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## GAY & LESBIAN LONDON

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# GAY & LESBIAN LONDON

London is, let's face it, pretty damn gay. The city of Oscar Wilde, Quentin Crisp and Elton John does not disappoint today, being a queer world capital on par with New York and San Francisco, with vast gay and lesbian communities that fan out throughout the city. There's also a superb film festival, one of the world's largest annual gay pride events, a simmering activist movement and more bars and clubs than most entire countries can claim.

Things have improved immeasurably in the past decade for gay and lesbian rights and recognition thanks almost entirely to the Labour government. Protection from discrimination is now enshrined in law, and civil partnerships now allow gay couples the same rights as straight couples, even with respect to adoption. That's not to say homophobia doesn't exist – outside the bubble of Soho, abuse on the street at public displays of affection is still shockingly common and sadly it's always best to assess the area you're in before walking hand in hand down the street.

The long-established gay village of Soho, once so central to any gay experience of London, has somewhat lost its pre-eminence in a city where redevelopment and high rentals have pushed people out to cheaper neighbourhoods. Soho retains the largest number of gay bars and pubs, and walk down Old Compton St at any time and you'll notice omnipresent gay and lesbian life, but many of the city's better clubs and venues are to be found elsewhere. The alternative two focuses of the city's gay life are in Vauxhall, south of the river, and Shoreditch, north of the City. Vauxhall, once a bleak concrete jungle, is now home to London's muscle boys, who party from Thursday to Tuesday without break. Fashionable Shoreditch is home to London's more alternative gay scene, often very well mixed in with local straight people; here you'll find arty parties, great shopping and the hipper clubs, where the muscle boys fear to tread.

The lesbian scene in London is far less visible than the flamboyant gay one, and lesbian bars are surprisingly few and far between. The most famous of these by far, the Candy Bar, is the place to head for a first-time visitor, although certain areas of the capital are well known to have large, thriving lesbian communities and are worth a visit in their own right – particularly Stoke Newington and Hackney in northeast London. Check out the excellent lesbian London website [www.gingerbeer.co.uk](http://www.gingerbeer.co.uk) for the full lowdown on events, club nights and bars.

## SHOPPING

**GAY'S THE WORD** Map pp92–3 Books

☎ 7278 7654; <http://freespace.virgin.net/gays.theword/>; 66 Marchmont St WC1; ☎ 10am–6.30pm Mon–Sat, 2–6pm Sun; ☎ Russell Sq

London's excellent and much-loved gay and lesbian bookshop is on a quiet Bloomsbury street where it gets relatively little walk-by custom. So much so that in 2007 it announced it was to close imminently unless it could raise emergency funds to pay for rising rents and to offset losses created by the internet. At the time of writing its 'sponsor a shelf' campaign had been successful and imminent closure ruled out, but this could change. There's a great range of gay and lesbian books and magazines as well as a real community spirit here – let's hope it survives.

**PROWLER** Map p68 Department Stores

☎ 7734 4031; [www.prowler-stores.co.uk](http://www.prowler-stores.co.uk); 5–7 Brewer St W1; ☎ 11am–10pm Mon–Fri, 10am–10pm Sat, noon–8pm Sun; ☎ Piccadilly Circus

Prowler's flagship Soho store is a gay shopping mecca selling books, magazines, clothes and 'lifestyle accessories'. There's also a discreet 'adult' section selling the usual array of DVDs and magazines, but the overall feel of the shop is one of a respectable gay department store.

## DRINKING & NIGHTLIFE

The queer drinking scene in London is wonderfully varied: whether you fancy a quiet pint in a traditional boozer that just happens to be gay or want a place to wet your whistle before going out dancing, you'll be spoiled for choice. Following are our favourite bars although there are plenty more; check the gay press for comprehensive listings.

London has some of the most exciting and varied gay clubbing in the world, but it's a moveable feast, as the clubbing scene is about club nights rather than venues. Whether it's drug-addled muscle boys, fetish clubs or skinny punk-rock guys and girls you're after,

## BEST GAY CLUB NIGHTS

### Monday

- **Popcorn** (Heaven, p335) Still a great and cheap night out, Popcorn is an 'Ibiza-style club night' with a great selection of music on offer in several different rooms and refreshingly priced drinks offers.

### Tuesday

- **Salon** (Shadow Lounge, p334) This former lap-dancing club in the heart of Soho now hosts this favourite evening for the capital's fashionistas presided over by the fantastic Minty and Talulah.

