

# 35 DOs and DON'Ts of a Gay Leather Bar

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## Learning leather bars is different from learning life outside the closet. Read about it below.

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In the room downstairs, a strobe flashed over mounds of muscle and harnesses. Men slipped in and out of shadow. I couldn't tell if they were dancing or fucking. I later understood that to be the point.

Upstairs, things were different — a quiet dive bar, people milling around wooden tables. Someone was choking on a dick in the corner. His gagging noises mixed with the music and talk. A circle of men stood around him and I didn't dare peek through. On the dance floor, I inched close to a guy with salt-and-pepper hair who was wearing a leather kilt. We made eye contact, he came in close. He put his arm around me and shouted in my ear, "Where are you from?"

My newness was obvious. "Georgia," I shouted back. He held me, we swayed with the music as he rubbed my chest. I relaxed. Then he pulled my hand under his kilt: a fully erect dick with a massive Prince Albert piercing jutting through the head. He pulls my hand and I follow him through the throng.

Lessons came later: dos and don'ts, codes and courtesies, good nights and bad ones. Learning leather bars was different from learning life outside the closet. I never feared coming out — but kink scared me.

Fear coupled with desire leads us all here — eager, fresh-faced, and ready to learn. Here's 35 rules of navigating a gay leather bar.

## A word of warning from Alex Cheves.

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My name is Alexander Cheves, and I am known by friends in the kink and leather community as Beastly. I am a sex-positive writer and blogger. The views in this slideshow do not reflect those of *The Advocate* and are based solely off of my own experiences. Like everything I write, the intent of this piece is to break down the stigmas surrounding the sex lives of gay men.

Those who are sensitive to frank discussions about sex are invited to click elsewhere, but consider this: If you are outraged by content that address sex openly and honestly, I invite you to examine this outrage and ask yourself whether it should instead be directed at those who oppress us by policing our sexuality.

## **1. DO come as you are.**

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Last Pride, the outdoor deck of my local leather bar was standing-room-only, a swaying mass of sweat and skin. Furry pecs were buckled down in black leather straps, asses were out, and every few minutes a man stood, coming up for air, before dropping back to his knees.

Most were gay men, but some femdoms (female dominants) were in attendance. They spilled out the front and back entrances onto both porches, into the parking lot, down the sidewalk and around the block — men in various states of dress and undress. Some were decked out in full-body leather (“full cow”). Others wore jeans and t-shirt. Some, like me, wore almost nothing.

Every body type was on display. Large folks of every gender strutted jockstraps. Skinny kinksters slinked through in latex. Countless guys like me — guys who work out but still eat donuts, who keep their beards trim and bellies natural — felt confident to lose shirts (and more).

You don’t need to fit a mold — there is none. The lovely thing about my hometown leather bar — and about leather bars across the world, and about the communities they serve — is the invite for everyone of every size. Different bars and clubs have different policies — some require gear, some require you to get through a selective doorman, some are male-only — but these are few. Most are open to all kinky people, and kinky people come in every shape, size, gender, and color. Come as you are.

## **2. DO know what’s happening the night you attend. Learn if it’s a normal bar night or special event.**

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I’ve walked into a leather bar expecting hardcore S&M, only to find a sea of 20-somethings dancing to Donna Summer (hardly a disappointment, but I left without a single red mark on my butt). Most leather bars post their schedule of events — “Blackout Wednesdays,” “Naked Mondays,” the monthly bondage club meeting, a specific party, a visiting DJ, or specific nights that require certain fetish gear — *somewhere*, but that “somewhere” may be a sign on the front door. Find out what’s happening, if you can, before you go.

### **3. DO come in proper attire.**

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In many leather bars, you can get by in jeans and a t-shirt. Some are more intense, catered to people actively in the scene who know fetish wear, and require you to meet dress code to get in the door. Find out beforehand if certain gear is required.

If you're a newbie, don't go to a gear party or to a bar that requires gear for entry as your first leather bar. Go to a classic "jeans and jockstrap" dive, one with pool tables — not fisting tables — in the middle of the room.

