

# YOUREX

**BNZ BREAKERS:**  
WILL SPORT EVER  
EMBRACE QUEER  
COMMUNITIES?

**ARE YOU  
THE NEXT  
MR NZ  
BEAR?**

**ROCKY  
HORROR  
SHOW**

**RETURNS!**

**RICHARD O'BRIEN'S  
ICONIC LEGACY**



**SANDRA BERNHARD**

**ANTHONY BOWENS**

**KRISTIAN LAVERCOMBE**

**ROBBIE 'DANGER' WEBB**

**BRONWYN TUREI**



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## FROM THE EDITOR



### A Summer To Celebrate

We are so excited that our summer of joy is finally upon us! We've spent the month trying not to get sunburnt and putting together a joyful, celebratory issue of *YOUR EX* that highlights we all have so much to look forward to! *The Rocky Horror Show* graces our cover, and we could not be more excited to see it return to Aotearoa with the fancy new West End production this coming March.

We were lucky enough to talk to its enigmatic writer, Richard O'Brien, and while we couldn't print everything he said about Brian Tamaki, he certainly convinced us to book tickets early and start planning our outfits for the show.

We're super excited for all our summer Pride festivals (including furry favourite Bear Week), topped off by Auckland's colourful Rainbow Parade on Saturday 21 February!

Right, we're off for a swim. Don't forget your sunscreen. Clothing optional.

*Olly & Matt*



COVER | **THE ROCKY HORROR SHOW**

# YOUR *ex*

UNAPOLOGETICALLY QUEER

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PHOTO | KEVIN THOMAS GARCIA







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# NYE: TWO BARS, ONE TICKET, ENDLESS DRAG & DANCING

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## OUT & ABOUT



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From pink to stink: the BNZ Breakers' Pride jersey decision highlights that professional sport still struggles with queer inclusion.

# HOW PRIDE IN SPORT BECAME A POLITICAL FOOTBALL

*Jessie Lewthwaite reflects on the enduring controversy around Pride in sport and the ongoing exclusion of LGBTQ+ athletes.*

**H**aving grown up in rural Queensland, I had spent my childhood absolutely obsessed with sports. There wasn't much to do in my hometown, and since illicit drugs, shoplifting, and teen pregnancy weren't really my thing, I gravitated towards being sporty instead. I played on the girls' soccer team as goalie, was a halfback for my high school girls' rugby team, and I did martial arts all my teen years.

After a career-ending injury—which definitely is the only reason I didn't go pro—I gave up on sports and embraced the pasty nerd I am today.

However, in 2017 I became sports-curious again—not to play, but as an observer. Being absolutely fed up with rugby, I searched further afield and found the LA Rams. See, in 2017 the Rams were the first NFL team to celebrate Pride. They proudly changed their jerseys to include rainbows and made “love is love” their slogan around their stadium. I was instantly impressed, and learning the rules of NFL became

my obsession. Years later, I am still in the Ramily, cheering my team on to this year's Super Bowl (hopefully).

So how is it that something that was brave in 2017 is still controversial almost 10 years later?! How have sports become a new weapon in the war of making rainbow people as invisible as possible?

Ironically, sport is pretty undeniably gay. Apart from the obvious man-on-man nature of rugby and the thinly veiled homoeroticism of a celebratory butt slap, there are also just a lot of queer people who play sport. If you look at any women's sports team, I guarantee they will be like 80% lesbian. That is not a fact backed by science, but it feels true. The Women's Soccer World Cup was basically just a lesbian convention that sometimes involved sports. Yet there are still teams refusing to wear Pride jerseys... in 2025.

Of course, trans inclusion at the Olympics is the headline act—the relay baton nobody

wants to drop and everyone attempts to explain with a PowerPoint. You know the kind: slides about “fairness,” science, and a graph that looks suspiciously like it was made in MS Paint during a blackout.

Somewhere in the background, actual trans athletes are just trying to stretch, hydrate, and pick leggings that can withstand three rounds of bureaucratic scrutiny. Everyone wants to point at trans women and scream about “protecting female athletes”, fully aware that by their own dumb definitions those same female athletes now have to compete against men... trans men are men, and by your rules, they are now in the ladies' league.

Perhaps after the one person with a brain cell in the room pointed this out, the Olympic Committee decided to just put our community in the “too hard” basket and ban all trans athletes from competing. I bet all the cis athletes feel so much better knowing they will no longer be dominated by the MANY trans athletes, like... um... where did Laurel Hubbard place again? Oh.

With this non-issue now sorted, and cowards who think wearing a rainbow on their jersey makes them gay, it is very understandable why queer people just wouldn't bother with sports at all, seeing it as just another battleground to attack us upon.

But there are still some awesome examples of inclusion out there, and I encourage queer people to strive to find one that represents them.

My highest recommendation would be Roller Derby. Even *The L Word* was less gay than Roller Derby.



# FESTIVE FUN AT FAMILY

*Family Bar is the place to be this NYE—\$10 gets you access to both Family and G.A.Y. Miss Ribena hosts the countdown, with drag shows from Miss Kola, Leidy Lei and Natrasha at 1am. In December, enjoy karaoke nightly in Saloon Bar from 10pm and weekend shows hosted by Kita Mean (Fridays) and Ribena (Saturdays). Planning a party? Email [grady\\_elliott@hotmail.com](mailto:grady_elliott@hotmail.com) to book your summer celebration at Family.*



**Family Bar & Nightclub**  
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PHOTOS | JASMIN SHEIKH



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# “WE’RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER”: RICHARD O’BRIEN’S MESSAGE FOR THE MADNESS OF OUR TIMES

Richard O'Brien.

*The man who penned the picture show candidly converses with **Oliver Hall** about AI, inclusion, Trump and the enduring magic of *Rocky Horror*.*

**W**hen I finally reach Richard O'Brien over Zoom and apologise for being late, he brushes it off with a wicked grin. “Don’t worry. It allowed me to go out on the front porch again and have another glass of red. It may affect our interview; we’ll see how that goes,” he winks.



## ROCKY HORROR SHOW

It is the most Richard O'Brien welcome imaginable – mischievous, theatrical and warm all at once.

We last spoke around five years ago, and I ask how the intervening years have treated him. He sighs, then laughs under his breath.

"I've been waking up every day and googling Trump. These last few days, with this change, have uplifted me. It's been heartening."

He is referring to recent political shifts in the United States suggesting Trump may be losing support. "We mustn't think this guarantees change coming. It's very difficult while this madman is in his position. Rationality has been abandoned. The whole world has been sitting on the edge of its seat."

Yet he admits there has been relief in seeing what he calls "sanity coming back into the room." Richard's political rage has always sat beside a deep, tender concern for humanity. He is never cynical for cynicism's sake.

On Trump himself, he is characteristically unsparing:

"It's astonishing, isn't it? If you stood in front of Trump and said to him, 'Your agenda is dog-eat-dog and you're top dog,' he'd probably say, 'What took you so long?'"

He says he and Trump have never crossed paths but points out a *Rocky Horror* co-star who has.

"Poor Tim Curry did during filming for *Home Alone 2*. He had to stay in Trump Tower. One of Trump's wives asked him, 'How's the room?' Tim told me, 'It's awful. Everything's gold and horrible.'"

As Aotearoa moves toward its own election year, Richard shares his hopes for this country.

"Unity," he says instantly. "The whole world needs unity above all. Divisiveness is encouraged by right-wing authoritarians. They always divide, demonise and separate us."

He raises an example from the past: Auckland Pride's decision to exclude police officers in uniform from marching.

"That was a silly mistake. It was essential the police were there in uniform to say 'We support you' and to be visible."

This leads him to recall speaking to a group of gay men decades ago in London.

"They were big bearded men, dressed like lumberjacks, and they were being unkind to 'sissy queens'. I asked them: 'If we want the world to accept us, why are you excluding people who are more feminine?' They couldn't answer. The rainbow banner should be about inclusion."

It's not only queer people Richard wants to see unite.

"With AI coming along, a lot of people who are anti-welfare will find themselves needing



Richard and co-star Tim Curry behind the scenes on *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* set.

benefits because AI is going to take away a lot of jobs. We're all in it together. We need to look after each other rather than divide."

As a creative, Richard's assessment of AI is grave.

"It's terrifying. A sci-fi reality. We're living in extraordinary times. We have quantum AI technology, and at the same time we still have hunter-gatherers on this planet. We're all getting left behind."

Richard blames the world's woes on one thing – what he calls 'Abrahamic creative myth fantasy', namely Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

"It's messed us up. Seventy-five per cent of the planet prefers magic to rationality. Most disapproval towards the gay community comes from that medieval worldview."

He rolls his eyes at one familiar local figure. "Look at Brian Tamaki. What a childish man. He said two gay men having sex with a happy ending makes God send a tidal wave. It's insane. And those leathers. It's very Tom of Finland."

With the mood lightened, he reflects on the greatest time of his life: the 1960s.

"I arrived in England in '64 for a working holiday, and in '65 I was in London. I couldn't have been in a better place. I started riding horses in films like *Carry On Cowboy*. England swung like a pendulum. It was a wonderful decade. I smoked my first jazz cigarette [a joint] in Mick Jagger's front room."

He laughs. "If you can remember the 60s, you weren't there."

Of course, no conversation with Richard is complete without talking about *The Rocky Horror Show*, which will tour Aotearoa with the award-winning international production that thrilled the West End.

He claims to be confused by the show's longevity when so many musicals have fallen by the wayside. He credits Tim Curry's iconic movie performance for part of that endurance.

