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Competing to Draw Gay Honeymooners

By MICHELLE HIGGINS

ALL newlyweds need a honeymoon — a fact that has the travel industry salivating.

The legalization of same-sex marriage in New York State has set off a race among resorts and hotels around the world to become the next honeymoon hot spot for gay and lesbian couples.

Kura Hulanda Resorts on the Caribbean island of Curaçao has said it will give the first gay couple to marry in New York State a

when choosing a vacation destination, gay travelers say. But there is nothing more important when selecting a honeymoon spot. “I wanted absolutely no feelings of discomfort,” said Alison Zack, a Web designer from New York, who chronicled her Connecticut wedding to Irene La Grasta last October on her Web site, mybigfatgaywedding.com. The couple chose Hawaii for their honeymoon, partly because they had heard it welcomed same-sex couples. “I didn’t want anyone who didn’t want us,” she said.

When it comes to honeymoons, the No. 1 question on the “gay weddings” message board at the wedding planning Web site theknot.com is, “Where will we be welcomed?” said Carley Roney, editor-in-chief of the site.

Popular itineraries for gay newlyweds, she said, tend to be in places that

already recognize same-sex marriage — and also fulfill those quintessential honeymoon requirements: gorgeous beaches, romantic surroundings, luxurious resorts. Among them: Spain; Portugal; Argentina; and Cape Town, South Africa. All those countries have legalized same-sex marriage.

Other places that are traditionally receptive to gay travelers (even if they are in places that don’t recognize gay marriage) are also high on the list. Mr. Green of Steele Luxury Travel said his favorite place to send newlyweds is Mykonos, Greece. Brazil, which he described as “the gay capital of South America,” is another option, he said.

In the Caribbean, which is practically synonymous with honeymoons, there are still destinations that gay newlyweds avoid; one is Jamaica, where disapproval of homosexuals is an entrenched part of island life and where gay rights activists have even been murdered. But other places are becoming more welcoming.

Curtis Kowalski, an American Express travel agent who specializes in gay travel, points to islands under Dutch or French rule, like Curaçao or St. Barth, which tend to welcome gay trav-



MEXICO CALLS The Maroma resort is already a popular honeymoon spot.

honeymoon at its expense, including airfare. (Other same-sex couples with a valid New York marriage license will get a free upgrade and dinner for two when staying four nights.)

Qualia Resort on Hamilton Island along the Great Barrier Reef has introduced a \$6,270 seven-night honeymoon package including a dinner for two and sunset cruise to “celebrate the legalization of gay marriage in New York.”

The W Union Square in Manhattan is offering any gay couple who book a wedding at the hotel by Dec. 31 two free nights to honeymoon at the W Retreat and Spa in Vieques, P.R.

Hotels are making extensive efforts for the gay wedding and honeymoon dollar, said Dane Steele Green, president of Steele Luxury Travel in New York, which caters to the gay community. Mr. Green was recently flown to Mexico, along with other gay travel specialists, by the luxury chain Orient Express Hotels and Resorts, which was pushing its Maroma resort (already a popular honeymoon spot) in the Riviera Maya as gay-friendly. Other hotels, Mr. Green said, have been offering incentives for gay newlyweds, ranging from lower rooms rates to free upgrades.

Hotels have been courting gay and lesbian travelers for years, but many see New York's move to legalize gay marriage as an opportunity to boost bookings for honeymoons, when clientele are particularly amenable to big spending. Gay men and lesbians already spend about \$70 billion a year on

domestic leisure travel, according to data from Community Marketing Inc., a research firm specializing in the gay travel market.

"We know this segment of the market is very profitable," said Gerardo Llanes, chief marketing officer at the Mexico Tourism Board, which is increasingly marketing beach resorts like Puerto Vallarta, Los Cabos and the Riviera Maya through ads in gay publications. "They spend more money than the average tourist on their vacation, and they're really loyal to the brands that are open to them."

Whether a place is gay-friendly or not is often a deciding factor



DEALS Hotels are offering free nights at resorts like the W Retreat in Vieques, P.R.

elers. Mexico, he said, is another choice for those looking for a romantic honeymoon on the beach.

"A lot of couples are excited about the Adonis Tulum," the first gay all-inclusive resort in the Riviera Maya, he said. But ultimately, where they celebrate their honeymoon isn't the main concern, he said. It's the memories they will take back.

Mr. Kowalski recently booked a honeymoon in Mexico for a gay couple, arranging an intimate dinner right on the beach, followed by breakfast in bed the next morning. "Like any honeymooners," he said, "it's not always about the destination. It's about the experience."