

Travel

Why Phoenix is on the Verge of Becoming an LGBTQ+ Epicenter

by David Perry
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(Source:Visit Phoenix)

Why isn't **Phoenix** more gay-famous?

"Phoenix gay nightlife is pretty diverse," event planner David Twigger tells me. "No matter what your scene is, we have it: country, Levi/leather, edm-dance, show bars..."

This wasn't hometown hype; "PHX" really is rather fabulous. There's fabulous gay clubs like **Charlie's** and equally entertaining lesbian clubs like **Boycott**; there are museums in the form of the **Heard** and **PAM**; sexy **pool-cocktail bars**; charming neighborhoods like **Roosevelt Row** and Evans Churchill with terrific food and one-of-a-kind street art. There's even the "Gay Denny's" (yes, that's what it's called) at 5002 N. 7th Street; by day, it is a mild-mannered chain restaurant. By night is a de-facto LGBTQ+ after-hours hangout with waffles.

Twigger was helping me with my plan of attack as I geared up for the night's shenanigans. And as he rattled off all the options, it struck me that the only thing this town needs to stake its claim on the national gaydar is a single, shining attention-getting device. Enter **Phoenix Pride**.

Desert Dreams



Phoenix Pride

In the world of LGBTQ+ travel, Prides go a long way in putting even small towns on the map (hello, Key West). And when it comes to maps, Phoenix exists in unusual territory. Phoenix Pride Executive Director Mike Fornelli informed me that the American Southwest has yet to establish a dominant LGBTQ+ hub.

PHX, however, tore into 2020 by becoming the fifth largest city in the U.S.; it has the diversity, inclusiveness, and LGBTQ+ population to become the Miami of the Sonora. It's just that the city grew so

quickly that its constituent pieces are still coalescing; the **Melrose District**, a one-mile stretch along 7th Street, is becoming the Phoenician rainbow road as you read this. Events like Phoenix Pride (November 6-7) go a long way in broadcasting the city's nascent LGBTQ+ presence. Provided it happens.

"Thanks to COVID-19, we were shut down in March, two weeks before our 2020 festival," says Fornelli. "So then we postponed it to November, then to April 2021, and we still couldn't do it. After four postponements, it looks like we will finally have it this year!"



So Pride '21 is going to be a party and a half with some unique additions. Being in the Southwest means Phoenix Pride has a strong **Navajo** contingent. You'll see "LGBTQ+2S" used frequently; it's not a physics equation, the acronym includes "**Two-Spirit**," the Native American interpretation of same-sex attraction and gender nonconformity that evolved separately from Abrahamic cultures.

"Before the colonization of our indigenous people, from putting our children into boarding schools and enforcing Christianity religion onto our people and trying to erase our traditions and cultures, the Navajo honored the LGBTQ+2S individuals," says **Navi Ho**, local indigenous drag star, **Sister of Perpetual Indulgence**, and the first Native American/Navajo Empress for the **Imperial Court of Arizona**.

"Some individuals were medicine people, shamans, and visionaries," says Navi Ho. "In the beginning, the Navajos didn't have to fight or protect themselves because they were honored, protected, and recognized."

[READ MORE: How LGBTQ+ Native Americans are Making Their Voices Heard]

Phoenix Pride has its own distinct identity. Moreover, Phoenicians have the bravery to hold both their parade and festival (in Steele Indian School Park) in the full light of the scorching Sonoran sun (take that, Vegas). Attendees should note Phoenix is the hottest city in the country and the second sunniest, so pack your sunscreen.

The West's Most Western Town



Scottsdale, Arizona (Source: Matthew Wexler)

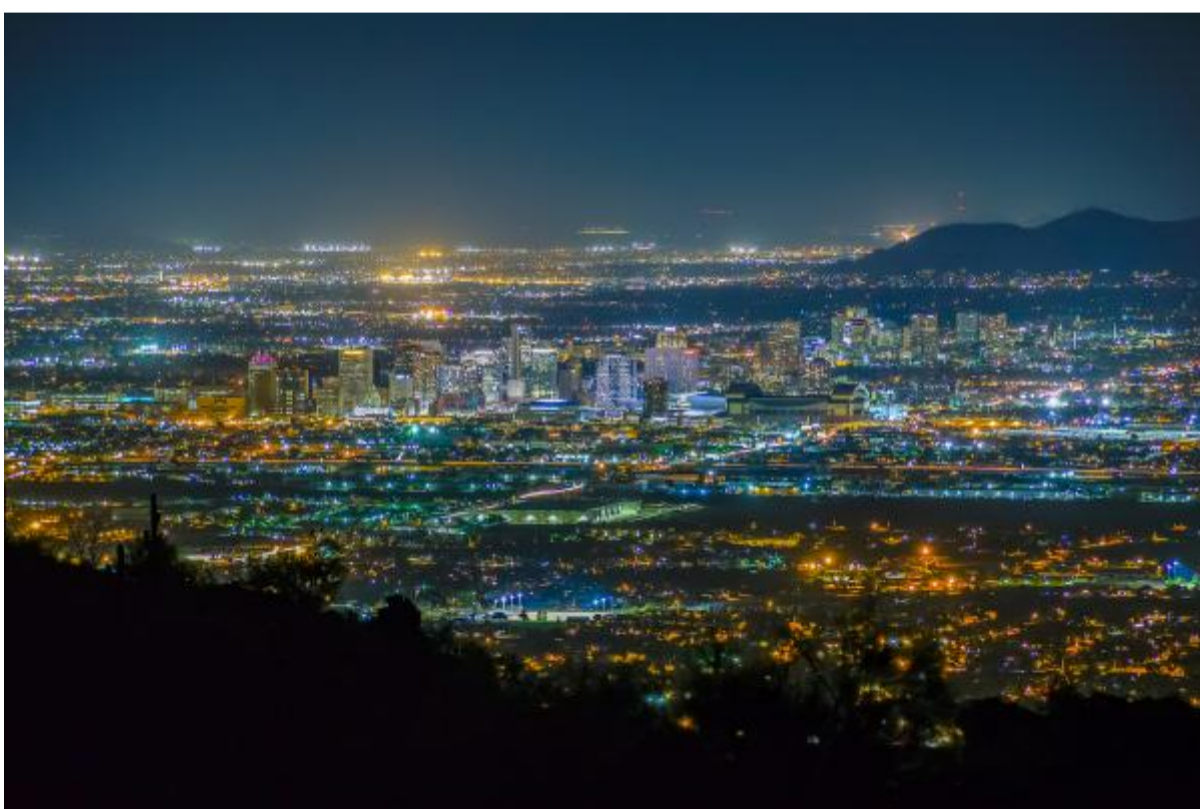
The ascendancy of Phoenix is not done in a vacuum; its partner in climb is next-door neighbor **Scottsdale**. Ironically, the two cities are opposites: the former is an adolescent metropolis fighting for its place in the world; the latter is so over that.