### **4. DON'T gawk.**

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We know you're gawking. Gawking may be one of two things: that judgy, snickering look of people who come to stare at people with their clothes off, or that terrified, deer-in-the-headlights look of someone who has no idea where they are.

"But I'm a beginner looking to learn!" That's great — we want you to learn everything you can about kink, and we want you to love your local leather bar — but since we have the internet, you should bone up (pun intended) on available info about the scene before you arrive. Try not to gawk, if you can help it. We're not zoo animals.

### **5. DO be respectful of the bar's intended clientele.**

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If you find yourself at a leather bar and are, for whatever reason, not kinky, not into leather, not into the people who are part of leather/BDSM, then you're not the intended clientele, and you may want to go elsewhere.

Even if you're in the LGBTQ+ community and you walk into an implicitly queer-dominant space, as most leather bars are, and are not into the sex lifestyles leather bars celebrate, you're the equivalent of a bachelorette at any gay bar in America — an unwelcome nuisance potentially ruining the space for people who care about it more than you do.

### **6. DON'T come with a judgmental attitude.**

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You might see many different body types in little (or no) clothing. You might see someone getting paddled, flogged, or fisted. Don't judge — we love what we do.

### **7. DO respect collar code.**

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Locked collar = he's taken. He has a partner, owner, daddy, handler, committed boyfriend, master, or sir. Behave accordingly.

If he's not wearing a collar, there's no one else in the picture, and he's free to play. If he has a collar with an open, unlocked lock on it (surprisingly difficult to wear without it falling off), he's un-collared/single/free but looking to get locked down (i.e. he's hunting for someone, whether that's a BF, sir, daddy, and so on).

## **8. DO be aware what happens in play areas, cruise hallways, and dark backrooms.**

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Backrooms/play areas are disappearing from American leather bars, but some still exist. If it's lights-out, this is where you go to touch (and get touched by) strangers — to kneel for anonymous cocks, to pull your dick out for anonymous blowjobs, to bend over for anonymous loads, and so on. If you get touched and are simply a voyeur (not there to play), gently push their hand away — and if you have to do this a lot, leave. Voyeurs aren't what the space is for, and if it's dark enough, you shouldn't be able to see much anyway.

Some leather bars go a step further and have a sling room, or have some sex furniture available, and will likely have low light so you can see well enough to use it. In these spaces, it's more acceptable to play with someone specific and turn others away — especially if you're engaged in a more intense kink like fisting, hardcore S&M, extreme bondage, and so on. You may attract an audience, which some consider part of the fun.

## **10. DO wait until after a kink demonstration to barrage the demonstrator with questions.**

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Many leather bars have demos for various kinky sex acts. The last one I attended was a needle play demo. This was delivered by a professional on an experienced sub. I was filled with questions — so was everyone else.

When the pro was ready to take our questions, everyone raised hands. We were gathered around a man lying belly-down on a table with needles inserted through pinched layers of skin down his back. Needle play — a lesser-known kink — requires expert-level skill and certain precautions (gloves, sterilized needles, and so on) to be enjoyed with a degree of safety. It's an education-heavy kink.

When you attend demos like this, don't barrage the demonstrator with every question you have — you may have many. Other kinksters will be there, some with more experience than you, some with less. Between their questions and yours, most questions will get answered. If not, wait till after the demo — after the sub has been cleaned off/cared for, after the

accoutrements have been put away — to go up to the demonstrator and ask him or her any lingering questions you have. Wait your turn if there's a crowd waiting too. Listen to what others ask. Thank the demonstrator. This is how kinks, particularly niche ones, are handed down.

## **11. DON'T freak out if you see public sex.**

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You're more likely to see public sex happening at a leather bar than, say, your classic tinsel palace gay bar with boyish go-go dancers and Top 40 hits blaring over a busy dance floor. Leather bars are implicitly more sexual, because they cater to a community that defines itself by the sex its patrons enjoy. Know what you're walking into — don't freak out.

