

Life Lessons Learned in Lauderdale

By Ron Bauman

February 17, 2025

Coming-of-age stories are a favourite genre of mine. The life lessons learned by characters are reflections of those we, the audience, face at points in our lives. Relationships are challenged in a familiar setting, testing the boundaries and limits between you and a friend, a lover or an unknown future. Storytellers like John Hughes led us to believe this transition only occurs from adolescence to adulthood. I believe we are presented with coming-of-age moments at all stages of life. Travel captures that childlike spirit for exploring curiosities that ravage our minds, and wouldn't you rather find out that truth on your own than watch others pursue them on film?

New Years 2024 was spent in the basement of my friend's house. As a gay man, that was not how I wished to ring in the new year. Pop culture might suggest that I should have been dancing shirtless in a crowded bar, but that was not how life was going for me. The Niagara region has a small LGBTQ+ community, with most people leaving the area for things to do. I declared, on our drive home, that I wanted to "be gayer" that year. How that would occur was not established yet, but an opportunity presented itself soon enough.

A few weeks later, Phil and I were invited to Fort Lauderdale, Florida, by Doug and Carter. We met them on a cruise we took in 2022. For some reason, there were a lot of gay men on that voyage, and we had crossed paths at one of the many trivia events. They were traveling with Carter's best friend, "Elias", who we also made a connection with. For over a year, we had talked through a chat group about meeting up again one day.

Carter would host us at an Airbnb in [Wilton Manors](#), a gay district in the southern Florida city. He was turning 30 and wanted us to join in the festivities. All we had to do was book our friends and chip in for food and drinks. It seemed Baby New Years was helping me fulfill my resolution. A trip to a warmer climate is always welcomed after a cold Canadian winter.

We have traveled with friends before, but not with three men we had met only once. I felt a trust with Doug and Carter, but Elias was a bit flighty and was bringing his new boyfriend of two months, Troy. Phil and I knew that there was a risk that things could sour on a trip. With an escape plan in mind, I dove headfirst into the seemingly calm waters with every suggested activity.



Our Airbnb was designed in classic Florida style. The exterior was unassuming and blended in with the neighbourhood. The interior was a mid-century modern swinging pad, outfitted with modern delights. The backyard was our oasis, with a large pool and attached hot tub, and a palm-thatched canopy. At night, the yard lit up with colour changing orbs as the glowing moon shone over us.

Wilton Manors is a quiet suburban neighbourhood in sunny Fort Lauderdale. It surrounds the main street, Wilton Drive, a [hotspot of colourful businesses](#) and palm tree-lined boulevards. It's the type of area that provide idyllic spaces for Instagrammable moments, with equally beautiful people wandering around the area all day and all night. My closest gay village is Toronto, which was a dry and crumbly tart compared to the fresh and delectable Wilton Manors. Especially Drynk and it's back patio set-up. It became the hideaway I craved the most.



The Drynk, back patio

From adult shops to strip clubs, Wilton Manors had all the experiences I believed could fulfill my new years wish. We visited every club, ate like queens and drank like fishes. It was the sort of vacation I could have done from a cruise ship and often questioned why we were not on one. Thankfully, we were landlocked for the eventual disruption.

Elias and Troy, being a new couple, had not developed a trust for such a highly sexualized environment. Their insecurities within their relationship melted out onto the dance floors

and into our cocktails. It was that sour stench we desperately tried to avoid. Both were a stereotype found within the gay community: dramatic, overzealous and bitchy. Doug and Carter were mirror images to Phil and me: old married couples with no need for dramatics.

On the eve of Carter's birthday, the volcano erupted. A toxic mess of lava spewed all down Wilton Drive when Elias and Troy came to blows. The beautiful buildings were the backdrop for a fight I had never witnessed and care not to see again. The two threw fists at each other over a disagreement about the next day's dinner. Even as an avid fan of reality television, I did not sign up for a front row seat to this show.

The 2 a.m. brawl followed us back to the house. Troy's suitcase was packed, and he was prompted to leave. Feeling frustrated and unsafe, I called a hotel for an immediate check-in. We had planned to visit a resort at the end of the week before flying home, and they said we could come at 9 a.m. With Elias naked and passed out on the couch, the four of us sat up all night in anticipation of Troy's violent return.

The rest of the week went smoothly enough. Phil and I moved to [The Grand Resort & Spa](#), a gay men's, clothing-optional resort. The private estate housed three pool areas and sat peacefully near the beaches of Fort Lauderdale. We ran out the clock on this trip, wishing we could hop on a cruise instead. We would see Doug and Carter again, who informed us that Elias had left with Troy to return to Georgia. I shook my head at this and just saw our savings get flushed away on the new expenses at our impromptu hotel change.

Coming out of that situation, I reaffirmed that I am gay enough by my standards. With my husband as my favourite travel companion, we can trust each other for support on our whims. New friends along the way help shape the experience, but not all friends are lasting. It may be a cliché for a coming-of-age story, but some lessons take multiple times to sink in. And prettier settings always help.