

# BEYOND 'THAT'S SO GAY'

A National Challenging Homophobia Tour

# LGBT Postcards from the Edge



TOUR WEEK EIGHTEEN, (TOWNSVILLE)  
UNDERESTIMATIONS: FROM BROWNSVILLE TO TOWNSVILLE

*"It's not uncommon to see two people, although they are never locals, holding hands here [in Cairns] but you would never see that in Townsville...Unless it was two massive dykes who had tats down their arms and were like, 'If you come near us we're gonna smack you in the mouth'..."*

And so "Tony" (introduced in my Cairns blog) from the Queensland Association for Healthy Communities (QAHC) prepared me for my drive down to Townsville.

*"Townsville is a funny place because it's different to Cairns...Cairns has a big international and domestic tourist market...It has two women to every man, whereas Townsville is the opposite...Townsville has the military..."*

Queensland's second biggest city, Townsville was one of the areas on the Beyond 'That's So Gay' national challenging homophobia tour where it's reputation preceded it. And that reputation was of a relatively dangerous city that was dominated by miners and military folk. Few had a good word to say about Townsville before I arrived with the exception of people in Mt Isa.

For Mt Isa, Townsville is at the end of a 10-hour drive east down the Barkly Highway and was more a destination as "the big smoke". Mt Isa residents rolled their eyes when describing how most people from The Isa had aspirations to one day live in Townsville. It seems they felt that locals could set their sights higher.

Far from being a "massive dyke" with tattoos up and down her arms, "Jodie" is an example of a young local lesbian who walks Townsville's streets holding her partner's hand.

*"It's definitely more accepting in society for two women to be together...I wouldn't say there are a lot of people who are comfortably out...You see some girls together but not the guys..."*



Jodie admitted that there was a different set of rules in Townsville for gay men.

*“There is still a stigma associated with men being together...It’s stupid, it’s ridiculous but until people choose to educate themselves that it’s not the 70s, it will be that way...”*

Yet despite two women having less societal pressure not to show public displays of affection (PDAs), Jodie still does not experience holding hands as an easy task.

*“I’m a Taurus, I’m quite stubborn, I’m me and if people don’t like it then they can f\*ck right off...I don’t have time for it...”*

Whilst this resolve holds Jodie and her partner in good stead in Townsville, there is one exception to their PDAs.

*“[At home with her family] is the one place where I can’t and I don’t... Dad’s OK but my mum is actually a part of a very religious cult...It’s only a recent thing, she joined about 10 years ago...And it’s really freaky in Townsville because they are all related and I don’t think it’s a good thing...”*

Jodie describes begrudgingly making concessions.

*“It’s caused a lot of problems in my family...It’s just easier if [mum] doesn’t see it...It was all about compromise...She didn’t lecture me and we don’t hold hands or touch...It sh\*ts [my partner] to tears, but that’s it...She’s the only mother I’ve got...”*

In recent times with the demise of a group who organised successful local parties for women who love women, Jodie and her partner have



started running parties to fill the void. However in a move welcomed by many, this updated model for Townsville events now include those who are not strictly lesbian.

*“For a while they had the [women only parties]...There was this whole segregation thing...You had to be a lesbian...If you were transgender, then you weren’t allowed...We never want it to be segregated...”*

Now men can also join in which QAHC believes is a great thing given the history of men organising gatherings.

*“The history was that the girls were really organised but separatist... They wouldn’t even have a male barman...And the boys...Well, they were totally disorganised...”*

Disorganised except for a gay bar that has been running for 18 years. As with other regional and rural Australian places, Townsville has a love-hate relationship with the main jewel in the small local gay crown: The Sovereign Hotel. The owners were the subject of every conversation I had in Townsville, with just about everyone feeling that they are not open to anything else lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender (LGBT) being run locally. Stories of sabotage and propaganda were in plentiful supply with common statements like, “I’ve never known them to do anything for the local community...”

One local described a local rite of passage.

“If you’re banned from The Sovereign then you’re considered a local...”



