



TOP 6 GAY EURO CITIES

By Katie Wood

THE introduction of low cost flights has been excellent news for all of us keen to slip away for a weekend of fun and frolics without busting the budget. And the great news is that ALL the hottest cities in Europe are now served by the likes of Ryanair, Easyjet and bmi baby.

I have spent the last year and a half researching over 90 cities in Europe from the low cost flight perspective for my book 'Fly Europe: The Complete Guide to Budget Airline destinations' (Aurum Press £12.99). Having blitzed the Continent, in my humble opinion, here is the low-down on the top six gay destinations worth a weekend of anyone's time this winter. They're not only beautiful but lively, liberal and packed with shops, restaurants and bars that will make you never want to return to grim winter Blighty.

▶ AMSTERDAM

AMSTERDAM is probably one of the gayest cities in Europe, with an excellent attitude and more to see and do than can possibly be crammed into one weekend. The city offers almost 100 gay bars, discos, shops and cafes, some of the world's best and weirdest museums, classic architecture, and 350 coffee shops, all within walking distance from Central Station.

FLIGHTS

Easyjet fly from Gatwick, Luton and Stansted.

EUjet fly from Kent International

BMI fly from Heathrow

PACKAGE

An excellent package comes from www.opodo.co.uk. The price for flights (inc. taxes), seven nights in a room in the very smart Tulip Inn with breakfast is £269.70 per person with flights from London.

EVENTS

The biggie in Spring is April 30th – the Queen's Official Birthday is used as an excuse for a mini-Gay pride. **Queensday** brings out all the people on the streets, and if you head to Reguliersdwarsstraat and Amstel you'll be in good company for fun.

Prague

▶ BARCELONA

BARCELONA is fab, fun and exciting for anyone who loves Art and Architecture. The gay scene is actually better in Sitges, forty minutes south by train, and mainland Spain's biggest gay resort. The joy is you can flit between the two easily and have a great few days.

FLIGHTS

Easyjet fly from Gatwick and Luton

EUjet fly from Kent Int'l

Air Berlin fly from Stansted

If you do buy a budget flight, it's worth checking out **Outlet Spain**. Offering a similar service to London's Outlet agency, they have some great deals on accommodation in centrally located areas. Website is www.outlet4spain.com and tel: + 34 93 810 2711.

PACKAGES

Brilliant Weekends (0870 758 5100) offers Makeover Experience packages to Barcelona from £350 per person, including meals and accommodation at the gay-friendly Hotel Neri, St Sever 5 (0034 93 304 0655; www.hotelneri.com). The minimum group size is four.

Another great deal comes from the gay specialist tour operator **Manaround**



Amsterdam

(020 8902 7177). They have a 3 star hotel close to the Ramblas in a twin room giving you two nights B&B with flights from London with BA for £185.00 per person, based on 2 people sharing.

EVENTS

Come February, join natives in celebrating **Festes de Santa Eulàlia**, a holiday dedicated to Barcelona's first patron saint. The Mayor's office organises events for the city and arranges the special guest appearances by mulasses (dragons) in parades. During **Festa de San Medir**, held in Tibidabo, Barcelona's young and old race to the mountain to be showered with candy by men galloping on horses down the mountain. How camp! In February, residents celebrate the end of winter and their last week of indulgence before Lent with **Carnival**. The more daring head over to Sitges or Vilanova i la Geltrú for some VERY rowdy partying!

For a map of gay Barcelona, detailing bars, clubs, hotels and restaurants, contact either **SexTienda**, c/Raurich 11 (Mon-Sat 10am-9pm), or **Zeus**, c/Riera Alta 11 (Mon-Sat 10am-9pm; tel 934 429 795). Look out also for a free magazine called **Nois** which carries an up-to-date list of the scene.



Barcelona

► NICE

FAR more liberated than in years past, the fun of the **Cote d'Azur** just oozes out of Nice. It's a wonderfully sybaritic city to drop into for a few days and there are plenty gay hotels, bars and clubs to see you through to the wee small hours.

FLIGHTS

Easyjet fly from Gatwick, Luton and Stansted.
EUjet fly from Kent Int'l
BMI fly from Heathrow

PACKAGE

This package from www.opodo.co.uk is hard to beat – Flights with taxes and five nights in the 4 star Acropole Hotel for £207.90. It is located close to the Promenades des Anglais and with easy access to the old Town, museums, glorious beaches, colourful gardens, stylish shops and fine dining.

EVENTS

Carnival lasts from 12th – 27th February and is one long party. This year's theme is 'King of The Deranged Climate'. All the parades take place on the Promenade des Anglais against the natural backdrop of the Mediterranean. New for 2005 is an evening torchlight **Flower Parade**. With over one million visitors expected it's a mega event and the gay community are expected to enter into it with spectacular costumes and celebrations.

