California Braces for ‘New Summer of Love’

SAN FRANCISCO — The groom was shopping for the perfect diamond for his betrothed — the other groom. As Rey Almeida, a 47-year-old elementary school principal, perused the Equality Forever rings (a same-sex wedding special at 40 percent off if purchased from June 16 to June 26), he couldn’t help reflecting on the symbolism.

“We’ve been waiting for the right moment,” Mr. Almeida, 47, said of marrying his partner, Alan Pex, a 46-year-old accountant who was initially as standoffish as Mr. Big on “Sex in the City.” “Now there’s the possibility of a ring, a ring that says, I want to marry you and spend the rest of my life with you.”

California is gearing up for the “new summer of love,” as it is being dubbed here: the legalization of same-sex marriage beginning at 5:01 p.m. Monday.

Unlike in Massachusetts, California’s new law does not limit marriages to residents of the state, thus resurrecting old postcard images of California as the promised land. But instead of Edenic orange groves, the new arrivals will be greeted with organic framboise ganaches, Russian River honeymoon canoe trips and Gay Palm Springs hotel packages with rose petals, Champagne, two souvenir pillows embroidered with the couples’ first names and aromatherapy candles at room check-in.

Faced with a wilted economy, water shortages and sticker shock at the gasoline pump, many California businesses are welcoming “the dinks” (double income, no kids) with open arms. “It’s basically a godsend,” said Daniel Diorno, the general manager of the Ingleside Inn in Palm Springs, which is offering honeymoon specials from $479 bargain basement (boutonnieres, 15-minute wedding, 20 guests) to the “Elizabeth Taylor” at $29,999 (poolside villas, wedding cake and reception, ice sculptures, flowers, sit-down dinner for 200 and three nights in the honeymoon suite). “We’re just blessed to help.” Ten couples from New York, Las Vegas and Phoenix have signed up for the options.

Jan Felshin, left, and Edrie Ferdun, retired professors who live on Fire Island in New York, have been together 49 years. They plan a wedding in Los Angeles.

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN
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According to Community Marketing Inc., a gay and lesbian market research firm here, four of the top 10 gay travel destinations are in California, with gay men and lesbians spending $64 billion a year on domestic leisure travel. The potential windfall of same-sex marriage was underscored this week in a study by the Williams Institute at the University of California, Los Angeles, School of Law, which estimated that over three years, same-sex nuptials would contribute $684 million to the state’s wedding industry and $64 million to the state budget.

The study also predicted that half of California’s 102,639 gay couples would marry over the next three years, as would 68,000 from out of state (including 12,000 from New York).

Among them are Jeffrey Dreiblatt, 47, a Web designer, and Willie Walker, 44, a legal assistant, from Brooklyn, who fell in love in the Borough Hall subway station 15 years ago while standing in line to buy tokens. They plan to honeymoon at an inn in Sonoma County after marrying in San Francisco on Aug. 8.

“When I was younger, I didn’t understand the point of getting married and replicating heterosexual life,” said Mr. Dreiblatt. “But over the years, my thinking has changed. The law in California and the implications for New York spoke to us and said, ‘now is the time.’ ”

Many gay men and lesbians are taking a wait-and-see attitude, said the Rev. Blane Ellsworth, an independent nondenominational minister in Napa who also has a Web site, Enchanting Elopements, listing equality-sensitive businesses. There is still the memory of the euphoria, and letdown, in 2004, when nearly 4,000 same-sex couples stood in line to marry in San Francisco, only to have the marriages nullified by the state five months later.

Mr. Ellsworth said those he has dealt with “are pretty smart business people.”

“They’re saying if they’re going to invest in a nice service and wedding, I’m going to wait until it’s a sure thing,” he said.

“We’re hoping our rights don’t get taken away again,” said Megan Marteny, 23, who was sipping Champagne one recent night with her partner at a wedding expo held by the Golden Gate Business Association, a gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender chamber of commerce.

In contrast to the experience in 2004, which had a spontaneous, storm-the-castle, free-tickets-to-the-Grateful-Dead quality, with hundreds of couples standing in line in the rain overnight, there is a palpable sense of impending permanence this time.

Ed Schultz, a social worker who became domestic partner to Steve Berlin last year, plans to go to City Hall on July 10. “Marriage has a certain dignity,” Mr. Schultz said. “When I go to work and say, ‘I’m domestically partnered,’ that’s something different than saying, ‘I’m married.’ ”

Charlotte Fiorito, a wedding photographer who specializes in same-sex unions, says she did “the 2004 crush in our rain ponchos. Now, a lot of people are planning the kind of weddings they have been waiting their whole lives for.”

Among them are James H. Bainton and Jeffrey Rueda, both 40 and doctors, who were about to send out letterpress invitations to their commitment ceremony at a Napa Valley vineyard when the Supreme Court ruled last month that gay men and lesbians had a constitutional right to marry. The invitation to their “commitment ceremony” was quickly changed to “wedding.”

“We’re still in the shaping mode,” Mr. Bainton said of the nuptials, with 100 guests, to take place beside a pond in fields of sage and lavender at the height of August tomato season. “This increases the meaning of it. It feels like we’re sitting here making history.”

While not quite a gold rush, businesses like Enchanted Elopements and myqueerwedding.com are popping up.

And across the state, there is a sense of the birth of new rituals. Steve Pougnet, the openly gay mayor of Palm Springs, plans to hold a citywide “marriage festival” on June 21, having been deputized two weeks ago by the county clerk. He has two dozen weddings lined up and is planning his own in the fall. Jan Felshin, 76, and Edrie Ferdun, 71, retired professors who live on Fire Island in New York, have been together 49 years. At their wedding in Mandeville Canyon, in Los Angeles, they will be joined by four other lesbian couples.

Not surprising, along with new rituals have come new etiquette questions. Couples whose marriages were nullified in 2004, like Joyce Feltham and Dorian Leslie Duren of Palo Alto, are wondering how to handle their “encore” wedding, a new breed here as couples embark on their second or third public pledge to the same person. “How do we tell people who brought gifts the first time not to feel obligated to bring another one?” Ms. Duren asked.

Peggy Post, the etiquette expert and author, who is based in Vermont, said the legalization of same-sex weddings, if it held, was bound to bring about changes in the ritual, the same way, she said, that brides now walk down the aisle with stepfathers, not just their fathers, and that a white dress has come to signify “the color of joy,” not just virginity.

So it will be too, when same-sex couples are pronounced “spouses for life.”

Armistead Maupin, one of the city’s most famous authors, became married in Vancouver, British
Columbia, last year to his partner, Christopher Turner, and will probably marry him again in California, he said.

“Straight people have grown up thinking they’re entitled to a fairy-tale wedding,” Mr. Maupin said. “One of our great advantages as gay people is that we’ve been forced to forge relationships without that fantasy. In doing so, we’ve figured out what’s at the core.”

He continued, “Our relationships supported us during the AIDS epidemic. We know what it means to have another person stand by you.”

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