Interestingly The Sovereign Hotel has survived as a local gay institution to this day, yet locals say that a decade ago there were a handful of gay bars. With locals describing Townsville as becoming more and more tolerant in recent years, it's almost counterintuitive that there would now be less gay establishments. But this mirrors international observations of the relationship between the level of hostility in a place and the efforts gay men will go in order to gather. The observation is that the more hostile an environment the greater lengths men will go to to meet. The theory is that when you limit gay men's opportunities to meet, socialize and have sex, then their creative and activist energy goes into overdrive. As one commentator remarked, some of the greatest examples of activism have come from the most unlikely places (e.g. Africa, the Middle East). Extending the theory, these observers would say that Townsville's apparent drop in hostility has led to the demise of former gay gathering spots in the city.

Not that abuse, harassment and extreme examples of violence don't happen in Townsville. Jodie explains.

*"I think the community is very tolerant...I wouldn't say it's a homophobic city...I don't think it's as bad as it could be...We don't have any problems, but I know others do..."*

"Rob" is a young gay man who experienced the homophobia of Townsville with full force in recent years. A local tradesperson, Rob would be working with a friend at a block of units.

*"I was rewiring a unit...It was rough units...We'd finished the second day...[His co-worker on the job] was an ex-drag queen and had camped it up...He would have done it in the carpark...They might have thought I was gay by association..."*



Although he doesn't remember, Rob was set upon by a group of men.

*"The next door neighbour had heard the noise and came to our defence...Everyone was chanting, 'Kill the fags, kill the fags...'...She heard it and ran down and got the guy with a baseball bat...Otherwise I'd be dead..."*

The first successful prosecution in Queensland of a hate crime was small comfort.

*"At the trial they said, 'We thought he might have been a fag so we thought we'd kill him anyway...We hate fags, but he deserves to die'..."*

This would have a very real impact on how Rob felt about his sexual identity.

*"I became suicidal, I was hating the fact that I was gay..."*

Coming to terms with the fact that he was gay was complicated by Rob's forced coming out to his family.

*"I didn't so much come out, I was forced out...I went to work one day [as an apprentice], I got home that day and dad came home and said we need to talk...And he went through and locke all the doors...He said, 'We got a phone call today'...Some guy had called up and said, 'Is he there?'...And when dad said no he said, 'Well just tell him he was the best f\*ck I ever had...'..."*

Rob's father reacted quite strongly.



*“Dad took my phone, my car, my keys...He dropped me off at work and picked me up...For five months that happened...Then I decided I had enough...”*

After moving away to Melbourne and finally coming home again under duress, Rob’s father would have a change of heart.

*“He said, ‘I don’t really give a sh\*t about the gay thing...I don’t care what you do’...”*

That Rob had been through a homophobic attack and some family illnesses changed his relationship with his parents.

*“It changed dad, it changed the whole family...It probably made mum clingier...”*

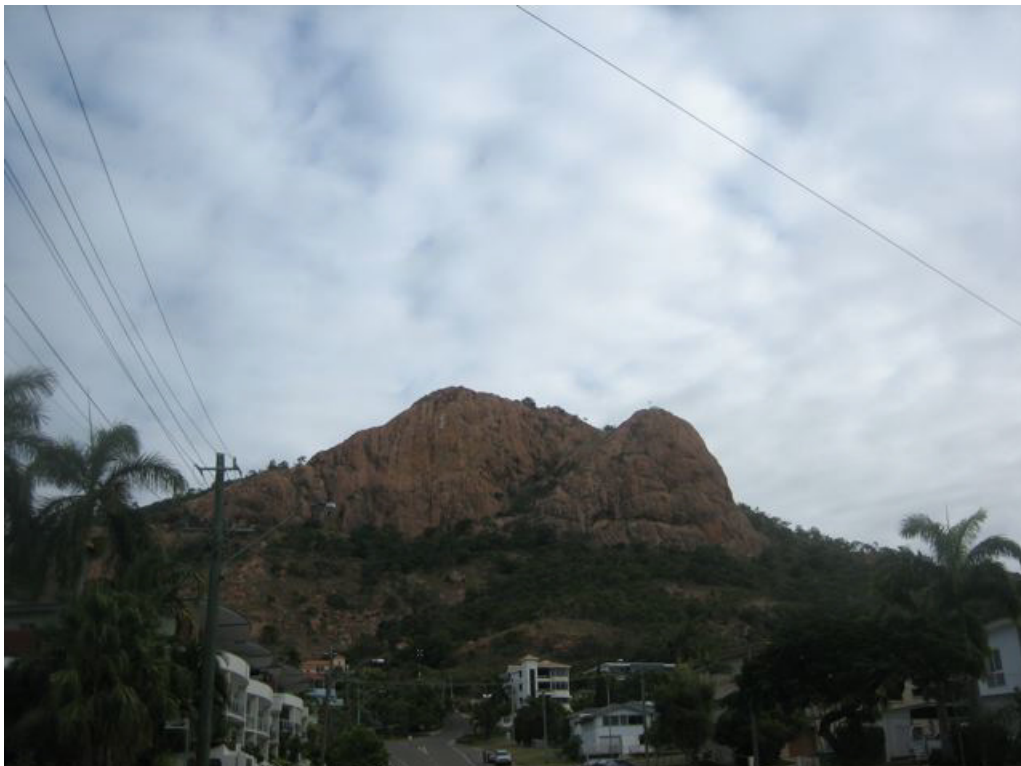
With a range of personal and professional challenges, Rob wonders at times if he wants to continue.

