

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO GOING DOWN (UNDER)

It's Sydney Mardi Gras season and the jewel of the southern hemisphere is getting ready for an influx of tens of thousands of gay tourists! Never been before? Here's Amanda Wood with the QX first-timer's guide to all that's good in the great Aussie city...

Back in 2002 when I heard the siren song of Sydney calling to me after living in London for 4 years, I found the decision to move back a harrowing one. I mean, I knew I wanted to live in Sydney again, but how could I give up London with its proximity to Europe, general fabulousness... and lets be frank, it's clubbing?

Well, after 4 years back in Sydney, I'm happy to report that I absolutely made the right decision. Sure, after living in the likes of London and New York it may feel a little small at first, and I'll confess I like to refer to Sydney as my little fishing village. But if you manage to get bored in Sydney, then you really have lost your lust for life.

There's the obvious charms such as great weather, stunning beaches, and gorgeous men, and when it comes to throwing a good party, Sydney has it in spades. As well as the famous Mardi Gras and Sleaze Ball parties, we now have both DTPM and Defected in the house with none other than Alan Thompson at the helm of both. I must admit that as the door bitch of DTPM I am a touch biased, but I do believe it is the finest party in Australia at the moment.

As well as being home to Alan Thompson, Sydney is a regular haunt for Wayne G, and often has DJs such as Bob Sinclar, Roger Sanchez, Fatboy Slim, Dimitri, the London scene's own Steve Pitron and many more passing through to take the decks at a party.

On Thursday nights, **Tommy Tanks** at the slick and sexy new bar and club **Slide** (41 Oxford St) is the place to be, while Friday nights are a great time to head upstairs at the **Midnight Shift** (85 Oxford St) to dance the night away, and check out the talents of the fabulous Ashley Swift in the Divastated shows.

If you still have a spring in your step when the sun comes up, get thee down to the **Manacle** (1 Patterson Lane, rear Taylor Square Hotel). The Manacle may look scary at first, but if you have the right spirit you'll probably find yourself being swept out of there at closing time later that afternoon.



Surfer Dude



Bondi Beach

make sure you have time to check out the nature, so to speak. **Taronga Zoo** is one of the best in the world, and will give you a chance to get up close to kangaroos and koalas. And I insist you take time out to go to the **Royal Botanic Gardens** and check out the bats. These fabulous flying foxes can be seen like strange fruit in the trees, and watching them wake up and squabble before flying off at dusk is something you will never forget.

Of course, there's the beaches... **North Bondi** and **Tamarama** or "glama-rama" as we locals like to call it are filled with sexy boys sunning themselves. **Manly**, **Balmoral** and **Palm Beach** on the other side of the harbour bridge are also very popular though a lot straighter. Just make sure you slap on lots of sunscreen, and be careful of rips (currents flowing from the beach back out to sea to us UK folk - ed), especially at Tamarama, or you could find yourself in the kind of high drama that could end with you starring on the nightly news. A good website to check out featuring some of the best gay friendly beaches is www.gaysydneyhotels.com/GayFriendlyBeaches.htm.

If you're after some steamier action, head for **Bodyline** (10 Taylor St) located in the heart of gay town, where Oxford St crosses with Flinders St near Taylor Square. Another essential hot gay emporium is **Kens of Kensington** (83 Anzac Parade, Kensington). Dubiously abbreviated to KKK, it's a bit of a trek away from the city's gay epicentre on Oxford St, but one worth making as it's Sydney's largest and most luxurious.

If you like to spoil your tastebuds, Sydney has a taste sensation for every budget. If you like the finer things in life, fight for a table at the 3 hat restaurant **Tetsuyas** (www.tetsuyas.com) though a word of warning, book as far in advance as possible or you may find yourself on a waiting list. Other delicious options include **The Icebergs** (www.idrb.com) at Bondi, **Long Grain** (85 Commonwealth Street, Surry Hills), or if you're after a quick bite on a budget **Sushi Suma** (Cleveland Street, Surry Hills) has a cult following. When it comes to breakfast, **Bills** (433 Liverpool St, Darlinghurst) is a favourite amongst locals, fashmag slags and visiting Hollywood stars.

Oh, and for Kylie fans out there, the Kylie exhibition is on at the **Powerhouse Museum** (www.phm.gov.au) and is a rare chance to get up close and personal with those gold hot pants.

For those with a taste for adventure, there's the Sydney Harbour Bridge to climb, and now a new thrill seeker experience called the **Skywalk** (www.skywalk.com.au) which gives 360 degree views of Sydney from 260 metres above street level. And if you have a group of friends, it's well worth all chipping in to hire a catamaran for the day to get out on the harbour in style.

If you have time, hire a car or jump on a train to get yourself up to the **Blue Mountains** just west of Sydney and pay a visit to the Three



Sydney loves drag!

Sydney is also giving gay boys and girls the chance to break free from the same old bars thanks to **Fagtag**

(www.fagtag.com.au), which takes pleasure in tracking down a bar or club which is usually filled with straights and "tagging" it for the night. Log on to find out which bar is about to be overtaken for the night.

But as much fun as it is to party in Sydney,



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Worth it! Hire a catamaran

Blue Mountains just west of Sydney and pay a visit to the Three Sisters (a geological wonder, not a posse of gay boys). The mountains can get a touch foggy at times, but if you end up there on a day where the three sisters are hidden from view, just take advantage of the wonderful cafes and restaurants, antique bookstores and second hand shops. And the **Norman Lindsay Gallery** at Faulconbridge is truly magical. While in the mountains though, do stick to the tourist paths and don't go exploring off the beaten track unless you really know what you are doing and are fully prepared. Many a tourist has learned the hard way that the mountains are confusing if you're not a local and have been pulled out by rescue crews after shivering in the bushes or hanging off the edge of a cliff for days on end. After all, you've got to get back to Sydney in one piece to enjoy the rest of your holiday!

