



## Puerto Rico and the Caribbean

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The islands of the Caribbean are renowned for their pleasant tropical climate. The social climate for glbtq people, however, is not always an inviting one.

Native Americans had already been living on many of the Caribbean islands for centuries when European explorers, beginning with Christopher Columbus in 1492, arrived in the New World. The advent of the Europeans spelled doom for the native cultures. Conquerors massacred many people, and settlers enslaved others. Oppressive treatment and new diseases took a heavy toll. Some Native Americans assimilated into the Europeans' communities, but for the most part the native peoples were eliminated.

The Spanish led the way to the Caribbean with voyages of discovery and the establishment of settlements. Other nations--England, France, and the Netherlands in particular--fought for territory in the region. In many cases islands were conquered and reconquered by warring countries numerous times over the centuries. Pirate ships also sailed the Caribbean, wreaking their own havoc.

The Europeans had hoped to find gold, but the Caribbean yielded little of it, and so the settlers turned to agriculture. With the native populations virtually wiped out, Europeans began bringing slaves from West Africa in the early sixteenth century to labor on their plantations.

Interaction between slave-holders and slaves gave rise to new languages called creoles. The best-known of these is probably the French-based Haitian creole. Others include the English-based creole of Jamaica and Papiamentu, which includes Portuguese, Spanish, and Dutch elements and is spoken in the Netherlands Antilles.

In addition to their language the Europeans brought their religions. Particularly on the Spanish and British islands these have historically played and continue to play a major role in shaping a cultural prejudice against glbtq people.

The nineteenth century brought a major debate over slavery. Haitian slaves led by Toussaint L'Ouverture rose in revolt in 1801, leading to the country's independence in 1804. In other areas events were less dramatic. Freedom for slaves came gradually, mainly between the 1830s and mid-century.

Cuba (about which there is a separate entry in this encyclopedia) became independent in 1902, but for the most part the Caribbean islands remained colonies or territories of European nations. In the 1960s many of the British islands opted to become independent members of the Commonwealth. Aruba became an autonomous member of the kingdom of the Netherlands in 1986, but the rest of the Dutch islands remain politically part of Holland. Likewise, residents of the French islands are citizens of France. Puerto Rico has been under United States control since the end of the Spanish-American War. U.S. citizenship was extended to Puerto Ricans in 1917.

From the twentieth century onward, the tourism industry has been of great importance in the Caribbean.

Despite aggressive marketing campaigns to lure visitors, glbtq travelers will not find a warm welcome in all destinations. Sasha Alyson, the owner of a gay and lesbian travel agency, commented, "Very broadly, the Dutch and French islands, just based on their heritage, are very good. The British are the worst. The Spanish islands are fine, but they are less open."

## **Puerto Rico**

The long and pervasive influence of the Roman Catholic church in Puerto Rico historically prevented gay men and lesbians from achieving any degree of public acceptance. Further contributing to their marginalization was the concept of *machismo*, which equates "manliness" with power. Various traits such as physical strength or the ability to provide for one's family are considered manly, but central to the image of the *macho* man is his sexual appeal to and prowess with women. Even a man with little power in any practical or objective sense can strive to gain the respect of others within his social circle through displays or talk of his *machismo*. Conversely, a man can be socially devalued for not behaving in a way considered *macho*.

In recent decades Pentecostal churches have been gaining ground in Puerto Rico. In a 1990 interview activist Roberto Caballero called the Catholic and Pentecostal churches "the most influential forces in molding public opinion" against glbtq rights.

Nor have political parties in Puerto Rico shown much enthusiasm for advancing glbtq rights. Activist José Santini stated in 1991 that "historically there has been a lot of homophobia in the *independentista* movement," referring to the faction favoring independent status for Puerto Rico, an issue on which there have been non-binding referenda in 1967, 1993, and 1998. The *independentistas*, one of the more liberal groups, have attracted many glbtq supporters. Santini stated that despite their contributions, "their work as lesbians and gay men hasn't been recognized."

The fight against AIDS led some glbtq Puerto Ricans to favor the option of statehood, which would have brought more funds for health care to the island. Proponents of statehood feared that the economy of an independent Puerto Rico would not be strong enough to afford better health care services.

Pedro Julio Serrano became the first openly gay man to run for public office in Puerto Rico when he announced his candidacy for an at-large seat in the commonwealth's House of Representatives in 1998. Although he had been a lifelong worker for the New Progressive Party, its leaders failed to support him, some even claiming that they did not know him.

