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Thailand: One Man's Dream Come True

By Andrew Stephens

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When Palm Beach County resident, Paul Lisker, talks about his recent travel to Thailand, his face seems to light up. "There were incredible things around every corner. All your senses were being hit. You would see a group of young children dressed in the saffron robes of monks, playing with other children; or stumble upon an orchid market; smell the lemon grass cooking and the incense burning. Then you'd turn your head and see shiny gold temples that look like they are up in heaven. It was spectacular."

Lisker has been planning this Thailand trip for almost all of his life, he says. "My older brother was in the Peace Corps in Thailand in the 60's and 70's, so he told us many wonderful stories. I would run around the house wearing the sarongs that he had brought home; eating Thai food; and dreaming about the place in the photos that he had taken. So I knew since I was very little that someday I would visit Thailand."

When it was announced that the 2004 International AIDS Conference would be held in Bangkok, Lisker, who is an HIV/AIDS caseworker for Compass in West Palm Beach, knew that the time had arrived for his dream adventure.

"Be prepared for a long trip, however," warns Lisker. "It took 26 hours to fly from Miami to San Francisco to Tokyo to Bangkok — even longer to come back." But beyond that, he sug-



In Thailand "you would see a group of young children dressed in the saffron robes of monks, playing with other children... then you'd turn your head and see shiny gold temples," says Paul Lisker.

gests that visitors plan to return with more belongings than what they brought. "Bring an empty suitcase, because the bargains there are incredible! My modest hotel room was just \$15 a night. I took a tuk-tuk ride (3-wheeled motorized tricycles providing tourists with white-knuckle rides through congested streets), and must admit that I got ripped off a little. I paid 150 baht for a ride that should have been 40 baht. But then again, the difference was only \$2, so who is quibbling?"

And Lisker said that he felt very safe everywhere he went, just by taking normal precautions. "I never felt threatened or intimidated. The Thai people are so friendly." He relates a story of when he

got a little sidetracked, and worried if he might have trouble finding his way back. "But I found a guy who spoke a little English, who actually got on the bus with me, helped guide me, and even tried to give me a little tour narration along the way. He just really went out of his way to help."

Bangkok can be noisy and crowded, just like any metropolis. But the strong cultural influences on daily life make the city unique. "There is no separation of church and state, so you will see things like a Buddha statue on the front of a CitiBank." Lisker says his favorite Bangkok destination is the Grand Palace — a large group of glittering royal buildings, which began construction over 300 years ago. Located on Rattanakosin Island along the Chao Phraya River, it is also the sight of the spectacular main temple, Wat Phra Kaew, which houses the Emerald Buddha — Thailand's most-revered cultural icon.

"The trip to Thailand was really a great way to recharge batteries," says Lisker. "For those of us with our face buried in our piece of the AIDS puzzle, it was refreshing to step away and see the big picture. It is clear that no matter if the delegates were from Thailand, Uzbekistan, India or West Palm Beach, many of the issues are the same." From Lisker's personal perspective, "It was a trip of a lifetime. A dream come true."

For more information on presentations from the Thai AIDS Conference, visit the web site: www.aids2004.org.

NATIONAL NEWS

Bush Ignores Kerry Call Not To Use Gay Marriage As Campaign Issue

by Paul Johnson

365Gay.com Newscenter
Washington Bureau Chief

Washington — Less than 24 hours after John Kerry officially became the nominee of the Democratic Party and called for a campaign of ideals rather than the wedge issue of gay marriage President Bush was on the campaign trail assailing "activist judges."

In a stump speech in Springfield Missouri, Bush told GOP supporters that "Our conviction that every life matters and every life counts will not change. Our belief in liberty and opportunity and the non-negotiable demands of human dignity will not change."

He continued: "We stand for institutions like marriage and family, which are the foundations of society. We stand for a culture of life in which every person matters and every person counts. We stand for judges who strictly and faithfully interpret the law, instead of legislating from the bench. And we will work together to build a culture of responsibility. The culture of this country is changing from one that has said, if it feels good, just go ahead and do it, and, if you've got a problem, blame somebody else, to a culture in which each of us understands that we're responsible for the decisions we make in life."

On July 29, in his acceptance speech in Boston, Kerry called on Bush to abandon attacks on gay families. "In the weeks ahead, let's be optimists, not just opponents," he said. "Let's build unity in the American family, not angry division. Let's honor this nation's diversity; let's respect one another; and let's never misuse for political purposes the most precious document in American history, the Constitution of the United States."

GOP sources say the President has no intention of dropping the marriage issue believing his call for a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage is resonating with voters.

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Taking a Look at the Gay Side of Costa Rica

By Andrew Stephens

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Adonal Chaves Hernandez lived in West Palm Beach and Fort Lauderdale for nearly 14 years, before returning home to Costa Rica last fall.

"I love South Florida," he says. "But in my mind, there is no more beautiful place in the world than my country."

Only 1,000 miles away and about \$250 air fare from Miami, Costa Rica is a perfect destination for the nature-lover.

Ricardo Brennes is a gay travel agent, based in Costa Rica. He notes that the whole country is about the same size as Florida — you could drive from the Caribbean Sea to the Pacific Coast in a single day. But packed into that small size is incredible diversity. "We have dry flatlands that look like Texas," says Brennes.

"And we have rain-soaked forests, sun-drenched white-sand beaches, and lava-blackened active volcanoes — all within a day trip of each other."

More than one-quarter of Costa Rica's land area is protected by the government, which provides the visitor ample opportunity to see diverse wildlife, such as monkeys, sloths, caimans, sea turtles, and brightly-colored birds in their natural habitat.

