

Messrs Midwest Leather and Missouri Leather at Club St. Louis



ST. LOUIS

Neither Southern nor Northern, not Eastern nor Western, St. Louis stands at the crossroads of America. Today, the city serves as the gay hub to an enormous region. Whatever you're looking for, you're likely to find it in St. Louis!

Peter Cini

If your gaydar scans 360 degrees, you'll hit an unexpected hotspot close to the center of the country in St. Louis – one that may not seem obvious at first sight. From the observation deck of the majestic Gateway Arch spanning the Mississippi, almost 630 feet above ground, lies a checkered urban landscape, featuring patches of revived old neighborhoods. It's the usual story of gay urban pioneers reclaiming abandoned and declining inner-city neighborhoods. Often it's a succession of neighborhoods, as waves of metrosexuals, then urban yuppies follow the gays and proceed to gentrify and cleanse the revived communities of all but boutique shops. The queers move on to a new enclave.

The urban fabric in St. Louis is rich and atmospheric. All the homes are sturdy brick and stone, many artfully embel-

lished over generations and lovingly restored in recent years by the Lavender Tribe. "Every council district is dying to have gays living in his district" says Rick Compton owner of The Brewer's Guesthouse – a welcoming B&B where Rick and partner Orlando are debonair hosts.

These elegant homes lie side by side with dilapidated structures, abandoned churches, and hulking deserted breweries that sit as if empty fortresses. These communities were the last gasp of the great 19th-century German and Irish migrations into the North American heartland. A couple of generations ago these enclaves were filled with large extended families packed into tight quarters. Most of the time these same buildings, restored to original elegance as private residences, show no signs of life at all.

Rick Compton describes the migrations of the gay population. "When I came out [in the early 70s], the Central West End

was the gay neighborhood and had been who knows how long. Prices and gentrification has slowly pushed a lot of the gay population to the near South Side, although a lot of gay people still live in the West End. In the 80s and 90s, more gay people moved to the Shaw neighborhood, Lafayette Square, Soulard, and Benton Park. This decade most gay businesses have moved to the Grove area."

Many restaurants and taverns in Soulard host large clans of youngish hetero families. The scene here has a very West Village feel to it – low-rise, modestly elegant, and red brick – thriving in, what seems, congenial coexistence with nearby gay hangouts.

There's also a hint of the city's French heritage left in this town. In the summer, the heat and humidity create a languorous atmosphere, and Mardi Gras is celebrated more fervently here than other parts of the country outside the bayou.

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Bars and clubs

In the Soulard, the storied hang-out and community anchor is **Clementine's** (2001 Menard). Gary Reed presides over the scene from his ring-side seat. A journalist by trade, Reed is a natural raconteur. He and co-owner Jan are your hosts. There's a mix of generations and styles at Clementine's. You're as likely to find Gran' Pappy and his boyfriend here – as you are Harry the Hunk in tight jeans hovering over the snooker table across from Tommy the Twink. You'll find a crowd on the patio at Clementine's, especially at the Weekend Feed at Three, a free buffet every Saturday and Sunday at 3pm. The edibles come from Clementines' Oh My Darlin' Cafe, whose menu includes chicken pot pie, fried oyster po' boys, prime rib, and daily specials. "Customer Appreciation Day" takes place late August, when management and staff – in drag – change places. Come Labor Day weekend, Clementine's welcomes participants in the finals of their 24th annual renowned Wet Jockey Shorts Contests. (Preliminary rounds took place on Memorial and Independence days.)

Just down the block from Clementine's is **Soulard Bastille** (1027 Russell), where every day is Mardi Gras (and the beads are always on). Bastille is an ornate gem on the corner of Menard and Russell in the heart of Soulard. Their Cobalt Grill is open seven days for lunch. The patio is packed when the weather is nice, and the atmosphere inside is always friendly. Happy hours are 11am to 7pm.

In the formerly industrialized zones near Manchester and Grand Avenues, cutting-edge dance- and video-bars have taken up residence.

Just off South Grand Boulevard, **The Complex** (3515 Chouteau) is one of St. Louis's most popular dance clubs, with the newest music and videos and top local DJs who light up the floor with state-of-the-art shows. The Complex is open until 3am Tuesdays through Sundays. Join in the tangle of stripped-down buff bodies on the dance floor, or watch the action from the cocktail bar above. In the renovated outdoor patio bar you can cool off and quench your thirst with new friends.