Serrano's independent campaign was fraught with danger; his life was threatened and his property vandalized. Although forced to abandon his campaign due to lack of funds, Serrano remains strongly committed to the cause of glbtq rights in Puerto Rico. The founder of Puerto Rico para Todos ("Puerto Rico for All"), he is a vigorous and courageous defender of glbtq Puerto Ricans.

A recent political struggle was the campaign to repeal Puerto Rico's anti-sodomy law, Article 103. The commonwealth's Senate finally struck it down in 2003, one week before the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence v. Texas* voided all American laws against sodomy.

Tourist guidebooks typically refer to Puerto Rico as the most gay- and lesbian-friendly destination in the Caribbean, citing San Juan's Condado quarter with clubs, cafés, and lodgings that welcome the glbtq public. Other cities have smaller gay scenes. The island of Vieques (which the U.S. Navy no longer uses for target practice), with a number of gay- and lesbian-owned restaurants and guest houses, is a favorite with glbtq travelers.

Despite the glowing recommendations of the travel books, in 2004 conservative Representative Miriam Ramírez de Ferrer took objection to a statement on the official tourism website that "Puerto Rico has a

diverse product directed to satisfy many segments of the market, including the gay market," demanding that the anodyne sentence be removed.

It is clear that progress must still be made before glbtq people enjoy full equality in Puerto Rico. There are, however, some hopeful signs. Through the efforts of organizations like Puerto Rico para Todos glbtq citizens are gaining greater visibility and a stronger voice.

### **The United States Virgin Islands**

The U.S. Virgin Islands--St. Croix, St. Thomas, and St. John--are an unincorporated territory of the United States. Residents are American citizens and send one non-voting delegate to the House of Representatives.

Sodomy was decriminalized in the Virgin Islands in 1984.

With a small population to begin with, the islands do not have much of a gay scene. St. Croix, however, has two gay-owned hotels. The Cormorant Beach Club offers packages that include commitment ceremonies. Glbtq locals and tourists alike enjoy the resort's fine restaurant, bar, and beach.

### **The Dominican Republic**

Columbus landed on the island of Hispaniola in 1492, and four years later Santo Domingo, the oldest European settlement in the Americas, was founded.

Haiti conquered and occupied the Dominican Republic from 1822 to 1842, and United States troops controlled the country from 1916 until 1924. Rafael Trujillo, elected in 1930, headed a brutal regime until 1960. Under his and succeeding administrations wealth and power have been in the hands of a few, while the majority of the citizens struggle with poverty and the lack of good job opportunities.

Dominican law makes no distinction between same-sex and opposite-sex relations. The age of consent is eighteen for all. Article 330 of the Penal Code, however, which forbids "every violation of decorum and good behavior on public streets" and carries a penalty of up to two years in prison, is occasionally used to target gay men. In 2003 Luis Villalona-Pérez succeeded in gaining political asylum in the United States based on evidence that he had "suffered threats, beatings, harassment, and humiliation" in the Dominican Republic because of his sexual orientation.

Travel writer Richard Ammon reports that outside Santo Domingo "there is very little identifiable LGBT life in the Dominican Republic" and that, as in most spheres of Dominican life, socioeconomic class plays an important role in the nature of the experience of glbtq people. Members of the more affluent classes may patronize trendy clubs without fear of harassment, but they show little solidarity with low-income glbtq people, and they look down upon "boogie boys," young men who do sex work (prostitution is legal in the Dominican Republic) and do not make them feel welcome in nice restaurants and clubs.

There is a small lesbian community in the capital, and younger women feel freer to make non-traditional life choices than do those of earlier generations. Nevertheless, in a culture dominated by the Catholic church, the expectation is that girls will become wives and mothers. Both young men and young women may enter into a heterosexual marriage or simply remain in the closet rather than reveal their sexual orientation to their families.

With many gay men reluctant to be publicly recognized as such, providing education about and treatment for AIDS has been a challenge. Since the 1990s, however, non-government organizations including Amigos Siempre Amigos have made vigorous efforts to provide counseling and help.

