Legalized Same-Sex Marriage
Boosting Hawai‘i Tourism
By Dr. Richard Kelley

‘Hawai‘i has long been a favorite travel destination for people from a diverse variety of cultures, beliefs and traditions, which is said to be a legacy of its Native Hawaiian population. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) visitors have found the Fiftieth State to be one of the most open-minded places in the world, which has kept it high on their list of preferred vacation destinations. The Hawai‘i Marriage Equality Act of 2013, which Hawai‘i Governor Neil Abercrombie signed into law effective December 2, 2013, has made Hawai‘i even more attractive to LGBT visitors, and many predict the resulting increase in wedding tourism will be significant.

Currently, only 16 of the 50 United States, plus the District of Columbia, have legalized same-sex marriage. Accordingly, it is not surprising that since Hawai‘i enacted its marriage equality law, nearly one-fourth of its 2,144 marriage license applications have been completed by same-sex couples, according to Hawai‘i News Now, citing recent data from the Department of Health.

The numbers may, in part, reflect pent-up demand and a rush of couples wishing to get married before January 1, 2014, to capture tax benefits for 2013. The long-run economic impact of the law is yet to be determined.

Nonetheless, Hawai‘i’s hotels, tour operators, wedding planners and airlines are all taking steps so they will not miss out on the potential of the same-sex wedding market as well as the much larger LGBT vacation travel market.

It has not always been this way. In 1999, Pacific Business News published an article titled “Hawaii Gives Gays Cold Shoulder.” The report quoted Jack Law, a gay activist and the owner of Hula’s Bar & Lei Stand, who expressed great frustration over his unsuccessful efforts to get anyone in the visitor industry to promote LGBT travel to Hawai‘i.

In that same article, however, Outrigger’s director of sales, Tom Wakita, Jr., also was quoted and pointed out that Outrigger has been focusing on the LGBT market for several years and was one of the few Hawai‘i hotel operators that belonged to the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association with a sales representative assigned to focus on gay and lesbian travelers.

A sidebar article of the same date noted that in 1995, four years previously, Outrigger was the only hotel company belonging to the International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA) that was rated “A” in gay-friendliness. Other major hotel chains were rated lower: Hilton Hotels Corp. (B+), Kimpton, Sheraton, Marriott (B), Hyatt (C+), Holiday Inn and Ritz-Carlton (D).

In 1999, a repeat survey ranked Kimpton and Joie de Vivre “A,” and Outrigger was in second place with a “B+,” together with five other national hotel chains.

A current article by Gay & Lesbian Travel writer Andrew Collins highly recommends a large number of Outrigger’s properties and calls them “gay-friendly.”

Outrigger’s leadership in attracting LGBT travelers may be related to its being a Hawai‘i-based company that grew up with the awareness that Native Hawaiians accepted a variety of human relationships in their culture. Accordingly, when hotel guests with values far from traditional Victorian social norms arrived, we saw no reason to discriminate because of cultural values. As we did for every other guest, we tried only to offer the best possible service and hospitality.

Now, in 2014, as community attitudes and cultural norms have shifted, other companies in Travel & Tourism are waking up. They are focusing on the LGBT market, advertising in LGBT publications and becoming sponsors or supporters of LGBT organizations. The website of the IGLTA highly ranks a number of major hotel companies as “Partners” – Hilton (Platinum), Hyatt (Gold), Melia and MGM Resorts (Silver). Aqua Hotels & Resorts, Hyatt and
Aston list special packages on the IGLTA website and in publications such as *Pride Guide Hawai‘i*.\(^1\) Of particular interest in that guide is the article on Native Hawaiian culture's acceptance for a variety of relationships found on pages 28-29.

Our political leaders are waking up too. *Pride Guide Hawai‘i* features full-page messages of welcome from Gov. Neil Abercrombie and mayors Billy Kenoi (Hawai‘i – the Big Island), Kirk Caldwell (Honolulu), Bernard Carvalho Jr. (Kaua‘i) and Alan Arakawa (Maui County, which includes Lāna‘i and Moloka‘i).

Yes, times are changing rapidly and we at Outrigger will have to work hard to stay ahead of the competition in the LGBT market, not only in Hawai‘i but across the Pacific and Indian oceans. We will succeed if we continue to focus on giving each and every guest the very finest in accommodations, service and hospitality. That is our heritage, and it will remain our guiding star in years ahead.\(^8\)

\(^1\) *Pride Guide Hawai‘i*. [http://tinyurl.com/kk4pb40](http://tinyurl.com/kk4pb40)