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clementines

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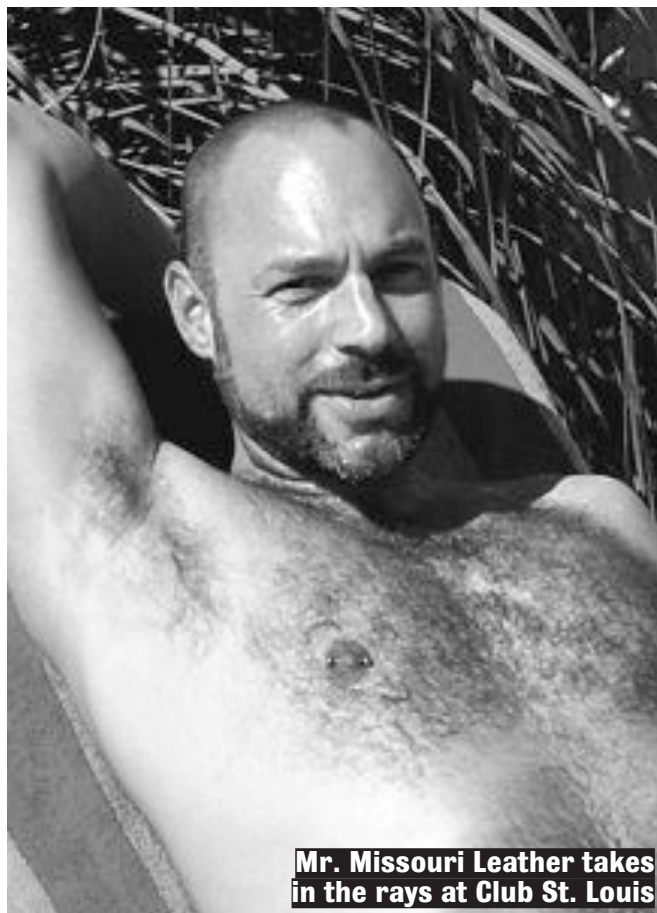
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Richard & Bill behind the bar at JJ's Clubhouse



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There's a big, diverse, generally young-and-friendly crowd here most nights, complemented by drag shows with performers of national renown.

Freddie's (4112 Manchester) is the early bar for area 20-somethings, but they welcome everyone, and their Saturday evening patio t-dances are the place to be. There's entertainment nightly, including bingo Mondays, karaoke on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and show tunes on Wednesdays. College Night is Tuesdays, and there's dancing Fridays through Sundays with the VJs on the dance floor flanked by a wall of video. On summer Sundays, catch the rays on the patio in a lounge chair with a drink, and then cool off under the water mister.

The borders of the this club district also happen to be bear country. If that's your style, you'll find **JJ's Clubhouse** (3858 Market) to your liking. Open at 4pm with happy hour, there's pool, electronic darts, video games, a jukebox, an ATM, fine cigars, plus friendly patrons and staff. The Clubhouse – a huge, adjacent garage bay –

opens Friday and Saturday nights at 9pm. JJ's is home to the Show Me Bears and other groups, with events such as the Mr. Missouri Leather Contest (in March), and Mr. Heartland Bear (in June). The Blue Max M.C. celebrates an anniversary in February, and the Gateway M.C. have theirs in October. "Hibearnation" is on November's second weekend. Friday nights are for leather (more leather means more discount!), and there's no drag anytime. See their website for specific event dates.

Other St. Louis night spots include: **Absolutli Goosed** (3196 S. Grand); **AMP** (4199 Manchester), with live music nightly; **Attitudes** (4100 Manchester); **Bad Dog** (17 S. Vandeventer), a new leathermen's saloon; **Grey Fox** (3503 S. Spring); **Korners** (7101 S. Broadway); **Magnolias** (5 S. Vandeventer), and **Niner Diner** restaurant, with dancing and weekend drag cabaret shows; **Novac's** (4121 Manchester), friendly to all, is a women's favorite that offers some gay nights. In the Central West End, **Loading Zone** (16 S. Euclid) is a young-guy hangout.