"Frank-N-Furter sits alongside Cruella de Vil as one of cinema's most memorable visual characters."

But the bigger reason, he says, is community.

"It's a rainbow event. It's allowed marginalised people to come together and feel safe and laugh. It's a childish piece of theatre – delightfully childish. But it's a gathering point. That's the happiest ending for me. Hearing them laugh, tap their feet, and knowing it brings people together."

Over the years, *Rocky Horror Show* has brought over 35 million theatre-goers together. It has toured 20 countries and been translated into 20 languages. Richard believes some of that success stems from it being a tale as old as time.

"Brad and Janet are Adam and Eve. Frank-N-Furter is the serpent. It's Hansel and Gretel. It's pubescence. Brad and Janet are discovering sexuality. That familiarity is there before the curtain even goes up. And it ends with society being reassured again. Safe. Satisfied."

Before we finish, I ask whether he has seen the Sabrina Carpenter chart-topping Tears video that pays tribute to Rocky. He laughs.

"No. But if things like that needed our sign-off, we'd never have been able to make our movie. Look at what we stole. Frankenstein. Excuse me."

He pauses, almost kindly.

"You're allowed to steal. The only rule is you must improve on what you stole from. Nothing is formed in a vacuum."

As we say goodbye, he adds, "I've been getting a bit tiddy here. Your fault."

He is entirely lucid, entirely charming and entirely Richard – philosopher, provocateur and the queer uncle we all wish we had.

Next year, as *Rocky Horror Show* tours New Zealand again, Richard's call for unity feels particularly poignant. In a world of shifting politics, rising AI and old myths clinging to new lives, his message is simple: we're all in it together. And perhaps that's why his creation still matters. It gives us a room to gather in, to laugh in and to celebrate our differences; not be afraid of them.

**Direct from the UK, starring a sensational West End cast, *The Rocky Horror Show* plays:**

**Auckland – The Civic | 26 Feb – 8 Mar | Tickets from *Ticketmaster***

**Christchurch – Isaac Theatre Royal | 11 – 15 Mar | Tickets from *Ticketek***

**Wellington – St James Theatre | 18 – 29 Mar | Tickets from *Ticketmaster***



# THE RETURN OF THE ROCKY HORROR SHOW

*Kristian Lavercombe, the actor who has starred in **The Rocky Horror Show** more than anyone else, discusses the enduring cosmic camp of Richard O'Brien's "coming-of-age story for anyone who's ever felt different."*

**A**fter a 15-year absence, *The Rocky Horror Show* is finally strutting back onto Aotearoa stages, with corsets and chaos fully intact. And for one performer, the homecoming is particularly sweet. Kristian Lavercombe, the Nelson-raised actor who has performed Riff Raff more times than anyone in history, is returning as the show's Narrator. For him, it feels less like a gig and more like destiny.

"This production has toured the world for 14 years. It's literally been seen by millions," he says. "There was even a West End version with Stephen Fry that topped the box office when it screened in cinemas. And somehow, this version never made it to New Zealand, which feels like a crime!"

Given the show's 52-year history, its overdue return feels momentous, not least because *Rocky Horror* is stitched deeply into the fabric of queer culture in Aotearoa. Its creator, Richard O'Brien, famously spent his childhood here. The film is a cult legacy. And for Kristian, it's been a defining artistic love affair.

## THE MAN WHO BECAME RIFF RAFF

On a typical Saturday night in the UK, Kristian would step on stage to an audience of two thousand people who were wearing feather boas, screaming callbacks and pelvic-thrusting their way through *The Time Warp*. For 14 years, that adrenaline never dulled.

"No matter what role I'm doing, I never completely shake that nervous energy. That's what keeps things alive," he says. "No one teaches you how to perform a role for 14 years. But I always treated every night like opening night. That mindset kept performance number 2,600 just as exciting as performance number one."

"Somehow I've performed in Rocky Horror more than anyone in the history of the show!"

Fans see Riff Raff as one of theatre's great queer-coded oddballs: hunching in the shadows, quietly biding his time, then unleashing cosmic rock-opera drama. After thousands of shows, Kristian's relationship with the role became deeply personal.

"During my 14 years as Riff Raff, I spent more time looking at that character's face than my own," he says. "He became my best friend. I performed with countless casts across multiple countries, but Riff Raff was the one constant."

These performances taught him why audiences identify with the character's quiet rebellion. "He represents the part of all of us that's tired of being ignored," Kristian says.

## PASSING THE TORCH

For the 2026 tour, Kristian is stepping into the role of the Narrator, while Riff Raff will be played by Ryan Carter-Wilson.

"Ryan was my understudy on the last tour – he's hardworking, talented, and a joy to share a stage with," Kristian says. "He covered several roles back then and played them all to perfection, so he's the perfect person to pass the baton to."

However, "not having Riff Raff looking back at me in the mirror has been one of the strangest



## THEATRE

adjustments,” he says. “There are definitely times I miss seeing him.”

### WHAT SETS THIS TOUR APART

Kristian describes this production as the most visually spectacular version NZ has ever seen.

“With *Rocky Horror*, there are sacred traditions you don’t mess with. The fishnets, the high heels, the feather boas, the half-naked muscle man; they’re all there!” he laughs.

But this tour also boasts the original film’s costume designer, Sue Blane, designing every corset and cape. Meanwhile, the creative team includes Tony nominees and Olivier Award winners handling design and lighting.

“This version delivers everything audiences expect while embracing incredible, world-class design,” Kristian says. “At the heart of it all is Richard O’Brien’s eccentric, glitter-soaked fairytale. His music hasn’t aged a day. That man knows how to write a tune!”

### A QUEER RITE OF PASSAGE

Half a century on, *The Rocky Horror Show* remains one of the most important queer cultural touchstones in theatre.

“*Rocky Horror* is a coming-of-age story for anyone who’s ever felt different,” Kristian says. “It gave people permission to be themselves.”

In 1973, a transvestite lead character shocked the theatre world. In 2026, the show feels just as rebellious.

“Even now, audiences are full of young LGBTQIA+ people who find inspiration in the show,” he says. “And the best part? Even if you’re a straight, rugby-playing mechanic, it’s totally acceptable to show up in a corset and heels and not be judged.”

*Rocky Horror*’s message, “Don’t dream it, be it,” has only grown sharper.

“As the world becomes more divided, its invitation to simply ‘be yourself’ feels even more vital. It reminds us to celebrate difference, not hide it.”

### A HOMECOMING LONG IN THE MAKING

Kristian’s connection to NZ theatre runs deep. He trained at NASDA,

performed extensively at The Court Theatre, and starred as Jesus in Auckland Theatre Company’s now-legendary Jesus Christ Superstar (“Cookiegate,” he teases).

Playing the Narrator in his fifth New Zealand *Rocky Horror* feels like a full circle moment.

“I’ve performed alongside Richard many times,” he says. “I hope he feels proud that the ‘little show’ he wrote for a three-week run has lasted over 50 years.”

### MAYHEM, MAKEUP & ABSOLUTE PLEASURE

After more than 2,600 performances, Kristian has accumulated stories; some printable, some not.

The most iconic involve Kiwi audiences: a fan dressed as a faux-Magenta who broke into his dressing room, and a seven-foot drag queen he had to physically redirect away from Richard O’Brien when they jumped on stage.

His advice for first-time audiences: “To quote the show: ‘Give yourself over to absolute pleasure.’ And yes, absolutely dress up. You’ll have a much better time if you do.”

### WHY ROCKY STILL ROCKS

So what keeps *The Rocky Horror Show* pulsing after 50 years?

“All of it,” Kristian says. “The music, the fashion, the message, the anarchy. *Rocky Horror* breaks every rule of what should work.”

As we prepare to time-warp once more, Kristian hopes audiences embrace its ethos fully.

“We all want to be unapologetically ourselves – but it’s easier said than done,” he says. “If *Rocky Horror* can help people achieve that, even just a little, then everyone should see it.”

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# WET & WILD: THE AUCKLAND ARTS FESTIVAL PLAY DIVING INTO WOMEN'S SEXUALITY

*Bronwyn Turei discusses her role in WET, the bold new Māori–Pasifika play exploring sexuality, shame and the power of speaking out.*

**W**hen actor and musician Bronwyn Turei (Ngāti Porou) talks about *WET*, the new Māori–Pasifika play she is starring in for the Auckland Arts Festival, she does not describe it in grand statements or sweeping predictions. She talks about people. Queer people, mothers, anyone who has ever shunned society's expectations, and what might crack open for them when they watch her character, Aroha, a Māmā and secret "cliterature" writer, finally take up space in her own story.

## SPEAKING TO QUEER AUDIENCES

When I ask Turei which parts of *WET* will speak to queer audiences, especially younger ones still feeling out their place in the world, she immediately mentions Fetu: "a character who is unapologetically themselves and out and proud, but dealing with being with someone who isn't."

"That shame, that questioning of yourself and who you are, will really resonate," she says.

But the connection goes beyond individual characters.

"There's the universality of erotic language. That element of taboo. All of us crave being seen, validated, wanted and safe. It's human. I think it will resonate strongly for queer audiences, as well as the rest of us schlubs out here."

## SEXUALITY & AGEING

One of the most powerful threads in *WET* is its interrogation of how society looks at, and limits, women's sexuality.

"There's this idea that from 40, women aren't really seen as sexual beings any more," Turei says. "You're relegated into caretaker, motherhood, the mature one. But the gear shift happens from that point. You need that part of yourself more than ever, because you're finally coming into who you really are."