*“I have no desire to continue to put up with this sh\*t...I have to pull my socks up and get on with it...Why do I keep going?...I ask myself why I keep going...Why don’t I pack up?...Why am I still in Townsville?... Why am I single?...I guess it’s easier to keep going than to stop...”*

Then Rob describes some recent perspective: a nephew that is battling leukemia.

*“I keep going for my nephew...If he can fight through everything he’s going through, then so can I...”*

He also has a housemate who is struggling health-wise.



*“And [my housemate], I’m all he’s got...”*

Stories like Rob’s stirred so much anger in Townsville that a group of locals decided to form the Anti-Violence Committee (AVC). A key catalyst was a bomb that exploded out the front of the local branch of QAHC. For a number of years there has been no QAHC office in Townsville, despite it being Queensland’s second biggest city. According to “Rose”, action was necessary.

*“It started a few years ago when the Townsville Aids Council was bombed...A couple of weeks later a man was attacked in the car park and stabbed in the neck with a syringe...And a group of citizens decided that that wasn’t good enough and that something needed to be done...”*

Funding from the State Government would follow for a ‘Safe Place’ program. Yet the AVC admits it was not utilised in ways they imagined.

*“Elderly ladies would use [the number] if they were at the bus stop and a few of our natives were being obstreperous...”*

A regular gathering was organised for local LGBT young people which fizzled out.

*“Most of the things [young people] wanted was to meet someone the same as them and to be able to go and do something with other young people who were having similar difficulties...We used to have activities in the past but then they all paired off, left and no other young people came back to take their place...”*

Schools were also targeted by the AVC, who had an interesting strategy to see if a school needed to address homophobia.

*“We used to put up gay posters in the school and then come back a few weeks later to see what was written on them...We used to do this to gauge how much they needed a talk...”*

Talks were typically organised in the first instance through school nurse contacts.

*“We targeted the school nurses but then it was ultimately up to the [school council] if we were allowed to go in...The headmaster was usually the first person you went to...But the education department’s ruling was if the [school council] didn’t allow it, then it couldn’t go ahead...”*

When they did go ahead, talks by panels of LGBT people to school staff were received well.



*“We went in with a panel for teachers...In one of the schools they were one of the worst in town for homophobia and bad treatment of gay kids, especially boys...The staff were the ones who asked the questions...Staff were absolutely dumbfounded because they were saying things and didn't realise it was hurting LGBT young people...It was a huge eye opener for them but then like everything our funding ran out...”*

Unfortunately I did not get to speak to the local Queensland Police Gay and Lesbian Liaison Officer (GLLO) who never returned my call. However Rose explained why the local GLLO had been quiet that week.

*“She had an accident...She was playing touch football and she had her nose smashed in so she's laying very low...[laughs]...”*



Key members of the AVC also run the local transgender support, Transbridge. “Madge”, a local transgender woman, realised that there was very little for people like herself. Since starting a decade ago, Transbridge has seen little change in transgender people’s experience in Townsville.