### Wednesday

- **Nag Nag Nag** (Ghetto, p335) Still the favoured haunt of the alternative cognoscenti in Soho, Nag's disco, nu-wave, synth-core and dirty electro beats make for one of the best midweek parties in town. See [www.nagnagnag.info](http://www.nagnagnag.info) for more.

### Thursday

- **Rude Boyz** (Fire, p336) London's notorious gay chav club attracts a young, badly behaved crowd who seem to spend most of the evening in the 'cruise cave' when they're not competing in amateur stripping contests on stage. Great fun.

### Friday

- **A:M** (Fire, p336) One of the fiercest and most popular gay nights in Vauxhall, A:M packs in a beautiful crowd of serious clubbers for an incredible 12-hour stretch. The music features some of the best techno and electro DJs on the London scene.
- **Popstarz** (Scala, p302) This grand dame of gay indie has been revitalised in the past few years and often features excellent live bookings. It's popular with a studently, friendly, mixed crowd. There are four rooms of great music from indie to the 'rubbish room'. See [www.popstarz.org](http://www.popstarz.org) for more info.
- **Trailertrash** (Map p150; [www.clubtrailertrash.com](http://www.clubtrailertrash.com); On the Rocks, 25 Kingsland Rd, Shoreditch E2; ☎ 10.30pm-late) Dirty electro disco brought to you by the Trailertrash crew served up every Friday in Shoreditch's sweatiest venue, but it's well worth braving the heat and grime with music this good and a crowd this friendly.

### Saturday

- **Duckie** (Vauxhall Tavern, p336) Get here by 10.30pm to avoid a massive queue because Duckie, hosted by the marvellous Amy Lamé, is the perfect antidote to pretension on the gay scene. Great indie tunes and some of the most unusual cabaret in London await you here.
- **Foreign** (Bar Music Hall, p299) The Bar Music Hall is the place to be in Shoreditch, and this hyperfashionable gay night is most popular of all, hosted by Jodie Harsh and Scottee. This is the place to meet the glamorous Hoxton crowd on their own territory – lots of fun. Oh, and it's free...
- **G-A-Y** (Astoria, p307) Love it or hate it, G-A-Y is a centre of gravity for the gay scene and seemingly where half of Soho is headed on a Saturday night when it's one of the world's largest gay clubs, attracting megastar PAs from the likes of Kylie. Bring your tight T-shirt. See [www.g-a-y.co.uk](http://www.g-a-y.co.uk) for more information.
- **Rebel Rebel** ([www.clubrebelrebel.co.uk](http://www.clubrebelrebel.co.uk)) Held in various venues, this indie monthly (first Saturday of each month) is one to make a beeline for. Clubbers of all stripes come together for a fantastic night of indie rock, punk and pop. As well as the monthly parties, it holds specials now and again that have taken in some great venues.
- **XXL** (Map p126; [www.xxl-london.com](http://www.xxl-london.com); 51/53 Southwark St, London Bridge SE1; ☎ 10pm–6am Sat) The world's biggest club for bears (hairy, stocky gay men) and their admirers is a real event. A very friendly crowd is spread out over a wonderfully quirky space, with two dance floors and a 'recreational maze'.

### Sunday

- **DTPM** (Fabric, p300) The name apparently stands for Drugs Taken Per Minute, and that has some resonance when you see the glam crowd that rolls up here – none of them appear to have slept since Thursday. However, the atmosphere is incredible, with superb music in a superb venue.

look no further – London has it all. The few exclusively gay clubs are listed here, while most big nights are held in straight clubs that put on a gay night or two each week. The gay press and the Gay & Lesbian section in weekly listings magazine *Time Out* are the best places to check for up-to-date club listings as things change weekly.

## THE WEST END

**BARCODE** *Map p68* Bar  
 ☎ 7734 3342; [www.bar-code.co.uk](http://www.bar-code.co.uk); 3-4 Archer St W1; ☎ 4pm-1am Mon-Sat, to 11pm Sun; ☎ Piccadilly Circus

Tucked away down a side street is this fun gay bar, full of a diverse range of people enjoying a pint or two and some evening cruising. There are frequent club nights in the downstairs area, including the very popular gay comedy night Comedy Camp every Tuesday (see [opposite](#)).

**CANDY BAR** *Map p68* Bar  
 ☎ 7494 4041; [www.thecandybar.co.uk](http://www.thecandybar.co.uk); 4 Carlisle St W1; ☎ to 2am Fri & Sat, to 11.30pm Sun-Thu; ☎ Tottenham Court Rd

This is the hottest lesbian bar in town, a great, friendly place, with a long bar on the ground floor and a miniclub in the basement where DJs play most nights. Look out for karaoke every Tuesday, which is a blast. Men are admitted as guests to women (one man allowed per woman).

