

# GAY & LESBIAN SYDNEY

## top picks

- Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras (p17)
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- Drag Kings at the Sly Fox (p199)

# GAY & LESBIAN SYDNEY

Tune up your gaydar and set sail for Lesbania: Sydney is indisputably one of the world's great queer 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 in a broad sense – 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 Taylor Sq on the Darlinghurst section of Oxford St. Newtown's King St comes a close second, with a distinctly lesbian bias. Most of the inner suburbs have a sizeable queer element (mostly those who want to avoid Darlinghurst!), particularly Kings Cross, Paddington, Potts Point, Surry Hills, Redfern, Erskineville, Enmore, Glebe, Leichhardt and the Eastern Beaches.

These days few Sydney dwellers even bat an eyelid at same-sex couples holding hands on the street, but 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

Ain't no denying it, Sydney puts on a good party. By good, we mean 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 & Lesbian Mardi Gras](http://www.mardigras.org.au) (www.mardigras.org.au) 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 the month-long lead-up to the parade and its after-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.

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 to trundle through, and attracts up

to half a million spectators ogling from the sidelines.

For the best views, make friends with someone who has an apartment above the street. If you're forced to stand on the street with all the plebs, bring a milk crate (oh so suddenly scarce) to get a better view. The gayest section of the crowd 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 efforts.

The phantasmal after-party (tickets starting at \$130, available through [www.eevolution.com.au](http://www.eevolution.com.au)) is an extravaganza in every sense of the word. With over 16,000 revellers knocking down the doors, it stretches over several large lavishly decorated halls and showcases the best DJs and lighting design the world has to offer. Past performers have included Kylie Minogue (twice), Boy George, Chaka Khan and DJ Paul Oakenfold. Tickets are limited – buy early or buy expensively!

Mardi Gras also runs the annual Sleaze Ball (p19) in late September/early October –

## 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 Pl – but this one was different. Two thousand people followed a truck down Oxford St in a carnival-type atmosphere, encouraging punters to come 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 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, the parade itself is considered by many to have helped transform Australian society into a more accepting place for lesbians and gay men.

a less public (and thus just a tad more authentic) invocation of G&L party rights. **Inquisition** ([www.sydneyleatherpride.org](http://www.sydneyleatherpride.org); tickets \$120), Sydney Leather Pride's big night, straps on the chaps in May. **Toybox** ([www.toyboxparty.com.au](http://www.toyboxparty.com.au)) is a hugely popular daytime (yes, you read that correctly) party held several times a year in Luna Park. While Mardi Gras is the city's main Gay Pride festival, Darlinghurst's Stonewall Hotel (p199) organises a minifestival around the traditional Stonewall commemorations in late June.

## SHOPPING

Oxford St in Darlinghurst has the biggest concentration of stores targeting Sydney's G&L shoppers. You'll find everything here from sex shops to bookshops and fashion outlets.

### TOOLSHED Map p80 Adult

☎ 1800 181 069, 9332 2792; [www.toolshed.com.au](http://www.toolshed.com.au); Level 1, 81 Oxford St, Darlinghurst; ☎ 10am-1am Mon-Thu & Sun, to 3am Fri & Sat  
Two-foot dildos, life-sized dolls, codpieces, S&M paraphernalia and tonnes of porn – or just call in to buy tickets to upcoming parties. It has another store nearby, downstairs at 191 Oxford St. Shop online if you're shy.

### THE BOOKSHOP DARLINGHURST

Map p80 Books

☎ 9331 1103; [www.thebookshop.com.au](http://www.thebookshop.com.au); 207 Oxford St, Darlinghurst; ☎ 10am-10pm Mon-Wed, to 11pm Thu, to midnight Fri & Sat, 11am-11pm Sun; ☎ 380

This outstanding bookshop specialises in gay and lesbian literature, with everything from queer crime and lesbian fiction to glossy pictorials and porn. A diverting browse, to say the least (hmm...which

would look better on my coffee table: the *Big Book of Breasts* or the *Big Penis Book?*).