*“One young woman, in this day and age, was thrown out...In 2010, to throw out your own daughter and reject her so vehemently?...There was another young woman who went to a local GP...He said, ‘You’re not transsexual, you’re just weird’...She’s not with us anymore...She committed suicide...”*

Rose elaborates.





*“He physically got her by the back of the neck, even though she’s 6 foot...He pushed her into the waiting room and screamed, ‘You filthy b\*tch, don’t you dare come back here’...She’s been transgender for many years...She was devastated...”*

Sometimes the transphobia can be more subtle.

*“[The local university] has had two girls who have been doing their nursing degrees...These two girls have both been refused placements and so couldn’t finish their degrees...One dropped out...The other was told that she passed her exams...Then she was refused a placement...When she asked why she was told because she didn’t pass her exams...”*

Madge believes that people automatically believe that she is going to be different.

*“Nothing’s changed for me, I’m basically the same nutcase I always was...[laughs]...They seem to think that I only wear a dress in order to pick up men...I don’t... People also think that transgender people are pedophiles...They have no idea what being transgender is about...It’s the cruelest, wickedest thing you could do to yourself...”*



With no resources except for the time of people like Madge, Transbridge receives calls at all hours.

*“They say, ‘I’m in a motel, I’m alone and I think I might be transsexual... Can you come down and talk to me’...So of course I do...You need an environment when you come out where you are safe and where you can talk to people...”*

Transbridge also take local transgender people to other places where they can experience life as their preferred gender. One recent drive to Cairns for the group presented some challenges when two transgender women were “going out” for the very first time dressed as women.



*“You have to go somewhere, you have to go and spend the whole day, go somewhere else where they don’t know you...We had one woman who walked out of [department store] with a security tag on... That set off the alarms and it drew attention from security and the other customers which was very tough for her...Then driving back the other woman had to drive through a police roadblock...It turns out she knew this copper personally...But he didn’t recognise her... Thank god...”*

Madge and others at Transbridge see the need to educate locals, and do so through talks such as Queensland Police recruits, although the time they are given is often 20 minutes as part of a full day. Yet they make the absolute most of it.

*“When we started they were slouched in their chairs and were halfway through the session...By the end, everyone was sitting up and full of attention...”*

Although the local transgender community has not felt a change in Townsville over the last decade, local gay men and lesbians feel there has been a distinct change. “Guy” came out in Townsville and has been out for that decade. I asked him why there might have been a local shift.



*“I think that’s a few things...One is a lot of Southerners have come up here and that’s changed things...And the other is there are a lot of TV shows...They might be your stereotypical gay characters, but it’s still in your face...The army has also worked a lot on equality and stressed that a lot...I know we are nowhere near having it yet, but still it’s helped...”*



Yet with so many men flying in and out for mining and so many men in the military, Townsville has a high incidence of men who have sex with men where men are not necessarily gay or single. Interestingly Townsville, along with Rockhampton, were two places that refused to show Brokeback Mountain at their cinemas.

A theme in the discussions I had with many local gay men was that they all, in some ways, had aspirations to have sex with a heterosexual man (usually married) and/or someone in the army. I observed the reactions of a group of gay men on two separate occasions where someone boasted of such a recent feat.

At Turtle Cove I spoke to a formerly married man who left his wife of 17 years. "Jack" says that he found it easier to continue relationships in Townsville whilst he was married. As soon as he came out, he found it harder. Describing his married days, Jack says he found it easy to find other straight, married men to have sex with.