Gay Nightlife in the Big City

Of course, some will also want to see the wildlife of a big city. And for that, all roads lead to the capital of San José. It can be congested and noisy, but San José also offers gay nightclubs, shops, hotels and restaurants. There are plenty of tranquil parks, neighborhoods, museums and theaters to get away from the hubbub when visitors need a break.

Although high-end luxury hotels dot the city, most of the cheaper hotels and eateries are west of Calle Central, between Avenidas 1 and 2. Barrio Amon has a number of gay-owned or gay-friendly hotels, such as Joluva, Colours and Keokoldi. But in this writer's opinion, the real pleasures of Costa Rica are to be found outside of the capital.

Visitors will find excellent surfing at Tamarindo, Dominical and Jacó beaches. Windsurfers consider Laguna de Arenal to be among the best locations in the world. You can even go cave-exploring at Barra Honda Park. But my personal favorite is whitewater rafting on the Pacuare or Reventazón rivers. Imagine the adrenaline pumping as you bravely face walls of white churning water — all the while screaming like a big ol' queen!

For those with relaxation in mind, consider the laid-back Caribbean flavor of Costa Rica's East Coast. Or wind your way along scenic mountain paths until you



Sunset on the coast of Costa Rica

men or two women kissing on their lips in the street is not fully accepted yet." And if you are planning a trip strictly for sex, you might want to consider going elsewhere.

"There was a Fort Lauderdale company that advertised in the gay *HotSpots!* Magazine last January, promoting sex tours involving children," recalls Hernandez. "And it infuriated many Costa Ricans.

Church leaders here tried to paint it as a gay issue, but the government rightly pointed out that it was not [since the ad referred to both boys and girls]. Other than that, the Ticos are a peaceful, welcoming, and open-minded people." Brennes concurs. "We have many gay visitors to our country, and I think pretty much everyone has been treated well."

"Pura Vida!"

When it comes to a travel destination that features luxurious accommodations; warm and friendly people; thrilling adventure activities; relaxing beaches; and stunning natural beauty — all in a gay-friendly environment — you will be hard-pressed to find anywhere more perfect than Costa Rica. As the Ticos say, "Pura Vida!" The pure life!

For travel information, contact Ricardo Brennes at www.aratours.com.

discover the nearly-hidden oasis of the Monteverde Cloud Forest. Listen to howler monkeys and watch flocks of scarlet macaws fly overhead, while enjoying a picnic lunch in the rain forest. You can witness the power of Arenal, one of the world's most-active volcanoes, and then soak in the relaxing waters of the nearby hot springs. And for going completely "natural," try the discreetly-nude beach at Playita in Manuel Antonio.

Just how 'Friendly' is Costa Rica?

Acting "appropriately" is the key to enjoying a romantic trip in Costa Rica. Whether you bring a partner or meet one there, Brennes suggests that you just keep in mind that it is a Latin-American country. "You can openly say 'I am gay' and nobody will point at you for that. But two

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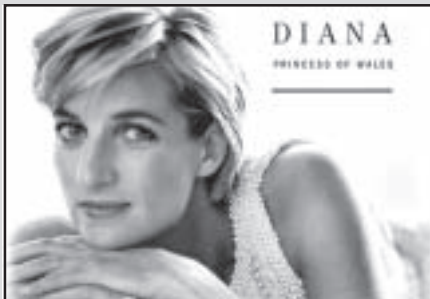
■ **DIANA**

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effort.” There will also be a silent auction during the event.

Tuesday’s Angels is reaching out to the community for corporate and individual sponsors to help defray the costs of entertainment, food, beverages, decorations, and other costs. They are also currently seeking items for the silent auction.

Those who would like to be part of the event should contact event co-chairs David Johnson (954.567.2052) and Steven Helpert (954.316.1400) or email Chuck Nicholls at Canick@aol.com.



More Information

Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art
 One Las Olas Blvd
 Fort Lauderdale, FL 33301

Jungle Queens: Wildlife without the Disco

A Trip to Jonathon Dickinson State Park Near Hobe Sound

By Andrew Stephens

Palm Beach Editor

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When you think of wildlife, does the latest nightclub opening or circuit party come to mind? Or do your thoughts go toward the four-legged variety?

If you enjoy spending your day floating down a gentle river, surrounded by mangrove trees and the critters that live in them, then maybe you should consider a trip up north near Hobe Sound, to Jonathon Dickinson State Park.

While this is not a “gay destination,” per se, (in fact you will not see a mirrored disco ball for miles), there is

no reason that gay and lesbian visitors would not have a thoroughly enjoyable time here, mixing with the other couples and visitors. Located on Federal Highway between Jupiter and Stuart, the park

boats over 11,000 acres of land for camping, canoeing, hiking and bicycling, picnicking, fresh and saltwater fishing and guided tours of the Loxahatchee River.

The hot summer months are the perfect time to try canoeing or kayaking on this beautiful river. Some 10 miles of this black-water stream wind through the park, from a cypress and hickory forest at the headwaters near Indiantown Road, to a mangrove wilderness as you approach the park’s picnic area and boat ramp. On a recent trip, our small group rented a boat



for a several-hour cruise down the river, spotting alligators, osprey, herons, and dozens of turtles. And yes, we also spotted a gay couple from Orlando, and a lesbian woman from Lake Worth — we really are everywhere, aren’t we?

Early weekdays offer a chance to avoid both the crowds and the thunder-showers, and birds and wildlife — of the winged and 4-legged variety — should be much more viewable. Contact the Park Office at 772.546.2771, or visit their web site at www.floridastateparks.org/jonathandickinson for more information.