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Where Delaware gets bohemian

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REHOBOTH BEACH, Del. — Even in the waning days of summer, when chilly winds skip off the Atlantic and necessitate a jacket for a nightly walk on the beach, this modest resort town is a relaxing and incredibly gay-friendly spot. It's the kind of place where the locals, without even asking, will unbutton your top button if you're looking a little stuffy or out of place.

Outbound

Once one of the country's best-kept secrets, over the past few years, Rehoboth Beach has become a busy gay destination for folks from all over, but mostly from nearby Baltimore, Philadelphia, New Jersey, and Washington. If it's like Provincetown at all, it's certainly on a miniature scale. There are no wild nights on the town here — no faux Divines towering in heels, no late-summer carnivals, and scant cheesy, gay-themed clothing stores.

In Rehoboth, a wild night might entail a candlelit dinner of crab cakes at an outdoor table at the intimate Café Solé (44 Baltimore Ave., 302-227-7107), and then it's a stroll down the boardwalk for thick slabs of fudge or maybe a herky-jerky ride on the bumper cars. Private house parties are a big draw, but they mostly dry up after Labor Day. Still, on the boardwalk you can see little pink Christmas lights dangling from balconies as grown men in Hawaiian shirts and leis sashay to "Heaven Must Be Missing an Angel." Oh, it's nearly too much.

Unless you drive the entire route, arriving in Rehoboth Beach can be cumbersome. You could fly into D.C. or Philadelphia, but the nearest airport is in tiny Salisbury, Md., and even then you are 45 minutes away. But it's a smooth drive through scenic farmland, and a basic two-day car rental for the weekend will cost you about $70. Upon arrival, don't be scared by the Cracker Barrel and endless stretch of outlet malls and fast-food joints that greet you. The good life awaits a few miles down.

Typical of a resort community, there's an abundance of queer-owned lodging, including the Cabana Gardens Bed & Breakfast (20 Lake Ave., 302-227-5429). It's easy to see why it's so popular with gay and straight visitors alike, and it's not just the location (it's a five-minute walk to all the attractions). The standard rooms open out to large wooden decks with pretty views, and owner Gary Trosclair is so helpful, he's practically your own private tour guide.

Because of Rehoboth's manageable size, don't fret about advance planning for your big day and night out. Pick up the informative gay magazine Letters from CAMP Rehoboth (www.camprehoboth.com) for a list of local happenings and business ads. Baltimore Avenue is the equivalent of P-town's Commercial Street. The busy Lori's Oy Vey Café (39 Baltimore Ave., 302-226-3066) is your first morning pit stop for creamy lattes or a light bite for lunch.

There are two acknowledged gay beaches: Poodle Beach (fittingly, just past Queen Street at the southern end of the boardwalk) and North Shores (in Cape Henlopen State Park). They couldn't be more different. Poodle Beach is where you'll find the youthful beefcakes and their admirers, and impromptu volleyball games forge fast friendships seemingly among strangers. The women tend to congregate on the decidedly quiet North Shores beach, though finding it can take forever if you don't know where you're going. A tip: Don't try to walk from Poodle Beach; it's 5 miles away.

By 4 p.m., most of the beach boys are clearing out, presumably to get cleaned up for happy hour at the Blue Moon (35 Baltimore Ave., 302-227-6515). Even around 11 p.m., this place is still packed with men sipping drinks inside and on the enclosed wooden deck outside. Everyone seems to know one another here, but then again, it feels that way everywhere in Rehoboth off season.

A meal at the very chic Planet X (35 Wilmington Ave., 302-226-1928) will reward you with one of the best meals you could have in Rehoboth (try the tandoori-style shrimp), as well as a prime opportunity to people-watch. The restaurant's bohemian vibe comes from its frantic waitstaff (not necessarily a positive, but they're all friendly) and its hodgepodge decor, with enough leopard-print tablecloths to rival Stevie Nicks's bedspread.

Locals describe the Frogg Pond (3 S. First St., 302-227-2234) as the sports bar where people who don't fit in with the rest of the town go. On a recent Friday night, an amorous, young lesbian couple pressed up against the glass outside, while an R&B band sang "We Are Family" inside. You get the point.

When you end up at the Double L (622 Rehoboth Ave., 302-227-0818) — and undoubtedly you will if you crave any sort of night life — disregard descriptions of it being the popular leather bar. It is, but it's also Rehoboth's most bumping gay bar, with even more men commingling and drinking on yet another wooden deck. Go on: Unbutton that shirt already.

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PHOTO/STEVE RUARK

The Rehoboth Beach, Del., arcade and amusement park Funland has been in operation since the 1930s. Still a resort town, Rehoboth Beach is also now a popular gay destination.

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