### HOUSE OF PRISCILLA

Map p80 Clothing & Accessories

☎ 9286 3023; [www.houseofpriscilla.com.au](http://www.houseofpriscilla.com.au); Level 1, 47 Oxford St, Darlinghurst; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Wed, Fri & Sat, to 7pm Thu; ☎ Museum

Not only is Priscilla the queen of the desert, she also has her own boutique – not bad for a cinematic bus. Run by some of the city's leading drag artistes, Priscilla is the place for feathered angel wings and boas, naughty nurse outfits, wigs, kinky thigh-high boots and sequined frocks to fit front-row forwards. Very camp women also welcome.

### SAX FETISH

Map p80 Clothing & Accessories

☎ 9331 6105; [www.saxfetish.com](http://www.saxfetish.com); 110A Oxford St, Darlinghurst; ☎ noon-6pm Sun-Mon, 11am-7pm Tue, Wed & Fri, to 8pm Thu, to 6pm Sat; ☎ Museum

No, it's not a kinky jazz bar with Dexter Gordon and Charlie Parker on the stereo, but rather a sexy, dark-hearted shop selling high-quality leather and rubber gear. Both sexes are catered for, and the 'accessories' range goes a little further than your standard belts and handbags (cufflinks take on a whole new meaning here).

## 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 have a scan of 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 at pubs, bars and clubs around town. Check out the weekly Sunday night session at the Colombian Hotel (opposite) in Darlinghurst, Wednesday night at the Sly Fox (opposite) in Enmore and the Bank Hotel (p173) in Newtown, Thursday night at Phoenix (right) in Darlinghurst and the monthly Moist night at Arq (right). Sydney's famous **Dykes on Bikes** ([www.dykesonbikessydney.org.au](http://www.dykesonbikessydney.org.au)) meet every now and then at the **Hampshire Hotel** (Map pp104-5; ☎ 9519 5149; [www.hampshirehotel.com.au](http://www.hampshirehotel.com.au); 91 Parramatta Rd, Camperdown) in Camperdown – see the Hampshire's website for details.

Most inner-city bars are gay-friendly. On Sunday afternoon, every gay man who thinks he's too cool (or butch, or old, or tired) for the Oxford St scene seems to descend on the Green Park Hotel (p167) in the Darlinghurst backstreets. Newtown's Bank Hotel (p173), Woolloomooloo's Tilbury Hotel (p169) and Darlinghurst's Kinselas (p167) attract a similarly mixed crowd. Sydney's world-class club Home (p167) started as a mainly gay club, and it still runs hugely popular themed parties called **Homosexual** ([www.homosexual.com.au](http://www.homosexual.com.au)) on the Sunday of long weekends.

Note that gay icon the **Imperial Hotel** (Map pp104-5; ☎ 9519 9899; 35 Erskineville Rd, Erskineville), which starred in *The Story of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, was closed for a major refit when we visited. There have been some council wranglings about increasing the pub's capacity, so a reopening date is hard to pin down. Call before you rock up to avoid disappointment. Sadly, the future doesn't look so rosy for the everlovin' Newtown Hotel on King St, which shut up shop in 2007.

## DARLINGHURST

### MIDNIGHT SHIFT Map p80 Bar, Club

☎ 9360 4319; [www.themidnightshift.com](http://www.themidnightshift.com); 85 Oxford St; admission free-\$10; ☎ noon-4am Mon-Wed, to 6am Thu & Fri, 2pm-6am Sat & Sun; 🏛️ Museum

The grand dame of the Oxford St scene, the Shift boasts two quite distinct venues. Downstairs the video bar attracts an unpretentious mix of blokes, twinks and bears, and has a musical mandate ranging from Top 40 to camp classics. Upstairs is a serious tits-to-the-wind club (open from 10pm;

# top picks

## GAY & LESBIAN BEACHES

- North Bondi (p97)
- Lady Bay, aka Lady Jane (p121)
- Obelisk (p115)
- Redleaf Pool (p90)
- Mclvers Baths (p100)

Friday \$5 before midnight, \$15 after; Saturday \$10 before midnight, \$25 after), with grinding beats (and teeth) and lavish drag productions.