### **The Dutch Islands**

The Dutch presence in the Caribbean dates back to the 1630s. St. Maarten (the southern portion of the island shared with French St. Martin), St. Eustatius (also known as Statia), and Saba in the Leeward Islands, and Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao off the coast of Venezuela are part of the kingdom of the Netherlands. Aruba has been a self-governing autonomous state within the realm since 1986. Residents of the other islands are Dutch citizens.

The Dutch islands are among the more hospitable in the region for glbtq people. Laws do not discriminate between same-sex and opposite-sex relations. The age of consent is sixteen for all.

Tiny Saba (only five square miles in area) has a gay tourism director and is a popular winter destination for gay men. The scene there is welcoming but often described with terms like "low-key."

German-born Boris Strehlke stated that he and his life partner, Michael Hirner, chose to open their hotel, the Delfina, on St. Maarten after encountering hostility in the British islands. On social life Strehlke commented that "there's no gay bar scene [in St. Maarten]. It's mixed, but no one cares. You can dance with your lover, and nobody cares."

A similar situation obtains on the other Dutch islands, none of which is particularly large or very populous. Of course, not every citizen is free of homophobia, but the prevailing cultural attitude is one of acceptance.

### **The French Islands**

The French settled Guadeloupe, Martinique, and St. Martin in the 1630s, and St. Barthélemy (also known as St. Barts) a decade later. St. Barthélemy was sold to Sweden in 1784 but reacquired in 1877. All four are now politically part of France, and so French law obtains there. The age of consent for all people is fifteen.

Tourism industry experts consistently tout the French islands as being among the more welcoming to glbtq travelers, but they quickly point out that none of them has much of a local gay scene.

In a recent study conducted in Martinique anthropologist David A.B. Murray learned that gay men found it difficult to come out publicly or even to their families. In the historically Catholic culture there is a strong expectation that both men and women will conform to traditional gender roles.

Murray reported that gay Martinican men often resort to "masking," assuming a heterosexual public persona, not only to protect their own reputation but also that of their family, a serious concern in the small island community.

"Masking" may include marrying or having a girlfriend while meeting with other gay men at private venues. Younger men, perhaps influenced by reports of progress on gay and lesbian rights in other cultures, were less likely to see this as an acceptable solution than older ones. Nevertheless, it cannot be said that the glbtq rights movement has yet reached Martinique.

Although the laws are relatively favorable and tourists find acceptance, the conservative culture of the French islands makes it difficult for glbtq citizens to live openly as such.

### **Haiti**

The French established their first settlement in Haiti in the mid-seventeenth century and ruled the country until it achieved independence through revolution at the dawn of the nineteenth century.

The nation's political history has been one of tumult, repression, and corruption, particularly under the rule

of the Duvaliers, François "Papa Doc" and his son Jean-Claude "Baby Doc," which began when the former was elected president in 1957 and ended when the latter fled the country in 1986.

The gulf between the small wealthy elite and the impoverished majority is great. Haiti has the lowest per capita income in the western hemisphere. The country is saddled with enormous debt, much of it incurred through mismanagement and corruption during the Duvalier years. As a result little money has been available to fund important public needs such as infrastructure and health care.

A particularly serious health concern is the AIDS epidemic. As of 2003 some 6.1 percent of adult Haitians had the disease, the highest rate in the Americas. In addition to deficient health care services, lack of education has contributed to the spread of the disease. A low literacy rate has made it hard for agencies to reach people, and since many homes are without electricity, television or radio campaigns are not effective substitutes.

In Haiti, AIDS is not regarded as a "gay male disease." It affects significant numbers of bisexual men and heterosexual men and women as well. Various international organizations have instituted education and treatment programs, but the situation remains grave.

Although same-sex relations are legal and anti-gay violence is relatively rare, there exists no real gay community in Haiti. In the 1980s the government of Jean-Claude Duvalier eliminated the gay bar scene, ostensibly to curb the spread of AIDS but likely doing more harm than good since forcing gay people underground only made education efforts more difficult. The regime of Jean-Bertrand Aristide, a former Roman Catholic priest, did nothing to improve the lot of Haiti's glbtq population.

### **The British Islands**

Numerous islands in the Caribbean are part of the British Commonwealth. Many were settled in the early seventeenth century. Others were acquired later through treaty or conquest.