It is a sentiment many will recognise, especially the idea that womanhood after motherhood is often flattened into a single role.

"You feel like you're moved out of that ingénue vibe. You're the mother, the matron, the caretaker, on the fast track to the crone. And it's like, no, I just created life. I am a goddess right now."

## USING HUMOUR TO COMBAT SHAME

There is something inherently queer about tackling shame through comedy, and Turei knows it.

"Humour is a magical tool," she says. "There's the old saying: get them laughing and while



their mouth is open, drop the truth in.”

It is an approach the play leans into: the slippery line between the erotic and the awkward, the personal and the performative.

“Shame is an isolator, humour is a connector. The queer community has that down to a fine art. We’re trying to dismantle loneliness and take away shame so people can experience liberation through honest connections. We’re all just under-developed human hearts stumbling around looking for connection.”

Turei is thoughtful when I ask what she hopes young queer people might take away from seeing Aroha on stage.

“That it’s okay to tell your loved ones what you need, and not be afraid of those conversations. Help your close network unlearn old ways of thinking and be open to new dialogue. That can create reassurance, listening, no judgement.”

She pauses, choosing her words carefully.

“I’d love people to feel empowered to confidently ask for what they need. Silence is often the biggest enemy.”

## DISCUSSING YOUR DESIRES

If you have ever left a show and immediately started debriefing about the big emotional themes, this one might take you in a slightly different direction.

“I think it will surprise people how much they want to talk about their sexual fantasies with their friends,” Turei says, cracking up. “Pandora’s box opening a bit.”

During development, the cast workshopped their own fantasies — “or what our sex room would look like” — and the experience reinforced something fundamental.

“It’s nice to take the taboo off and realise we all have our things.

Talking about them stops them turning into internalised shame. You might discover you’re pretty boring in the grand scheme of things.”

She says this warmly, highlighting that the aim is for audiences to feel included, not exposed.

“I hope people go away and talk about their own fantasies.”

## THE BEST GAY ICON FOR THE JOB

If Aroha’s secret “cliterature” podcast ever launched a Pride special, Turei knows exactly who she would put behind the mic.

“Janelle Monáe. She and Aroha are the same generation. I’d love to hear what crosses over culturally and about their respective awakenings. Her expression through her music and videos is so sexy and full of ownership. Inspirational.”

It is easy to imagine Monáe in that fictional studio, bold, brilliant and boundary-busting, which is exactly the territory *WET* wants to play in.

## COME FOR THE CLITERATURE, STAY FOR THE KŌRERO

For all the discussion of desire, power, shame and connection, Turei ends the conversation in the most unpretentious, Aotearoa-theatre way possible.

“I hope people come and see it, enjoy it, and if you feel like chatting with us afterwards. That’s what a theatre foyer is for. Come say hi.”

It is the kind of warmth that makes *WET* feel less like a mysterious new festival work and more like an invitation — to laugh, squirm, recognise yourself, and maybe even to talk about things you have never said out loud.

And if Turei has it her way, there will be plenty of those conversations echoing through Te Pou Theatre this March.

**WET plays at Henderson’s Te Pou Theatre from Thursday 5 to Sunday 15 March 2026 as part of the Te Ahurei Toi o Tāmaki Auckland Arts Festival. Tickets and more information at [aaf.co.nz](http://aaf.co.nz)**

## GIVEAWAYS

### Win 2 x Tickets to Circa’s Duck Pond at Auckland Arts Festival



*Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake gets a feather-ruffling twist in Duck Pond — a high-flying, genre-bending reimagining by acclaimed contemporary circus company Circa. Fusing the elegance of classical ballet with jaw-dropping aerials, acrobatics and humour, this wild retelling blends the iconic score with The Ugly Duckling in a riot of feathers and flair. Held at the stunning Kiri Te Kanawa Theatre, Duck Pond promises thrills, laughs, and a uniquely beautiful night out. Tickets for Friday 13 March*

### Win 3 x Double Passes to The Rocky Horror Show

After 15 years away, *The Rocky Horror Show* is strutting back into Aotearoa — bigger, bolder, and brasher than ever! Direct from the UK and starring a sensational West End cast, this glitter-drenched cult classic is more than a

musical — it’s a full-throttle party. From *Time Warp* to *Sweet Transvestite*, the iconic songs and outrageous energy will have you dancing in the aisles. Whether you’re a longtime fan or a Rocky virgin, you’ll love this riotous blend of fun, frocks, and Frank’n’Furter fabulousness. Don’t miss your chance to dress up and do the Time Warp again! Tickets for Auckland — Wed 4 March | Christchurch — Thurs 13 March | Wellington — Wed 15 March.



### Win the Ultimate ghd Summer Styling Kit



Your best hair yet? Sorted. This luxe summer prize pack from ghd includes everything you need for sleek, glossy, head-turning style: ghd rehab split end cream, ghd bodyguard heat protect spray, the all-rounder paddle brush, volumising blow-dry cream, and a sectioning tail comb for flawless finishes. Perfect hair days, every day.

Scan the QR Code to be into win!





# ANTHONY BOWENS:

## THE PRIDE OF PRO WRESTLING

*Anthony Bowens, All Elite Wrestling's first openly gay star, is redefining sports entertainment by championing LGBTQ+ visibility and smashing stereotypes.*

In a world once hostile to openly queer athletes, Anthony Bowens stands as a powerful and unapologetic symbol of progress. From breaking barriers in the ring to becoming an inspiration for fans around the globe, Bowens' journey has been one of resilience, authenticity and triumph. As All Elite Wrestling's (AEW) top openly gay star, his influence now reaches new audiences across Aotearoa, with AEW recently arriving on Disney+ in New Zealand.

"It's cool, and we deserve to be there," Bowens says. "AEW is a growing brand... Hopefully we can take over the world and have shows there in New Zealand."

Bowens began his wrestling career in 2012 and publicly came out as gay in 2017, marking a significant personal and professional turning point. At the time, he was unsure how his career would unfold, especially in such a traditionally masculine space.

"That was my biggest fear going into a lot of this. Would my career be able to go where I wanted it to go after I came out? That weighed on my mind for a very, very long time," he reflects. But instead of setbacks, Bowens found liberation. "It ended up being the best thing that ever happened to me."

By being open about his identity, Bowens helped reshape the narrative for queer wrestlers. A moment that encapsulated this shift came in 2023 during an AEW segment celebrating Pride Month. In the ring, a



## SPORT

comedic storyline ended with a ditzzy female heel character making a pass at Bowens, and him proudly declaring, “I’m gay,” prompting fans to erupt into supportive chants. The clip went viral.

“I actually sometimes forget how powerful that moment is until it goes viral again... It’s a reflection of how far pro wrestling has come.”

Bowens is candid about wrestling’s troubled past when it comes to LGBTQ+ representation. Characters like Goldust were often based on harmful stereotypes or “gay panic” humour. Today, he sees his own presence as helping redefine those old narratives. “It’s really cool to see the progress that’s been made... seeing how many smiles it’s brought to people’s faces is really cool.”

Still, Bowens doesn’t sugar-coat the challenges. “There are still crazy people on the internet who say rough things,” he says, but his focus remains on the positive change he can drive.

For Bowens, being out isn’t just a statement; it’s a commitment to connection. Through meet-and-greets, he’s had the chance to hear from fans whose lives have been touched by his journey. “They tell their story and how they’ve connected to my journey. Sometimes it’s hard not to cry.” One fan shared that he’d bonded with his late partner by watching Bowens on TV. Another revealed that Bowens helped change deeply rooted prejudices he held. “He thanked me for helping him realise that was just one bad person, not reflective of our entire community.”

With his recently reunited tag team, The Acclaimed, Bowens found enormous success in AEW, becoming a Tag Team Champion and Trios Champion. When the group split in 2024, he reinvented himself under a new moniker: The Pride of Pro Wrestling.

“It’s a play on words, highlights who I am, and fits the current

[heel] character who can’t understand why he’s not the face of the company despite all his media obligations and advocacy.” Importantly, Bowens is aware of how his persona is perceived and remains thoughtful about the fine balance between visibility and representation. “I think the audience is smart enough to separate it... It’s interesting to have an LGBTQ+ heel who is not presented in the outdated ways it used to be done. I’m just me — and a lot angrier than I used to be.”

Despite the heavy workload and international schedule, Bowens remains grounded thanks to his husband, Michael Pavano, whose own star has risen through viral celebrity impressions on TikTok and YouTube. “When we get home, we make sure we go to dinner or go on a hike to stay connected.”

Visibility comes with its pressures, and Bowens knows he’s paving new ground. “There hasn’t really been an openly gay singles wrestler who’s risen up the ranks. That’s high on my bucket list.” Alongside in-ring achievements, Bowens continues to branch into entertainment — appearing in a 2023 Savage X Fenty Pride campaign, acting, and auditioning for new roles. “I want to be known as one of the best to ever do this... Now with AEW behind me, I want to be a face of the company, someone they take pride in.”

As AEW prepares for its Australia tour during Sydney’s Mardi Gras season, Bowens isn’t ruling out a visit to New Zealand. “I might have to text Tony Khan after this and say, ‘Let’s go!’”

Asked if he has a final message for his Kiwi fans, Bowens keeps it simple:

“Thank you for your support, and make sure you show your Pride every single day.”