### SLIDE Map p80 Bar, Club

☎ 8915 1899; [www.slide.com.au](http://www.slide.com.au); 41 Oxford St; admission free Wed & Thu, Fri & Sat before/after 10pm \$5/\$10; ☎ 7pm-late Wed-Sun; 🏛️ Museum Slide inside Slide, a gorgeously converted banking chamber where a colourful crowd of sexy gays and straights shimmies across polished concrete between plush booths and the central bar. If the sound and vision overwhelms, spy yourself a candidate from the mezzanine.

### ARQ Map p80 Club, Drag

☎ 9380 8700; [www.arqsydney.com.au](http://www.arqsydney.com.au); 16 Flinders St; admission free-\$20; ☎ 9pm-late Thu-Sun; ☎ 378, 380, 389

If Noah had to fill his Arq with groovy gay clubbers, he'd head here with a big net and some tranquilisers. This flash megaclub has a cocktail bar, a recovery room and two dance floors with hi-energy house, drag shows and a hyperactive smoke machine. Look out for the notorious Fomo foam party, the drag-king-fuelled Moist ladies' night and the Retrosexual retro night.

### EXCHANGE HOTEL Map p80 Club, Live Music

☎ 9331 2956; [www.qbar.com.au](http://www.qbar.com.au), [www.pashpresents.com](http://www.pashpresents.com); 34-44 Oxford St; admission free-\$25; ☎ Q Bar & Phoenix 10pm-late Wed-Sun, Spectrum 8pm-late Wed-Sun, Exchange 10am-4am Mon-Fri, 9am-6am Sat & Sun; 🏛️ Museum

There's a whole mess of venues here, mashed together under one roof. **Q Bar** pumps hot house seven nights a week; **Spectrum** is an alt-indie club with live bands; and sticky, sexy, claustrophobic **Phoenix** is home to alternative gay clubbers. Sandwiched in

between, the **Exchange** is a regulation beery pub. Down and dirty: if you don't come out drenched in sweat, you're not doing it right.

### **PALMS ON OXFORD** Map p80 Club, Drag

☎ 9357 4166; 124 Oxford St; admission fee; ☎ 8pm-1am Thu & Sun, to 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 don't scream when Kylie hits the turntables you'll be the only one.

### **SYDNEY BY DIVA** Map p80 Organised Tour

☎ 9360 5557; www.sydneybydiva.com.au; tours depart Oxford Hotel, 134 Oxford St; tours \$100;

☎ 6pm & 8pm subject to bookings; 🏠 378, 380, 389 All aboard for a truly camp, 2½-hour, 'rosé-tinted' drag queen comic tour of Sydney with deliciously drag hosts: from Oxford St to the Opera House and Bondi Beach and back. Minimum numbers required (get a group together).

### **COLOMBIAN HOTEL** Map p80 Pub, DJ

☎ 9360 2151; www.colombian.com.au; 117 Oxford St; admission free; ☎ 9am-6am; 🏠 Museum

Insanely popular and adorned with posters of shirtless stallions, this swanky art-deco booze barn serves up an intoxicating mix of cute guys, thumping music and heady drinks. The decor is to die for, and the window seats take the legwork out of cruising the street.

### **OXFORD HOTEL** Map p80 Pub, DJ

☎ 9331 3467; www.theoxfordhotel.com.au; 134 Oxford St; admission free; ☎ 24hr downstairs, Gilligans 5pm-late, Supper Club 7pm-late Wed-Sun; 🏠 378, 380, 389

Another year, another owner, another refit...another panic that this treasured venue may (shudder) go straight. So far, so gay. The new incarnation still attracts a beer-swilling slice of gay blokedom to its spacious street-level bar, the post-dance-party crowds to **Gilligans** mini-basement club, and a sassier crowd to the indulgent 1st-floor Supper Club lounge.