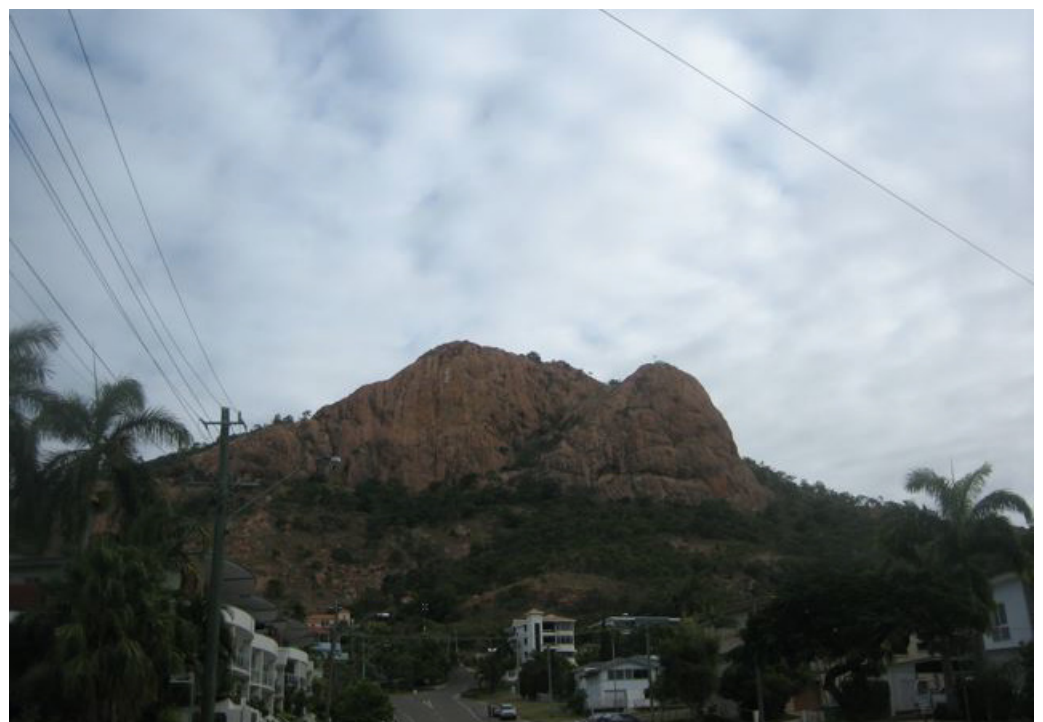
*"You can hit the casino any night of the week and pick-up men for sex if you are discreet enough..."*

But finally Jack had to come out.

*"I played around [with men] before my marriage and then lived in this bubble for 17 years...We had great sex, we got along, but then one day I woke up and realised I wanted something more..."*

His wife did not take it well, and his father was worse.

*"He vomited, literally, for three days after I told him...Now five or six years on, he comes around cautiously to the unit half expecting some gay man to jump out of the cupboard to get him..."*



“Guy” came to Townsville after growing up on the Sunshine Coast. His journey to realising he was gay had a few twists and turns.

*“I knew by 15 or 16 that having sex with men was a homosexual thing, but I didn’t want to be it...I didn’t want to be abused and harassed...I was overweight already and I didn’t want to add to the fire...High school can be a very traumatising experience for a lot of people...I knew I was different...”*

An interesting social norm for first sexual experiences was doing the rounds at Guy’s schools, confusing him as to his own first same sex sexual experience.

*“When I was younger I always heard that a guy loses his virginity twice...Once to a girl and once to a boy...I wondered if I was only experimenting...”*

Once in Townsville, Guy started a three-year relationship with a young woman and also joined the Mormon church.

*“Part of it was soul searching, a part of it was denial...I couldn’t understand why anyone would choose to be abused, harassed...I’d met a couple of gay people and seen quite a promiscuous lifestyle, and I didn’t believe that was who I was...I believed I was very old fashioned...I was described once by someone as being an old soul...”*

When it came to a decision to be baptised, Guy went ahead merely because of a new “elder”.

*“I was already contemplating it, and then a new elder came along... He was probably one of the most stunning men I’ve seen in my life... He sealed the deal for me...”*

Guy describes the baptism as he and the elder in a large bath of water, both in white gowns and both not wearing anything underneath.

*“I clung onto him, I latched onto him and yes I was massively attracted to him...Majorly I guess is the word...”*

Yet this life caught up with him.

*“I went through a time of feeling quite repressed, feeling depressed and contemplating suicide...In some regards I didn’t feel complete... Within the church community I felt very accepted, but they weren’t accepting me they were accepting the heterosexual me...It was not long after that that I decided that I was gay and that I needed to identify with it in some regards...”*

Watching a movie, a gay perennial favourite, Beautiful Thing, helped.



