

Wednesday, January 7 2015

National

# Fla. could become Deep South's prime gay wedding destination



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Alberto Molina-Coats, right, kisses his new spouse Glenn Molina-Coats after a mass same-sex wedding near the Hillsborough County Courthouse Tuesday, Jan. 6, 2015, in Tampa, Fla. Clerk of the Circuit Court, Pat Frank, married the couple after U.S. District Judge Robert L. Hinkle's ruling that Florida's same-sex marriage ban is unconstitutional took effect early Tuesday in all 67 counties. (Chris O'Meara/Associated Press)

By **Associated Press** January 6 at 2:44 PM

YULEE, Fla. — With gay marriage now legal in Florida, same-sex couples from around the Deep South crossed the border Tuesday as the Sunshine State became a prime regional destination for gay and lesbian weddings still banned back home.

Out-of-state couples lined up outside county courthouses early Tuesday in the Panhandle and northern Florida counties. Some drove for hours to

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get marriage licenses at the first opportunity.

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“As soon as we heard about the ruling we pretty much decided on a whim to come yesterday,” said Scott Singletary, 22. “We wanted to make sure to do it as soon as possible, in case (the law) changed.”

Singletary and Dustyn Batten, 23, of Waycross, Georgia woke before dawn to make the nearly two-hour drive into Florida’s Nassau County. They had been planning a commitment ceremony in Jacksonville, but were thrilled to learn they could actually get married now that Florida’s gay marriage ban was lifted.

Walt Disney World and other top Florida destinations have offered commitment ceremony packages for years, but wedding planners, and hotels and resorts are sensing a new tourism boom with more couples wanting weddings.

“I’ve been fielding a ton of calls from out of state,” said Rachel McMurray, a licensed wedding officiant who married a lesbian couple on Jacksonville’s courthouse steps Tuesday. “Even if their state doesn’t recognize the marriage, it gives them a sense of legitimacy.”

“My phone’s been blowing up,” said Shanie McCowen, who owns Rainbow Bells, a wedding

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planning company in Boca Raton. She said she normally gets four or five wedding inquiries a week, but fielded about 30 on Sunday and Monday alone, and now expects more business from Georgia and Alabama.

County tourism boards have already changed their advertising: "Finally we all do" is the headline on Broward's tourism home page, over a picture of a gay couple in wedding attire on the beach.

Thirty-six states, including 70 percent of the nation's population, now allow gay marriage. From South Carolina up the East Coast, court rulings and legislatures have gradually opened the door to same-sex weddings.

Not so in the rest of the South: Gays and lesbians are still denied marriage rights in a swath of states from Texas to Georgia as well as Arkansas, Missouri, Kentucky and Tennessee.

Robert Lewis, 70, and Duber Gomez-Fonseca, 37, together for nine years, rolled in from Jackson, Mississippi to wed, even though their home state won't recognize their bond. "Hopefully it will just be a matter of months before all 50 states do this," Lewis said as they joined dozens of couples outside the Escambia County courthouse in Florida's



## Panhandle.



St. Petersburg already hosts the largest gay pride parade south of Atlanta, but tourism officials are seeing an increase in hotels and resorts offering gay wedding packages there. David Downing, interim executive director of Visit St. Pete Clearwater, said that LGBT “imagery” has been blended into ad campaigns they run in New York and Chicago.

“It’s a very nuanced message. It’s a very sophisticated crowd that can sniff out inauthenticity a mile away,” he said.

The executive board of the International Gay and Lesbian Tourism Association happens to be meeting in St. Petersburg this week, and can see for themselves that “this is a great destination for weddings, be they straight weddings or gay weddings,” said Downing.

“Our focus is on the experience. We’re telling our many constituencies, this is who we are. We’re inclusive. We welcome everybody.”

The same cannot be said about everyone in Florida. Officials in Jacksonville’s Duval County, Panhandle County near Escambia and a handful of others said they will issue marriage licenses as required by law, but will no longer provide courthouse marriage

ceremonies, to avoid making some heterosexuals uncomfortable.



That didn't stop Cassie Rogers, 41, and Jennifer Royael, 38, from having a courthouse wedding in Jacksonville.

With bubbles floating and crowds gawking, the Clearwater, Fla., couple attired in teal dresses beamed with tear-stained cheeks as McMurray pronounced them "wife and wife."

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Nelson-Gabriel reported from Pensacola. Associated Press reporters Tamara Lush in St. Petersburg and Matt Sedensky in West Palm Beach also contributed to this report.

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