterbandb in the Lower Highlands where my host Joshua is stretched out on the couch with morning paper in hand while his pink-haired partner Manuel is making a pot of coffee for everyone—both are in the buff.

Denver Pride turns 50 today and Rocky Mountain queers have turned out for it in impressive numbers. PrideFest fans out from the city’s gold-foiled capitol and across Civic Center Park and as I ricochet between sun-avoidant gays hoisting Pride parasols, LGBTQ+ families pushing rainbow-colored strollers, and stilettoed drag queens furiously fanning themselves while throbbing EDM music rattles the rotunda, I feel like I’m inside a giant, gay pinball machine.

I am joined today by my friend Mitch, a onetime intern of mine, who meets me for lunch at **Levan Deli** ([eatleven.com](http://eatleven.com)), a very chic counter-service restaurant, bakery, and wine bar recommended to me by my Misterbandb hosts. Busy servers wearing Pride Progress t-shirts weave and cantilever throughout the narrow dining room while artfully balancing plates of classic pastrami sandwiches and turkey clubs in their arms. Afterward, Mitch and I head to gay bar **Buddies** ([buddies-denver.com](http://buddies-denver.com)) where we seek shade while occasionally throwing it.

As the late afternoon sun moseys westward, I head to the rooftop at the **Clayton Hotel & Members Club** ([claytondenver.com](http://claytondenver.com)) where I collapse poolside into a comfy daybed. The Clayton is a 63-room lifestyle hotel and social club in swanky Cherry Creek offering several restaurants, coworking spaces, and fitness amenities. Today, its rooftop is abuzz with swimsuit-clad millennials. I order a frosty mango colada and fall into a conversation with Mike and Andrea, a

local couple who joined the Clayton to hang poolside and work remote. Mike is not afraid to admit he really digs my tiny striped Aussie Bum swimsuit. (I love confident straight men.) I alternate between napping, swimming, and lapping up cool, mountain breezes before heading off to the rooftop restaurant for a grilled escarole salad and pepperoni pizza with city views.

My friend Chad and I are determined not to pay a cover charge tonight which seems like an impossible Pride Weekend feat until we stumble upon **Denver Sweet** (denversweet.com), a chill bear bar with a rooftop. It is here where we encounter a geeky throuple and their divorced, bisexual lady friend and break the ice by having them answer multiple-choice trivia questions in exchange for free drinks. None guess where Chad and I are originally from (South Dakota and Illinois respectively), or my underwear type (a leopard print thong), but the bisexual lady gets a free vodka soda when she correctly guesses the origin and end destination of my road trip. The three dudes are clearly into my friend Chad, but he's happily married and not interested in a Pride foursome.

### DENVER TO SALT LAKE CITY

**Fox and the Hen** (foxandthehen.com) is a chirpy little indoor-outdoor LoHi neighborhood breakfast spot decorated in pops of pink and citrus and specializing in fancy toasts. I fuel up, offer my glittery gay best to Denver's Pride Parade (which I will sadly miss), and hit the road.

Colorado is a land of pine-scented highways, roadside waterfalls, five-star ski lodges masquerading as frontier-era cabins, and serpentine rivers clear enough to reflect towering mountain peaks. As if it couldn't get any more magical, a brown bear literally lumbers across the highway right in front of me—a wildlife spotting I've dreamed of my entire life.

The streets of Steamboat Springs are lined with Pride Progress flags. I stop here for lunch at **Back Door Grill** (thebackdoorgrill.com), a name that recalls the excellent hookup I had with a hunky blonde otter Saturday morning right before hitting up Denver Pride Fest. The road between here and Salt Lake City is mostly desolate, and my only companion is the baritone swagger of queer country crooner Orville Peck, and later a passing chipmunk who races across the highway as if a pair of front row Taylor Swift tickets await him on the other side. In sleepy Vernal, Utah, I snap a photo of a Barbie pink Bron-tosaurus, a nod to nearby Dinosaur National Monument.

The Alpine-like foothills of the Wasatch Mountains outside Salt Lake City are alive, not so much with the *Sound of Music* but more like with the sounds of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. I'm completely spent as I motor into the city, and even in this fervent heat a steaming bowl of ramen in trendy and queer-ish neighborhood Sugarhouse perfectly hits the spot.

"Those bitches and friends" is the Pride Month theme at Salt Lake City queer bar **Try-Angles** (clubtryangles.com). It's a Sunday, but the mood in the bar is boisterous thanks to a group of mostly straight bike polo players who have taken up real estate on the back patio. Next, I head to **The Suntrapp** (suntrappslc.com), the oldest queer bar in Utah. It shuttered its doors in March 2024, but reopened a few weeks before my June visit under new, female-led ownership and apparently with two-hour lines stretching around the block. But I never make it inside. Instead, I connect in the bar's parking lot with a hot pocket gay on Scruff named Will and meet him 10 minutes later at his high-rise loft where I carry him to his bed and fold his small body into a naked pretzel—twice.