**AEW’s weekly shows  
Dynamite and Collision  
are streaming on Disney+.**



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# A SENSIBLE APPROACH TO SEXUAL HEALTH

*Dr Mataroria Lyndon answers your health-related questions.*

## HOW OFTEN DO YOU RECOMMEND QUEER MEN AND TRANS WOMEN GET STI TESTS?

For sexually active queer men and trans women, I recommend having a sexual health check every three months if you have multiple partners or new partners. If you're in a monogamous relationship and both partners have been tested, every six to twelve months may be appropriate.

Frequent testing means early detection and treatment, which helps keep you and your partners healthy and prevents infections from spreading in our communities. Many STIs, like chlamydia or gonorrhoea, can have no symptoms at all — so regular screening is about protecting yourself even when you feel completely fine.

If you don't have symptoms but you're worried about a recent sexual encounter, wait a bit before getting tested so the results are accurate.

You can get tested for chlamydia, gonorrhoea, and syphilis after two weeks, and for HIV after six weeks from the time you last had unprotected sex.

You can easily book an STI test discreetly through the Tend app. The most important thing is that testing becomes a regular part of your self-care, just like brushing your teeth or checking your blood pressure.

## WHAT SHOULD A COMPREHENSIVE SEXUAL HEALTH SCREENING INCLUDE?

A good sexual health check should be thorough, inclusive, and tailored to your sexual practices. It's not just a "one-size-fits-all" approach. At Tend, our clinicians will ask a few questions to understand your needs and lifestyle in a judgement-free space. From there, we recommend a mix of tests that may include:

- Urine and swab tests for chlamydia and gonorrhoea (these can be throat, rectal, or genital depending on your sexual activity)
- Blood tests for HIV, syphilis, and hepatitis A, B, and C
- A physical examination if needed, or if you have any symptoms like pain, discharge, or sores

We know these conversations can feel vulnerable, so our clinicians are trained to

create a comfortable, inclusive environment for everyone, regardless of gender identities or sexualities. Regular screening is one of the simplest, most effective ways to look after your wellbeing and that of your community.

## CAN SOMEONE GET AN HIV TEST DISCREETLY THROUGH THE APP, AND IS PREP (PRE-EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS) AVAILABLE THROUGH TEND? IF SO, WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO BEGIN THAT PROCESS?

Yes, absolutely. Privacy and accessibility matter to us. Testing for HIV is included in our routine STI screening, which can be discreetly booked in the Tend app under:

### Book a service → Screenings → STI screening.

You don't need to call or come into a clinic first, and your results are shared securely in the app when they're ready.

You can also access PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) through Tend. Just go to:

### Book a service → Contraception and PrEP → PrEP initial consultation.

This appointment can be done online or in person — whichever feels most comfortable for you.

During your PrEP consultation, the clinician will talk with you about your sexual health, answer any questions, and arrange the necessary blood tests before starting the medication. If PrEP is right for you, you'll get a prescription and follow-up plan to make sure it's working well for you.

Both STI testing and PrEP consultations are available to enrolled and casual patients, so you don't need to be an existing Tend patient. Booking through the Tend app is simple, confidential, and discreet.

### Download the Tend app or visit [tend.nz](https://tend.nz)

Got a health-related question for Dr Mataroria Lyndon to answer?  
Email [ask@gayexpress.co.nz](mailto:ask@gayexpress.co.nz)





# BEAR NEW ZEALAND WEEK 2026

## ARE YOU THE NEXT MR NZ BEAR?

*From Wednesday 4 to Sunday 8 February, **Bear New Zealand Week 2026** roars into Tāmaki Makaurau with its boldest, furriest, and most welcoming programme yet.*

**F**rom sweat-drenched dancefloors and cheeky underwear parties to laid-back brunches and board games, Bear New Zealand Week 2026, from Wednesday 4 to Sunday 8 February, offers a dynamic line-up of events catering to every flavour of bear and bear enthusiast.

“It’s about creating space for people who don’t always feel like they fit into the mainstream gay scene,” says co-founder Paul Heard. “Whether you’re a bear, cub, otter, chaser, wolf, twink — you’re welcome.”

### FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS:

#### NAKED YOGA

Wed 4 Feb, 4pm @ Toi Tu – A grounding, clothes-free session to start the week right. \$10. Sells out fast — doors lock at 4pm sharp.

#### MEET & GREET

Wed 4 Feb, 6pm @ Abstract Hotel – Courtyard catch-ups, snacks, and friendly intros. Free.

#### FUNNY, FURRY, FIERCE!

Thu 5 Feb, 7pm @ Classic Comedy Club – A showcase of top queer comedians, curated by Neil Thornton. \$35.

#### UNDERBEAR PARTY

Thu 5 Feb, 9pm @ Phoenix Cabaret – The iconic underwear party returns. No shirt? No problem. From \$40.

#### URBAN WALK + PONSONBY LUNCH

Fri 6 Feb, 10am + 12pm – A casual city stroll followed by group lunch. Free.

#### ASS CLASS WITH DR GEORGE

Fri 6 Feb, 2pm @ Body Positive – A fun, frank workshop on anal health and pleasure. \$15 to support Body Positive.

#### HAUS OF BEARS VARIETY SHOWCASE

Fri 6 Feb, 7pm @ Phoenix Cabaret – Drag, cabaret, dance and more celebrating queer talent. \$20.



**T**he centrepiece of the week is the Mr Bear Competition held on Friday 6 February at Phoenix Cabaret.

This is not your average pageant. “It’s about someone who represents the kaupapa of the bear community — friendly, inclusive, caring and proud,” says Paul. There’s no body type requirement and no need to be a performer.

### THE FORMAT:

- Bear Casual Wear – An intro into everyday gear
- Bear Fantasy – A moment to express yourself (leather, jockstraps, drag, or something else entirely)

- Raffle Round – Mingle with the crowd and raise money for a charity of your choice

The winner scores a year of community ambassador duties — including representing Aotearoa at Mr Australasia Bear in Melbourne — and becomes a visible champion for the queer and trans whānau in and around the bear scene.

And even if you don’t win? Many past competitors call it one of the best nights of their lives.

Anyone over 18 who identifies with the bear community — including trans men and non-binary folks — can enter. Prior contestants are welcome to re-enter. Previous winners should leave the stage free for the new cubs coming through.

**For tickets, more info and to enter Mr Bear NZ visit [bearnewzealand.co.nz](http://bearnewzealand.co.nz)**

#### BOARD GAMES @ DICE & FORK

Sat 7 Feb, 12pm @ Victoria Park Market – Chill hangs over tabletop games. Free, registration required.

#### TRI-NATIONS PARTY

Sat 7 Feb, 9pm–4am @ Phoenix Cabaret – DJs from NZ, Oz and beyond. From \$40.

#### BEAR BRUNCH

Sun 8 Feb, 12pm @ Long Room – A supercharged Sunday social. Free, registration essential.

#### GEAR SOCIAL & SWAP MEET

Sun 8 Feb, 3–6pm @ Café 39 – Meet kink-friendly folks, find a new look. Free.

#### WET FUR @ CENTURIAN

Sun 8 Feb, 2pm – Wind down at Centurian’s new space. Discounted entry.

#### LEATHER & GEAR CLOSING PARTY

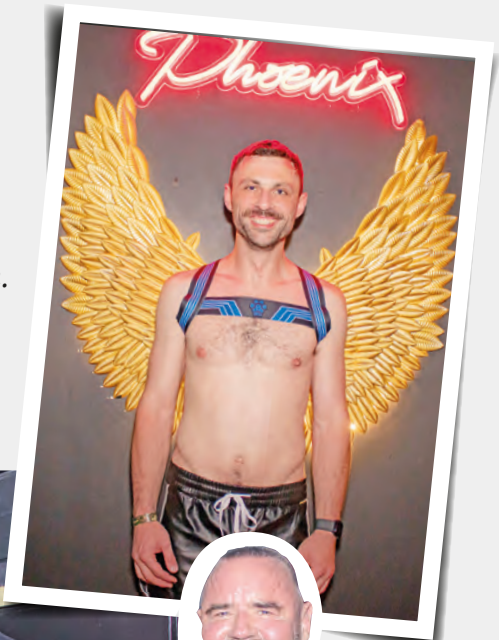
Sun 8 Feb, 6–10pm @ GAY on K’ Rd – Wrap the week in your hottest gear. \$20.



## OUT & ABOUT

# URGE TURNS UP HEAT

*URGE's 28th birthday brought the beats, and the drama! DJs Butterchick, Everett Wayne and James Leuii kept the dancefloor pumping before a small fire in G.A.Y's loo set off alarms around 2am. With everyone evacuated, the real show was outside: a jockstrap-clad crowd spilling onto the street turned the emergency into a full-blown street party. K Road has never looked so cheeky!*



**Urge Events**  
Phoenix, 258 Karangahape Road.  
PHOTOS | JASMIN SHEIKH

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## DIRECTORY



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# DECEMBER EVENTS

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**Gurls Night Out**  
2nd Saturday 13 December from 7pm  
For trans, crossdressers and their admirers

**KiwiFist**  
3rd Saturday 20 December from 7pm

**CHRISTMAS DAY**  
25 December from 7pm  
We are open normal hours, as always. There will be snacks and nibbles too, if you haven't eaten too much already. Everyone is welcome at all events.