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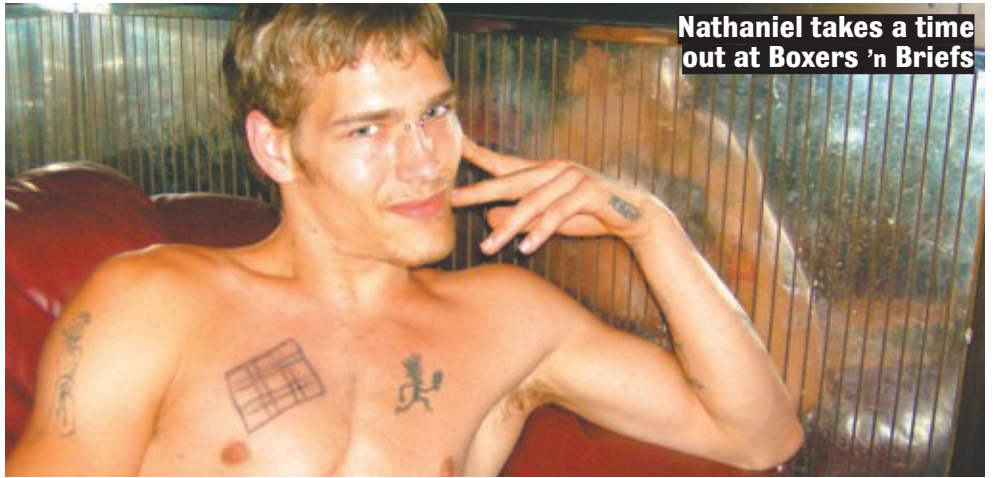
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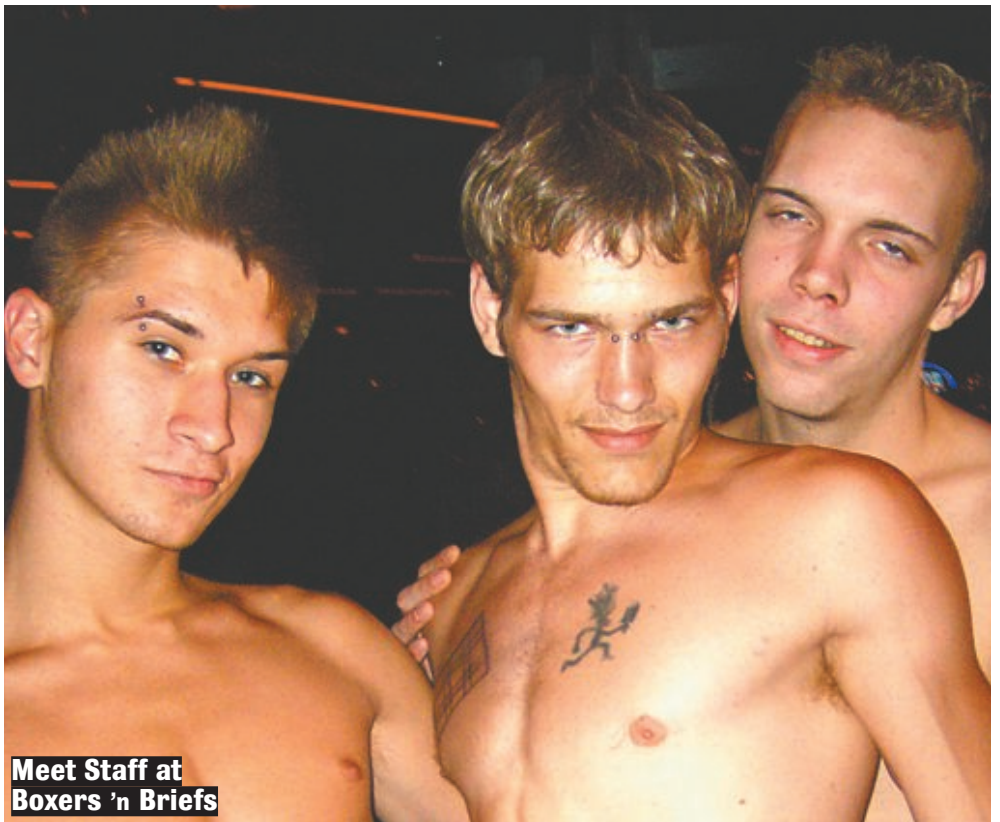
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At The Complex



