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GAY & LESBIAN SYDNEY

top picks

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GAY & LESBIAN SYDNEY

Sydney is indisputably one of the world's great gay cities. Gays and lesbians have migrated here from all over Australia, New Zealand, the region and the world, adding to a community that is visible, vibrant and an integral part of the city's social fabric. It's hard to imagine another metropolis putting a gaggle of drag queens into the closing ceremony of its Olympic Games. Yet that moment was so typically Sydney – cheeky, flirtatious, glitzy, light-hearted and self-deprecating.

Darlinghurst is the city's main gay ghetto, with most of the bars, clubs and gay-targeted businesses based around Oxford St. Newtown's King St comes a close second. Most of the inner suburbs have a sizable queer element, particularly Surry Hills, Potts Point, Kings Cross, Paddington, Redfern, Erskineville, Enmore, Glebe, Leichhardt and the Eastern Beaches.

These days few city dwellers would bat an eyelid at same-sex couples holding hands on the street. The battle for acceptance has been long and protracted. As recently as the early 1990s, several murders were linked to hate crimes and a stroll up Oxford St could result in a chorus of abuse from car windows. Sydney is now relatively safe but it still pays to keep your wits about you, particularly at night.

NSW's gays and lesbians enjoy legal protection from discrimination and vilification, and an equal age of consent (16 years). Marriage/civil unions and adoption rights are the next big hurdles. Other challenges include the ongoing impact of HIV/AIDS (there are over 300 new infections in Sydney annually) and the growing scourge of crystal-meth addiction.

PARTY TIME

There's no doubt about it, Sydney gives good party. By good, read big, lavish and flashy. Some party animals treat it like a professional sport, spending months preparing for the big fixtures, which can resemble endurance events.

Sydney's famous gay and lesbian Mardi Gras is now the biggest annual tourist-attracting date on the Australian calendar. While the straights focus on the parade, the gay and lesbian community throws itself wholeheartedly into the entire festival, including the blitzkrieg of partying that surrounds it. There's no better time for the gay traveller to visit Sydney than this month-long lead-up to the parade and party, held on the first Saturday in March. Along with film festivals, theatre, art exhibitions, talks, gay zoo tours and cruisy harbour cruises, the big events are the launch, fair day and the pool party (for information on all things Mardi Gras related, visit www.mardigras.org.au).

On the big night itself, the parade kicks off around sunset preceded by the throbbing engines of hundreds of dykes on bikes. Heading up Oxford St from Hyde Park it veers right into Flinders St, hooking into Moore Park Rd and culminating outside the party site in Driver Ave. The whole thing takes about 90 minutes and attracts up to half a million spectators.

It's best to watch from an apartment lining the street (better make friends with those locals quickly), but if you're forced to stand on the street, the gayest section is between Crown St and the first part of Flinders St. If you're running late, the crowd thins out considerably near the end – although by this stage the participants' enthusiasm is on the wane. Another fun option is to volunteer as a marshal – you'll need to attend a few meetings and arrive hideously early on the day, but you'll get the best view and a discounted party ticket for your trouble.

The party (tickets \$130 from Ticketek, p168) is an extravaganza in every sense of the word – attended by over 16,000 revellers it stretches over several large lavishly decorated halls featuring the best DJs and lighting designers the world has to offer. Performers have included Kylie Minogue (twice), Boy George and Chaka Khan.

Mardi Gras also runs the annual Sleaze Ball (p18) in late September/early October. **Inquisition** (www.sydneyleatherpride.org; tickets \$95), Sydney Leather Pride's big night, is held in May. **Toybox** (www.toyboxparty.com.au) is a hugely popular daytime party held several times a year in Luna Park. While Mardi Gras is the city's main Gay Pride festival, the Stonewall Hotel (p184) organises a minifestival around the traditional Stonewall commemorations in late June.

SHOPPING

Oxford St has most of the stores targeting gays and lesbians. At opposite ends of the spectrum, House of Priscilla (p126) and Sax Fetish (p126) offer plenty of opportunity to play dress-up.

TOOLSHED Map p78 Adult

☎ 9332 2792; www.toolshed.com.au; 81 Oxford St, Darlinghurst; ☎ 10am-1am Mon-Thu & Sun, 10am-3am Fri & Sat

Two-foot dildos, life-size dolls, codpieces, S&M paraphernalia and tons of porn – or just call in to buy tickets to upcoming parties. It has another store nearby at 191 Oxford St. Shop online if you're shy.