Sub-level 1, 25 Dundonald St, Eden Terrace, Auckland  
(09) 373 2657  
lateshift.co.nz



## FASHION



Clockwise: Striped Through Tank Top (\$16.50) | Vinyl 5P Shorts (\$135) | Fishnet Socks (\$34) | Striped Through Fly Brief (\$14.50)





Mesh Through Shirt (\$142)

# REFLECTING ON 2025

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MODEL | **ATILA ESCOLANO** @ATILAESCOLANO  
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# CHRISTMAS GIFT GUIDE:

## THOUGHTFUL TREATS, STOCKING STUFFERS & LUXE FINDS I SWEAR BY

**Angus McDougal**  
finds the perfect gift for  
everyone on your list!



@angusmcdougallnz

**D**ecember is here, which means two things. One, my social calendar is suddenly fuller than my bathroom shelf. Two, I am in my gifting era. I genuinely love giving gifts. I also love receiving them, but gifting is one of my favourite things to do because it feels personal. A tiny PSA from me, though: it really is the thought that counts, so do not go getting yourself into debt to satisfy the spirit of giving. Spend wisely, choose well, and keep it fun. Here is everything I have been loving, buying and wrapping for the people I adore this season.



### STOCKING STUFFERS THAT ACTUALLY SLAP

I am not doing the panicked Christmas Eve sprint through the mall this year because I already know what is going into stockings. Starting with *Bouf Flouf Factor Hair Tonic*. It is small, mighty and one of the only hair growth products I have found that actually works. It keeps your strands in growth mode and stays lightweight and non-greasy.

\$39.95 at [farmers.co.nz](http://farmers.co.nz)

*Jo Malone London Christmas Ornaments* are another absolute winner. At \$72.00 from [mecca.com](http://mecca.com), you can choose the blue ornament with Blackberry and Bay hand cream plus English Pear and Sweetpea, or the green with Wood Sage and Sea Salt hand cream plus Lime Basil and Mandarin. They look beautiful on the tree and even better in someone's stocking.

And then there is the *M.A.C Surreal Shine Mini Highlighter Duo*. Two liquid highlighters in pink and bronzed gold that deliver mirror-like shine with zero effort. Such a fun one for your niece or nephew who is getting into make-up or loves a bit of sparkle.

\$80.00 at [maccosmetics.co.nz](http://maccosmetics.co.nz)



### GIFTS I BOUGHT ONCE AND NOW GIVE TO EVERYONE

I love a gift with a story, and this one starts with a dog. I bought the *Subwoofer Piha Dog Collar Large in Navy Forest* for \$199.00 from [subwooferdog.com](http://subwooferdog.com) and it absolutely landed. My friend was so touched that I had thought outside the box. The quality is beautiful, and the brand lets you add engraved tags with the dog's name and even a matching leash. Chic and considered, and perfect for the person whose dog is basically their firstborn.

Then sunglasses. I am a sunglasses person. I have around twenty pairs and recently added two more from *Age Eyewear*, which is an Auckland-owned brand with a great price point and beautiful designer frames. And with the Boxing Day Races at Ellerslie the very next day, these make the perfect Christmas gift. I love the *Wager* aviator style and at \$269.00, they are a steal compared to a Tom Ford pair.



## HAIR HEROES FOR THE PEOPLE YOU REALLY, REALLY LIKE

If I truly adore you, you may just find the *ghd Cherry Chic Limited Edition Deluxe Gift Set* under your tree. It is true hair luxury. You get the Chronos Styler, which styles three times faster, and the Helios Dryer, all inside a beautiful vanity case.

\$820.00 at [ghdhair.com](http://ghdhair.com)

If you are after something smaller, the *ghd All Rounder Mini Paddle Brush* is one of my handbag heroes. Smooths, detangles and tames everything summer throws at your hair.

\$38.00 at [ghdhair.com](http://ghdhair.com)



## MINIS THAT MAKE YOU LOOK LIKE YOU PLANNED AHEAD

*ed&i Mini Range Bundle* includes Morning Coffee, Day Hydrate and Night Cap in travel-friendly 100 ml bottles. Such a good little set for gym bags, weekends away or anyone who loves minis.

\$28.00 at [Chemist Warehouse Ultra](http://Chemist Warehouse Ultra)



## THE FULL GLOW-UP

*Boost Lab Essential Collagen Boosters* are perfect for gifting someone who loves a glow. I like to use them before my evening moisturiser as part of the seven-day programme to really kick the skin back into rejuvenation mode. Hydrating, tightening, and giving that fresh, polished look.

\$39.95 at [farmers.co.nz](http://farmers.co.nz)

And for the LED curious, the *Express by Déesse Pro LED Mask* is my go-to. I love the fact that instead of the usual hard shell, this one is soft. I can put it on, lie on my side and literally drift off while it does the work. Tip: use on clean, dry skin with no products underneath for the best results.

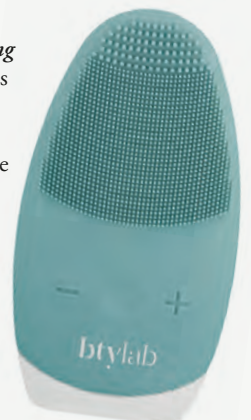
\$789.00 at [kiaracosmetics.co.nz](http://kiaracosmetics.co.nz)



## JEWELLERY WITH AN ATTITUDE

The *Nick Von K IDGAF Ring* is one of my favourite finds this season. A brilliant Moissanite held in a clawed hand shaped like a single raised middle finger. Fierce, sparkly and unapologetic.

\$390.00 at [nickvonk.com](http://nickvonk.com)



## GADGETS THAT ACTUALLY WORK

The *Btylab 2-in-1 Sonic Cleanser* is a device I use daily. I especially love it in the morning with a gentle cleanser. The way it leaves your skin feeling afterwards is almost unbelievable. Sonic pulses loosen dirt, oil and makeup deep in the pores, so your skin ends up smooth, fresh and ridiculously clean. One of my favourite beauty tools.

\$99.00 at [btylab.co.nz](http://btylab.co.nz)

## CHRISTMAS, SORTED

Those are my December favourites. Things I use, love and happily give. Choose thoughtfully, shop within your means and lean into the fun of it all. And if anyone is shopping for me — well, reread the list!



# SANDRA BERNHARD:

## A LEGACY OF FEARLESS REINVENTION

ARTICLE | OLIVER HALL

*Sandra Bernhard discusses her fearless five-decade career, from comedy trailblazer to queer cultural icon, and how she's continued to evolve while staying unapologetically herself.*



For nearly five decades, Sandra Bernhard has been one of entertainment's most enigmatic shape-shifters. To speak with her today, from her home in New York City, is to encounter a woman who has grown, sharpened, and expanded through every era she's lived through, yet remains unmistakably, defiantly Sandra.

New York is where she feels most alive now. "There's always so much happening," she says, though she still carries the imprint of Los Angeles, where she lived for years, honing her early craft and finding her footing in a world that wasn't quite sure what to make of her yet.

Bernhard entered the public eye in the early 1980s, but she's quick to point out that her sexuality or identity were never meant to be the headline in those early days. "When I started off, that wasn't where I was at. I was 19. My sexuality was fluid. I was defined as bisexual back then, but I didn't define myself as anything because that wasn't the thrust of what I was doing. I wanted to be an entertainer." She reels off the names that helped shape her: Carol Burnett, Cher, Tina Turner, Mick Jagger, Diana Ross, Bette Midler, Lily Tomlin. "I wanted to be everything that was great and bigger than life."

But inevitably, she became something else too: a cultural lightning rod. Even when she wasn't trying to make statements, she made them. Her legendary 1988 appearance on *Late Night with David Letterman* with Madonna — a moment queer audiences still cite as revolutionary — was, to her, simply part of the performance. "I've always pushed the envelope. It was more tongue-in-cheek and fun. I've never set out to make some big statement..."

I do something because it's entertaining, engaging, edgy, funny, glamorous, crazy."

She pauses, then offers one of the clearest distillations of her career: "I feel like I am the statement



— I don't have to make the statement."

Decades on, the culture has rearranged itself dramatically around her. Outrage has moved from late-night shockwaves to the short-lived storms of social media. Does she think it was easier to be daring back then? The question barely finishes before she answers.

"Absolutely. What's considered outrageous now doesn't scratch the surface. It has no impact... [back then] there was room to take it in, digest it, ruminate — in a way you can't anymore. Things come fast and furious. People are outraged, and by the next day it's on to the next thing."

It's not cynicism; it's observation. Bernhard has always been a social critic, long before Twitter made everyone try to be one. "I don't think most people are equipped to be social critics," she says. "It's been a real detriment to our society."

Her ability to cut through the noise, then and now, is one of the reasons her work still resonates so strongly. From her breakout role in *The King of Comedy* to her groundbreaking one-woman show *Without You I'm Nothing*, from her turn as Nancy on *Roseanne* to her poignant, deeply human portrayal of Nurse Judy on *Pose*, Bernhard has shaped pop culture in ways that often go uncredited. She sees her career not as a list of highlights, but as a constellation.

"They were stepping stones," she says. "*Without You I'm Nothing*... we forged a lot of territory nobody had touched before. *Roseanne* was another cultural touchstone. And *Pose* jumped into territory of really holding up a mirror to that time... So many things have come full circle that I've been part of."

It's impossible to ignore the emotional weight she brings to her work on *Pose*, where her portrayal of a nurse working through the AIDS crisis mirrored her own experiences in 1980s New York. "I was losing a lot of friends during

the AIDS crisis. It hit home," she says. "It was fascinating to take that experience and infuse the character with what I remembered. It was a very powerful experience."

