

It's gloomy as my flight makes its final approach into Sydney—though the clouds look to be hurrying away, revealing the skyscrapers of the city's CBD, cubistic in their non-grid misalignment. On the ground we park next to a Singapore Airlines A380; my first peek at the world's largest airliner. Although I'm awed by the technical achievement of the fully two-story plane, its appearance is uninspiring: it's too squat, its cockpit so low it makes the thing seem hunchbacked. *Oh, but imagine First Class!* I fantasize about that private-suite bed I've only glimpsed in photos.

A cab ride into town lands me at Sullivan's Hotel, an austere white box of a building, one of those charmless mid-rise 1960s affairs where the addition of frosted-glass balconies and a sleek, curving blonde-wood front desk qualifies it as "budget boutique."

I have just enough time to freshen up, however, in advance of my big night on the town. First stop: one of the "Hotels" on lively Oxford Street, two-story establishments with dark-wood pub seating and strong drinks.

"Hi!" It's all hugs and kisses and a joyful reunion with two gals collected during my travels to date: Whitney, one of the Canucks from Goa who's here in Sydney to meet her California boyfriend; and Sarah, my seatmate from that delayed flight out of Tel Aviv. If this isn't proof positive that solo travel need not be lonely, I don't know what is.

"I rode horses in Petra and fell head over heels with the man who taught me," Sarah says. *Hey, at least someone got lucky in the Middle East.* Looks like the same is holding true in Palolem.

"Sam's still there," Whitney says of her other friend. "She met somebody." I guess that might compensate for the lack of air-con over three months.

"Please tell me it wasn't that Larry character," I say. It wasn't. *That's a relief.* Guys like him don't need further encouragement.

The gals head home after a couple of drinks—it's a work night for Sarah, and Whitney's in prep mode for the boyfriend's arrival the next morning. For me, however, the evening's just getting started: this is Mardi Gras week in Sydney. Taking place around the same time as its New Orleans counterpart—and Carnival in Rio—this one's the city's Gay Pride. The main event's still a few nights off but the bars in Darlinghurst, the city's rainbow district, fill up as the night deepens. I start

at the Stonewall Inn, much larger and more glam than its New York counterpart, and—surprise—another bar/club hybrid.

Things here move fast: a boy of medium build, slight stoop, curly hair in a blonde dye-job, begins eyeing me, smiling. *I know that look.* A dash nerdy like my first fling back in Dublin, and the coincidence is more than skin deep: his name's Michael and he too is a "uni" (college) student. Making out ensues, as does a trip back to Sullivan's, where he stays the night.

He's really nice, but it hits me as he heads out the door the next morning: *something's missing.* He's a down-to-earth kid going through his "slutty" phase. (Which for me has lasted far too long. Oh well.) But here again, the grander romances underscore what's lacking in the lesser ones. *I know, I know,* you can't meet the love of your life at a club. Or thus goes the received opinion. Then again, that's where Bradley and I met—and in spite of everything that went down I do not regret the ensuing relationship or the liver donation. Not one iota.

But I'm here in one of the world's gay meccas, might as well give the roulette wheel another spin. Out late the next night, I reach the broad plaza where Oxford and Flinders streets intersect. I notice revelers hurrying into clubs like high schoolers rushing to class after the bell rings. This is part of yet another drug-prevention ploy: the Sydney police have imposed an odd sort of curfew, prohibiting entry to any nightspot between the hours of two and five—though the establishments themselves remain open. *Another pointless gesture.* I head into Arq, a glitzy club hosting an underwear party on its upper level. The high-ceilinged dance floor is awash with laser lights and disco bulbs and crowded with fetching young men clad in 2^(s)ists or Calvins. Through the large glass revolving entry door I spot a cute guy trying to withdraw cash from an ATM. Playing it a bit coy, I chat with a straight couple nearby. Soon ATM boy floats over.

"Do you know if the machine's working?"

I know a good excuse to make conversation when I see it. His name's Guy and he's a carpenter by trade, quieter and hunkier than most of the gay boys I encounter. Dark brown hair, tight-fitting black satin singlet, and expensive blue denims—he may work in construction but he's still a homo. He spouts random, stream-of-consciousness sentences in something of a monotone, suggesting he's high.

“No I’m not,” he says when I ask, but he wants to be. He takes my hand and leads me to Arq’s outdoor space, a narrow corridor squeezed between two buildings. We approach a sketchy-looking fellow, pockmarked face and mess of facial hair. He sells Guy two Ecstasy tablets and me a couple more. I plan to conserve mine for the big party, but Guy pops his right away. Then he kisses me and agrees to come back to my hotel. Round two.

Our chunky black shoes thud on the blue-carpeted stairway. I enter the room, stick the keycard in its slot to activate the lights and air conditioning, then continue the proceedings. We’re partway into our under-the-sheets activities when Guy stops me. More stream-of-consciousness conversation leads to a drug-fueled confessional.

“My father beat me until I was nineteen,” he says, his eyes dry but on the verge of welling up. “Finally I got large enough and broke his ribs.” On and on he rambles. *Oh boy*. I try to be empathetic but it’s tough to deliver psychiatric insights to a hunky naked guy in my bed at four o’clock in the morning. Then, in mid sentence, Guy interrupts himself.

“I want more pills.”

I don’t—I’m set for the festivities in a couple of nights and have no desire to overdo things. Okay then, he says. He gets up, puts clothes back on his beefy frame, and bids me adieu.



