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A GAY HEYDAY

**Laguna Beach Magazine takes an introspective look
at gay life in Laguna Beach and how the town
dramatically changed over the years.**

By Debbie Lavdas | Photos courtesy of Laguna Beach Independent



NOT SO LONG AGO, LAGUNA BEACH WAS THE PLACE TO LIVE AND PLAY FOR AN ABOVE-AVERAGE NUMBER of gay people. The town was a mecca and gay destination with bars such as the Boom Boom Room, the Little Shrimp and Woody's. The town's gay-friendly reputation dates back to the 1930s when Los Angeles crowds headed to Laguna to escape LA raids on gay and lesbian bars. The Hollywood crowd then hit with Rock Hudson and others coming down in the 1940s. And by the 1970s, 1980s, and even into early 2000, Laguna Beach was a prime gay playground. So what changed everything, and where did they go? Will the gay community in Laguna ever be as prominent as in the heydays? The answers depend on who you ask.

WHERE THE BOYS ARE

"Laguna has definitely changed. It seems like Newport Coast has kind of infiltrated, and that whole conservative flux has just pushed its way down the coast and pushed all the boys out of town," says Nick Gannon, a 27-year-old public relations and marketing consultant. Nick knows a good time and says the social scene here is lacking, to say the least, for a 20-something single gay man.

"About five or six years ago things kind of dissipated. Laguna is still like our little village, but as far as gay outlets, there really are none. I go to more private parties at my friends' houses. ... The Boom Boom Room shut down shortly after I started going—we had a really short, sweet relationship," he laughs.

Other ways Laguna has changed? "It's become very mainstream, and it's really just all about big 'McMansions' ... In addition, I feel as though the art community in Laguna is not supported enough. The art culture is branded as a kitschy, crafty art base, when, in actuality, Laguna has amazing talent in the contemporary and sculpting fields. And not to generalize, but a lot of the homosexual community are really art-based. So once the emphasis on the art community went away, that was the last straw."

Nick has recently decided to transition to permanent life in LA or New York. Where will you find him? Where the boys are. "The place to go was always like West Hollywood, but there's a huge surge where the gay community is going to the east side of LA: Silver Lake, Los Feliz, Echo Park. It's a really nice scene. Very neighborhoody and there's a huge art community there."

BOOM TO BUST

"The Boom really was kind of the epicenter of the gay community," says Fred Karger, gay activist and founder of the organization Save the Boom! The Boom Boom Room closed in 2007 and was the oldest gay bar in the western United States, according to Fred. The Boom and other popular gay bars in Laguna Beach were purchased and flipped for profit, despite their popularity. "The owners bought the Boom Boom Room and Coast Inn in 2000 to flip it. They were successful and sold it just five years later," Fred says. "Mr. Udvar-Hazy (Beverly Hills multibillionaire) ended up buying the building for \$12.7 million that had been sold for \$4 million in 2000. The



Dance floor at the Boom Boom Room

Club Bounce

ASF HELP AND HOPE

AIDS Services Foundation of Orange County (ASFOC) was founded in 1985 in the living room of Ken Jillson and Al Roberts, a longtime Laguna Beach couple. Along with a small group of volunteers, they created ASF because people were dying, desperately needed help and had nowhere to turn. ASF is now the largest provider of services to prevent the spread of HIV and improve the lives of men, women and children affected by HIV/AIDS in Orange County. (ocasf.org)



What was once the Boom Boom Room turned into the Democratic Party headquarters for the election.

THE AIDS ERA

“[The AIDS epidemic] took so many of our leaders and our advocates,” says Bob Gentry, former Laguna Beach mayor, the first openly gay mayor in the U.S. and a Laguna Beach City Council member from 1982 to 1994. “I think if that disease had not swept through Laguna the way it had, Laguna would be a very different town today.” The devastating virus hit in the early 1980s. “Laguna Beach had the county’s highest per capita AIDS death rate of any city in the country. That era was a very, very tough time for us,” says Bob, who left the city in 1999 and is now retired.

“I think there began to be an undercurrent of … thoughts of ‘maybe we need to change this town a little bit and maybe we shouldn’t be so gay positive,’ ” Bob says.

“I moved to Laguna in 1970. … It was safe, hospitable and just the place to be on the weekends. … While I don’t live there anymore, from what I hear, it’s not the same kind of welcoming of people who are different and unusual.”

same situation occurred with Woody’s down the street from the Boom; it was also sold by its owners during the Laguna Beach real estate boom in 2005-2006. Both bars were packed, and I know that Woody’s had its best year in its 12-year history the year it was sold.”

The only gay bar left in town now is Main Street Bar, which turns into Club Bounce on weekend nights.

“My fear was that Laguna would end up a lot like Santa Barbara, which was a bustling town with a great gay life in the ’70s. One by one the gay bars closed, and the gay community left,” Fred continues. He has argued with city leaders to bring a new gay bar in. “Palm Springs has become a huge gay/lesbian tourist destination with dozens of gay resorts and 10 or 12 gay bars. It’s a huge boost to that economy,” Fred says. “Younger people are going to Los Angeles, San Diego, Long Beach. It’s not like everyone’s packing up, but we are losing more members of the gay community than we’re gaining.”