Despite her decades in the business, Bernhard's excitement for performing has never dimmed. "Every time you get on stage, you're a new version of yourself," she says. "It fires on so many cylinders for me that it never gets old."

She's held on tightly to the qualities that defined her early on: bravery, instinct, and an unwavering willingness to take risks. "I've maintained my belief in myself... in being a committed performer and willing to take chances."

Her relevance has only intensified in recent years, with roles in *American Horror Story*, *Severance*, *Survival of the Thickest*, and the upcoming A24 film *Marty Supreme* alongside Timothée Chalamet. She lights up talking about it. "Once you establish your iconic status, it stays with you throughout your career. That's a real gift."

And while her roots in queer culture run deep — drag queens were her backup singers long before they were mainstream stars — she's still amused it took so long to be invited onto *RuPaul's Drag Race*. "I was surprised it took so long... but that's a whole other conversation," she cracks.

Asked what gives her hope these days, she points to the people around her and the possibility that thinking, engaged citizens can reclaim the narrative. "I love my life. I have incredible friendships and people who keep me engaged and excited... So I'm always hopeful about the world and humanity."

Five decades into a singular, fearless career, Sandra Bernhard continues to redefine what it means to be an entertainer, an icon, and a queer cultural catalyst. She never needed to chase relevance — she simply stayed herself, and the culture kept coming back to her.

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# NELSON:

## YOUR NEXT SUN-SOAKED, ARTS-RICH GETAWAY

*Oliver Hall discovers Nelson is a sun-soaked, arts-forward city offering cultural festivals, boutique wineries, luxury stays, and queer-friendly experiences that feel like home.*

There is a point, driving the curve of the coastline into Nelson, where the world suddenly turns postcard-perfect. The road sweeps around sunlit bays, hills fold softly into the sea, and you get that unmistakable twinge of “this is going to be special.”

If Wellington is the cultural heartbeat of the North, Nelson is its warm, sun-drenched southern cousin: creative, proud, community-forward, and as beautiful as New Zealand gets.

This is the birthplace of World of WearableArt, the home of some of Aotearoa’s most compelling galleries, and one of the country’s sunniest regions. But what truly sets Nelson apart is not just the scenery — it is the way its people show up.

Whether it is a parade, a circus show, a Rat Pack revival, or a vineyard concert on a Sunday afternoon, Nelson locals appear in full force and with full enthusiasm. Nowhere is that more evident than at the Nelson Arts Festival, a carefully curated, joyful celebration of performance, storytelling, and community.

Founded with bold creative leadership,

including former director Lidia Zanetti whose queer sensibility propelled the festival into a new era, the festival is now in the hands of artistic director Janelle Bish, whose programming is both thoughtful and confidently curated.

What makes Nelson’s festival distinct is that it is not a gamble. Most shows perform for one night only, and everything feels chosen with care. We saw several performances and did not hit a single dud.

While the art may have drawn us in, the hospitality, sunshine, and sea-soaked charm kept us blissfully captive. No trip to Nelson is complete without visiting Tahunanui Beach, a sweeping, mountain-framed paradise perfect for swimming or paddle boarding.

### THE SMALL CITY THAT SHOWS UP

We arrived in the city to free street parking (an underrated luxury) and the unmistakable thump of drums echoing down the street.

The annual **Mask Parade & Carnivale** had kicked off on Upper Trafalgar Street — a riot of colour and collective joy that felt like half

the city had spilled onto the streets. Families, performers, school kids, dogs wearing tutus — it was a full-community embrace.

The vibe was instantly warm and open. Within minutes we had chatted with the mayor and watched dance troupes float past as restaurants overflowed with locals cheering the marchers on.

There is something rare about a festival where you genuinely feel like you are witnessing a whole town celebrating itself.

Galleries were also buzzing across the CBD, with The Suter, Nelson Provincial Museum, and Refinery ArtSpace all presenting festival-linked installations. Nelson’s arts identity runs deep — you can feel it in the way people talk about the festival like an annual pilgrimage.

### PIHOPA RETREAT: WHERE LUXURY BECOMES A LOVE LANGUAGE

If you are looking to splurge on a romantic escape — proposal, anniversary, or the kind of queer-luxury getaway where you both bring three outfit changes for breakfast — Nelson has a secret weapon: **Pihopa Retreat** ([pihoparetreat.co.nz](http://pihoparetreat.co.nz)).



## TRAVEL



Boulder Bank & Nelson City.



Upper Trafalgar Street.

Tucked behind stately gates and surrounded by towering century-old trees, Pihopa feels like the love child of a Hamptons estate and a contemporary luxury lodge. There are just six suites, each one an elegant, thoughtfully designed sanctuary.

Think fireplaces you can watch from bed, deep bathtubs for two, walk-in wardrobes, and balconies overlooking rolling grounds.

The toiletries are locally made, the loose-leaf

teas are premium, the complimentary mini-bar is actually worth getting excited about, and the house-made cookies and cakes placed in the room feel personal — and delicious.

Breakfast is served in a beautiful historic former chapel, now gently repurposed into a serene dining space. It is the kind of breakfast that rivals the best brunch spots in Auckland or Wellington — beautifully plated, generous, and cooked to order by someone who cares deeply about the details.



Pihopa Retreat.



Winter-paddleboarding at Tahuna Beach.



## TRAVEL

... CONTINUED



Ah House Garden Room.

And then there is the early evening ritual: complimentary canapés and drinks in the poolside bar, a hushed, luxurious way to ease into the night.

If you are after romance, indulgence, or simply a few days of feeling like your highest self, Pihopa is unrivalled in the region.

### NELSON BY NIGHT

If there is a place that captures Nelson's artsy, unpretentious cool, it is **The Dog's Bone** (@thedogsbone), a self-declared dive bar built from donated materials and fuelled by craft beer, stacked burgers, and genuine camaraderie.

We arrived on open mic night, expecting a casual vibe. Instead, we walked into a full scene. High-calibre performers, creatives drifting in from festival shows, long-time locals cheering from the bar. It is scrappy, queer-friendly, arty, and distinctively Nelson.

We followed with a drink at **Bamboo Tiger** (@bambootigernelson) which boasts velvety red interiors, a glamorous garden bar, and the best espresso martinis I have ever tasted.

This is the late-night jewel in Nelson's crown. Owned by the team behind Auckland's G.A.Y and Family Bar, it channels disco energy, tiki-bar cheekiness, and a mixed, eclectic crowd.

Live acoustic sets warm the night before the DJ takes over. This is the place to be if you want to dance.

### A WARM WELCOME IN THE HEART OF THE CITY

For a more intimate, home-style stay, Nelson's gay-owned **Ah House** (ahhouse.co.nz) offers the perfect combination of comfort, hospitality, and unbeatable location.

Hosts Mark and John are the kind of people who instantly make you feel like you have arrived at a favourite auntie's house — if your aunts had spotless rooms and a penchant for going above and beyond.

Breakfast arrives either on your balcony or quietly to your room, depending on your mood. Rooms range from a stylish garden suite to a cosy apartment beneath the main house. The best part is you can walk everywhere. The city is literally on your doorstep.



The Velvet Rebels' Rutene Spooner.



Bar Rosa by Bianca Grinovero.

### OUR TOP PICK OF THE ARTS FESTIVAL

That day we saw three Arts Festival shows and our favourite had to be the incomparable Māori musical duo, Retene Spooner and Shea Kokaua — **The Velvet Rebels**.

The pair took the crowd on a lush journey through Rat Pack classics, including a rendition of *Fly Me to the Moon* that left the audience in such awe you could hear a pin drop.

Spooner (@rutenespooner) in particular is a world-class talent that everyone should try to see live.

### UNEXPECTEDLY COSMOPOLITAN DINING

Nelson's dining scene surprised us — and nowhere more so than **Bar Rosa** (barrosa.co.nz), a moody, bustling Italian restaurant that feels plucked from Barcelona or Rio.

The moment we stepped in, locals were stopping manager Edoardo to tell him how grateful they were to have this place in their city.

The food was sublime — rich, elegant, deeply satisfying. Do not miss the free-range porchetta, and for dessert, the honey butter tart.

The ambiance was sophisticated and humming. The kind of restaurant it is worth planning your whole trip around.



The view from Windhover Estate.



Moutere Hills Restaurant & Cellar Door.



Timeless talent Anna Coddington.

### EXPANDING OUT TO MOUTERE'S VINEYARDS

Leaving Nelson for a day or overnight trip feels like stepping directly into a scene from a wine label. Gentle hills, boutique vineyards, artist studios, and small-town warmth define the Tasman region, and it is all an easy, scenic drive.

Our accommodation here was **Windhover Estate** (windhoverestate.com), an ideal base for exploring the region. Suites are fully equipped for longer stays, and guests of the main house or stables have access to a stunning infinity pool overlooking the coastline of Kina Beach.

This is truly one of the most serene spots we have experienced. If you are planning a celebration, their Beach House sits right on the sand and can be rented for the day.



## TRAVEL



The Apple Shed.



Rimu Wine Bar by Chocolate Dog Studio.

Sunshine, wine flights, and an idyllic rural setting define **Moutere Hills Restaurant & Cellar Door** ([mouterehills.co.nz](http://mouterehills.co.nz)), which is where we headed for lunch. The menu is refined and beautifully plated, offering fresh, seasonal flavours and wines to match.

It is the sort of lunch that restores your soul a little. We loved the colourful fresh salmon crudo and lively “Textures of Orange” cake.

If seeing a beloved Aotearoa artist at an outdoor vineyard concert sounds dreamy, that is because it is.