## **12. DON'T touch without permission.\***

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\*Some exceptions apply.

You should never touch someone without their permission — this is a rule of life and is true 99.9% of the time. The only circumstance where this rule gets challenged is in a lights-out space made for anonymous play — spaces which exist in some leather bars, gay sex clubs, gay bathhouses, and so on.

In these spaces, you waive a degree of consent by entering them, and consensually submit yourself to being touched by people you cannot see. This is why we enjoy these spaces. They can be uncomfortable for people who don't understand what they are or aren't prepared for them.

In all other cases, never touch someone without their permission — even and especially in a leather bar, when you may be tempted to assume a “free pass” for touching because of the heightened sexuality of the space. Sure, on some dance floors, with some substances, people get touchy-feely. You know how to do this, you've navigated this before — that dance floor feeling when you're crowded together and everyone's hand is on everyone's crotch. While it's difficult to parse through where consent falls in situations like this, it's wise and respectful to maintain the importance of asking first in all situations.

If someone is tied and gagged and being led around via collar and leash, ask the person holding their collar. If you're in a sling room and a guy is in the sling waiting to get fucked, he's giving nonverbal consent to at least come inspect him. It's still polite to ask before touching him, but by being there he's giving a degree of consent to be viewed. (If he's blindfolded, as I often am, he's forfeiting a hefty amount of consent — he's willfully handing over the reins. Consent gets nonverbal in situations like this.)

At first glance, kinky sex spaces make consent murky. Upon second inspection, you'll see where consent is given. In some cases, it's given by simply setting being in a particular situation, such as with lights-out backrooms. In all other circumstances, never touch someone without their permission. This is the fine line between consensual sex play and assault. The kinky community does not condone assault and never will.

### **13. DO learn the etiquette of lights-out play areas.**

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Even if you're in a lights-out space, you don't have to have sex. You may get touched, but sex is different. If you're not there to have sex — just touch and be touched — then it's simple: don't fuck. Don't bend over. Don't stick your dick in someone's butt.

If someone tries to finger you and you don't want to get fingered, push his hand away. If they don't get the message, you can say audibly, "Not here for that," or simply "No." If someone's hounding you, leave. You assume these risks by being there, and while they might seem threatening and uncomfortable, these risks are easier to navigate than you think.

Other backroom etiquette pointers: don't pull out your phone or turn on a light (the only exception being if you drop something and need to scrounge for it). In a lights-out space, a phone light can be blinding, and ruins the purpose of the space — anonymity. Keep talking to a minimum. If you want to have a couple's chat or political debate, go back to the bar.

### **14. DON'T lick boots without asking.**

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This is for boot-worshippers, daddy-lovers, dominant-seekers, leather submissives, and so on. It seems obvious, but I've accidentally kicked guys in the face before, unaware that their tongues were on my boots. It's not sexy — it's creepy and you may get a broken nose.

### **15. DON'T invade people's space or be disrespectful — regardless what scene you're into.**

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Puppies: even if you're in pup headspace, you don't have permission to come up and bark in a stranger's face, or start sniffing them. That's annoying and rude. Be a good boy.

### **16. DON'T freak out if you see someone getting whipped, flogged, paddled, spanked, or hurt.**

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They want it. S&M (sadism and masochism) is the sexual fetishization of pain — delivering it, receiving it, and enjoying it. S&M can be seen as the crux of much of kink. At any leather event, you will see people enjoying S&M, even if this simply means someone is bent over taking a light paddling. They may be getting hurt, but it’s consensual, enjoyable hurt.

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## **17. DO expect and respect smoking areas.**

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In an age when smoking areas are hard to find in any establishment in the United States, you will still find smoking patios or smoking rooms at leather bars — put there for cigar daddies and their human ashtrays. The cigar fetish is still raging in the world of kink (cigarettes less so).

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## **18. DO read up on the hanky code before you go.**

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The hanky code has survived in kink. Some say the hanky code was always part of kink, BDSM, and the leather community — that it never existed outside of it. Others say it was once a mainstream feature of gay life, regardless if you considered yourself kinky or “vanilla” (non-kinky). Others ask a more obvious question: Were gay men ever vanilla?