### **STONEWALL HOTEL** Map p80 Pub, DJ

☎ 9360 1963; www.stonewallhotel.com; 175 Oxford St; ☎ 11am-6am; admission free; 🏠 378, 380, 389

Nicknamed 'Stonehenge' by those who think it's archaic (gay druids?), Stonewall has three levels of bars and dance floors, attracting a younger crowd. Hosted by wonderfully glam drag queens such as Tora Hymen, cabaret, karaoke and games nights spice things up – Wednesday's Malebox is a sure-fire way to bag yourself a boy. A few years ago, the ceiling collapsed on the dance floor: the DJ yelled out, 'I finally brought the house down!'

### **BODYLINE** Map p80 Sauna

☎ 9360 1006; www.bodylinesydney.com; 10 Taylor St; admission \$23; ☎ noon-7am Mon-Thu, 24hr from noon Fri-7am Mon; 🏠 378, 380, 389

This four-level gay men's sauna offers plenty of heat and steam, particularly on big party weekends. The house creed: 'Say "yes" with enthusiasm and "no" with courtesy'.

## **INNER WEST**

### **MANACLE** Map pp104-5 Pub, DJ

☎ 9560 0400; www.clarencehotel.com.au; Clarence Hotel, 450 Parramatta Rd, Petersham; admission free-\$15; ☎ 9pm-1am 1st & 3rd Sat of the month; 🏠 Petersham

Descend into the hirsute, leather-clad gloom of Saturday night in the Inner West and pretend the sun will never come up. Manacle relocated from Taylor Sq a while back, but it's still Sydney's best leather night. Actually, it's more about the cult of masculinity; there's no strict dress code, but women and drags shouldn't bother trying.

### **SLY FOX** Map pp104-5 Pub, Drag

☎ 9557 1016; 199 Enmore Rd, Enmore; admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Thu, to 6am Fri & Sat, to midnight Sun; 🏠 Newtown

This blue-collar backstreet bar hosts Sydney's biggest weekly lesbian night on Wednesday, where drag kings pack their crotches and hit the stage – gay men don't have a monopoly on gender illusion in this town. Cheap cocktails (\$6!) every night from 6pm to 9pm.

## **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

through the roof during Mardi Gras month, particularly around Darlinghurst, Surry Hills and Paddington. Both the Wattle Hotel (p206) and the Manor House (p205) are on the actual Mardi Gras parade route, but unless you've booked a year in advance you've got fat chance of getting a room with a view. Other handy gay-friendly hotels include the Medusa (p205) in Darlinghurst, Sullivans (p208) in Paddington, **Medina On Crown** (☎ 8302 1000; www.medina.com.au; 359 Crown St, Surry Hills; 1-bedroom apt \$500-530, 2-bedroom apt \$580-610; 🚗 301-303; 🚶) in Surry Hills, and Hyde Park Inn (p203) and Vibe Hotel Sydney (p211) on the Surry Hills side of the city. Online, have a look at www.gaysydneyhotels

.com and www.stayz.com.au/gay-accommodation/nsw/sydney for more suggestions.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

[www.ssonet.com.au](http://www.ssonet.com.au) Online version of Sydney's main gay newspaper, the *Sydney Star Observer*.

[www.lotl.com](http://www.lotl.com) Sydney's monthly lesbian magazine, *Lesbians on the Loose*.

[www.acon.org.au](http://www.acon.org.au) AIDS Council of NSW website.

[www.pinkboard.com.au](http://www.pinkboard.com.au) Gay bulletin boards and information, including classifieds, a venue guide and blogs.

[www.gaydar.com.au](http://www.gaydar.com.au) Sydney's main gay personals site.

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