

PRIMARY PREVIEW



The Independent

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Community News

From the People You Know and Trust

For Advertising Information See Page 14

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candidates and more than 160 voters and supporters attended the Dolphin Democratic Caucus's Candidate

Forum at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center in Fort Lauderdale on August 11.

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Lavender Footlights Festival

Lavender Footlights Festival, a yearly theatrical event devoted to gay and lesbian-themed plays takes place September 9 to 12 in Miami.



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Gay Media Shuts Child Sex Website

Governments Mobilize To Arrest "Sex Tourists"

By Andrew Stephens

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For the past two years, gay residents of South Florida and the local media have warned local authorities that they believed that a travel web site based in Fort Lauderdale had been acting to procure foreign children for sexual "vacations." Now, as a result of a recent investigation by *The Independent*, the web site has been shut down, and arrests are believed to be imminent.

Ordering a Child "Companion" Online

Since May 20, 2003, the "Costa Rica Taboo Vacations" web site has been online, offering the "discreet" services of "clean, fun-loving... companions of both sexes," who will fulfill "all personal desires." When the web site first appeared, they offered boys and girls as young as 14. In early 2004, they began offering children aged "12 and under."

The company also posted a page of "Testimonials" from previous clients. "My sexual companion was delivered to my hotel room," reveals Shawn from Miami. Rick from West Palm Beach is quoted as saying, "... the girls in Costa Rica ... fulfilled all of my desires, and then some!" Lastly, Kevin of Newark praised Costa Rica Taboo Vacations for providing boys that were "insatiable." "Next time, I'll bring Viagra!!!"

Targeting Gay Clients

When advertisements for the

Costa Rica Taboo Vacations web site appeared in a local gay publication, many in the community were outraged. "I was stunned," said local travel agent Paul Stalbaum, when he saw the ad and the Web site. "It was disgusting. I just stared at it, wondering why they would think they could sell this kind of stuff to a gay audience."

Stalbaum said that a prospective client contacted him about the company and wanted him to organize a trip for him. "I told him that this was not the type of trip I would be willing to set up," he said. "It is a repulsive business that goes on in several countries, and I won't be part of it."

Many in the gay community agreed with Stalbaum. The web site was first exposed last year and *Washington*

Blade reporter Chris Seely followed up with a story in January of this year. Yet, the web site continued operation.

'Independent' Investigation

After first alerting the FBI, *The Independent* began its own investigation. Posing as a potential client, *The Independent* was able to establish contact with Richard Baxter, the self-identified owner of the company. In subsequent correspondence, Mr. Baxter offered to provide *The Independent* with a 10-13 year old child "companion" for \$225. The companion service, explained Baxter, would be for "sight-seeing only." For an additional \$100, however, he would provide the "Es-

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Primary Races Down to the Wire

By Paul Harris

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After months of campaigning, candidates in Florida are coming down to the wire in their attempts to get elected to become either the Democratic or Republican candidate for positions ranging from U.S. Senator, to members of the school board.

In Broward County, the only out gay candidate, Jamie Bloodworth, is running for the position of Democratic candidate in the November runoff for Supervisor of Elections. In the final days of

the campaign she will be advertising on television in an attempt to reach voters. Bloodworth is running against Brenda Snipes, a Democrat, who was appointed by Governor Jeb Bush to complete the term of the former supervisor, Miriam Oliphant. Oliphant is also running for the position from which she was effectively fired at the end of last year by the Governor.

Another race which is arousing gay interest is a judicial race in which a right wing judge appointed again by Jeb Bush, Cheryl Aléman, is being challenged by lawyer Robert Malove. Aléman is the

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COSTA RICA from front page

cort Companion,” which would include overnight privileges with the child.

Baxter noted that this price guaranteed the child for 24 full hours, and thus could be broken into periods of five hours each day, for example, with a different child each day.

The Independent was directed to meet Baxter’s employee (referred to on the web site as “Alejandro”) at the airport in Costa Rica, where we would be shown photographs to select the child we wanted. Once we had selected from three specific hotels in Costa Rica, the child would be delivered to our hotel room later that night.

