

# Cincinnati is cooler and LGBT-friendlier than you might think



Cincinnati – [www.alsglobal.com](http://www.alsglobal.com)

by **Albert Rodriguez**  
**SGN A&E Writer**

Something is happening in Cincinnati. It's called change. A dramatic change, actually. On the exterior, several districts – Over The Rhine, The Banks, Northside – have undergone, or are undergoing, major redevelopment, resulting in new condo buildings, public parks, retail shops, restaurants, bars, and coffee shops. Particularly in Over The Rhine, or OTR, a considerable amount of aging homes and commercial spaces are being renovated, altering not only the landscape, but also the energy from dormant to vibrant. The transition is happening inside as well with the LGBT community digging its heels into the city's political and social scenes; Cincinnati elected its first openly-Gay councilmember, Chris Seelbach, a few years ago and numerous Gay-owned and/or Gay-friendly businesses, from independent shops to upscale eateries, have created a more comfortable, safe, and community atmosphere. While visiting this Midwest city, I sensed it was going through a rebirth, one that appears necessary, or crucial, to even compare itself with other urban destinations in the same region, like Chicago.

Cincinnati might not be at the top of your travel destinations, however; but if you're looking for a new place to discover with great food, diverse neighborhoods, live entertainment, major sporting events, and a strongly united and inviting LGBT community, consider it for a long weekend or a pit stop to the East Coast. For trip planning, go to [CincyUSA.com](http://CincyUSA.com).

## GETTING THERE

Delta Air Lines ([delta.com](http://delta.com)) offers the only non-stop flights between Seattle and Cincinnati, at just under 5 hours on either the outbound or return leg. Otherwise, you'll have to connect through LA, Salt Lake City, Atlanta, Detroit, or another Delta hub. The Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport is in Hebron, Kentucky, allowing you to step foot in that state for the first time, if you've never been. If not arranging a shuttle or rental car from the airport to Cincinnati, I recommend Uber, Lyft, or a newer personal car service called Drivr ([godrivr.com](http://godrivr.com)) that will transport you wherever you need to go in a Tesla, because why taxi when you can Tesla? Should your itinerary keep you downtown, or near the city core, you can easily get around on foot, or bus, though light rail is unfortunately not available. You might also want to consider

Red Bike; bike rental is an affordable and fun method to explore the destination. For bike rentals, go to [cincyredbike.org](http://cincyredbike.org), or look for a Red Bike station scattered throughout.

## ACCOMMODATIONS

An alternative to staying in brand name accommodations is the 21c Museum Hotel Cincinnati ([21cmuseumhotels.com/cincinnati](http://21cmuseumhotels.com/cincinnati)) in downtown. Its location puts you directly in the thick of things, within walkable distance to restaurants, shopping centers, sports stadiums, and just a few blocks from the trendy Over The Rhine neighborhood, which is like a combination of Seattle's Capitol Hill and Fremont districts, though not as developed. The 21c hotel brand was launched in Louisville nine years ago and has expanded to various cities rapidly, turning run-down buildings into hip, sophisticated places to stay; the Cincinnati property was its second opening. With 156 rooms and modern amenities – 42" HDTVs with full cable listing, work desks, luxurious and firm beds with crisp linens, Nespresso brewing systems, Malin + Goetz bath essentials – 21c is perfect for travelers wanting contemporary accommodations in a less crowded environment. Visual art is a focal point of this hotel, itself a museum with 8,000 square feet of exhibition space. Permanent and rotating exhibits are displayed – from the lobby "Floor Module Table," doubling as the check-in counter, to the stairway up to the spa on the top level, where San Francisco artist Ryan Wolfe's "Field of Grass" is posted on

a high wall. The second floor galleries with current exhibits like "Transforming Transformation: Cuba, In and Out" are open 24 hours. Close to the elevators, en route to the first floor restrooms, you'll notice the groovy "Healing Tiles" display that is also part of the hotel's collection. On-site amenities include The Spa at 21c, a full service spa with three treatment rooms that offer a variety of massages, body scrubs, body wraps, facials, and more. Metropole Restaurant & Bar, on the main floor, serves breakfast, lunch, and dinner in a beautiful, bistro-style setting with original floor tiles and crown molding. And, the Cocktail Terrace on the rooftop level is an excellent spot to have cocktails with spectacular views of the city, or can be reserved for private events, such as bachelor/bachelorette parties and wedding receptions.