**EDGE** *Map p68* Bar  
 ☎ 7439 1313; [www.edge.uk.com](http://www.edge.uk.com); 11 Soho Sq W1; ☎ to 1am Mon-Sat; ☎ Tottenham Court Rd

Overlooking Soho Sq in all its four-storey glory, the Edge is London's largest gay bar and heaves from the early evening until the early hours with preclubbing revellers fueling up for the night ahead. There's a heavy straight presence though, as it's so close to Oxford St, but it's still a fun place to start the evening.

**FRIENDLY SOCIETY** *Map p68* Bar  
 ☎ 7434 3805; 79 Wardour St W1; ☎ 6-11pm Mon-Thu, to midnight Fri & Sat, to 10.30pm Sun; ☎ Piccadilly Circus

Definitely one of Soho's hippest gay bars, and thankfully one of the few fashionable queer drinking establishments that hasn't initiated a dubious door policy or membership scheme to ensure that only the rich

and beautiful arrive. A fun and up-for-it crowd assemble in the early evening, drink beer under S&M Barbie and Ken, and chill out to live DJs all evening.

**KU BAR** *Map pp72-3* Bar  
 ☎ 7437 4303; [www.ku-bar.co.uk](http://www.ku-bar.co.uk); 30 Lisle St WC2; ☎ 5pm-midnight Sun-Thu, to 3am Fri & Sat; ☎ Leicester Sq

This is the London gay teen hangout of choice and at the weekends it seems as if every under-20-year-old in the southeast converges on the Ku for preclubbing drinks. Its location doesn't hurt either, where Chinatown, Soho and Covent Garden meet, and there's always something going on, from karaoke to cabaret.

**SHADOW LOUNGE** *Map p68* Bar  
[www.theshadowlounge.co.uk](http://www.theshadowlounge.co.uk); 5 Brewer St W1; ☎ 10pm-3am Mon-Wed, 9pm-3am Thu-Sat; ☎ Piccadilly Circus or Oxford Circus

This home from home for the Soho glitterati is a stylish basement bar with plenty of comfortable coves to hang out in as well as a dance floor complete with pole for dirty dancing. The door policy is a little erratic: at quiet times you're usually fine although there's generally a £5 to £10 entry charge; other times you'll need to be with a member or a Soho 'face' to make it past the gorillas on the door.

**TRASH PALACE** *Map p68* Bar  
 ☎ 7734 0522; [www.trashpalace.co.uk](http://www.trashpalace.co.uk); 11 Wardour St W1; ☎ 5pm-midnight Sun-Thu, to 3am Fri & Sat; ☎ Piccadilly Circus

This cool two-floor space from the people who revolutionised London's gay scene with indie club Popstarz in the 1990s has great staff and an alternative yet unpretentious feel. The lines outside can be big at the weekends, so get here early – as with most cool places in London, demand way outstrips supply. There's a small dance floor downstairs with a more relaxed lounge upstairs.

**YARD** *Map p68* Bar  
 ☎ 7437 2652; [www.yardbar.co.uk](http://www.yardbar.co.uk); 57 Rupert St W1; ☎ 1-11pm Mon-Sat, 1-10.30pm Sun; ☎ Piccadilly Circus

This old Soho favourite attracts a great cross section of the great and the good. It's a pretty attitude-free place, perfect for preclub drinks or just an evening out. There

are DJs upstairs most nights in the cool loft area as well as the eponymous courtyard downstairs.

**GHETTO** *Map p68* Club  
 ☎ 7287 3726; [www.ghetto-london.co.uk](http://www.ghetto-london.co.uk); 5-6 Falconberg Ct W1; ☎ 10pm-3am Mon-Thu, 10.30pm-4.30am Fri & Sat; ☎ Tottenham Court Rd

In a sweaty basement, this leading gay club has nevertheless established itself as the hippest Soho has to offer, with its 1950s American milk bar-style white seats and red walls. The most talked about night is Nag Nag Nag, where both Boy George and Yoko Ono have appeared, followed by Friday's in-yr-face The Cock. There's also Thursday's indie-music Mis-shapes and Saturday's trashy Wig Out.

**HEAVEN** *Map pp72-3* Club  
 ☎ 7930 2020; [www.heaven-london.com](http://www.heaven-london.com); Villiers St WC2; ☎ 10.30pm-3am Mon & Wed, 10pm-3am Fri, 10pm-5am Sat; ☎ Embankment or Charing Cross

This long-standing and perennially popular gay club, under the arches beneath Char-

ing Cross station, has always been host to good club nights, but its big draws today are its three long-established nights: Saturday is still the flagship night for gay clubbers who like very commercial House music, while Monday is the cheap and cheerful student-oriented Popcorn, possibly gay London's best-value night out. Wednesday is cheeky midweeker Fruit Machine.

