

The Nation's Summer Capital: Rehoboth Beach

Going to work has begun to feel like an excruciating form of torture. When you close your eyes, you see sunlight dancing on the water. You taste the salt in the air and the sound of the surf crashing onto the shore is starting to do things to your body you'd rather not talk about. You, my friend, have a serious case of wanderlust that only a trip to the beach will cure.

You could go to Key West, P-Town, or Fire Island - the standard East Coast LGBT beach hotspots. Or you could try something different: Rehoboth Beach, Delaware. I know, you're probably thinking, "Dela-Where?" Rehoboth Beach is happening. Known as the Nation's Summer Capital because so many DC lawmakers and staff come here for weekends and mini-beach vacations, Rehoboth Beach is the gayest resort town in the Mid Atlantic. The GLBT history is inspiring. The beaches are gorgeous. The nightlife is vibrant. And with over 200 gay owned restaurants, shops, night clubs and lodgings, and an active Gay and Lesbian community center, the town embraces GLBT visitors.

From Camp Meeting town to CAMP Rehoboth town

Founded in 1873 as the *Rehoboth Beach Camp Meeting Association*, the Rehoboth Beach was originally a site for Methodist camp meetings. The Camp Meeting Association disbanded less than a decade later and the town transformed into a resort destination. The town developed an early gay underground in part due to its prominence as a getaway for DC lawmakers and their staff (a population that then as now included a fair sprinkling of gays and lesbians.)

A nascent gay and lesbian scene sparked in the 1940's when Tallulah Bankhead and her Hollywood cronies cavorted at the DuPont mansion and the local art league hosted a group of women painters known as much for their romantic friendships as for their art. In the 1950's, a few gay men started gathering at the Pink Pony bar for happy hour. Word began to spread about several guest houses that welcomed gay and lesbian guests and the backroom of Nomad Hotel gained a reputation as a meeting spot for closeted folks from DC. In the 1970's, holiday weekends began drawing 300- 400 gay men after two gay discos opened.

GLBT people were fairly visible by the 1990. Sometimes as many as 700 gay men could be found dancing under glitter balls on weekend nights. With all this visibility, some long time residents got cranky. There were a few gay bashing incidents. Cars began sporting bumper stickers stating "Keep Rehoboth A Family Town." And when the Strand applied for a liquor license, the local homeowner's association drew their line in the sand. They lobbied to ban bars not connected to restaurants and won. The Strand eventually closed.

Local LGBT people fought back and CAMP Rehoboth was born. True to its name, (CAMP is an acronym for for “Create a More Positive” Rehoboth), volunteers set out to make Rehoboth Beach not only safe but welcoming for LGBT folks. They hosted meetings with local governments, conducted sensitivity training with the police department and met with homeowner associations. CAMP’s efforts worked and volunteers were able to bring the communities together. Now there is a relatively large, visible LGBT population, around 200 GLBT owned and operated businesses and LGBT visitors are welcomed with open arms.

The beaches

Like many East Coast seaside resorts, Rehoboth Beach has a boardwalk lining the beach. *Reader’s Digest* dubbed the boardwalk “Best of America.” It sports two arcades with carnival rides and games and numerous ice cream shops, French fries stands, and candy stores that sell salt-water taffy. Even if you despise arcades, it’s hard not to get excited about bumper cars and Whack-A-Mole. And your inner child will be delighted about the shaved ice snow cones at *Lexie’s Frozen Yogurt*. Just off the boardwalk, on Rehoboth Street, They make the biggest, fluffiest snow cones I have ever eaten.

Rehoboth’s broad beaches are pristine, the water is fairly clear and the waves are usually gentle*. Folks with more than swimming on their mind should know that while everyone gets along pretty well, gay men, straight folks and lesbians have tended to stake their claim to particular sections of the beach. Straight folks, especially older folks and families, gather in the mid-section of the beach, in front of the hotels and the more frenetic sections of the boardwalk where they have easy access to toilets, ice cream and Whack-A-Mole.

Gay men tend to soak up the sun and strut their stuff at Poodle Beach. Located at Queen and Prospect Streets at the south end of the boardwalk, Poodle Beach is close to the hotspots in town but not as frenetic as the midsection of the beach.

Lesbians tend to set up camp about a mile north of the boardwalk on the North Shores. The North Shores are in Gordon’s Pond Nature Preserve, a part of Cape Henlopen State Park. There’s a parking fee but it’s worth it to be at a beautiful beach. As an added bonus, there is a dog-friendly 1.5 mile walking path around Gordon’s Pond and walkers sometimes catch glimpses of ospreys, monarch butterflies, and otters.