Secret Cove Nude Beach Lake Tahoe, Nevada

Photo: Jason A. Heidemann

### SALT LAKE CITY TO RENO/TAHOE

At the westbound Salt Flats Rest Area about 90 minutes outside Salt Lake City, a fanny pack of tourists (my official term for a cluster of sightseers) are furiously snapping selfies and making "snow" angels on the ground. I've reached the **Bonneville Salt Flats** (utah.com), a 30,000 acre densely packed, bone-white salt pan that is both a social media playground and a race car enthusiast's dream come true. At the international raceway pull off, I drive right onto the flats and take a few photos while enjoying the pristine silence.

Near the state line where Utah passes the torch to Nevada, I see snow-capped mountains lining one side of the horizon and red rock peaks on the other. This is exactly why I love Nevada. Home to gaudy, neon-lit cities, more mountain ranges than any other state, and an estimated 600 ghost towns, this is where America's pioneering spirit thrives right alongside the state's two most defining features—miles upon miles of sagebrush and slot machines.

In Elko, I park my car in front of Mona's Ranch, a bar and brothel that sits across the street from legendary Basque restaurant the **Star Hotel** (elkostarhotel.com). I enter the Star to sunburnt cowboys hunched over the bar while Kenny Chesney's "Summertime" plays. It's a Monday and everyone in town is crowding the large dining room where servers swing through saloon doors wielding cauldrons of cabbage soup, family-sized mixed greens salads slathered in creamy dressing, plates of French fries, and baskets of bread with ice cold butter. I order the pork sandwich with mayo and garlic slivers. The food is a revelation, though portions are so big I may never eat again.

Reno is like the child of a rock ‘n’ roll legend who tries to follow in their parent’s footsteps, but never quite manages even one hit single. In short, it’s no Las Vegas. Downtown is anchored by the Reno Arch (which famously proclaims it “The Biggest Little City in the World”) and the ROW, a trio of crumpled casino resorts that pale in comparison to the slicker ones that have sprung up along Virginia Street about 15 minutes south. But I love it anyway. Plus, what Reno lacks in razzle dazzle it more than makes up for in natural beauty including foothills dusted in shamrock green and proximity to stellar attractions like Tahoe and Pyramid Lake. I check in at the **Jesse Hotel** (thejesseren.com), a cool little corner property with a lively bar and restaurant, and just six rooms.

At the lounge inside the steeple-shaped atrium at **Oyster & Sushi Bar on Sky Terrace at Atlantis Casino** (atlantiscasino.com) I’m slurping a spicy seafood pan roast—a signature menu item. But the real pleasure tonight is on the casino floor where I’m printing money and wondering if I can parlay my luck into another hot hookup. I swing by **Carl’s Saloon** (carls-thesaloon.com), a lowkey gay taproom with a sprawling and flower-filled outdoor patio covered in astroturf. It’s quiet tonight, and I realize that if I want to tug on a nice shaft I’ll have to find one of those retro slot machines with a handle.

In the morning, I head straight to **Secret Cove Nude Beach** (tahoepublicbeaches.org/beaches/secret-cove) on The Nevada side of Lake Tahoe. I am expecting solitude on a weekday and am surprised to find it overrun by influencers taking selfies, though they eventually leave. Secret Cove is dominated by large, chunky boulders and water so crystal clear you can see every speck of sand on the lake floor. The corners of the cove bend toward each other like the edges of a flaky croissant, creating a true sanctuary.

After throwing down my towel and ditching my clothes I fall into conversation with a Mauritian adventurer who just finished six years in the German army and is spending his summer trekking across the American West. He has brought with him a standup paddleboard and lets me take it for a spin around the cove which offers vistas most sunbathers never get. I also see my Mauritian friend removing his swim trunks and am not displeased. Leaping from boulders into Tahoe’s frigid water is the most alive you can feel in nature, and I spend the day alternating between doing this and sunbathing as if I’m a two-song playlist on repeat. Tahoe is heaven.

Completely tuckered out, I have a delicious Mexican dinner at cheerful cantina **Azul** (azullatinkitchen.com) in South Lake Tahoe and spend the rest of the night laying low at **Basecamp Tahoe South** (basecamp-hotels.com/tahoe-south), a chic and cheerful hotel that sits on the Cal-Nevada state line and boasts a beer-forward cantina, fire pits, yard games, and live music nightly.

## RENO/TAHOE TO PORTLAND

So abundant are red barns and cattle crossing signs, California’s far north interior could pass for the prairie if it weren’t for the Cascade Mountains in the background. One such peak is pointy and snow-capped Shasta which looks like an earthy version of the Luxor in Vegas. Its majesty is a reminder that the Golden State never fails to impress. That said, as I drive through one national forest after another, I also see areas blackened and hollowed out by wildfires.