Anna Coddington, performing under the late-afternoon sun at **Neudorf Vineyard** ([neudorf.co.nz](http://neudorf.co.nz)), was a highlight of our entire trip.

Coddington’s talent deserves to make her a household name like Bic Runga or Anika Moa. Hearing her live with a glass of wine grown on the very vines we were sitting between was a blissful way to spend the afternoon.

[www.yourex.co.nz](http://www.yourex.co.nz)

### MAPUA’S BOUTIQUE BLISS

Mapua is a sunny, colourful hub of creativity, full of boutique shops, galleries, roasteries, and artists’ spaces, positioned around an idyllic wharf.

After wandering through stores like Delicious Homewares and Coolstore Gallery, we settled into **Rimu Grove’s Wine Bar** ([rimugrove.co.nz](http://rimugrove.co.nz)) for tasting trees — five small pours elegantly perched on a wooden stand. A vineyard’s version of a flight, and a really fun way to explore regional wines.

Sitting quite literally over the water at Mapua Wharf, **The Apple Shed** ([appleshed.co.nz](http://appleshed.co.nz)) might be one of New Zealand’s most idyllic dining settings.

Warm service, seasonal dishes, and that shimmering harbour view — it is romance and relaxation distilled.

We recommend indulging in the house-smoked blue warehouse croquettes and the slow-braised beef tri-tip with a side of Apple Shed crispy potatoes to experience the best in modern Kiwi fare.

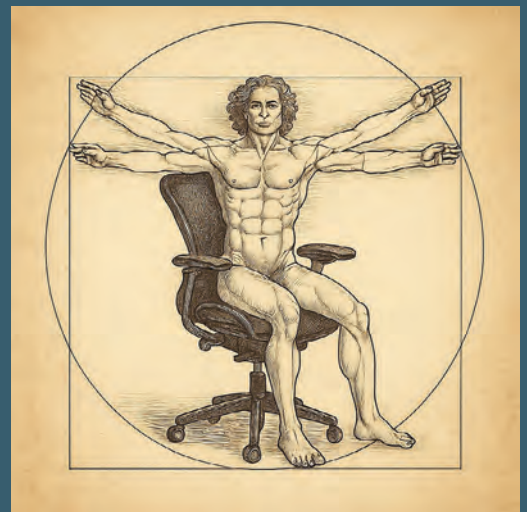
The Nelson Tasman region does not just welcome you — it wraps around you. It is warm and artsy, with a genuine community spirit flowing through everything here.

It is a city that shows up for its artists, its events, its people, and for you — the traveller who arrives expecting a good time and leaves already planning the next one.

If you are looking for beauty, creativity, queer-friendly hospitality, and a festival that gets curation right, Nelson is waiting.

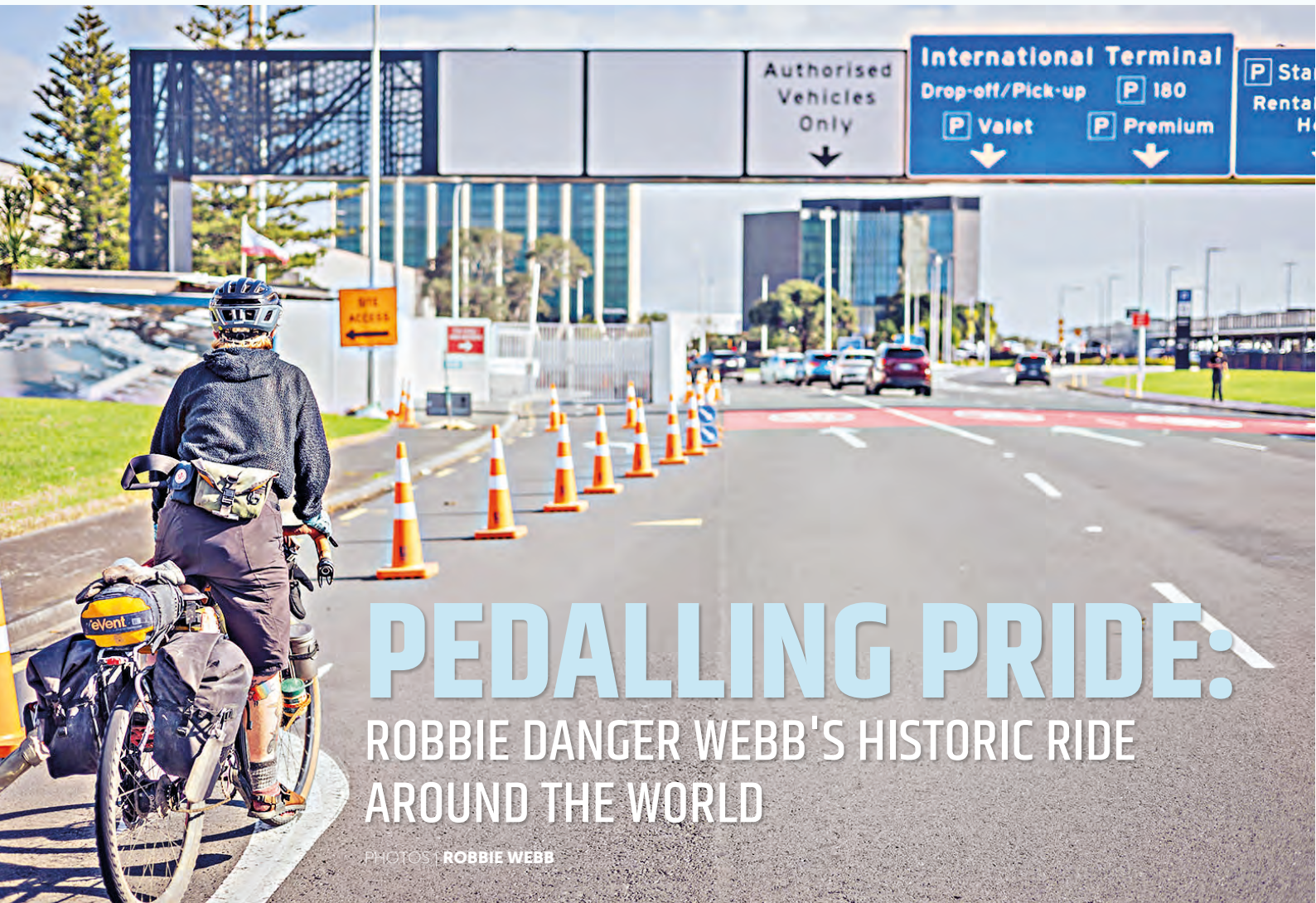
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# PEDALLING PRIDE:

## ROBBIE DANGER WEBB'S HISTORIC RIDE AROUND THE WORLD

PHOTOS: ROBBIE WEBB

*YOUR EX* talks to **Robbie Danger Webb**, the first openly transgender person to circumnavigate the globe by bike.

**W**hen Robbie Danger Webb talks about the year they spent circumnavigating the globe by bike — the first openly transgender person to do so — they do not start with the record, or the kilometres, or the borders crossed. They begin with where they come from.

“I grew up in Waiuku, near where Tāmaki Makaurau meets the Waikato,” Robbie says. “I grew up semi-rural, and did not do much outdoors aside from occasional farm stuff. I was bad at sports and did not really know how to ride a bike. I lived for painting and drawing, and I found my people when I studied fine art at university... I’ve mostly been based in central Tāmaki Makaurau since then.”

Coming into queerness happened unexpectedly, and later than many imagine. “I didn’t realise I was trans until I was 26. Before that, I was a punk feminist who had a mohawk and wore men’s clothes a lot. There’s a lot of things I’m sure could have been better or different but if they were, I wouldn’t be me.”

The bike came into their life through politics, not sport. “I got into cycling through climate activism. I hate car dependency and I hate how miserable and selfish our cars make us. Once I started commuting by bike, I heard there were these really big multi-day commutes you could do to go see beautiful places, and basically eat whatever junk food you like, and I thought that sounded amazing.”

Those early rides became training grounds for something bigger. “I started out in 2018 with little overnight trips with friends. Then in 2020 I did the Tour Aotearoa (a 3,000 km ride from Cape Reinga to Bluff). After that, I knew I wanted to cycle around the world, but it was a long process to get there and save for it! There aren’t sponsors for people like me.”

The world record idea came later and reshaped everything. “It took six months to get my route approved with Guinness. In the end, it was roughly four and a half years of planning before I started. I did everything myself, from the budget, to social media, to the route design, visas, and testing and setting up all my own gear.”



Robbie in India during world record ride.



One of Robbie’s stops in Türkiye.

But the decision to attempt the record wasn’t just about the athletic challenge. Robbie set out, by their own definition, to be the first openly transgender person to bike around the world. When asked what “open” meant to them, they’re clear: “That I am publicly trans in all of the





media about me, on my own social media, and if anyone asked me what my record was, for example when signing my logbook as a witness, I would tell them."

That visibility was not without risk. "There was just one time in the US when a man was signing my book. He told me 'nobody likes trans people around here,' but he signed it anyway. There could have been more times in other countries where people might have been transphobic but the word 'trans' got lost in translation. That probably worked to my advantage."

Safety — physical, emotional, political — was a constant calculation. Robbie describes ultra-endurance riding as equal parts determination and emotional discipline. "To be good at ultra endurance you tend to have to be very hell bent on things. And you have to recognise that being afraid is a huge waste of valuable energy, so you just look ahead and get good at recognising what might be dangerous, then keep away from it. Prevention is key! Whether that's staying away from big cities, making sure you don't get a chronic injury, or finding a secret place to sleep in the bushes where no one will find you."

