

Gays paint a Klein Karoo town pink

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IT WAS all feathers, stilettoes, flamboyant hairdos and sleek lingerie when the gay community descended on the conservative Klein Karoo town of Steytlerville at the weekend.

Dozens of gay couples and singles, from as far as Mossel Bay, flocked to the sleepy town near Graaff-Reinet to attend the gay pride party called The Queens of the Desert.

The party followed months of tension between the organisers and members of the community who opposed the event.

Organiser Mark Hinds claimed to have been at loggerheads with the Baviaans Municipality and local tourism office, whom he also accused of stealing his idea of bringing a festival to the small town.

Last year he had planned a gay festival called Karoo Experience Goes Pink. But this idea was scrapped, he claims, when the municipality went ahead with their own version, called the Rainbow Festival.

"A minority of old white people, who call themselves Christians, shot down the idea of having a gay party and even held a petition to oppose it. Our tourism people hijacked my idea and made their own version in which gays or the colour pink would not be part of it. To me, that spells discrimination."

Despite that, the Rainbow Festival proceeded last year and the second one starts next week, allegedly at a cost of R50000 to the municipality.

Mayor Ewald Look chairs the festival committee, which Hinds said is composed mainly of people against his brainchild.

Lindi van Rooyen from Baviaans Tourism said they arranged the Rainbow Festival, and it had nothing to do with Queens of the Desert.

Local pastor Brian Evans and shop owner Elize Joubert, who were said to be behind a petition, yesterday refused to be drawn into the matter. "We stepped in because we wanted to bring tourists into our town and it's not true that the Rainbow Festival excludes gays," said Van Rooyen.

Despite the war of words over who owns which event, Saturday's party went on uninterrupted at Karroo Hotel, which is owned by Hinds. Although not as packed as anticipated, those who attended went all out and came dressed to the nines as slaves, kings or queens with heavily made-up faces and manicured nails to pull off a convincing "girly" look.

The highlight of the event was the Steytlerville Follies by Hinds and his partner, Jacques Rabie, dressed as his alter ego Dame Leyla Lamborghini. Then it was off to the G. Party in which the queens and kings – and their slaves – drowned themselves in various beverages and danced the night away, some in unforgiving heels.

The Queen of the Desert title went to Crystal from Port Elizabeth, who showed off "her" slim body in a tight-fitting black number and matching accessories.

Andrew September, who travelled from PE with three friends, said the perception of homosexual people had always been negative and that pride events would help change the general attitude. "I came here to free my sexual orientation, to have fun and to feel proud of who and what I am.

"My family accepted my lifestyle but some people are still opposed to gays. Just by being here, I felt like a free bird even though we were the only coloured people here."

He added: "I hope to come back again." - By LINDILE SIFILE

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IN THE PINK: They came in all shapes and sizes, and in a variety of costumes, too. Picture: LINDILE SIFILE

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