

To ensure the perfect Sydney holiday take a leaf out of my book and get your best mate, in my case he's called **Blair Witch**, to emigrate long enough before your visit to give him ample time to establish a great network of friends. Two years should suffice. This way you have a place to stay and an instant social life. Cunning eh? Failing that you can get some great deals to take in the sights and be part of the biggest gay party on the planet – the **Sydney Mardi Gras**. But make sure you arrive a week before the main event so that you can attend the legendary **Harbour Party** to get you into the spirit of things. We got to Sydney two days before the Harbour Party (or **Azure** as it's officially known) to recover from the flight and discover the city. The sun was blazing and explore we did. What a stunning place - stylishly designed around the harbour, the many bays and beaches and the hilly landscape, it really is a treat. After settling in, we were ready to have a bit of fun. The Harbour Party takes place on a Sunday starting at 4pm and is set along the water's edge with none other than the Opera House and Harbour Bridge as your backdrop. Sydney weather, it turns out, is unpredictable and the skies clouded over. But there is nothing like safety and warmth in numbers, and before long the boys and girls were reduced to various states of undress. All outdoor events need a dose of sunshine (remember London Pride last

year? I know, I'd rather not either) but as it got darker no-one cared. Local DJ **Alex Taylor** got the crowd warmed up and then the international guest was our very own **Wayne G** who played late into the night. There were so many recognisable faces from London that I strangely felt at home. **Ultra Nate** and **Crystal Waters** were the added entertainment and went down well. My most memorable moment was hearing Wayne play **Xanadu** which, with a few fireworks lighting up the amazing backdrop, it truly was a beautiful sight to remember and sent the crowd into camp overdrive. Approaching midnight the crowd reluctantly departed and headed for the gay scene that is clustered around **Oxford Street** (their equivalent of Old Compton St). The two premier clubs are **Arq** and **The Midnight Shift** (only a gay club could be called this) and were conveniently close enough to try both out in the same night. The majority of the gay scene favours Hi-NRG anthems, but if that isn't your thing, then local DJ's like **Kate Monroe** and Alex Taylor play a more UK style. London's **Stewart Who?** was playing at Arq, which is where we set up camp for the night. He didn't disappoint with his funky house and I can shamefully admit that my fellow and I resorted to dancing on a podium along with the rest of them. But that's a rare foray for me, and I tell you this in confidence and it must go no further than you,

MY FIRST MARDI GRAS

ANDY NEILL reports from Sydney



me and the gay scene! After a PA in the main room upstairs, **Ultra Nate** came down to the basement to play a few records in the middle of Stewart's set. The crowd was confused for a while but **Ultra** was having a blast and we warmed to the selection of dirty house from the US with a bit of mainstream thrown in for good measure. Mr Who? returned to a cheer and the partying continued well into the daytime. Loved Arq and wanted more.

The following day the holiday plans were trashed. Wayne G had introduced my DJ hubby **Steve Pitron** to Glen, the manager of Arq, and before you knew it he was booked to play the club's Recovery party the day after Mardi Gras. Cue Blair Witch to change our flights and thus cancel our post-Sydney chill out on an idyllic Thai island and much frantic organisation to get Steve's records flown over from London. Once that was sorted we spent the week leading up to the Mardi Gras getting our requisite holiday tans and kept away from the gay stuff for a few days to take in some Aussie scenery. If you can't take the time to travel around Oz then you can get a little taste of what this country has to offer with a 90 minute drive to the **Blue Mountains**, which are breathtaking. You also have to take a few boat trips around the Harbour, or even here a tiny motor boat where you can pass about trying to steer the thing (I just went round in circles) and drop your anchor at one of the tiny secluded beaches for a bit of sunbathing and a few beers. After a fabulous week of being tourists with brilliant sunshine it was time for a big dollop of stress. My mate Blair said that tickets for Mardi Gras never sell out and we could get ours last minute. But of course when last minute arrived they'd sold out. My first Mardi Gras... and no bloody tickets! After a multitude of phone calls and much cursing, we managed to track down a couple.

They didn't come cheap but Cinderella was going to the ball after all. Mental note: tickets can only be purchased over the internet and must be done well in advance. Oh, and heavy rain was forecast. Surely never in the World of God would it piss down AT MY FIRST MARDI GRAS!

Mardi Gras Parade Weather Forecast: Heavy rainfall moving south from Queensland and thick foundation running down hundreds of drag queen's faces. Unlike London Pride March, the Sydney Parade starts at 8pm and the streets are clog-a-block with gays, straights and their families. It was heart-warming to see what seemed like the entire city turning out for the Parade. Despite the hideous stormy weather the crowds gathered and they waited and waited. Then the Dykes On Bikes' arrived to much fanfare and the Parade went on for two hours. But the darkness, the rain and my balcony view meant that my photos were tragic. (I have since managed to blag a few and so have to thank www.PiezImagez.com where you can take a look at many more professional pics at your leisure). After we got merry and wet it was back to base for a quick wash and blow-dry and then on to Fox Studios for the Mardi Gras Party, a massive event with 17,000 people rammed into several huge rooms. The size is distracting and you can spend hours wandering around until you find your niche. We eventually settled into the only air conditioned room where DJ **Lisa German** was playing and a chance to dance without the trance. The atmosphere



was great and I have to admit to getting well and truly off my face. The many rooms offered chillout space, stage entertainment and a variety of DJ's and there is something for everyone. I even chanced upon a small outside tent playing **Madonna's 'Burning Up'** and **Kim Wilde's 'Kids In America'** to which my friends Brett and Amanda and I freaked out like teenagers at a school disco.

And as if that wasn't enough, the surprise of the trip was the day after (or Recovery). This seemed to be the best part for many, with the clubs open all day long and packed out, and everyone all luvved up. In the evening there are many venues to choose from including the famous **Queer Nation**. We opted to pay our last homage to Arq for

Steve's stint on the decks. **Crystal Waters** made her last PA and got the crowd going and then Pitron rocked. The crowd went mental, and Blair Witch and I hugged and cried like babies on the dancefloor (as you do) as it was time for us to bid farewell. We were soon on our way to the airport in glorious sunshine - you could say that the sun had really messed up with its timing. Put it this way, next year can only be better as the chance of getting freaky weather again must be slight... or then again, you'd better pack a broly. But sod the rain, we had a ball. And so will you.

> Alternative tour operator **Manaround**, tel 020 8902 7177 or check out www.manaround.com