Mardi Gras 2006

In the past 28 years, the Sydney Mardi Gras has grown from a violent gay rights street protest, to one of the world's largest gay and lesbian festivals. In 2002 there were concerns the party may have been over for good when Mardi Gras collapsed. But thankfully, reports of Mardi Gras' death have been greatly exaggerated.

Not only have a talented bunch of people stepped forward to create New Mardi Gras, corporate sponsorship from groups such as Gaydar has helped raise a phoenix out of the ashes. "Gaydar has essentially been created by the community that it serves, so to be able to give something worthwhile back to the community makes this deal even more significant," says Trevor Martin, Marketing Director at Gaydar. "At the time we began negotiations with New Mardi Gras they were talking about having to scale back the session considerably, this partnership will allow New Mardi Gras to continue to invest in and grow."

Yes, these days Mardi Gras is back on form, with a spectacular arts, sport, and cultural festival, and of course a very, very big party.

This year's festival is made up of more than 100 events, including artists such as

Jimmy Somerville, Sophie B Hawkins, Courtney Act and many, many more. The festival kicked off on Friday 3rd February and closes with a bang on Saturday 4th March with the Mardi Gras parade and party, which shouldn't be missed.

With hundreds of thousands of people lining the parade route, it can get a bit competitive, and vantage points do vary. The **Parade** snakes its way up Oxford Street to Taylor Square, before turning down Flinders Street and making its way to the old showgrounds for the party. Taylor Square is by far the busiest spot, with some people staking out their patch from early that morning. But there's no need to spend all day sitting on a milk crate waiting for the Dykes on Bikes to announce the start of the parade. Just walk along the route until you find a better spot.

Or best of all, treat yourself to a reserved seating spot in the **Bobby Goldsmith Foundation's 'Glamstand'** (www.ticketmaster.com.au).

The BGF raises money for people living with HIV and AIDS, and not only does the Glamstand guarantee you a seat with a view, it provides running commentary from drag queens and local celebrities, and easy access to a bar.

When the parade is over, it's time to take a deep breath and step into the **Mardi Gras Party**. With around 15,000 people in every possible state of overdress and underdress around you, the afterparty can be a little overwhelming at first, but I know you can do it.

The party is so big that you should be prepared for the very real possibility of losing all of your friends the moment you walk in the door, and possibly not seeing them again until a few days later. It's recommended that you set a meeting time and place before you go into the party in case anyone in your group gets lost. But don't worry if you do lose your friends. You'll make new ones quickly enough, and getting lost, wandering around bumping into people you haven't seen for years and didn't even know were in the country is one of my favourite things about Mardi Gras.

It's worth pointing out that the crew in the medical tent are wonderful folk who don't judge, so if you or any of your friends feel unwell, do go and pay them a quick visit. Also, keep an eye out for any "78ers" - the people who marched in the very first street parade back in 1978. Some of these legends went to hell and back fighting for gay rights and always bring a tear to my eye.



Sydney Mardi Gras

There are a number of special clubbing events on during Mardi Gras time. **Malcolm Stewart's** party on Thursday 2nd March is one that everyone scrambles for a ticket for. This charity event has become famous around the world, and as the party is invitation only, part of the fun is trying to meet Malcolm or find someone lucky enough to have a spare ticket to share with you.

The one you'll hear most about is the **Azure** party (www.azureparty.com) on the 26th February. The quality of this event has been criticised recently since the original Harbour Party team stopped managing the event. However, as a tourist experience it's essential, purely for the fact that it takes place against the backdrop of Sydney's Harbour Bridge and Opera House. This year, it will be followed by a special **Crash London** party at Arq (www.arqsydney.com.au), and by Wayne G at **The Midnight Shift** (www.themidnightshift.com). DJs Steve Pitron, Paul Heron, Mikey D and Jamie Head are all jetting in for the Crash Party: surely an unmissable event and you can guarantee it'll be a fierce affair. And if you miss Wayne G that night, you can still catch him at The Shift when he launches his latest CD on Wednesday 1st March.

Sunday the 5th March, the night after the Mardi Gras party, is one of the highlights of the calendar, with **DTPM Sydney** (www.spankrecords.com.au) doing what it does best. The DTPM Mardi Gras party sells out weeks in advance, so to avoid tears on the night, it's best to buy your tickets before you leave the UK. Also on Sunday 5th is the **Indulgence** party at The Shift for those who love their men in leather and denim.

Local DJs such as Kate Monroe have earned stellar international reputations, and Kate's regular Sunday night **Odyssey House** (www.matrecodings.com) at the **Deck Bar** from 6pm is a must. There's also **Toybox** and **Homosexual** (www.homosexual.com.au), which takes place at Sydney's stunning harbour-side club Home amongst many more. So much to do, so little time...

Further information

For details at tickets to **Sydney Mardi Gras** parade and party check out www.mardigras.org.au. For all **Mardi Gras Film Festival** information, go to www.queerscreen.com.au

Gaydar Travel is the official tour operator for Sydney Mardi Gras. Check out www.gaydartravel.com or call 0800 180 4686, Mon-Fri 10am-6pm, Sat 10am-4pm.