The hanky code has vague roots, but we know it started in the 70s (or earlier) as a covert way for gay men to communicate what kind of sex they were looking for in the pre-internet, pre-Grindr, pre-mobile phone, pre-revolution days. When cruising seedy neighborhoods and underground dives could get you killed or arrested — before AIDS hit its peak — we invented a code of wearing colored hankies in the back right or left pocket of our skintight jeans with colors dictating what sex we were seeking. Right pocket meant you were bottom/submissive. Left pocket meant you were top/dominant.

Most of the hanky code is lost to antiquity. Some of it would be considered racist, or at least problematic, in today’s milieu. Bone up on the more obscure colors of the hanky code with my guide written for today’s kinky cruiser — [“69 Ways To Cruise With The Hanky Code Today.”](#)

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## **19. DO go with a buddy/mentor/dominant, especially if you’re new.**

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This is not a dig at your ability to navigate a leather bar as a newcomer. This is simply how leather bars work, how kink is: we are guided through them by people who’ve been taught by their own guides, their own mentors.

Many newcomers start as submissives, learn the ropes, then try dominance. Even if you're not naturally dominant (or don't think you are), this is a good way to begin, as it teaches you submission from a sub's perspective, which will make you a better dominant, and it's a direct way to learn the kinks you're into. If you're absolutely unwilling to sexually submit, at least have a mentor to teach you. Part of this teaching — this introduction to our world— is navigating a leather bar with someone who's been before.

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## **20. DON'T assume all sex acts are welcome or permitted in all areas.**

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A reality of our modern times is that sex in bars is hard to come by. Establishments are more heavily regulated now. Underground spaces are no longer underground. We live in the era of tagging your location on Facebook and surveillance cameras everywhere.

Park cruising is gone. Backroom cruising is nearly gone too. Depending on where you are, you may not be able to fuck in front of everyone — on the dance floor, by the bar, or otherwise. Then again, you may — but wait until you get a vibe of what is allowed (or better yet, ask) before doing something that might get frowned upon by staffers and management concerned with keeping their lease (a reasonable fear all leather bars face with the ever-growing threat of gentrification wiping them out).

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## **21. DON'T assume any leather bar is male-only. There are many women kinksters!**

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Your kinky, leathery family is not just men. Many women, genderfluid, and genderqueer folks are part of this awesome community. If the venue says “male-only” (and you're in the United States), it may not be a leather bar. It's likely a sex club or bathhouse with memberships and a paid entrance fee.

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## **22. DON'T assume the bar will provide lockers/clothes checks — have a “plan b” for where to stash your stuff.**

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Most leather bars have a clothes check (I admittedly have never been to one that provides lockers — it'd be a blessing for heavy gear venues). That said, you may venture out to the oddball leather bar with no coat check — nowhere to stash your things.

Bring a bag, leave your stuff in your car, or ask the bartender if you can safely keep something behind the bar. I've done all three. A coat check is better, and regardless what you do, you should keep your valuables (phone, wallet, keys) on your person, but there are

ways to have fun sans-check. Pro Tip: always ask nicely, tip generously, and be unfailingly polite.

### **23: DO always tip folks working at the clothes check — even if it's free.**

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Some coat checks are fundraisers. I've been to many leather bars where the people running the check were working for a community HIV clinic or were raising funds for a local leather or motorcycle club. In these cases, the coat check will likely cost money. Even if it's free, you should tip the people you trust to watch over your stuff.

### **24. DO keep in mind that substances change the safety protocol for certain kinky sex acts.**

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If you get drunk and decide that you want to get flogged, your ability to detect pain will be changed and lessened by alcohol. A good flogger won't flog someone who's drunk, but a leather bar makes the possibility of drunk flogging a distinct possibility. It's a considerably bigger safety risk if the person holding the flogger has been drinking or is drunk, in which case you should not do it.