## WINING AND DINING

So many good restaurants, so little time. My visit to Cincy lasted four days, yet it still wasn't enough to tackle the city's up and coming food scene. At the top is Sotto ([sotlocincinnati.com](http://sotlocincinnati.com)), a rustic Italian ristorante in downtown. Every dish we ordered was superb, from the Chicken Liver Mousse w/Pistachio Bruschetta to the Bavette con Botarga (pasta tossed with tomatoes, bread-crumbs, and Habanero oil) to the short rib cappellacci (small pasta dumplings with shallots, Amish butter, thyme, and short rib). All seats at Sotto were occupied on the weeknight we dined, proving that it's one of the most sought-after dining attractions

in town; if you won't take my word for it, then ask tennis star Serena Williams and hip hop beau Drake, who had dinner there a week after we did. Another standout is The Littlefield ([littlefieldns.com](http://littlefieldns.com)), a bourbon-inspired bar and restaurant with a casual atmosphere, indoor and outdoor seating, and a menu of "Bites" vs. large, full meals. The Pigs in a Blanket – house made pork sausage wrapped in pastry with mustard and fennel apple sauce – are a must, a matured version of the childhood treat, yet still fun to eat. The Meatloaf Sandwich with tasso ham and gravy between two slices of artisan 16 Bricks bread is also recommended, as is The Littlefield's signature Bourbon Pecan Pie.

The Contemporary Arts Center's Collective Cafe ([contemporaryartscenter.org](http://contemporaryartscenter.org)), on the lobby floor of the Contemporary Arts Center, next door to 21c Museum Hotel, deserves a suggestion. Familiar favorites with a twist, such as Kentucky Croque, Greens and Eggs (with sauteed kale), Biscuits and Vegetarian Gravy, or the Breakfast Ciabatta, along with regionally roasted coffee in an ample, neatly designed space with communal tables and complimentary WiFi will start your day off right. Somewhere else to begin the day is Coffee Emporium ([coffee-emporium.com](http://coffee-emporium.com)) with four locations, although the cafe at Walnut Street and East 12th is the most popular and offers abundant table, counter, and couch seating in a relaxed ambiance where everyone from students to Kroger and Macy's executives (each of their headquarter offices just blocks away) gather for coffee, pastries, and organic deli food.

You don't travel across the country to eat fast food, but when in Cincinnati a stop at one of the many Skyline Chili ([skylinechili.com](http://skylinechili.com)) diners for a three-way is in order. Cincy's version of chili is soupy and thin, like a sauce, that can be eaten in a bowl, though most of the chain's loyal patrons prefer it over a hot dog or spaghetti with shredded cheese and onion – that's a three-way. The more toppings, the more ways (i.e. three-way, four-way, five-way). Skyline is a must-do, if at least once.

For drinks, Sundry & Vice ([sundryandvice.com](http://sundryandvice.com)) is an apothecary-inspired lounge with everything cool – cocktails, bar space, peeps. It was a good mix of Gay men, straight guys by themselves or with girlfriends, and young women just out of college on the night I visited, yet they all appeared to be Cincinnatians and OTR folks; my cosmopolitan, by the way, was on the mark. Nada ([eatdrinknada.com](http://eatdrinknada.com)), smack in downtown, is a two-level restaurant serving



Cincinnati Music Hall – [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org)



simple Latin cuisine with bar counters on both floors; usually packed, it pulls in visitors and locals alike.