Nightlife

When the sun goes down, people head for the bars. While we are welcome everywhere, there is definitely an LGBT scene. The unofficial lesbian hangout is The Frogg Pond. It has the feel of an “old school” lesbian bar. The beer menu is limited but they offer live music, including nationally recognized singer songwriters. Gay men tend to head for the Aqua Grill, the Blue Moon, or the Purple Parrot. The Aqua Grill is known for their cosmos and “fiery fairy wings.” They have an outdoor patio, a mini-beach made complete with a mini-

pool, and the bartenders and servers are sans-shirts. The Blue Moon also has an outdoor patio but the action is inside with Pamala Stanley or the entertainer de jure. The vibe at the Blue Moon is more overtly sexual and the testosterone is palpable. Getting to the bar requires working your way through a veritable sea of men. The Purple Parrot is an indoor bar with a casual, light hearted feel and is known for Karaoke. Later in the evening, the Double L heats up. It's the go to place for leather, bears and boys. And if you've got the urge to shake what your mamma gave you, Cloud 9 transforms into a dance bar with a live DJ after the kitchen closes. Rehoboth Beach is also known for its lively house parties, many of which are open to the public. Look for announcements online on meet-up boards and on fliers posted at Poodle Beach.

Folks in recovery don't get left out to dry. Friends of Bill W. can find refuge at CAMP Rehoboth, the local GLBT center. They host GLBT oriented N.A. meetings every Sunday and GLBT oriented A.A. meetings every Thursday.

Whether you drink or not, ya gotta eat. The best bets for food are the Blue Moon, the Cultured Pearl, Jakes, Dogfish Head Brewing and Eats and the Rehoboth Beach Farmer's Market. The Blue Moon is one of the top restaurants in Delaware. The setting is upscale, the food is a work of art and the service is exceptional. For Sushi and Japanese food, you can't beat the Cultured Pearl, anywhere. The ambiance is as amazing as the food. The outdoor dining area boasts a huge rooftop pond with Koi, aquatic plants, and raised gazebos. The indoor dining rooms are both elegant and child friendly. They also offer live entertainment. If you want to get a feel for classic Mid-Atlantic seafood, go to Jakes. It's the place people send you when you ask, "Where's a good place to get seafood?" Dogfish Head Brewing and Eats is best known for the great beer they make onsite, but they also have great pub food and live music on the weekends. If you want something offbeat, make a field trip to the Rehoboth Beach Farmer's Market where rain or shine, local vendors hock their wares every Tuesday from 12:00 pm to 4 pm. If you're renting a house, this is a great place to go to stock your refrigerator. In addition to organic produce, cheeses, bakery goods and meats, they sell wool products, gourmet vegan meals, buffalo burgers, and fresh seafood.

Accommodations:

Accommodations range from large beachfront hotels like the Atlantic Sands to "painted lady" B&B's. Many of the B&B's are gay or lesbian owned. Several stand out. The Silver Lake Guest House overlooks Silver Lake and has earned a national reputation. *Out and About* deemed the Silver Lake Guest House to be one of the top ten North American Gay guesthouses and *Fodors Gay Guide* dubbed it "best of the bunch." It's the closest gay guesthouse to Poodle Beach, has an over lake deck and offers lake and ocean views. In a

different vein, the Rams Head Inn caters to men who wish to go “au naturale.” The Ram’s Head is a clothing optional men’s resort that has a pool, hot tub, sauna, and onsite gym.

Just a note, not many B&B’s or hotels have onsite gyms. This does not mean your inner gym bunny is out of luck. *Body Shop Fitness*, Rehoboth Beach’s local gym, allows guests to drop in for a fee. The equipment is well-maintained, they have a decent selection of cardio equipment and weights and staff are willing to show people how to use the equipment. They also offer classes like spinning, boot camp, zumba and yoga.

At the north end of the beach, near North Shores, many lesbians set up camp, literally, at Cape Henlopen State Park. The park has a few cabins and over 150 sites, most with water hook-ups. Reservations can be made on-line and the prices, even for cabins, are reasonable.

So what are you waiting for? Stop spinning your wheels dreaming about where you could go and start planning your vacation! Make your reservations and get out to the Nation’s Summer Capital -- Rehoboth Beach, Delaware!

*The waves aren’t great for surfing, so if you’ve got boogie boarding or surfing on your mind, be prepared to take a ride up or down the coast to find decent waves.

*To ask Regina a question, check out upcoming workshops, or check out her books and other writing, go to: www.ReginaSewell.com . This column originally appeared in Outlook:
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