

# GAYTIMES



## Fort Lauderdale, Florida.



Words **Stephen Unwin**

If there was a god, she'd totally twitch her nose and create Fort Lauderdale. The beach, that goes on forever and is wider than your average strait, lapped by the glistening Atlantic on one side and glossy five-stars on the other; sand peppered with just the right amount of palm trees for your Insta clichés and the odd giant deck chair with 'Fort Lauderdale Beach' plastered all over it, and colour-drenched beach bars serving gyros (think doner kebab, only they eat them sober here) and loaded fries (think cheesy chips, only they eat them sober here); and all the LGBTQs you can shake a Pride flag at. There's a theme here, and it's called quality of life. Once a Miami afterthought, Fort Lauderdale is a smiling alchemy of sunshine, money, and people getting the hell out of its more obvious neighbour, 30 miles that-a-way down Highway 1 if you're taking the scenic route.

We keep harping on about the LGBTQ lot around here, right? That's because it may just be the gayest (and proudest) town in America. Actual statistics show that of all the city officials in the land, Fort Lauderdale has among the highest percentage of LGBTQ people. Dean Trantalis, its mayor, is gay. In Wilton Manors (more of which later), just north of Downtown FT, all of its elected government officials are LGBTQ (only Palm Springs can boast the same thing) and it has the second-highest per capita LGBTQ population in the States, at 14%. (Provincetown pips it to that rainbow post.)

And the gay nightlife glitters all over its bustier neighbour, too. Wilton Manors – some people even call it Gayberry, which is all kinds of cute – and includes Georgie's Alibi, a restaurant, bar, club, and local favourite with its adjoining Manchester Room with drag queens. There's The Pub, which feels like a neighbourhood bar, if your neighbourhood bar has a 400 sq ft dance floor, Rosie's has quite the jumpin' lunchtime scene, Infinity is where you'll wear your nicer togs and The Manor Complex or Hunters (or both) is where you'll scuff 'em up. And all of the above – plus plenty of other places we haven't mentioned – are in rolling distance of each other so punch Wilton Drive into your Uber and

you're off. Back in Downtown FT your best-bet bars are Stache, Apothecary 330 and Rhythm & Vine, while lingering between these two heavyweight LGBTQ neighbourhoods are Le Boy and Cubbyhole. And we've barely started. Did we even mention honky-tonk Scandals Saloon?

And we bet you didn't know you needed an underwater adults-only burlesque show with your hotel, right? That'd be B Hotel, funky and right on the beach, rooms with floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook rows and rows of beach volleyball nets. Or that you needed to eat at the sexy-as Kuro inside the crazy-as Seminole Hard Rock Hotel because it's probably the hottest restaurant around even if it is a bit of a schlep south towards Hollywood (other Hollywoods are available), but it's totally worth it not only for the insanely good modern Japanese but because the hotel (they're still building it. It's like South Florida's La Sagrada Familia) is in the shape of a guitar. A 450 ft one. Someone got paid good money to come up with that. Oh, and if you're taking notes, the air con in America is eye-shatteringly glacial, so even if you've sweated several dress sizes outside you'll need at least something diaphanous for covering up at dinner. Turns out seventeen paper napkins draped over bare legs, shoulders, knees and toes doesn't quite cut it. And not only is getting to this neck of the LGBTQ woods easier – and cheaper – than ever thanks to our friends at Norwegian Air and their new London-Miami route, 2020 sees Fort Lauderdale Pride morph into Pride of the Americas, a testament to not only how freaking good a show they put on (special shout out to Ritz-Carlton's legendary pre-Pride brunch), but how seriously the Pride community respects this dazzling LGBTQ destination. Uniting the community from Canada right down to Argentina and all the way up again in case they've missed anyone, Pride of the Americas will see 350,000-odd global revellers pack the Fort Lauderdale sands for a humdinger of a five-day party in April. And if anyone fancies swinging by Miami while they're here, we won't judge.