Oregon is crazy beautiful. There’s a mountain! There’s a mountain!

There’s a mountain! I’m on the eastern side of the Cascades which means it’s sunny, warm, and gorgeous as I barrel toward the city of Bend. Rivers rush alongside state highways lined by sprigs of lilac and the state’s famous Douglas firs as hawks circle overhead while framed by wispy white clouds.

Bend is like P-town for straight liberals. It’s an idyllic land of beards, breweries, and bicycles that boasts a downtown so picturesque it looks plucked straight from a Hollywood backlot. I stop at the **Somewhere That’s Green** (somewheregreen.com) plant shop, whose out owner combined his love of horticulture and musical theater by opening the drag and performance space Greenhouse Cabaret in the back of the shop. Before leaving town, I snap a selfie at the **World’s Last Blockbuster Video** (bendblockbuster.com).

Thanks to a nerve-racking crush of motor vehicles clogging downtown Portland at rush hour (whoever says the city has been hollowed out by the pandemic is way off), my eyes are fixated firmly on the road so I use the giant Pride flag I know will be hanging outside the **Heathman Hotel** (heathmanhotel.com) as my beacon. The Heathman is a regal little boutique property and a real gem that reminds me of the small hotels you see in Times Square (the kind of place within striking distance of Broadway theaters), or in Portland’s case the Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall which sits right next door. The hotel is also the only real Portland location referenced in *50 Shades of Grey*, though it seems unlikely any cuffing will happen tonight in my lovely one-bedroom suite.

Around the corner from **Powell’s City of Books** (powells.com) in the Pearl District (where practically every endcap is pushing queer literature in honor of Pride Month) I take a seat at the bar at irresistibly colorful and queer-owned Thai eatery **Farmhouse Kitchen** (farmhousethai.com) which serves street eats and boasts about a half dozen locations up and down the West Coast.

Google claims the **Eagle Portland** (eagleportland.com) is “not too busy” tonight, but there must be 50-60 guys here when I arrive, including around a dozen nude dudes clustered around the pool table. Apparently, it is naked billiards night. Every TV is showing a different adult video except for one behind the bar which is playing a low budget horror flick.

At downtown strip club **Stag PDX** (stagportland.com) a performer with flowing crimped hair, a fire engine red thong, and Buddha belly is climbing the pole like Nomi in *Showgirls*. Another dancer is trying to incorporate a pair of gymnast rings into their act, but finally gives up on trying to untangle them. Lastly, there’s a twink in a grey jock named Danny Boy who is so entwined with the pole, he reminds me of a merry-go-round figurine. When he sees me pull out a fiver, he bends over and beckons me. Based on the facial and bodily ambiguity of each dancer, I’m guessing genderqueer is tonight’s theme.

## PORTLAND TO SEATTLE

Always bet on amazing food in Portland. For breakfast, I head to **Café Olli** (cafeolli.com), a handsome little breakfast spot that recently won plaudits in the *New York Times*. I order a sweet cardamon bun and a frittata sandwich with pickled veggies on a milk bun. Everything is delightful.

Seattle is so beauty pageant pretty in summer I want to immediately hand it a tiara and sash. Because today’s drive is so short, my only stop along the way is in downtown Olympia where I admire the capitol and all the Pride flags lining the front of it. Truthfully, I’m just dying

Celebrating Pride 50 in Denver, Colorado



Photo: Jason A. Heidemann

to get to Seattle where I can at last drop off my car and celebrate the city's 50th Pride. Upon arrival, I see throngs of supporters waving trans flags. It's not even dusk and already queer sparks are flying.

After more than two weeks on the road I'm ready to feel at home, and luckily I have picked the right hotel for it. **Level Seattle** ([stayinglevel.com](http://stayinglevel.com)) in South Lake Union offers luxury suites featuring a living room, full kitchen, and in-room washer and dryer. It's also gay heaven. From the comfort of my balcony, I peer onto the 2nd floor pool where more than 300 queers partied at a Pride event here just a few weeks ago. Meanwhile, half of queer Seattle is at the hotel this weekend thanks to two gay groups who have booked room blocks. After throwing all my dirties into the laundry, I step into the hallway just in time to see a hunk clad only in a towel holding the door open for his crew.

The restaurants lining Pike Street have flung open their windows and are filled with gay partygoers fueling for the weekend ahead. I end up at queer-owned Asian eatery **Biang Biang Noodles** ([biangbiangnoodles.com](http://biangbiangnoodles.com)) where hearty portions foil my dream of a trim Pride Weekend waistline. So full-bellied am I that when I arrive at **Diesel** ([dieselseattle.com](http://dieselseattle.com)), a packed bear bar with a 50:1 love handle ratio, a man named Aldridge with a nose ring and army beanie places his hands on my tummy and says, "I like your belly." An empty seat next to the

bar's ordering area at **Madison Pub** ([madisonpub.com](http://madisonpub.com)) proves the perfect perch. Here I meet Connor who has great thighs and wears a shirt that says: he/him/hole. I also meet a guy wearing a blue crown who hugs me for no reason, a marketing analytics exec who keeps me entertained, and a guy from Hawaii with fake lashes who is celebrating his friend's 50th.