EXPLORING

A lot of money isn't needed to discover Cincinnati; in fact, some of the exploring requires just two feet and a pair of eyes. A stroll through Over The Rhine will introduce you to a bevy of independent shops, selling items from vintage posters to vinyl records to hand-crafted donuts; Holtman's Donuts ([holtmansdonutshop.com](http://holtmansdonutshop.com)) has been making fresh donuts since 1960 and draws worshippers of the disc-shaped snack all day to its three storefronts, including its Vine Street location. Park + Vine ([parkandvine.com](http://parkandvine.com)) is an eco-friendly general store with natural, organic, and raw items worth checking out, if not to buy anything than to have a bite to eat inside its cafe. Findlay Market ([findlaymarket.org](http://findlaymarket.org)) has been around since 1852, and though much smaller than Pike Place Market, this artisan shopping arcade has been the launch pad for many restaurateurs and shopowners. Vendors selling fresh meat, seafood, salads, Asian hot dishes, desserts, and prepared carry-out meals is what you'll come across inside. And outside in the surrounding blocks are more shops to purchase chocolate, pho, hand-picked fruits and vegetables, and sandwiches.

Two public parks should go on your itinerary, the first is Washington Park ([washingtonpark.org](http://washingtonpark.org)) that stages outdoor movie nights, free fitness workouts, "Yappy Hour," and other events during the year and is right across the street from the Cincinnati Music Hall ([cincinnati-symphony.org](http://cincinnati-symphony.org)), home of the Cincinnati Symphony and Pops Orchestra, Cincinnati May Festival, Cincinnati Ballet, and Cincinnati Opera. The second is Smale Riverfront Park ([mysmaleriverfrontpark.org](http://mysmaleriverfrontpark.org)), right on the riverfront and running the length of Paul Brown

Stadium, home of the Cincinnati Bengals, and Great American Ballpark, where the Cincinnati Reds play. The park has playground attractions for both children and adults, including a giant foot piano, as well as trimmed lawns to picnic on and from which to watch the riverboats passing through the Ohio River.

LGBT COMMUNITY AND SCENE

Chris Seelbach made history in 2011, becoming the first openly-Gay, city-wide elected member of the Cincinnati City Council. Prior to this, he pushed for and helped win a campaign to repeal Article XII, the anti-Gay law that cost the city more than \$25 million in lost revenue. Despite two big colleges in the area – University of Cincinnati and Xavier University – Cincy has for many years leaned conservative, but Seelbach's seat on the council is part of the transition to trend more progressively. The Greater Cincinnati HRC chapter ([hrc.org/steering-committees/cincinnati](http://hrc.org/steering-committees/cincinnati)), incorporating the regions of Cincinnati, Dayton, and Northern Kentucky, is a strong resource for the local LGBT community and has been leading the effort in providing information and guidance for the recent Kentucky Gay marriage dispute. Cincinnati Pride ([cincinnati-pride.org](http://cincinnati-pride.org)) is a weeklong event in late June culminating with a parade and festival along the riverfront halting at Sawyer Point/Yeatman's Cove. Next year's date has already been set for June 25, 2016.

Among the Gay bars, or "Gay-friendly" as they bill themselves, is Below Zero Lounge ([belowzerolounge.com](http://belowzerolounge.com)) in the OTR. It's your best opportunity to socialize with a vast clientele of Gay men, though directly above is The Cabaret ([cabaretcincinnati.com](http://cabaretcincinnati.com)), owned by "RuPaul's Drag Race" contestant Penny Tration and home to some of the most talented drag entertainment in the Midwest. Tillie's Lounge



21c Museum Hotel Cincinnati – Photo by Albert Rodriguez

([facebook.com/TilliesLounge](https://facebook.com/TilliesLounge)) is named after a famous circus elephant, and it's the only place on earth I know of that pairs premiere cocktails with macaroons. Glitzy decor with piano and chandeliers, swervy bar counter, miniature lamps, and imported throne chairs give the joint a swanky feel, while an interactive, friendly staff and a series of themed nights (trivia, karaoke, etc.) has made it a gathering spot for those primarily living in the now-hipster Northside district. Across the river in Northern Kentucky, the longstanding Rosie's Tavern ([facebook.com/RosiesTavern](https://facebook.com/RosiesTavern)) is your vintage dive bar that brings together a non-

pretentious, very local crowd in the town of Covington, a 10-minute drive from downtown Cincinnati.

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