## CLERKENWELL, SHOREDITCH & SPITALFIELDS

**JOINERS ARMS** *Map p150* Bar  
 ☎ 7739 9854; 116 Hackney Rd E2; ☎ 6pm-2am Fri & Sat; ☎ Shoreditch or Old St

Determinedly run-down and cheesy, the Joiners is Hoxton's only totally gay pub-club (perhaps reflecting the degree to which such distinctions are blurred around E2). It's a crowded, funky old boozier where hip gay boys hang out at the bar, dance and watch people play pool all night.

### LOCAL VOICES: SIMON HAPPILY *Interviewed by Tom Masters*

Simon Happily is the creator and host of popular gay comedy night Comedy Camp ([www.comedycamp.co.uk](http://www.comedycamp.co.uk)), the 'straight friendly' Tuesday-evening show held downstairs at Barcode in Soho (see [p304](#) and [opposite](#)).

**Where did the idea for a gay comedy night come from?** Before I set Comedy Camp up I'd been shocked at how many comedians still made homophobic jokes or remarks and consequently how few lesbians and gay men tended to be in the audience. So I set up Comedy Camp as a safe environment for people to watch comedy, knowing they wouldn't have to listen to homophobic jokes. It doesn't only feature gay acts – that would get boring, not to mention repetitive – but those comedians who work well with a majority lesbian and gay crowd.

**So it's been a success?** Within a few months we had queues stretching round the block and major comedians, including some household names, asking to perform here. I never expected Comedy Camp to get so big, let alone be so critically acclaimed by the comedy critics in the mainstream press.

**So anyone can go?** Comedy Camp was always designed to be a 'straight-friendly' lesbian, gay and bisexual environment. A straight comedy-club promoter told me I should call it 'gay-friendly' – I said 'no, it's "straight-friendly"' and so the tag was born. It may be semantics, but it neatly sums up what the club is about. Everyone's welcome at Comedy Camp, regardless of sexuality, so long as they know and respect what they're coming to and recognise it's primarily 'our' safe space.

**Best and worst of gay London?** The best thing is definitely the variety due to London's large lesbian and gay population so there are lots of different places to go for different things. The worst is the large number of nightclubs that all seem to play the same heavy clubby dance music. I know they're very popular, but aren't my thing! I'm also not a fan of some of the snobbier, overpriced, more attitude-filled venues – there are plenty that are down-to-earth and better value so I'm more likely to head there.

**Did London improve for gay people under Blair?** Yes, London – like the UK – became much more tolerant under Tony Blair, not just in terms of equality legislation, but also there's been a clear social change – arguably his greatest legacy. Having said that, there are sadly still bigots and thugs in the capital. Personally, I like to keep my element of risk small, so while public displays of affection are unlikely to cause problems in Soho, I wouldn't risk it in some parts of the city late at night!

**What would be your first act as Mayor of London?** Ban cars for all but the disabled, put segregated cycling lanes on every road and bring back more trams rather than those hideous lane-hogging bendy-buses!

## THE EAST END & DOCKLANDS

### WHITE SWAN Map p156 Club

☎ 7780 9870; [www.bjswiteswan.com](http://www.bjswiteswan.com); 556 Commercial Rd E14; 🕒 9pm-2am Tue-Thu, 9pm-4am Fri & Sat, 6pm-midnight Sun; DLR Limehouse

The White Swan is a fun East End kind of place, with a large dance floor as well as a more relaxed pub area. Its legendary amateur strip night has sadly disappeared, but there's still plenty of flesh on stage on Saturday. Club classics and cheesy pop predominate.

## NORTH LONDON

### BLACK CAP Map p168 Bar

☎ 7428 2721; [www.theblackcap.com](http://www.theblackcap.com); 171 Camden High St NW1; 🕒 noon-2am Mon-Thu, to 3am Fri & Sat, to 1am Sun; ☉ Camden Town

This friendly, sprawling place is Camden's premier gay venue, and attracts people from all over North London for its great terrace and downstairs club, where you'll find plenty of hilarious camp cabaret as well as decent dance music.