The ferry dock at Circular Quay buzzes with activity. It’s a glorious sunny afternoon, perfect for an outing to one of the city’s many beaches. Last time I was here I took a languid bus trip to the clifftops of Bondi and Tamarama. This time it’s a ferry to Manly, on the other side of Sydney Harbour in the northwest.

Although it’s missing a grand anchor structure like San Francisco’s Ferry Building, Sydney’s waterborne transit network still puts its counterparts in harborfront North American cities to shame. Digital read-outs indicate departures—dozens in a given hour. Boats glide in and out with the efficiency of Japanese trains. It makes sense: for a metropolis draped around the coves and inlets of a drowned river valley, this is a key facet of its public transportation network.

Our boat backs up and turns east, leaving behind the cluster of CBD skyscrapers and the Harbour Bridge. We come upon the Opera House, a structure whose iconic status is even grander in person: its curves and points must be witnessed in three dimensions for the full effect. Up close, the million-plus tiles that form its smooth contours of frilly white reveal themselves. The grit and imperfection of the actual building contrasts, sometimes jarringly, with its formal beauty. But the illusion persists. I maintain that this structure will be remembered as one of the greats in the history of human building.

Onboard are other distractions: two British gay guys named Paul seem friendly enough, and one of them—the better looking one, bronzed skin and brown eyes—seems to take an interest in me. Next to him are some females and a chatty straight boy—a fellow Canuck, I hear from his accent, also traveling the world solo. Then the strangest thing happens: the minute I start to speak to Canada boy—Kyle’s his name—the Pauls turn icy.

I lose track of them as the ferry docks, and I wander around Manly for a spell. Perched on a narrow isthmus, it feels like my old Boston neighborhood crash-landed in beachfront New South Wales: four-story brick apartments surround verdant parks and tennis courts. Its main pedestrian drag, the Corso, has more of a beach town feel, surf shops and ice-cream parlors and eateries with my favorite Aussie snack food, barramundi fish & chips. Finally I reach the beach itself, where the gals are burying Kyle in the sand while the Pauls look on, aloof.

“It’s Mardi Gras. I want a guy to kiss me!” Kyle exclaims. The British boys smile and do nothing, so I step up. I go easy on him: just a peck on the cheek. I stand up and turn around; maybe the Pauls are in a chattier mood now. I ask them what we’re doing later and one replies with a voice that would freeze the sun.

“We’re meeting *friends*.”

Okay, maybe not. I still have no idea what I did to irk them so.



Parade day at last.

I must admit, Gay Pride events have long befuddled me, odd blend as they are of activist rally and hedonist hoedown. But the

Sydney variant sets itself apart: the march runs after dark, allowing the city's drag queens—a stellar lot even before *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* made them famous—to flaunt rampant, wildly illuminated outfits. It's still late afternoon when I arrive but the crowds are out, some decked out in attire to complement the parade. A bored-looking fellow, shirtless and in black angel wings, withdraws cash from an ATM while his impossibly slender friend in pink shorts dances and twirls to music from a nearby bar. His black T-shirt, cut off at the midriff, says it all: "PARTY PRINCESS."

I purchase a plastic stool for seven Aussie dollars—a wise investment to see over the throng—and park myself next to a crowd of backpackers seated on blankets. They're all straight, save for one: Koen, a tall, blonde, eighteen-year-old from Amsterdam.

"You deserve a medal!" I exclaim. He's the first bona fide gay backpacker I've encountered in all my travels.

Dark at last. The crowd is seven deep. Pre-show entertainers roam the street, though this ebullient throng needs no warming up. As the strains of Bob Sinclair's "World, Hold On" pump out over megawatts of loudspeakers, the parade's first contingent, Dykes on Bikes, roars past, a blur of lesbian leather and exhaust. The crowd goes bananas, the mass of human energy washing over me in a contact high.

After that it's the usual cavalcade of activist groups, radio stations, dancing boys...and Joan Rivers. The septuagenarian comic looks about the same as she did in my youth, when she was a dead-ringer for my manic-depressive seventh-grade biology teacher. Surrounded by men in pompadours, she delivers shtick out of a face spread tighter than a trampoline. But I can't stay for the whole act: it's time to primp and prime for the afterparty, the biggest gay dance shindig in the world at Fox Studios Australia.

An old fairgrounds turned movie studio turned shopping and entertainment complex, this venue hosts the gargantuan affair out of three different buildings. Walking through the expansive park, a middle-aged mom and her daughter—both a bit tipsy—begin chatting me up. Where are you from, how long are you here—usual questions. She's excited to hear I'm from Canada as her daughter's going to Banff to work. Then her mobile phone rings.

"I'm walking in with an adorable gay boy."

Hopefully one of the males this evening will think the same.

A mess of security at the entrance gates, where shirtless guys are checked—very cursorily, more to satisfy the authorities, I suspect—for contraband. I've already downed mine, though as the evening progresses I make a not-so-astonishing realization:

Nothing's happening.

I was never a hard-core user so “brain burnout” is an unlikely explanation. My regimen of antidepressants is a likelier cause, as is my supposition that the quality of this illicit substance has declined over the past few years. The party too, is anticlimactic: I dance and chat up a range of folks—and even have one cosmic encounter, running into a fellow with whom I'd had a fling at this very event six years before. But surveying the crowd, dancing at all the different spots, it hits me: *I'm kind of over this scene.*