



Sydney

by Andrew Matzner

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Although not the official capital of Australia (Canberra holds that distinction), Sydney certainly feels like it, as the country's oldest, largest, and most vibrant city. With thriving lesbian, gay, and transgender communities, an accommodating atmosphere, and its annual Mardi Gras celebration that draws upwards of one million attendees, Sydney has become a regional center for glbtq culture and a favorite destination for tourists of all genders and sexualities.

Established on aboriginal territory in 1788 by British settlers, Sydney is surrounded by stunning cliffs, radiant beaches, and verdant national parks. Today it boasts perhaps the most recognizable harbor in the world, featuring the expansive Harbour Bridge and distinctive white petaled opera house. The city has developed into a culturally diverse urban center with a rapidly growing population of over four million people.

Sydney's large lesbian and gay male neighborhoods are found in Darlinghurst, Paddington, and Surry Hills, with newer enclaves developing in Newtown, Leichhardt, and Alexandria. Glbtq social life is centered on Oxford Street, which has a multitude of gay-owned and operated restaurants, cafes, entertainment venues, and bookshops.

Sydney gained international attention when it was selected to host the 2000 Olympic Games. Controversy erupted when it was announced to the media that a bevy of drag queens would represent Stephan Elliot's film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), during a segment of the closing ceremony that paid tribute to Australian cinema. And so it was that amidst mixed public cries of both condemnation and support, October 15, 2000 witnessed the first open display of gay culture and transgenderism at an Olympic ceremony.

The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras is the world's largest celebration of glbtq pride, and, beginning each February, lasts for three weeks. The festivities include all types of parties, performances, exhibitions, an outdoor fair day, and a two-week film festival. The culminating event is the Mardi Gras Parade, which features over 100 floats from glbtq and gay-friendly organizations, and is broadcast nationally on Australian television.

Although today the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras has all the trappings of one big--and heavily commercialized--street party, this historic event did not start out that way. Influenced by the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City, lesbian and gay political activism picked up momentum in Australia from the early 1970s. In particular, Sydney's burgeoning lesbian and gay subcultures attracted people from all over the country.

The struggle to repeal laws that criminalized homosexual acts reached a head on June 24, 1978 when more than 1000 people marched down Oxford Street in celebration of Gay Solidarity Day. Demonstrators called for a repeal of all anti-homosexual legislation, an end to police harassment, and increased acceptance of gay men and lesbians. When police suddenly rescinded the organizers' permit in mid-parade, a riot ensued,

and over fifty people were arrested.

The police eventually dropped all the charges against those who were arrested, but the lesbian and gay community was already galvanized. Organizers quickly planned a follow-up parade for the next year, and the newly dubbed "Mardi Gras" became an annual event that steadily grew in size over time. While repressive laws against homosexuality still remained on the books, the parade continued to be political, rather than purely festive, in nature. Once each of the Australian states began decriminalizing homosexual relations in late 1984, Mardi Gras organizers shifted their focus more toward the goal of entertainment instead of activism.

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