

"GAY PRIDE, White Party, Mardi Gras, call 'em what you like, all the annual parties hosted by gay scenes the world over must be basically the same... aren't they? I mean, all you need is a large venue, a row of portaloos and good weather, don't you?" I used to think to myself. Well not exactly.

If you are fortunate enough to travel the world's gay grand prix party circuit you would probably make pit stops at Miami's White Party, Amsterdam's Orange Ball and for Birmingham Pride (well, maybe not). But, if you can only pick one event then make sure it is for Sydney's Mardi Gras.

"But isn't that a long way to go for a party?" I hear you cry.

Well here's the thing... London, arguably, has the most varied and progressive gay scene on the planet, but even a scene so healthy can have its dark moments. None darker than January and February, when no sooner has New Year's Day arrived and we are donning our black veils and grieving until spring and our urge to fly far, far away for some sun and gay fun is at its peak. This is why an increasing number of Brits are making the pilgrimage to Sydney each year for the biggest and the original gay Mardi Gras.

Don't listen to those who moan about last year's bash being below par because, like bottles of Beaujolais, some annual gay events, wherever they are held, will be regarded as vintage and some will leave a bitter taste in your mouth. Let it be known that 2005 will go down as a vintage year for Sydney. Official!

For the uninitiated Sydney Mardi Gras is a month long festival starting in a civilised fashion in early February with gay cultural events, film and theatre, art exhibitions and the like, culminating in two full-on party weekends. The focal point of the penultimate weekend is the **Azure Harbour Party**, a Sunday alfresco bash at the lush Botanic Gardens with five thousand people packed alongside the

# MARDI GRAS

# 2005

## ANDY NEILL reports from Sydney

water's edge with the Opera House as its backdrop.

Thankfully, being an event that would be wrecked by rainfall, we were spared the indignity of squealing and running for cover, as the promised thunderstorms never materialised. The party filled up quickly after it kicked off at 4pm and by nightfall the atmosphere was palpable, thanks to the excellent DJ line-up. Having moved away from the Hi-NRG policy of previous years this time it was funky house all the way with Sydney favourite **Dan Murphy** warming us up a treat, **DTPM's Alan Thompson** (who emigrated to Sydney a year ago) took over as the sun went down and played a

great set. **Beyond** and **Crash** starlet **Steve Pitron** was next and kept the crowd baying for more with a set that was the talk of the town.

The party sadly ended at midnight so it was time to hit the bars and clubs, which are open round the clock, some still going on Tuesday morning. Good grief! And, not wanting to seem rude, we mucked in with the best of them spending more time than would normally be considered good for your health in fetish club **Manacle**. No, not because we fancied a bit of the rough stuff but because it doubles as a busy afterhours club, which was a welcome newcomer to the scene since we last partied down that way. But with hangovers and comedowns beckoning the partying had to be put on pause, if only for a few days while we recharged the disco batteries for the grand finale – the **Mardi Gras Party** and **Recovery** weekend.



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► During your 'downtime' between the weekenders you can take a trip up the coast, visit the mountains or go walkabout in the Outback if you would like a more informed opinion of Australia. But there is heaps to do in Sydney itself without needing to venture elsewhere. And if you want to stay gay then the usually modest-sized gay scene has enough to keep your pecker up with thousands of gay tourists finding it difficult to stay indoors at night.

By day you can chill out on **North Bondi Beach** which became a gay swimwear catwalk, if ogling toned flesh and see-through trunks is your thing. I settled on a bit of Bondi browsing and a good retail workout and, with a new tan and a new top, I was ready for the final leg of the holiday.

The month long Mardi Gras Festival draws to a close with a Parade and an official party on Saturday night. The Dykes On Bikes and the other usual suspects of Pride marches take to the streets and it was as good as gay parades get. With 200,000 (yes, I counted) people lining the route it is difficult to get a good vantage point. The best views are from one of the balcony parties, but tickets are hard to come by and most people bring their own milk crates to stand on. Don't recoil in horror! The crates are as traditional as the dykes and their bikes and you can buy them for a couple of dollars along the route, so there's no need to try to smuggle one in your hand luggage.

The official party is held immediately after the Parade at **Fox Film Studios**, which is a massive space. There are several huge studios turned into laser-filled dance arenas, heaving to capacity with twenty thousand of your fellow gay boys and girls. Having learned my lesson the hard way at big events like this the trick to enjoying them is to have a good look around first and find a place to settle.

DJ **Richard Weiss** deserves a mention for keeping us dancing until way after

daybreak in the Dome room, which was the more 'intimate' room of them all. But it still managed to house a few thousand inside and was the only room playing familiar house music, the others being more tribal and trance-based if that takes your fancy.

We made periodic excursions to all the other rooms throughout the night to make sure we caught some of the PA's, the most memorable of which were Aussie heroes **Tina Arena** and **Darren Hayes** who both went down a storm performing dance remixes of their best hits. It was then that we came to appreciate the huge rooms because they took on a concert feel. We have to admit that we missed British girl **Nicki French**, but somehow we coped. With cabaret stages and chill out areas dotted around the grounds and the most accessible toilets, bars and coat checks you are ever likely to find, we felt well and truly catered for. We still wanted more when the party ended just before Sunday lunchtime with a grand finale in the main room. Had we really been in there for 12 hours?

But there was no rest for the wicked as the Recovery parties were about to begin, but don't be fooled by the name. Calling the final Sunday of the festivities the **Recovery** is a joke to be quite frank

because there are more parties than you can shake a stick at and you have no time to recover from anything. Armed with the knowledge that Sydney's own **DPTM** monthly was taking place that night, and that **Crash** was in town for its debut as **The Midnight Shift**, I reluctantly accepted that even in my most hardcore frames of mind I had to squeeze in some sleep somewhere.

It was a tough call and I ended up missing the Sunday afternoon **Toybox** party at the **Lunar Park** fairground, which according to reports was fantastic. But hey ho! No time for regrets, as after a disco nap I was soon appreciating the splendour of straight venue **Tank**, which was playing host to DTPM. Think London's Fabric combined with the Rock and you have an idea of how stylish that place is. Many London faces were to be seen at Tank with Alan Thompson giving them a double dose of what they came for playing both opening and closing sets.

Could we possibly have more fun and games ahead? Surely not. But true to form, like the entire holiday, just when you think you have had all the good times to be had you wind up having some more. For what better way to end our stay than with the Crash team down at **The 'Shift**. Crash's **Rod Lay** had enlisted DJs **Brent Nichols**, **Steve Pitron** and **Wayne G** to encourage us to drag the proverbial arse out of our stay. And so we did. Excellent stuff! So, after a couple of days recovering from the Recovery it was time for that daunting long flight back to Blighty... but we didn't care, we'd had the holiday of a lifetime. That is until the next year, of course!



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