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Annual Atlanta Bear Fest comes out of hibernation

BY BO SHELL

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Leave the lions and tigers at home July 6-9; it's all about the bears at the 2012 Atlanta Bear Fest.

Pool parties, live music and bar nights are among the event's highlights according to John Beck, president of Atlanta's Southern Bears, who have held an Independence Day Weekend gathering for hirsute men and their admirers for "many years" now.

The event — a bigger, hairier version of the more mainstream circuit party, often called a "run" — was known as "Bear All," before the Southern Bears took a hard look and a one year break before renaming it Atlanta Bear Fest in 2009.

MORE INFORMATION:

2012 Atlanta Bear Fest
July 6 - 9

"The first time I attended 'Bear All' years ago, not a single person introduced himself or made any effort to include me," Beck says. "Southern Bears made the decision that we wanted our ABF events to be just the opposite of that. We want our guests leaving and telling everyone what a good time they had and how friendly it was."

At its relaunch, Atlanta Bear Fest saw about 150 full run attendees and about 75 day pass guests. Those numbers have grown to about 200 and 125 in the past three years.

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After two years with a cheeky prison theme, the 2012 “Roman Holiday” theme draws inspiration from television’s “Spartacus,” known — at least in the gay bear community — for its naked, muscular male actors.

“What’s not to like?” Beck says.

Busy bears

While nightly bar trips aren’t surprising when you imagine a couple hundred gay men gathering for a weekend event, the Atlanta Bear Fest offers a variety of programming to keep the party going almost all day, every day.

Dinners, bingo, movie screenings, Mr. Bear and Cub contests and live music from bear-favorite RockCub punctuate a schedule that revolves largely around the swimming pool at the Courtyard Northlake Marriott in Tucker, the host hotel for the event.

It must be quite the sight; some 200 topless gay bears flirting and floating around a metro-Atlanta watering hole.

“The stories I could tell,” Beck laughs, “Our first year we didn’t sell out the hotel and there was a family reunion booked there with us. We got a lot of looks and a lot of parents and grandparents herding their children inside.”

The group has “basically sold out the hotel” for the past three years, so random onlookers haven’t been an issue — a benefit to hosting the event at a smaller hotel outside Atlanta’s busy tourist corridor where “Bear All” events were hosted years ago.

In looking to revamp the old run style, the Southern Bears learned that attendees wanted privacy, inclusive run packages without extra costs and overall affordability.

It might be a short shuttle ride from the host hotel to the host bar, the Atlanta Eagle, but Beck says satisfying these factors make the barely-ITP hotel a dream locale — the walking-distance cigar shop, ice cream parlor and liquor store notwithstanding.

“What we have found is that the hotel and local businesses have welcomed us with open arms,” Beck adds.

Cuts for a cause

Armed with a straight razor, Tracy Lacobie has been a master barber for 25 years. A friendlier Sweeney Todd, he owned his own shop in Greenville, S.C., for eight years before moving to Atlanta in 2008.

You can find him behind a chair at Axiom Salon for Men in Midtown Atlanta, a perfect fit for a man whose specialties are flat tops and razor texturing.

Lacobie is offering his services to the Atlanta Bear Fest attendees, and all of the proceeds are going to Lost-n-Found, a homeless LGBT youth advocacy organization.

“Anytime I do a charity event, I like to keep the money local,” says Lacobie, whose partner is Southern Bears Vice President Kris Goedel. “Lost-n-Found struck me as a special one this year, because someone close to me just came out to my partner and me. He’s terrified of his family finding out, for fear he will be tossed out.”

It’s not the first time Lacobie has cut for a cause. In 2010, he donated his Atlanta Bear Fest proceeds to Jerusalem House, and more recently you might have seen him lowering ears on the back porch at the Eagle for Lost-n-Found’s clipper party which raised more than \$1,700 with the help of a massage therapist and boot black.

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Lacobie joins several other vendors over the run's weekend, including the Atlanta-based KubCakes baked goods and Florida-based bear t-shirt vendor Bear Bones Clothing.

While Lacobie and the Southern Bears organization itself are both supporting Lost-n-Found this year, Beck adds that the group is also raising funds for PAWS Atlanta, a private not-for-profit animal welfare organization.

Atlanta Bear Fest like 'little vacation'

Bristol Correa, a flight attendant from Atlanta, has been to bear runs in Indianapolis, Chicago, Las Vegas, Orlando, Atlanta — more than he can remember over the past six or seven years.

Similar to the Atlanta Bear Fest, most runs last several days at a host hotel with a nearby host bar and most raise funds for bear organizations and charities in their respective cities.

Attendees can find almost anything they're looking for: new friends, old friends, bear vendors, sex and even husbands.

Correa met his partner at the infamous and well-attended Texas Bear Round-Up, and a year later at the same event, the two were engaged.

But like the geographical differences that separate them, each run has its own mood. It seems that Atlanta's run might be small compared to many bear events, but what it lacks in size, it makes up in charm.

"It's very welcoming," Correa says. "Because it's in a hotel that surrounds the pool, it feels very private and it is like a little vacation full of great people and good looking men."

While a run can mean many things to its many attendees, it seems that at their core, runs like the Atlanta Bear Fest give gay men outside the mainstream a space of their own, no matter where they are.

"If you talk to the people who were around for the early days of bear runs and events, they will tell you that many started because they did not feel included in the 'normal' gay lifestyle..." Beck says.

"These days I think it's about having fun and taking pride in who we are while at the same time doing some good and giving back to the community as a whole."

Top photo: Last year's Atlanta Bear Fest saw more than 300 total attendees, many traveling nightly to the Atlanta Eagle, the event's host bar. (by Dyana Bagby)

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