BOOKSHOP DARLINGHURST

Map p78 Books

☎ 9331 1103; 207 Oxford St, Darlinghurst; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Wed, 10am-11pm Thu, 10am-midnight Fri & Sat, 11am-11pm Sun; ☎ 380

This excellent bookshop specialises in gay and lesbian literature, with everything from queer crime and lesbian fiction, to glossy coffee-table books and porn. A fun browse, to say the least.

DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

Sydney's gay scene is notoriously fickle. What's popular one week may be completely dead as soon as the next new venue opens, so it pays to pick up the excellent free street press (*Sydney Star Observer*, *SX*, *LOTL*) to find out what's 'so hot right now' – or better still, ask a local.

Most of the venues listed below attract a predominately gay male clientele. Despite Sydney's size, there are no permanent lesbian bars, but rather a series of lesbian nights, including the weekly Wednesday night sessions

PARADES & POLITICS

On 24 June 1978 a Sydney icon was violently born. There had been other gay rights marches (in 1973 activists were arrested in Martin Place), but this one was different. Two thousand people followed a truck down Oxford St in a carnival-type atmosphere, encouraging punters out of the bars to join them.

After harassing the participants for much of the route, the police corralled the remaining marchers in Darlinghurst Rd, Kings Cross, beating and arresting 53 of them. Worse still, the names of the all of the arrestees were published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and many of them lost their jobs.

The following year 3000 people joined the march, dubbed the 'Gay Mardi Gras', and in 1981 the decision was made to move the event to summer. The current parade still has a serious political edge; more than just a protest, many consider that the parade itself has helped to transform Australian society into a more accepting place for lesbians and gay men.

at the Bank Hotel (p164) and the Sly Fox, Friday nights at Middle Bar (p159) and the monthly Moist nights at Arq (p184).

Most inner-city bars are gay friendly. On Sunday afternoons, every gay man who thinks they're too cool (or butch, or old) for the scene seems to descend on the Green Park Hotel (p159). The Bank (p164), The Tilbury (p159) and Kinselas (p159) attract a similarly mixed crowd. Home (p158) started as a mainly gay club, and it still runs the hugely popular homosexual parties on the Sundays of long weekends.

DARLINGHURST

COLOMBIAN Map p78 Bar, DJ

☎ 9360 2151; 117 Oxford St; ☎ 10am-4am;

☎ Museum

Insanely popular, this swanky drinking spot offers an intoxicating mix of cute guys, thumping music and heady drinks. The décor is to die for and the window seats makes it oh so easy to cruise the street.

MANACLE Map p78 Bar, DJ

☎ 9357 4166; 1 Patterson Lane; ☎ 8pm-1am Thu & Fri, 7am-1am Sat & Sun, 7am-4pm Mon; ☎ Museum

A fittingly dodgy entrance down a set of stairs in a back lane leads to the pits of hell – or at least to Sydney's main leather bar. Actually, it's more about the cult of masculinity; there's no strict dress code, but women and drags shouldn't bother trying. Dudes that just can't stop can descend into the gloom on the weekend and pretend the sun never came up.

OXFORD HOTEL Map p78 Bar, DJ

☎ 9331 3467; 134 Oxford St; ☎ 24hrs; ☎ Museum

Another year; another owner; another refit; another panic that this treasured venue may

top picks

GAY BEACHES

- North Bondi (p93)
- Lady Bay, aka Lady Jane (p117)
- Obelisk (p111)
- Redleaf Pool (p87)

(shudder) go straight. So far, so gay. The new incarnation still attracts a cross-section of gay blokedom to its spacious street-level main bar with outdoor seating and a video juke-box, and a mini danceclub in the basement.

MIDNIGHT SHIFT Map p78 Bar, Club, Drag

☎ 9360 4319; www.themidnightshift.com; 85 Oxford St; ☎ noon-4am Mon-Wed, noon-6am Thu & Fri, 2pm-6am Sat & Sun; 🏠 Museum
The grand dame of the Oxford St scene, the Shift boasts two quite distinct venues. Downstairs is a video bar attracting an unpretentious mix of blokes, twinks and bears, and a music policy that ranges from Top 40 to camp classics. Upstairs is a serious tits-to-the-wind club (open from 10pm; Fridays \$5 before midnight, \$15 after; Saturdays \$10 before midnight, \$25 after), with grinding beats (and teeth) and lavish drag productions.

STONEWALL HOTEL Map p78 Bar, DJ, Drag

☎ 9360 1963; www.stonewallhotel.com; 175 Oxford St; ☎ 11am-6am; 🏠 Museum
Spreading over a gorgeous three-storey heritage building opening boldly on to the street, Stonewall has a fun vibe and attracts a younger crowd. Hosted by the wonderfully glamorous Ricca Paris, there are drag shows every night of the week, as well as movie nights, karaoke and the ever-popular male-box night (wear a numbered sticker and send each other messages). A few years ago, the ceiling collapsed on the dance floor, causing one DJ to proclaim 'I finally brought the house down!'

