



Bears

TEXT JOSIE PYKE PHOTOS JAN VAN BREDA



Heavily set, rugged and fiercely hyper-masculine, these are males who convey strength, identity and are an ever-growing sub-culture of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (lgbt) population. Welcome to the “bear” community.

Evolving in the 1980's, with a carefree effervescence, this social movement of homosexual males has increasingly become an influence and a symbol of many things, from self-expression to self-identity, from literature to fashion.

Literally taken from the English noun "Bear", these hairy, thick-set males gained this status due to their acceptance of their masculinity.

How one defines a Bear is ambiguous. Some refer to it as a way of life, a social movement. Others see it as an image or a perception, more based around aesthetics. Yes, bears have grown in society because of their image, but it's an image of free-will. There is no rule book within the Bear community that says you have to look thin, well groomed and effeminate, to be classed as a homosexual male.

Even though the Bears on the surface seem a positively unpretentious community, there are several subcultures, sometimes known to be quite strict. There have been debates as to what actually constitutes these subcultures. Younger or aspiring bears are labelled cubs or otters. Otters are the slimmest type of Bear with finer hair, cubs can be as hairy as they like, but are typically younger looking: a baby bear. The wolves exhibit maturity and masculinity and are usually the older and more dominant males. Bearded, larger male covered with a blanket of hair? You're a definite grizzly. Muscle Bears speak for themselves and have created a successful separate culture to the rest. Their muscular,

body builder status has become a demand within gay culture and events such as Mr Muscle Bear pageants are a growing demand. These muscle Bears are known to shun the idea of cubs or the otters being part of the community. Adversely, the muscle Bears have the same idea of Bears with higher body fat, often referred to as "Chubs". Muscle Bears and their culture have been known to exclude males who do not conform to their standards of a "real Bear".

Whether you're a cub, a grizzly, or simply just an admirer, BEAR Magazine caters for all varieties of Bear lovers. 1985 saw the beginning of the Magazine. Published by Richard Bulger in 1987, it was released as an alternative to the mainstream gay men's mags. It featured erotic content including stories, photos and even dating ads which allowed the readers to meet other likeminded males, making BEAR magazine a successful network. Men would also submit photos of themselves to be featured in the magazine. Although under new direction, BEAR Magazine is still growingly popular in the USA and gracing the top shelves, it's also available digitally. Two years after Bear Magazine came the Lone Star Saloon, also known as "Bear Bar USA". Set in San Francisco, the Saloon is known as a defining point in Bear history. It infamously provided Bears and bikers with a source of familiarity and welcoming. Now known as the world's most famous bear bar, the Lone Star Saloon is still in full swing today. The bar holds an annual "International Bear Rendezvous" as well



“The **diversity** on **Furball** is immense. It doesn’t matter if you’re **big, small, young** or old. **It’s a very fascinating scene.**”

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as monthly “Cubcake” parties for fans of the younger less masculine bears known as the Cubs.

The late eighties became the rise of The Bear Hugs Group and private “play parties”. Described as inhibited and erotic, these private liaisons provided bears with a safe, intimate environment to meet, play and often result in orgies. Spreading the love of the bear community overseas, these groups and parties reached Great Britain and soon after, steamy hot tub parties known as “Bear Soups” were introduced.

Flemish fashion designer and self proclaimed Bear, Walter Van Beirendonck, known for his powerful colour combinations and unconventional context, brought Bears to the catwalk. In preparation for his summer 2010 fashion show, bored of casting for regular male models, Beirendonck held an open casting call for “Muscle Bears”. Understanding the shock element he would be giving to the public, Beirendonck says for him, although there’s a sexual attraction, he simply likes to see different body types on the catwalk. He describes the Bear scene as a “nice vibe” not caught up in drugs or heavily focused on sex, a “positive scene”.

Continuing to excel Bears as symbols of vanity and fashion, International Mr Bear contests are now a global event. This wonderfully masculine beauty pageant, in which the winner

becomes the symbol and representation for bears in their hometown, first started in Bear birthplace San Francisco 1992, but has now spread to Germany and the UK. The categories for Mr Bear are Grizzly, Cub, and Daddy, with one winning the overall title.

There are various Bear comics by Jeff Jacklin, contributing to Bears recognition in the media. These fantasy bear worlds have been known to excite Bear readers with their stories of powerful muscle Bears teamed with fabulous comic book art. Today, Bears are role models of self belief and confidence, a fierce display of all types of masculinity in this fabulous, rapidly expanding sub culture of the LGBT community. Bears are considered symbols of sex, fashion and lifestyle and have created a whole new category within the LGBT community. If that’s not impressive enough... .

What I love most about the Bear community is their desire to break the enclosed stereotype of homosexuality. Right from the beginning, they said no to generalisation. In the 21st century, there are enough problems with generalising as it is, but the Bears questioned the fixed idea that a man had to be thin, hairless and young to be accepted as part of gay culture. What’s wrong with being homosexual but still loving yourself as a man? According to the Bears, absolutely nothing.