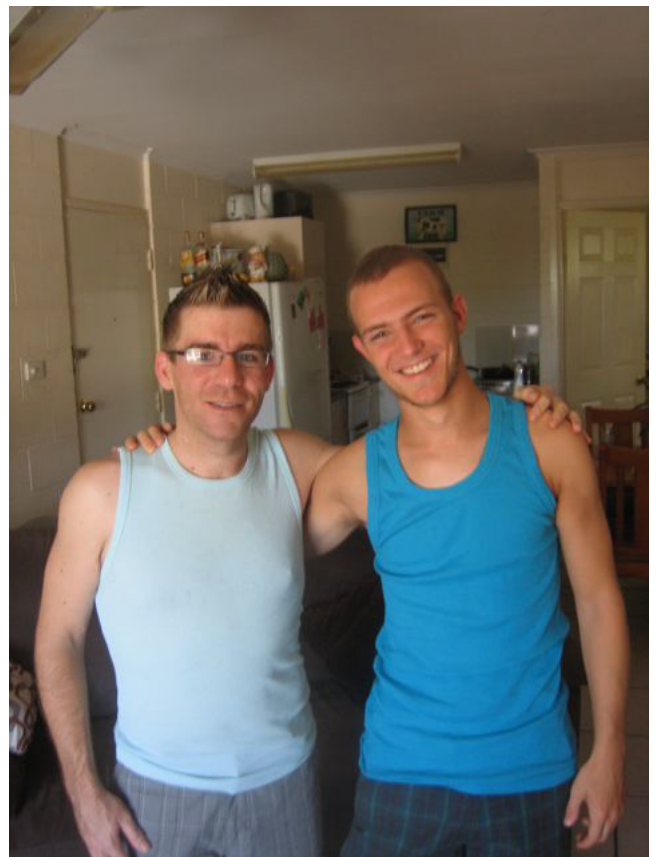
He did so in his share house which just so happened to be full of lesbian housemates.

*“They all kept telling me I was gay...I finished watching the movie and rang my mum...I didn’t even get the word hello out before I started crying...She responded [to me coming out] with, ‘Don’t tell your father’...I thought, ‘Crap, obviously this is the wrong thing I’m doing, this going to disappoint people’...So I went back into my shell...”*

A close gay friend he met on an online gay dating site would help Guy see there was nothing wrong with him being gay. This encouraged Guy to come out to the rest of his family.

*“I was at my mum’s birthday where I threw a party for her...I was working away at the BBQ and called dad over...I basically came out and said that I was gay...He said, ‘I already knew, here, you should have a beer’...When I told grandma [later], it was the first time I heard her swear...She said, ‘I know that...I still f\*cking love you’...”*

Guy amongst others acknowledges that Townsville, like other regional centres, struggles with the community coming together for a common goal. Talks with locals revealed that there is a fragmented LGBT community. Said one:



*“I think it’s the community fighting against itself which is the issue...”*

Like Jodie, Guy and others are doing their best to move forward, yet the local politics and “history” seems to be getting in the way.

“Eddie”, a local gay business owner, believes this is in part to a gender divide in Townsville.

*“A lot of women in this town don’t like men, oh there are a few that do...It’s the same with gay guys that can’t stand lesbians...They just think lesbians are pushy, get drunk and take over...The lesbians think that the gay guys are too girly and bitchy...”*



Despite this there might be signs of the community coming together.

Jodie recently ran an LGBT party with a Spice Girls theme that saw over 400 people attend.

With such potential for LGBT gatherings and people's low expectations about what Townsville has to offer, Eddie finds tourists are changing their plans.

*"We get people coming here to town...Usually they've been in Cairns and they've heard about here on the grapevine...They realise it's not the hick town they thought we were...They think at first it's Brownsville, you stop for a cuppa and you keep going...When people come here that all changes..."*

Before I left Townsville I had the fortunate experience of having drinks with a group of local young gay men before a trip to The Sovereign. I was asked about my travels and what I thought of tourist hotspots.

*"I've found so many places I have been to have been overrated... Except Townsville..."*

The locals all went silent and looked at me, steeling themselves for yet another anti-Townsville comment.

*"Townsville is clearly underestimated in many ways..."*

Smiles and nods broke out across the room. Perhaps they felt that someone finally got it.