MECCA NO MORE

“I remember eggs being thrown over the fence at the Little Shrimp, and people driving by yelling ‘faggot! ’ ” recalls interior designer John Wallace Benecke, who has lived in Laguna Beach for 13

years. He also remembers all the times at The Boom: the long lines waiting to get in on Friday and Saturday nights, the drag nights there and the goldfish “aquarium” built into the bar top, the summers at West Street Beach packed with gay men, hearing Rudy (a local performer) play and sing at the Little Shrimp, and having drinks at Woody’s after a day at the beach.

“Laguna Beach is not a gay town at all anymore,” John says. He believes high housing costs have contributed to the decline of gay life in Laguna Beach. “The older gay population living here took advantage of the housing boom and cashed out and moved … to more gay-friendly places.” He also cites the lack of city support for the change in the gay scene: “The city of Laguna Beach did nothing to try to keep gay people in Laguna, and the [visitors bureau] did nothing at all to try to invite gay people to come to Laguna Beach to vacation, spend their money, stay and play! They never recognized the value of the gay population.” Additionally, he says that gay people are able to meet others on dating websites—explaining why bars aren’t as important now as they once were.

GAY WOMEN WEIGH IN

It seems it’s not just gay men leaving Laguna Beach. “Yes, I’m making a big transition in my

life in moving out of Laguna," says Fernanda Rocha, manager of Laguna's Art of Fitness. Fernanda has been a large part of the local gay community, as well as involved in the national scene in campaigns such as NOH8.

"I'm in a relationship, and love and business are taking me to LA," says Fernanda, also known for her lesbian reality role on Bravo's "Housewives" empire.

Fernanda, now 35, repeats a shared sentiment that the town isn't what it used to be. "I miss the energy from the gay community, the bars, the dancing. For me, it's now very quiet. I used to go to the Boom Boom Room. ... Woody's was another bar we'd go to. Back then, Laguna was a very open place for the community. When those bars went away, a big part of the community went away as well," she says.

Fernanda moved from Brazil to LA in 2001, then moved to Laguna in 2003. "I remember my first time here in Laguna. I was impressed. People said that Laguna was so open; they accept anyone; everybody's friendly. ... And now that the gay community has been going away to places where they can socialize more, those qualities of Laguna are disappearing. That, to me, is not good."

Fernanda isn't alone with her move to LA or thoughts that the gay scene in Laguna Beach is gone for women as well.

"I haven't lived [in Laguna] for almost a year," comments Brittenelle Fredericks, 26, who now lives in Hollywood and works at a marketing firm in Beverly Hills, as well as owns Homme-Girl, an online retail company. "There really wasn't a gay scene for the most part that I knew of—and if there was, they were really good at hiding."

"I feel like the gay community is constantly evolving. The crowd I used to hang out with years ago has grown up, and we would much rather participate in amazing dinners and group events, as opposed to going out and getting crazy. I feel like the 'scene' migrated up to LA because of the opportunities."

Brittenelle says she still loves Laguna, and it still has the best beaches. "It's always a great place to go, clear your head and get away from whatever is going on in your life."



Fernanda Rocha

THE UPSIDE

Town today is definitely not the same as it was for gay people five, 10 or 20-plus years ago, but some continue to see the glass half-full.

"The Boom was a dump," says David Clemens, 46, who has lived in Laguna the last 10 years. "Society has changed, and gay people now can go and be themselves anywhere. Back in the day, gays had to sneak out of LA and come down here. But now, we can go anywhere and be who we are. And we don't want to go to these dumps anymore. If you look at West Hollywood, they've really upped the ante. People spend millions of dollars on these bars now. The Boom never kept up," David says.

"My partner and I didn't come here to Laguna to live because it was a gay town, we came because it was a beauty. My partner was apprehensive of coming here because of its stigma of being a gay city. He'd probably say it's more refreshing now," he adds. "It's not hostile or anything. A lot of places have fixed themselves up—and there are a

lot of new restaurants that we wouldn't have if it weren't for all the tourists coming." David admits that he had a lot of fun here in the 1980s and misses some of those times, but would he trade it for present day? "If I had to give up the upgrades that I've seen in Laguna to get those times back, would I? Probably not."

BRINGING IT BACK

Could Laguna Beach ever return to its gay mecca days? Most doubt it, but not all. "Oh sure," Bob Gentry, former mayor of Laguna, says. "There could be more of a gay presence in city government, marketing done to the worldwide gay community—a multimillion-dollar travel possibility—and if that is ever tapped, and Laguna is seen as coming back, welcoming and wanting to be part of this movement, Laguna would flourish in a minute. It would be like the revitalization of gay Laguna that's in everyone's minds—for even young people who've heard about it. So I think yes, it's extremely possible." **LBM**