## SOUTH LONDON

### TWO BREWERS Map p200 Bar

☎ 7498 4971; [www.the2brewers.com](http://www.the2brewers.com); 114 Clapham High St SW4; 🕒 noon-2am Sun-Thu, noon-4am Fri & Sat; ☉ Clapham Common or Clapham North

Clapham may have a rather suburban feel in general, and the High Street in particular, but the Two Brewers endures as one of the best London gay bars outside the gay villages. Here there's a friendly, laid-back, local crowd who come for a quiet drink during the week and some madcap cabaret and dancing at weekends.

### AREA Map p198 Club

[www.areaclub.info](http://www.areaclub.info); 67-68 Albert Embankment SE1; 🕒 10.30pm-6am Sat; ☉ Vauxhall

Home from home for circuit party boys but still very welcoming to all, Area describes itself as 'polysexual' and hosts some of the most inventive nights in town, including monthly Queer Kandi and Saturday nighter Evolve.

### CRASH Map p198 Club

☎ 7820 1500; 66 Goding St SE11; 🕒 10.30pm-6am Sat; ☉ Vauxhall

If Vauxhall in general is one of London's newest gay hangouts, then Crash, in particular, is its Muscle Mary heaven. There are two dance floors churning out hard beats, four bars and even a few go-go dancers.

### FIRE Map p198 Club

☎ 0790 503 5682; [www.fireclub.co.uk](http://www.fireclub.co.uk); South Lambeth Rd SW8; 🕒 10pm-4am; ☉ Vauxhall Sealing Vauxhall's reputation as the new gay nightlife centre of London, Fire is another expansive, smart space under the railway arches, hosting the infamous Rude Boyz for gay chavs and their admirers on Thursday night, as well as centrepiece of the Vauxhall weekend A:M on Friday, and Sunday all-nighter Orange.

### HOIST Map p198 Club

☎ 7735 9972; [www.thehoist.co.uk](http://www.thehoist.co.uk); Arches 47B & 47C, South Lambeth Rd SW8; 🕒 10pm-3am Thu, Fri & Sun, 10pm-4am Sat; ☉ Vauxhall One of Europe's most famous fetish clubs, the Hoist is a one-stop shop for guys into leather and uniforms. The dress code is very strict – everyone has to wear boots, and either rubber, leather or uniform. Check out the array of fetish nights on the website.

### VAUXHALL TAVERN Map p198 Club

☎ 7820 1222; [www.theroyalvauxhalltavern.co.uk](http://www.theroyalvauxhalltavern.co.uk); 372 Kennington Lane SE11; 🕒 7pm-midnight Mon-Thu, 7pm-4am Fri, 7pm-2am Sat, 2pm-midnight Sun; ☉ Vauxhall

Rough around the edges to say the least, the Vauxhall Tavern is the perfect antidote to the gleaming new wave of gay venues now crowding Vauxhall's gay village. Friday's Le Phreeque and Saturday's Duckie, a wonderful indie performance night hosted by Amy Lamé, are rightly considered to be two of the best club nights in London.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

London has a lively free gay press documenting the ever-changing scene. You can pick up these free publications at any gay venue and it's always a good idea to do so as the listings are the most up-to-date and wide-ranging available. Many different magazines come and go each year, but the mainstays are the tabloids *Boyz* ([www.boyz.co.uk](http://www.boyz.co.uk)) and *QX* (<http://qxmagazine.com>), and the more

serious and newsy *Pink Paper* ([www.pinkpaper.com](http://www.pinkpaper.com)). They all include weekly listings for clubs, bars and other events, and often contain flyers that grant discounted entry to various venues. Magazines on sale at most London newsagents include *Gay Times* ([www.gaytimes.co.uk](http://www.gaytimes.co.uk)), *Diva* ([www.divamag.co.uk](http://www.divamag.co.uk)), *Attitude* ([www.attitude.co.uk](http://www.attitude.co.uk)) and *AXM* ([www.axm-mag.com](http://www.axm-mag.com)), although some less enlightened proprietors still place them on the top shelf next to the pornography.

Check out the following listings and personal websites:

**Gay London** ([www.gaylondon.com](http://www.gaylondon.com))

**Gaydar** ([www.gaydar.co.uk](http://www.gaydar.co.uk) or [gaydargirls.co.uk](http://gaydargirls.co.uk))

**Ginger Beer** ([www.gingerbeer.co.uk](http://www.gingerbeer.co.uk))

**Time Out** ([www.timeout.com/london/gay](http://www.timeout.com/london/gay))

**Visit London** ([www.visitlondon.com/people/gay](http://www.visitlondon.com/people/gay))

**London Lesbian & Gay Switchboard** (☎ 78377324; [www.llgs.org.uk](http://www.llgs.org.uk)) Provides free advice, counselling and other help to anyone who needs a sympathetic ear.

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