The **W Scottsdale** and **BS West**, the premier gay club of town, are active partners in Phoenix Pride, but boy, this is one laid-back city, particularly its retro center, where Old West meets mid-century modern (Scottsdale was Frank Lloyd Wright's **winter home**, after all). Spangled with galleries, museums, and a healthy dose of saloons, Old Town Scottsdale — a 20-minute drive from Phoenix — is made for dilly-dallying.

So I dillied at **Diego Pops**, famous for its Brussels sprouts nachos, and dallied at **Hula's Modern Tiki**, whose 1950s cocktails are something out of "Gilligan's Island" had the Professor ever whipped up booze. I meandered by fountains, wandered by statues. And I came back to my original question: Why isn't this place more gay-famous?

My guess? We simply haven't been looking.

Quick LGBTQ+ Guide to Phoenix & Scottsdale

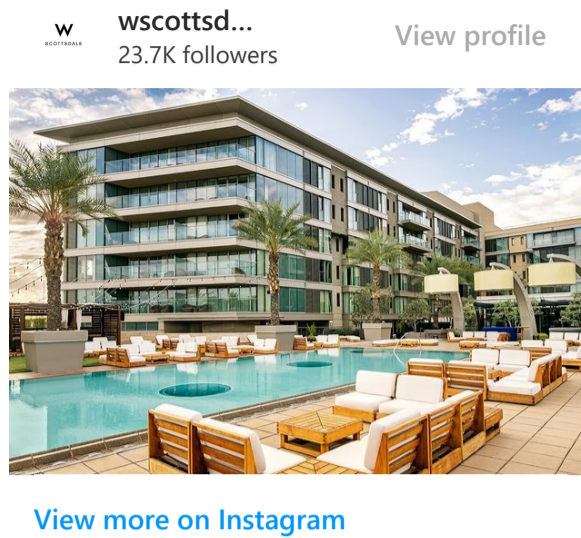


Phoenix at night. (Source: Getty Images)

Where to Stay:

Rise Uptown: Directly between the Melrose District and the Phoenix Pride fairgrounds at Steele Indian School Park along the **Valley Metro Light Rail**, this boutique hotel could not be better placed. The pool, and the pool bar, in particular, rock.

W Scottsdale: Practically a destination on its own, this venerable property is just outside Old Town Scottsdale. An LGBTQ+ ally, the hotel features a non-binary as the model for its spa.



Where to Go

Charlie's: The go-to LGBTQ+ club of Phoenix, it's within eyeshot of the Rise Uptown and marks the start of the Melrose neighborhood.

Heard Museum: One of the most gorgeous collections of Native American art I've ever seen, this museum began as the personal collection of Dwight B. and Maie Bartlett Heard.

Museum of the West (Scottsdale): This museum gives an unflinching perspective on the Southwest, from both of the Natives and the incoming Whites.

PAM: The Phoenix Art Museum covers ancient to contemporary (The Yayoi Kusama room is TrIpPy), and the perfect way to fill up a morning if not by the pool.

Roosevelt Row Arts District: Comprised of several neighborhoods, this is the alterna-hip section of Phoenix, filled with cafes, graffiti art, and funky stores, including gay-owned **Phoenix General**.

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Where to Eat

Matt's Big Breakfast: In the Roosevelt Row Arts District, Matt's is so popular that early arrival is a wise idea. I recommend the Salami Scramble. Perfecto!

Fez on Central: Just off the light rail, gay-owned Fez is right across from the LGBTQ+ center and not far from the Pride festival grounds at Steele Indian School Park.

The Churchill: Also in the Roosevelt Row Arts District, this retail and dining collective offers 10 options for bites and buys.



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The Churchill

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David Perry is a freelance travel and news journalist. In addition to EDGE, his work has appeared on ChinaTopix, Thrillist, and in Next Magazine and Steele Luxury Travel among others. Follow him on Twitter at @GhastEald.

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