“You and I Can Get into Trouble...”

When asked about the legality of such a transaction, Baxter acknowledged wrongdoing. “Yes, you and I can get into trouble for this, but that is why I only use these three hotels.” Baxter then named the Hotel San Gildar, Hotel Presidente, and the Best Western Jacó Beach Resort at Jacó. “I use these hotels because I take care of them, and they allow my companions into the rooms,” alleged Baxter.

The Independent contacted all three of the hotels for comment. Representatives for the El Presidente and Best Western Jacó Beach Resort both immediately and vehemently denied the allegations, insisting that they had never heard of the company. Hotel San Gildar failed to respond by our deadline. It should be noted, however, that other

than the allegations of Baxter, there is no other evidence of wrongdoing by these hotels.

South Florida Residents Implicated

Searching public corporation data, *The Independent* was able to identify Mr. Baxter as the co-owner of a company called “Costa Rica ‘T’ Tours.” That corporation is registered under the name of Grant Colvin, with Patricia Alvarez and Richard Baxter listed as co-owners. All are described as having the same Coral Springs address. However, when *The Independent* attempted to personally visit the three for comment, the “home” address listed was revealed to be a postal box.

The Independent was also able to verify the involvement of Richard Baxter and his business partners by tracing domain name information for the web site. That too, leads back to the trio and Costa Rica “T” Tours. Using software programs designed to trace the path of Internet signals, it was confirmed that the web pages were stored on computers physically located in Fort Lauderdale, and hosted by “WebStream Internet Solutions.”

Web Site Shut Down, Evidence Preserved

When notified by *The Independent*, WebStream President Kerry L. Brewer reacted swiftly. “This is completely unacceptable to our company, and to me personally as a parent,” he said. WebStream immediately blocked access to the web site, while preserving

the evidence for the FBI. Mr. Brewer also confirmed that the web hosting fees were paid for using the credit card of Grant Colvin, one of the registered owners of Costa Rica “T” Tours.

Since Baxter was using an AOL account for correspondence, *The Independent* also attempted to obtain similar cooperation from America Online. AOL’s Media Relations contact, Nicholas Graham, failed to respond to numer-



Arthur Kanev, arrested in Pompano Beach, became the first U.S. citizen extradited back to Costa Rica for alleged crimes against young girls.

Photo © La Nación.

ous requests for comment.

Arrests Imminent?

FBI Agent Judy Orihela of the Miami Field Office would not comment on any possible arrests, or even the possibility of the Agency itself being involved in the original web site, saying only that “The FBI does not comment on ongoing investigations.” But it is clear that if the operators of Costa Rica Taboo Vacations have arranged even one of the tours claimed on their testimonials page, then they have broken laws here and abroad.

The Protect Act, signed last year by President Bush, makes it a crime for U.S. citizens to travel abroad and engage in sex with children, regardless of the age of consent in the country visited. The Act also provides that web sites that promote sexual tourism will be held accountable in U.S. criminal courts.

Costa Rica has recently increased their age of consent from 15 to 18 years of age, and has begun its own crackdown on “sex tourism.” According to the Costa Rican Security Ministry’s Special Unit On Sexual Exploitation, at least 10 Americans have been convicted of sexual exploitation of children in Costa Rica during the past three years.

Man Arrested in Pompano Beach

In May, suspected pedophile Arthur Kanev became the first U.S. citizen to be extradited back to Costa Rica to face trial in that country. Kanev, who was arrested while hiding in his mother’s Pompano Beach home last year, is accused of drugging, raping and photographing dozens of young girls while visiting Costa Rica.

Another US citizen, Scott Thomas Cochran, 39, was sentenced earlier this month to 154 years in a Costa Rican jail for sexually abusing young boys. Abusers of several other nationalities are also either convicted or awaiting trial.

The Independent appreciates the assistance of the FBI, WebStream Internet Solutions, local and Costa Rican gay organizations, and travel professionals, for their assistance in filing this story.