The Cayman Islands and Jamaica lie south of Cuba. Commonwealth islands in the Lesser Antilles include the British Virgin Islands, Anguilla, Barbuda, St. Kitts and Nevis, Antigua, Dominica, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Grenada. The Bahamas and the Turks and Caicos Islands, north of Cuba and Hispaniola, respectively, Barbados, east of the Windward Islands, and Trinidad and Tobago, north of Venezuela, are generally considered part of the Caribbean group because of their geographical proximity.

The islands of the British Commonwealth are among the least hospitable to glbtq people. The cultural climate is particularly hostile in Jamaica. (Ironically, Jamaica was a place where gay playwright and actor Sir Noël Coward was able to find a peaceful haven from the 1940s until his death at his home, Firefly, in 1973. The house, donated by his life partner, Graham Payn, to the Jamaica National Heritage Trust, is now a museum.)

Homophobic violence has caused some Jamaicans, especially men, to flee to other countries for asylum. Hundreds have been attacked and beaten, sometimes fatally. Amnesty International reported in 2001 that Jamaican police were party to the harassment, participating in or permitting beatings of gay men and effecting "arrests and malicious detentions."

In a 2002 interview Michael Wynter, the head of the Jamaican Constabulary's Office of Professional Responsibility, claimed to have received no complaints from gay men about police conduct but admitted that Jamaica's law against sodomy may have discouraged them from coming forward.

The Offenses of the Person Act criminalizes same-sex relations. Being in a "compromising position" can be enough to bring about arrest. Those convicted face up to ten years in prison at hard labor.

Virulent expressions of homophobia can be found in Jamaican reggae songs, some of which suggest that "batty boys" and "chi chi men"--two pejorative terms for gay men--be killed by various means. Activist Peter Tatchell protested the homophobic lyrics at the Mobo (Music of Black Origin) awards shows in London in 2002 and 2003 and was set upon by angry reggae fans. Subsequently three reggae singers defended their lyrics, claiming that "homophobia is part of Jamaican culture." The Jamaican glbtq rights group J-Flag reported that "there has been a wave of homophobic assaults and murders coinciding with the release of anti-gay records."

J-Flag (The Jamaican Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals and Gays), founded in 1998, has been working to improve the lives of glbtq Jamaicans by providing counseling, advocating constitutional revisions to eliminate discrimination, and helping to document the cases of people seeking asylum in other countries.

Discrimination remains alive and well in Jamaica, however. The island's popular Sandals resort chain (which also has hotels in St. Lucia, Antigua, the Turks and Caicos, and the Bahamas) unapologetically accepts only heterosexual couples as guests.

The Cayman Islands, too, have discriminated against glbtq travelers, in 1998 refusing a cruise ship carrying some 900 gay passengers permission to dock. Thomas C. Jefferson, the Cayman Islands Minister of Tourism, defended the action, saying, "Careful research and prior experience has [sic] led us to conclude that we cannot count on this group to uphold the standards of appropriate behavior expected of our visitors." The "prior experience" proved to be a 1987 visit by gay men from a charter cruise, some of whom publicly displayed affection, which, according to Jefferson, "offended" and "disturbed" local residents.

The scheduled arrival in 1998 of a cruise ship carrying gay tourists to the Bahamas also engendered protests led by Pentecostal Bishop Harcourt Pindar. Prime Minister Hubert Ingraham condemned the homophobic statements and said, "Homosexuality is not a contagious disease, and it is not a crime in the Bahamas"--neatly parsing his words because while consensual relations in private are legal, public activity might bring jail time.

The British government, after a decade of unsuccessful efforts to persuade Caribbean commonwealth members to abolish laws against same-sex relations, took the unilateral step of repealing local laws in Anguilla, the British Virgin Islands, the Cayman Islands, Montserrat, and the Turks and Caicos, effective January 1, 2001, since the statutes were in violation of human rights agreements to which Britain subscribed. Clerics in the Cayman Islands Ministers Association denounced the action.

The consecration of Canon Gene Robinson as Episcopal Bishop of New Hampshire also met with opposition from Anglican bishops in the Caribbean, who condemned his ordination at their 2003 synod. Patrick Manning, the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, also announced his opposition to Robinson's elevation.

It is clear that progress on glbtq rights in the British Caribbean will have to overcome serious obstacles before equality is achieved.

## **Conclusion**

The history of the islands of the Caribbean has generally not been favorable for glbtq citizens, nor is the current situation among the best. Nevertheless, some strides have been made, permitting hope that with the work of committed activists and people of goodwill more will be to come.

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