### **25. DO support leather bars — especially in places outside your city.**

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Leather bars are disappearing. Thank gentrification, an evolving social climate, a world of tech, and a million other factors. Even the classic, non-leathery gay bar — the drag queen palace, the queer dive, the limp-wristed cocktail lounge, gossip central — is rapidly becoming an artifact of years past, pre-Grindr nostalgia: a throwback to that simpler time before we found sex partners with a simple click.

Leather and the sex communities synonymous with it — kink and BDSM — have transferred its arena of instruction to websites and blogs. As various internet entities crack down on adult content, we may now reasonably ask how kink and leather will survive. Thankfully it will, because there are a lot of kinky people out there. Regardless what you feel about the scene, about leather bars, or about any social interpretation or perception of what we do, there are a lot of people who enjoy getting tied up, who enjoy dominance and/or submission, who like wearing leather, and who want to be seen wearing it. Kink will change — it won't die.

Support leather bars. Give them your patronage. In many cities, the local leather bar is the last vestige of a public kink community, the last haven for sexual deviants, people who want and enjoy more than simple, vanilla sex with the lights on at the foot of the bed. If you want more out of sex and want to be around people who do, support our spaces. We need you.

## **26. DO respect your elders at leather bars.**

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They know more than you. Kinky men and women of a certain age likely have been doing this before the internet made kink accessible to everyone, before porn became what it is today, before information on fetish scenes was widely available.

When they started off, they put in serious work (and probably serious travel time) to find good equipment and willing players. While you should respect your elders everywhere, at a leather bar, they're the pros you must look up to. They're the ones you need to ask for information, guidance, help, and feedback. They're the ones passing down the ritual and care of leather along with all the wonderful, sexy parts of BDSM we love. They're the reason we have it.

## **27. DON'T be a racist. Don't tolerate those who are.**

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Leather bars are places of tolerance — places where you can be the queer, kinky, leather-loving, cum-hungry, rubbery, buckled-up, cigar-smoking, nonmonogamous, polyamorous, daddy-seeking, cocksucking person you are. They are not places where you can be racist.

One of the greatest things about kink is its celebration of differences — different bodies, different fetishes, different kinks, different ways to get off. We come here because we want something different, because we're willing to challenge what is considered "normal." This kinky, anti-establishment, anti-censorship sentiment — one of rebellion, sexual freedom, and revolt — is the heart of our community. You must allow your own freedom before you play this way. You must put in the work and the communication to enjoy kink; the hardest part of which is letting yourself explore it when cultural teachings instruct us to feel shame and embarrassment for what we like.

This celebration of difference, this core truth, should be enough to tell us that racism has no place here. Prejudice and discrimination are not welcome, and we should know better. Don't tolerate racists

## **28. DON'T assume dominance without earning it first.**

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This is less a rule of leather bars and more of a reminder to self-described dominants in all scenes: submissives don't automatically submit to you because you call yourself "Sir." Good, skillful dominants know this; the rest of you need to figure it out.

An inexperienced submissive new to the scene might think he or she has to submit themselves to your petting, commands, and barked orders on the back deck of the leather bar, but they don't. You don't get to be an asshole, regardless what you call yourself.

You earn dominance. You earn trust. You don't take it or assume it. I'm saying this as a skilled sub: learn your place.

## **29. DO be aware of your space, particularly if you're attempting to whip, flog, or spank someone in a crowded area.**

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Flying flails may hit someone nearby. If you're attempting to do single-tail whipping, you need lots of room. If you're trying to lead around a puppy on a leash, remember this gets hard in packed bars and on crowded dance floors.

If your senses or movements are impaired — if your arms are bound, or you're gagged or hooded — getting around will be harder as more people pile in. Be aware of the space and learn when play needs to stop and/or gear needs to be shed in order to move more easily.

## **30. DON'T take leather competitions too seriously.**

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Some men and women in various kink scenes (leather, rubber, pup, bootblacking, and so on) compete for titles. If they win, they're "titleholders," and will hold title for a year — their "title year." That's the simplified version.