► PRAGUE

THINGS in Prague have changed enormously in the past few years – in all ways. The gay scene is far livelier and the scope for a great short break is better now than it's ever been. Don't believe tales that it's all stag nights and hen parties, Prague has fun for all persuasions. Find out the latest from gayguide.net/europe/czech/prague. Once there, **Prague Post** does the occasional update on gay and lesbian nightlife; otherwise you'll need to get hold of the bi-monthly gay magazine **Amigo** (www.amigo.cz)

FLIGHTS

BMI Baby fly from Gatwick
Easyjet fly from Stansted
EUjet fly from Kent Int'l
Discovery fly from London City
SmartWings fly from Gatwick

PACKAGE

Three night packaged city break from £179. Stay at the 3* Henrietta hotel packages include return flights from London Heathrow with British Airways plus two nights accommodation, based on two adults sharing a twin/double room on a bed and breakfast. Book now and you'll also be entitled to some fantastic free night offers that could save you up to £80 per person. Offers are valid for travel until 31st March 2005, subject to availability. Packaged by Great Getaways. To book call **Opodo** on 0870 010 8429. Or log on to www.opodo.co.uk and check the 'build your trip' page:

EVENTS

Prague's **One World Film Festival** (3rd – 21st April 2005) has rapidly become an important voice to be reckoned with. Worth thinking about planning a trip round these dates as apart from the opportunity to see some seriously classy movies, the city is brimming with luvvies who brighten up the nightlife scene considerably.

Another fun evening is the **Witches' Night** (Paleni cardojenic).

30th April is the Witching Hour for the Czech people. This ancient folk festival is an amalgamation of Halloween and May Day, which marks the end of Winter and the beginning of Spring. An effigy of a hag or witch (presumably symbolising Winter or perhaps a historical reference to the Czech pastime of witch-hunting) is burnt on a pyre on top of hills across the country. Good ethnic stuff and very photogenic.

► GRAN CANARIA

THE winter scene in Gran Canaria is excellent and the options for getting out to this popular resort are endless.

FLIGHTS

Thomsonflights, **Excel**, **First Choice**, **Fly Globespan** and **Monarch** all offer flights and there's barely an airport in the UK that does not have a low cost charter option. Log onto www.whichbudget.com to see the numerous flights available.

Not only is the weather hot here: the resort of **Playa del Ingles** pulsates with life and attracts thousands of gay visitors from across Europe and beyond every year, many returning time and time again.

When the sun goes down, the delights of the infamous **Yumbo Centre**, in the heart of Playa del Ingles, keeps the heat turned full-on. Here you'll find dozens of gay bars, clubs, cinemas, saunas, sex shops and backrooms - something to cater for just about every taste - to help you make it through until the early hours.

PACKAGES

For a gay package log onto www.throb.co.uk who have well-priced packages from £535 for 14 nights self catering and flight-inclusive. Mantrav have just opened their brand new exclusively gay resort, **Club Las Palmas** in Maspalomas, featuring 18 one bedroom bungalows. Swimming pool with bar, weekly buffet and more. Breakfast is included with all stays. Telephone 0870 78 76 848 and mention 'OX' for latest deals. Another good choice comes from **Sensations** (Tel: 020 8902 7177) who have a 3 star central self catering one bedroom apartment including 7 nights accommodation, flights on BA from Gatwick & return airport transfers for just £286.00 per person based on 3 people sharing.

EVENTS

Go out for **Carnival**, which kicks off on January 21st. On the 29th January is the **Drag Queen Competition** and gala ceremony. The 4th March see sees the wild **Carnival Parade**. More information: www.laspalmascarnaval.com



Club Tucanes Playa, Gran Canaria

► **BERLIN**

THE Gay Scene in Berlin is as diverse as the city. In the main districts, Kreuzberg, Schöneberg, Mitte, Friedrichshain & Prenzlauer Berg, same sex couples can be seen, like any other couples, kissing and holding hands. Because of this acceptability, the gay scene is not limited to gay venues. Gay social life is one of the many threads which makes Berlin and adds to its amazing character.

The scene here is a strong one with a lot of variety, something for everyone. The more traditional gay male scene is at **Nollendorplatz**. **Kreuzberg** is a liberal, open-minded part of town, where gay life is most connected with the diverse pulse of the neighbourhood. **Friedrichshain** and **Prenzlauer Berg** are part of a newer scene in the east, which feels like its very alive and still developing.

FLIGHTS

Ryanair fly from Stansted

Air Berlin fly from Stansted

PACKAGES

Manaround (Tel: 020 8902 7177) have a 4 star hotel on the banks of the River Dahme in a twin room including 2 nights B&B & flights from Heathrow with BA for £179.00 per person based on 2 people sharing. Meanwhile www.opodo.co.uk have two return flights including taxes, two nights in the Berlin Plaza Hotel for just £113 per person.

EVENTS

On 6th February the major **Carnival** events take place bringing even more life to the city. Gays adopt it in an exuberant manner as it travels through the city centre. Log onto http://karnevals-zug-berlin.de/kzb_index.htm for more info.

► **Gran Canaria pics courtesy of Manaround and Sensations Holidays. For the latest deals and packages, tel: 020 8902 7177.**

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