Nathaniel takes a time out at Boxers 'n Briefs



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At Freddie's Bar



At The Complex



Meet staff at
Boxers 'n Briefs



Visitors from Green Bay
on summer migration



At Freddie's Bar

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On the other side of Mississippi River in Illinois, two clubs are nearby. **Boxers 'n Briefs** (55 Four Corners Lane, Centreville; at the intersection of routes 157 and 13) is one of the few places in America with completely nude male strippers, and with an emphasis on youthful beauty. Performances are on the bar and on-stage, or – if you prefer – in the VIP lounge for private shows. There are shower shows, too. Every night here is 18-plus, and they're open until 6am Fridays and Saturdays (closed Mondays). They also have full range of x-rated videos and DVDs for sale.

Also on the Illinois side, **Bubby & Sissy** (602 Belle in Alton, Illinois) has dancing and drag shows.

Accommodations

St. Louis Guest House (1032 Allen; 314-773-1016) celebrating its 24th year of service, is a comfortable place to stay in historic Soulard. They offer suites with kitchenette, cable TV, VCRs with XXX videos, and DSL lines and wi-fi internet. Safes are provided for security in each room. Their secluded courtyard has a hot tub for nude relaxation and friendly conversation. Garry and Billy are your hosts.

Brewers House B&B (1829 Lami; 314-771-1542) is a bed-and-breakfast in a Civil War-vintage house in the old brewery district. Old and new mix nicely here – and there are rooms with fireplaces and satellite. They're located between downtown and Anheuser Busch (where you can tour and taste the brew), and within walking distance to the Soulard and the old Market. Go off in another direction and you'll hit some fine restaurants as well. Nice breakfasts and helpful advice on the scene are provided by Rick and Orlando.

Cafes and dining

Coffee Cartel (305 Euclid at Maryland) is an all-ages, 24-hour, gay-frequented coffeehouse with wireless internet. **Chez Leon** (4580 Laclede) is a Parisian-style bistro and bar, with dinner menu. TJ Wildflower (4590 Laclede) fills the outdoor patio with guys before bar hours.

Several good ethnic restaurants line South Grand, and here you'll find **Moka Be's** (near the corner of Arsenal), a local gay cafe,

and **St. Louis Bread**, a cafe with free wi-fi.

A similar cafe district is in the U-City Delmar Loop area, around the beautiful old **Tivoli Cinema** (6350 Delmar), with its art-house film bookings. **Soulard Coffee Garden Cafe** (910 Geyer) has sidewalk and garden seating, breakfast, sandwiches, salads, and pastas, plus coffees, smoothies, and deserts. **Chavez** (925 Geyer) is a bright new Mexican restaurant in Soulard.

Shopping and relaxing

The annual gay pride festivities take place in the South Grand district, and there are several stores of interest here.

At **Cheap Trix** (3211 S. Grand) Frank, Michael, Rizz, and family continue to expand and acquire ever-more interesting merchandise, including leather items, cards, magazines, t-shirts, shades, oils, and other fabulous finds. Exotic body piercing and now tattooing are done here in a safe, friendly, and private setting. Plus there's lots of imaginative jewelry. A new basement area offers an expanded selection of leather clothing and accessories, DVDs, and fetish items.

At **Barbdwyr** (15 S. Vandeventer), Bryan does impeccable custom leather and rubber clothing, tailoring, and accessories.

Amid Euclid Street's upscale stores and sidewalk cafes you'll find **Left Bank Books** (399 N. Euclid), a well-stocked general bookstore with a good gay section.

Saunas and health clubs

Pamper yourself and relax, or work out at **Club St. Louis** (2625 Samuel Shepard Drive). This beautifully designed facility has a great workout room, a big new skylit jacuzzi, tanning beds, and big-screen movie lounge. Newly renovated, The Club has wi-fi internet access, too. The steam room is clean and hot, and the staff here is exceptionally friendly and helpful. There's an outdoor pool for exercise or leisure that's refreshingly cool on a hot summer day, or comfortably heated later in the season. On summertime Saturdays and Sundays there are complimentary buffets. The Club is open to guys 18-plus all day and night, every day. Note the special \$10 rate for lockers Tuesday nights.

Mega-Plex Spa (11674 Old Highway 40) is a bathhouse at the adult bookstore and theater complex in Boonville. ▼

At The Complex



Complex manager Tom White mixes with guests

