

The O Effect

Olivia takes vacationing to a whole new level.

By Diane Anderson-Minshall

I'd heard it before, dozens of times, and it always sounded clichéd, exaggerated, perhaps merely the effect of too many sun-drenched days lazing on a beach somewhere slightly exotic. But weeks after I disembarked from the MS Westerdam—a lumbering vessel that took me from Florida to Cozumel, the Cayman Islands, Turks and Caicos and the Bahamas—I was saying it too: Olivia changed my life.

Olivia, of course, is the one-time record company that, in the last 35 years, has turned into quite a cool niche-travel firm—and one of the country's largest lesbian-owned companies. It took me years to finally take an Olivia cruise and when I did, I went with as much trepidation as excitement. I anticipated pool parties packed with 20-year-old bikini bodies or, conversely, being the youngest person (and the only woman of color) on a shipload of coupled white retirees. Neither was true.

What I did find were nearly 2,000 eager lesbians, ages 18 to over 80 (believe me, the octogenarians partied harder than Gen-Xers), a nicely diverse group of women and strong programs to support travelers who were single, or had disabilities or other differing needs. There was a tiny handful of men, too (mostly gay men who preferred the lesbian cruises to the party boats aimed at dudes, or trans men who were involved with queer women) though they were less than 1 percent.

I knew from the first night, when the legendary rock band Heart came on board to perform—their first time doing so on a cruise ship—and the Wilson sisters' performance made me rethink my marriage vows, that this trip would impact me. But I didn't realize until the end that I'd walk away with a halo of happiness that I'd officially dub the "Olivia Effect."

No doubt, it's Olivia's ability to create this effect that has led the company into new territory this year, announcing the creation of the first Olivia "communi-

ty." Not one to shy away from big risks, the founder and face of Olivia, Judy Dlugacz—who welcomes guests aboard the ship, even now—jumped in immediately after she saw a condo community in Arizona that she thought would be perfect for "creating the Olivia experience."

So for the women like me, so taken by the Olivia Effect that they can't get enough of Olivia's expanded travel options—in 2009, these include a luxury cruise to Tahiti, a riverboat cruise in Europe, a festival in Ixtapa, Mexico, and another Caribbean cruise to raise money for the Dr. Susan Love Foundation—Dlugacz has built a little lesbian motherland in Arizona.

"This is a dream come true for me," she effuses. "It's always been my desire, from the time we started as a record company, to create community."

A bit like a retirement community, but for lesbians of all ages and stages of life, Olivia's first full-time, land-based community will actually be a condominium complex in Tucson that sits on five acres of beautiful landscape with over a dozen three-story residential buildings plus pools, a spa, barbecue pavilions, a clubhouse and gym. Talking about the units themselves makes anyone sound like a realtor (full-size washer and dryer! over-size walk-in closets!) and there's no arguing that the new Olivia community offers homeowners and renters a gay-friendly luxury resort to live or vacation in. The complex circles a golf course and dog runs, and is close to great shopping, wilderness hiking and museums. Even skiing is 30 minutes away in the winter.

Olivia has made purchasing the condos a snap, with banks and financing companies on hand to make it a one-stop shopping experience for buyers, and setting it up so that women can buy with a friend or solo.

But for the vast number of excited lesbians plunking down \$10,000 to reserve one of the 330 units—50 women did in the first week after the announcement—Olivia's new venture in Tucson isn't about real estate.

It takes what many feminists left behind in the '70s—

women's land—and updates the concept for 2009. It's a place where women of all ages and backgrounds can combine modern living with the things the back-to-the-landers once wanted, like the ability to make decisions about their own communities.

"I'm going to buy my own [condo] as well," says Dlugacz, who states that as CEO she'd never ask other lesbians to do something she wouldn't. And as the company sets sail into new territory, Dlugacz is as excited as any of the community's new owners are.

She, too, still falls victim to the Olivia Effect, so having this outpost in Tucson will, for her and for lesbians from around the globe, be a chance to "live Olivia 365 days a year." ■



Ladies enjoying the big "O"