Mechanical issues were expected. "I had some truly epic mechanical failures from my stuff wearing out and breaking, but I'm skilled at bike mechanics and was able to hustle help from local bike communities." But the worst disruption came from an airline, not a broken chain. "My bike got left behind at Montreal airport. I changed my flight to be four days earlier, then my flight got cancelled. Despite Air Canada's reassurances, they didn't put my bike through on my new flight to Lisbon. The airport in Lisbon happened to be on strike when I arrived. By the time I got the bike, it came on that original flight!" Robbie's coping mechanism? "The only way to get through that situation is to put on your best polite brave face. If someone won't help you, try asking another person until you find someone that isn't having a bad day."

There were dangers on the road too. "I was hit by a car in the USA. I have a cool scar around my eye now, which came from my sunglasses cutting into my face. It needed five stitches." But they're quick to contextualise it: "I was lucky it wasn't

**"being afraid is a huge waste of valuable energy, so you just look ahead and get good at recognising what might be dangerous, then keep away from it."**

worse, but for anyone worried, keep in mind that I've put in more hours than many cyclists will do in their lifetimes. The actual chances of being hit by a car and sent to the hospital are very low."

Being back on the bike was largely driven by the community around them. "It took a while to get over being cautious around cars that approached from the same angle."

But quitting was never an option. "The record was hard and lonely. But life in general can be that way. For me, having a hard and lonely day on the bike is still much better than having one of those at home." By the time they left, "I'd been saving and planning for the world ride for five years, and basically packed up my life in Tāmaki Makaurau before I left, so there really wasn't a lot to come back to anyway." The ride wasn't an escape. It was a choice. "I hoped that being a world record cyclist would give me access to new, cool opportunities, and it's something I felt was uniquely me. I'd much rather die trying to live my dream than compromise who I am for safety, and I think that's something a lot of trans people would relate to."



United States of America.

Across continents, reception varied. "Cycling is a great way to connect with people, because a lone foreign bicycle adventurer usually seems interesting, vulnerable and safe. So a lot of people either didn't notice I was queer or didn't seem to care, aside from other trans people, who would instantly clock me!" Acts of kindness were common. "People in India, Türkiye and the US would stop to give me food or a drink." But there were places Robbie remained alert. "The only place I was worried was in the Midwest USA. It was in the midst of the US election and a lot of conservatives had a lot of aggressive signs put up outside their houses. Oh yeah, and everyone there has guns."

What they want now is simple: community. "Trans people are severely underrepresented in the outdoors and honestly, I'm bored of hanging out with the straights. Please come outside, everyone. It's nice out here."

Post-record life is quieter, but still in motion. "Right now I'm in Naarm, and in between attending some big cycling events here I'm trying to write a book about my record. It's been a bit slow going as getting back into normal life has been quite a heavy readjustment period!"

As for their new visibility, Robbie doesn't frame it as a mantle, but as a connection. "It can seem like the world for trans people is getting smaller and smaller. We have to keep reaching for each other. It's awesome to try to become the trans representation my younger self would've liked to see."

**Follow Robbie on Instagram  
@dirtdroprobbie**



# BEYOND THE SWAB: WHAT A PEER-LED CLINIC CAN REALLY CHANGE

*What if STI testing didn't start with a swab — but with a conversation?*

**T**hat's one of the quieter revolutions behind Test'n'Treat, New Zealand's first peer-led sexual health clinic. While headlines have focused on the clinic's speed (test today, get treated today), there's another story unfolding in the rooms at Body Positive's Auckland offices — one about trust, transformation, and what happens when communities get to lead their own care.

"We are trying to normalise sexual health testing and remove the stigma and fear that people have around accessing these services," says Mark Fisher, Executive Director of Body Positive. "Would you come back and tell your friends? That's what we ask. That's how we'll know it's working."

At the centre of that is Benji — a trained peer tester, not a clinician — who is often the first person a client interacts with. His role isn't just about running tests. It's about listening, explaining, and gently disrupting a long legacy of shame and judgement around sexual health.

"Early data indicates one in four of our clients have never had an STI test before," Mark says. "That's huge."

## THE PEER DIFFERENCE

So what's different about a peer-led model?

Instead of sitting across from a stranger in a white coat, clients talk to someone who might have similar lived experiences. There's no pressure. No performance. Just an invitation to speak freely, make informed choices, and maybe ask that one question you've been too afraid to ask your GP.

"It's about care, not judgement," Mark says. "We don't make assumptions."

And that shift — from compliance to consent — is bigger than it sounds. Especially for groups who've been historically stigmatised, ignored, or treated with suspicion in clinical settings.

## MAKING PREVENTION EASIER TO ACCESS

While most clients walk in for STI testing, many leave with more than they expected: knowledge, clarity, and access to prevention tools they didn't know were options.

"We offer PrEP, PEP, DoxyPEP, and Mpox vaccination — all available onsite," Mark explains.

DoxyPEP in particular is still gaining visibility in New Zealand. The antibiotic is used preventatively after sex to reduce the risk of bacterial STIs like chlamydia and syphilis. It's an emerging tool in the HIV/STI prevention toolkit, and Test'n'Treat is one of the few places actively offering it.

"We're cold chain certified, we've got clinical oversight, and we're set up to offer these tools safely," Mark says. "It's a one-stop shop."

## COMMUNITY NOW, COMMUNITY LATER

While Test'n'Treat is making immediate health gains, Mark is thinking long-term — about systems, scale, and what kind of healthcare we want for the future.

"Our hope is that others will see this as an opportunity to do something similar for their communities," he says. "This is a way for communities to lead and provide an alternative to overstretched clinical services."

As the clinic moves into 2026, Body Positive will evaluate its outcomes: who it's reaching, how it's working, and what can be improved. But for now, the most meaningful metric is still the stories that walk back through the door.

"When someone comes in, says 'This was easy,' and tells their friends — that's the real success," Mark says.

**Body Positive is located at 1/3 Poynton Terrace in Newton, Auckland, and operates as a drop-in centre Mon–Wed 10am–5pm, Thurs 10am–8pm, and 10am–4pm on Fridays.**

**[bodypositive.org.nz/testntreat](http://bodypositive.org.nz/testntreat)**





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# EAGLE BAR: WHERE NEW YEAR'S EVE GOES OFF

*Eagle Bar's doors stay open all holiday season (closing only on Christmas Day), and this bar knows how to turn a night out into a moment. NYE has no cover charge, but the bar fills up well before midnight, so plan ahead and arrive early to avoid the queue.*



**Eagle Bar**  
259 Karangahape Road, Auckland.  
PHOTOS | JASMIN SHEIKH

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ABSTRACT HOTEL × YOUR EX

# WHERE CHIC CALM MEETS URBAN COOL

*Want to be near K Road's buzzing gay nightlife but escape to a stylish sanctuary when you leave the dance floor? The Abstract Hotel has what you're looking for.*



**T**ucked at the top of Upper Queen Street, where the city hum melts into the creative pulse of Karangahape Road, the Abstract Hotel offers one of Auckland's most effortlessly stylish stays.

The rooms themselves are a surprise. With dark navy-painted walls, step inside and you're wrapped in a soothing, intimate cocoon – ideal for anyone who values deep rest. It's the perfect space to switch off, curl up, and let the outside world fade for a moment. Whether you're unwinding after a night out or easing into a long morning sleep-in, the mood lighting and plush textures make relaxation effortless.

But while the rooms feel curated for calm, the hotel's shared spaces offer an entirely different kind of pleasure. Abstract is overflowing with gorgeous amenities, from the stylish library lounge where you can read, work, or meet friends, to a spa and restaurant that locals adore.

Their spa, Sa-ni, in particular, has earned a glowing reputation, attracting plenty of Aucklanders who swear by its calming treatments and dreamy atmosphere. Add a



genuinely solid gym and you've got the rare hotel where you can keep up a wellness routine without sacrificing indulgence.

Food and drink are handled with the same attention to detail. The on-site Italian restaurant, Alla Prossima, is also a local favourite – so good that it attracts plenty of diners who aren't staying at the hotel. And for something quieter, the open-air, atrium-style bar is a beautiful little sanctuary for a pre-dinner wine or a nightcap.

As soon as you step outside, the vibe switches from serene to electric. Abstract sits just five

minutes' walk from K Road's iconic LGBTQ+ nightlife: Eagle Bar, G.A.Y., Phoenix, Family, and the colourful late-night energy that only this neighbourhood can deliver.

For those heading to Bear NZ Week, the Abstract is once again the official host hotel – and they're offering an exclusive 10% discount for the bear community using the promo code **BEARNZ26**. Valid from 2–28 February 2026, it's perfectly timed and perfectly placed for anyone wanting comfort, style, and unbeatable convenience.

To book visit [abstracthotel.co.nz](https://abstracthotel.co.nz)





OUT & ABOUT

# RAINBOW NZ CHARITABLE TRUST'S GLAM & GIVE

*This fundraiser helped push GiveOUT Day fundraising to a record-breaking \$110,000. The Trust's flagship night dazzled with joy, pride and purpose, as community members and allies came together in support of LGBTQIA+ initiatives across Aotearoa.*

*"Our expectations were blown away," said Trust Co-Chair Gurv Singh. "Everyone should feel proud."*



GiveOUT Day @ Freeman & Grey  
Ponsonby.

PHOTOS | JASMIN SHEIKH



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