The mountain is out! It's a gorgeous Saturday morning in the Emerald City and I head to LGBTQ-owned **Dough Joy** ([doughjoydonuts.com](http://doughjoydonuts.com)) where the chipper staff greets me with "Happy Pride!" I order a gender-nonconforming donut (well, a donut glazed with frosting the color of the Transgender flag) and bop to the beat of Sylvester's "You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)" over the loudspeakers.

A bus ride later I find myself standing in front of a port-o-potty labeled Honey Bucket at **Denny Blaine Park** ([seattle.gov/parks/all-parks/denny-blaine-park](http://seattle.gov/parks/all-parks/denny-blaine-park)). Out of it emerges a large, hairy, and nude uncut bear. The sun is casting a sparkle over the waters of Lake Washington and about a dozen or so folks have shown up to bake their cakes at this lowkey clothing-optional strand. One perky dude with dark curly locks is even doing nude calisthenics and just watching him is exhausting me. Denny Blaine is mostly queer, but after sunbathing here for a hot minute I make my way down the street to its gay male coun-



Photo: Jason A. Heidemann

terpart. There are more dangling sausages at **Howell Park** ([seattle.gov/parks/allparks/howell-park](http://seattle.gov/parks/allparks/howell-park)) than at a butcher shop and I park myself in a sea of idling queer men drinking White Claws and smoking joints. “This is how they take it away!” a man shouts at two dudes he believes are getting frisky with one another.

Women rule Seattle’s culinary scene. In a single day, I have lunch at **Marination** ([marinationmobile.com](http://marinationmobile.com)), a lesbian-owned fast casual restaurant specializing in Hawaiian food. (Think pieces of Spam strapped to sushi via seaweed and pork katsu sliders with kimcheese spread.) After a late afternoon stroll around gayborhood Capitol Hill, including stops at kinky **Doghouse Leathers** ([doghouseleathers.com](http://doghouseleathers.com)) and at a block party at queer bar **Union Seattle** ([unionseattle.com](http://unionseattle.com)), I refuel with a café latte at lesbian-owned **Shikorina Bakeshop & Café** ([shikorinaseattle.com](http://shikorinaseattle.com)). When I finally make it to a late dinner, it’s in off-the-beaten path neighborhood Madison Valley. **Kamp** ([kampseattle.com](http://kampseattle.com)) is a stellar New American restaurant that is lesbian owned. As I slice away at my cauliflower steak, the chef appears several times behind the bar where I’m sitting but mostly shrugs off my effusive and elaborate praise. I couldn’t have asked for a better last supper.

In January 2024, law enforcement sparked outrage in Seattle’s queer community after raiding **The Cuff Complex** ([cuffcomplex.com](http://cuffcomplex.com)) and the **Seattle Eagle** ([seattleeagle.com](http://seattleeagle.com)) with flashlights and citing “lewd conduct.” But less than one week later the Washington Liquor and

Cannabis Board announced that a regulation on lewd conduct was outdated and would no longer be enforced. The LGBTQ+ community cheered, and the good times continue at tonight’s packed Eagle underwear party where a sea of men clad mostly in thongs and jockstraps sweat, dance, and collide with one another under a sea of crisscrossing laser beams and in dimly lit corners. “Leaving so soon,” asks a slim and handsome otter I’ve been cruising who catches me handing my slip to the clothes check guy. “Not anymore,” I say clasp his hand tightly and following him back into the darkness.

Famous **Pike Place Market** ([pikeplacemarket.org](http://pikeplacemarket.org)) is lined with Pride flags, though most of the tourists who have queued up this morning at the original Starbucks or to watch workers dressed in orange Grundens bibs toss fish from one end of a stall to another seem blissfully unaware that the **Seattle Pride** ([seattlepride.org](http://seattlepride.org)) parade is about to begin. I veer away from the market’s cobbled streets and wedge myself along the parade route. In a few hours, I will be on a plane back to Los Angeles. The skyscrapers lining 4th Avenue funnel the sounds of the Women’s Motorcycle Contingent, which I can hear revving up in the distance. That familiar purring will usher in an afternoon of unbridled joy, defiance, radical self-expression, pumped fists, and a whole lot of glitter. Behind my sunglasses, tiny tears are forming. I’m not sure if this is because I’m excited for the parade or because I have at last reached an epic finish line. Either way I’m feeling a lot of pride today. ■