Winners go on to compete in state, regional, national, and international competitions (the international leather competition happens every year in Chicago, Illinois, and is sensibly called "International Mr. Leather," or IML). Generally speaking, winners are expected to compete for community service, for some clearly-stated cause. In the beginning, we raised money for AIDS awareness and advocacy. Some titleholders have made it their mission to fight for homeless queer youth or LGBTQ people overseas. All are expected to care about the leather community and its history.

Competitions include a degree of pageantry and some public speaking. As an attendee at some of them, I can say they're a lot of fun. They bring our community together. But as always happens in anything involving winners and losers, politics and infighting can sour them.

Competitions are fun and made to do good, to give back. They're not meant to be taken too seriously. Enjoy them. Enjoy the spaces where they happen. Enjoy the people you meet at them.

### **31. DO learn the history of the leather bar.**

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It's important. Patrick Smith, the 37th International Mr. Leather titleholder, created [Leatherpedia](#) for this purpose — to pass down info on all things kink. Other organizations like the [Tom of Finland Foundation](#) and the [Leather Archives and Museum \(LA&M\)](#) do good work bringing leather history out of obscurity and into public record. Leather bars and their clientele were among the first to mobilize against AIDS. Some of the first gay bars in the United States were leather/kink-catered. Learn your history!

### **32. DO get a harness.**

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It's the basic uniform for someone hitting the scene. A harness will probably be the first piece of fetish gear you buy — the foundational building block on which most fetish looks start.

You may find, after some time, that you're not into harnesses. Many people in the leather community don't fetishize leather, and don't like harnesses. There's no gear you "have" to have, no item you "have" to buy, but you'll be the odd person out if you don't at least own a decent, simple, black leather harness. Keep one hanging in your closet.

### **33. DO ask the bartender about the scene — particularly if you're in an unfamiliar city.**

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Touched down in a new city? Go to the nearest leather bar. The bartender (or someone there) will be able to tell you where to go, what places sell gear, what parties are happening, where the guys cruise, where the gayborhood is, and so on.

You might say this is true of all gay bars — not so. Many dancey, disco-ball pop bars hire hot straight hunks with no clue about the scene. This is frustratingly true for many gay bars that cater to non-kinky clientele.

Being a bartender at a leather bar is different. It comes with a certain degree of responsibility. Your bartender may not be an Abercrombie & Fitch model with washboard abs. He may be a seasoned, bearded gentleman with a red hanky in his back pocket, a man who's seen everything, with a fat septum ring in his nose and hours of stories at the ready.

Treasure him, this patron saint of the gay leather bar. Some of them have delicious nicknames — “Daddy Sal,” “Pete The Pig,” or simply “Grunt” — and they know where to go. They’ll size you up immediately as a newbie and give you the lowdown. Tip generously when they fix you a stiff drink.

### **34. DO tell people if you’re a beginner.**

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You don’t want to present yourself as experienced if you’re not. You can get hurt this way. There’s no shame or embarrassment in saying you’re a beginner in kink. That’s part of the journey. Enjoy it every step of the way.

### **35. DO try more than one.**

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If your first night at the nearest leather bar is a letdown, try again. Avoid sweeping summations of the scene from a few experiences. If you decide your nearest one is not for you, go to a gay leather bar in New York City (Eagle NYC, The Cock), San Francisco (Powerhouse, Eagle SF, 440 Castro), Los Angeles (Eagle LA, Faultline), London (Eagle London, The Backstreet), Berlin (SO MANY). You may not have to travel far. More cities have bars with leather, fetish clientele than you think. Explore!

A willingness to try new experiences is crucial — it’s kind of the whole point of kink. The more you grow, you’ll learn the crucial role that leather bars play. They give our communities ground space — a place to exist that isn’t digital. They deliver the irreplaceable experience of interacting with each other.

In case you haven’t realized this yet, your sex life is important. When you go to a leather bar, you take a step into this idea that we can build a community based around what we like, how we want it, and how we play — and we do. Welcome to the family.