ARQ Map p78 Club, Drag

☎ 9380 8700; www.arqsydney.com.au; 16 Flinders St; admission free-\$20; ☎ 9pm-7am Thu, 9pm-9am Fri-Sun; 🏠 380
Sydney's gay superclub is a beautiful venue split over two levels. Downstairs

is cool and loungy, with amoeba-shaped sofas and pool tables. Upstairs you'll find the cutting-edge light and sound system being worked by the city's top DJs. Look out for the notorious foam parties (Fomo), hilarious drag king fuelled women's nights (Moist), retro nights (Retrossexual), amateur drag comps (Fabulon) and the ever-popular weekly Saturdays.

PALMS ON OXFORD Map p78 Club, Drag

☎ 9357 4166; 124 Oxford St, Darlinghurst; ☎ 8pm-1am Thu & Sun, 8pm-3am Fri & Sat; 🏠 Museum

No-one admits to coming here, but the occasional queues prove them liars. In this underground dance bar the heyday of Stock Aitken Waterman never ended. It may be uncool, but if you're not screaming when Kylie's played you'll be the only one.

PHOENIX Map p78 Club, Live Music

☎ 9331 2956; 34 Oxford St, Darlinghurst; admission \$10; ☎ 10pm-6am Thu-Sun; 🏠 Museum
The epitome of down and dirty; if you don't come out drenched in sweat you're not doing it right. This tiny underground club attracts a queer mix of bohemians, party dykes and shirts-off butch dudes. Thursdays are straighter and veer towards indie, with live performances.

BODYLINE Map p78 Sauna

☎ 9360 1006; 10 Taylor St, Darlinghurst; admission \$23; ☎ noon-7am Mon-Thu, 24hr noon Fri-7am Mon; 🏠 Museum

This three-level gay mens' sauna offers plenty of heat and steam, particularly on big party weekends.

INNER WEST

IMPERIAL HOTEL Map pp100-1 Bar, DJ, Drag

☎ 9519 9899; 35 Erskineville Rd, Erskineville; ☎ 3-11.30pm Mon, 3pm-midnight Tue & Wed, 3pm-4am Thu, 3pm-6am Fri & Sat, 1pm-midnight Sun; 🏠 Erskineville

Like a comfortable old sequined pump, the Imperial's always there in the back of the closet to slip on when you want a really trashy night. Famous as the setting of *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, drag is still very much on the menu – from the hysterical Bingay (gay bingo) on Tuesdays, to the multi-act extravaganzas in the cabaret room from Thursday to Saturday. At the time of

research the fabulously skanky cellar dance bar was getting a sluice out and refit.

NEWTOWN HOTEL Map pp100-1 Bar, DJ, Drag

☎ 9517 1728; 174 King St, Newtown; ☎ 11am-midnight Mon-Fri, 10am-midnight Sat, 10am-10pm Sun; 🏠 Newtown

In Sydney's other gay enclave, the comfortable Newtown does a roaring trade with a mixed gay crowd looking to shoot pool, play pinball and watch lavish drag shows on the tiny stage (Friday through Sunday).

SLY FOX Map pp100-1 Bar, DJ, Drag-King

☎ 9557 1016; 199 Enmore Rd, Enmore; ☎ 11am-midnight Mon-Fri, 10am-midnight Sat, 10am-10pm Sun; 🏠 Newtown

This fairly blue-collar bar hosts Sydney's biggest weekly lesbian night on Wednesdays, where drag kings pack their crotches and take to the stage, proving that gay men don't have a monopoly on gender illusion in this town.

SLEEPING

It would be very surprising (not to mention illegal) for gay couples to strike problems finding rooms in any Sydney establishment. Accommodation fills up fast and prices shoot up throughout the city at Mardi Gras time, but particularly in Darlinghurst, Surry Hills and Paddington. Both the Wattle (p191) and the Manor House (p194) are on the actual parade route, while other handy gay-friendly hotels include the Medusa (p191), Sullivans (p194) and Medina On Crown (p194).

FURTHER RESOURCES

- www.ssonet.com.au Sydney's main gay newspaper.
- www.lotl.com Sydney's monthly lesbian magazine.
- www.acon.org.au AIDS Council of NSW.
- www.pinkboard.com.au Gay bulletin boards and information.
- www.gaydar.com.au Sydney's main gay personals site.

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