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Nov 04, 2016 by [Ami Hutchinson](#)

Changing Hearts and Changing Minds: The Power of LGBTI Tourism ^[1]

"Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness." – Mark Twain

Travel, both local and international alike, has the unique ability to connect people from all walks of life; travel is not only educational and eye-opening, but also promotes tolerance, understanding and respect. Travel by members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender,

and intersex community in particular provides opportunities for both tourists and local communities to grow, develop mutual understanding, make new friends and experience new cultures. *Tolerance Through Tourism* – a groundbreaking LGBTI tourism project co-developed by the Center for Integrated Training and Research (COIN) and ProActividad in the Dominican Republic – sets out to use the power of tourism to improve the lives of LGBTI people in that Caribbean nation, while advancing understanding and acceptance of LGBTI people around the world.

LGBTI Tourism and the Dominican Republic

The idea for the *Tolerance Through Tourism* project came about following a September, 2014 meeting organized by Charlie Rounds and Steve Roth on behalf of the Kevin J. Mossier Foundation. LGBTI advocates from across the Caribbean met with representatives from major tourism corporations, including Celebrity Cruises, Marriott, Club Med, and Cruise Planners to discuss how the travel industry can support LGBTI advocacy efforts. The Dominican Republic – the most popular travel destination in the Caribbean – was eventually singled out to pilot the project.

To travelers around the world, the Dominican Republic has something for everyone: pristine beaches, wilderness and adventure, a welcoming people, and rich cultural history. In addition to its notable curb appeal, the DR was chosen for a number of strategic reasons, including the fact that homosexuality is legal (unlike in much of the Caribbean); that public opinion towards LGBTI persons has evolved favorably over recent years through the diligent work of advocates on the ground; and that the LGBTI community has a strong ally in openly gay U.S. Ambassador to the Dominican Republic, Wally Brewster.

What is Tolerance Through Tourism?

According to John Waters, program manager at COIN, “*Tolerance Through Tourism* is a different approach for winning hearts and minds. It’s the confluence of the private and non-profit sectors, culminating in a social enterprise that uses the power of tourism to make positive changes in the lives of LGBTI people.”

Tolerance Through Tourism will create increased opportunities for LGBTI Dominicans to receive training and employment opportunities related to the tourism sector, while at the same time generating resources through social enterprise initiatives to fund local LGBTI NGOs’ community work. The program will also bring positive exposure and visibility to the local LGBTI community.

The program will enhance the travel experience of LGBTI tourists by creating customized programs for LGBTI guests and ensuring a genuine welcome to the Dominican Republic. Travel packages will highlight the best of the Dominican Republic – family travel, adventure

travel, and cultural tourism – by targeting small (4 to 24 person) groups of LGBT individuals and creating specific tailor-made holidays.

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The Dominican Republic’s economy will also benefit from increased LGBTI tourism. A recent tourism study estimated that in 2014 the global LGBTI community spent in excess of USD\$200 billion on travel. In the DR, the project will seek to grow this industry to both generate work and income opportunities for local LGBTI community groups and promote a society that is stable, safe, just, and tolerant, and that respects diversity, benefits everyone and contributes to durable acceptance and prosperity.

COIN and ProActividad are excited to have the support of Ambassador Brewster who, along with his husband Bob Satawake, lives and works in Santo Domingo. Brewster, the first openly gay U.S. Ambassador to serve in the Western Hemisphere, is known for his strong commitment to human rights and advocacy on behalf of the Dominican LGBTI community. Their support for *Tolerance Through Tourism* is indicative of the United States’ overall commitment to respecting and promoting the human rights and dignity of LGBTI people.

At the end of the day, says Rounds, “Although *Tolerance Through Tourism* will not directly change laws in the Dominican Republic, it will do a lot to advance acceptance and improve the lives of LGBTI people.” Organizers of the program hope it will serve as a model for other tourism-based economies across the Caribbean and around the world to use the power of tourism to help improve the lives of LGBTI people in their countries.
