

WHAT THE HELL IS BURNINGMAN? AND WHERE DID YOU GET THAT GREAT TAN?

By T. Mikey



They heckle each other as they pass, laughing, and parting ways with the friendly phrase “Have a great burn!!!”

And you wonder..., “Where the hell am I? Am I dreaming? Am I awakening? Am I doing both? What strange vision from the oddest corner of Salvador Dali’s subconscious am I actually walking through at this very moment? And where was I going again?”

Don’t Panic. It’s all completely normal. Just another typical

It’s hot, it’s so hot you and 47,000 of your strangest friends are naked... or very close to it. You hop on your bike and ride it in the direction of a rumor. An “amazing thing” is said to be out in that direction. You were told so by a beautiful stranger who refreshed you with a light misting of water and then offered you a backrub, only to disappear when you turned around. Odd, but you seem to just roll with it and not think twice. On your journey to this strange unknown place, you are caught in a ferocious dust storm. Without your goggles you would be blind, with your goggles you’re still blind. Visibility drops to inches as every centimeter of your exposed skin gets a gentle sandblasting from every conceivable angle. Yet, you continue to ride. Blind, you hear chaos and music all around you, surrounding you, yet still miles away. It retreats as it approaches. It calls to you, while ignoring you by name. You’re lost and disoriented while at the same time exactly where you’ve always wanted to be, at peace with yourself, and in the middle of a great adventure. As the dust starts to clear you see strange indiscernible shapes moving in the distance. You’ve been awake for days, hyper stimulated and overmedicated, so you can’t quite believe your brain when it’s telling you that you are actually witnessing what appears to be a near miss collision between a 25 foot high neon ghetto-blaster and a camel with four legs and two wheels.

Wednesday here on the playa. Your current address is 4:15 in a space where time no longer exists. You’re in the heart of something called Black Rock City, and everything is far better here than it has ever been before, because at this very moment you and 47,000 of your strangest friends are having the time of your lives, here, at Burningman.

Without realizing it, 19 hours have past since you began your bike ride. Next thing you know, you blink and it’s three weeks later, and you’re back home, back in you’re “normal” life. Staring at a computer monitor, and wondering what has happened.

You attempt in vane to explain your new collection of memories and photographs to your friends and loved ones who universally seem to respond the same way. All together now... and in perfect harmony....

“What the hell is Burningman? And where did you get that great tan?”

You roll your eyes and just try....

You see, for those who have been, no explanation is needed, or even possible. For those who might not have been, let’s start with just the facts, mam.

The Facts:

“Burningman” is a weeklong art and music festival held annually in Nevada’s Black Rock Desert. For 1 week of the year it is the 5th largest city in Nevada. This year there were over 47,000 participants strong, and it’s been growing exponentially for over 20 years.

Incredible art is displayed and alive in almost every inch of this 7 square mile event. At the end of the week, every thing that was brought in for the event is either packed up, or burnt down leaving no trace that this festival ever happened in this pristine desert environment.

Yes, amazing art annually burned to the ground, including the centerpiece of the event, a giant 70 foot high wooden and neon sculpture of a man, that is set ablaze on the last Saturday in an amazing spectacle of fireworks and pyrotechnics.

Every year incredible world-class artists descend on this event taking advantage of the HUGE space available and create mammoth art installations, many of which are larger than most buildings. Only to burn them down mere days after their completion in an awe-inspiring display of radical self-expression.

During the day temperatures can reach over 120 degrees, by night they may drop below 50. You are as challenged by the elements as you are by your neighbors particular artistic vision.

You will find no cell phone signal, but possibly discover poorly functioning Wi-Fi for the few that can’t pull themselves away from their laptops for a week.

It is part circus, part camping, and part waking dream where you are just as likely to discover your inner Zen as bump into a long lost friend.

There is no money allowed, no advertising either. It is a child friendly event that only bans: dogs, guns, and feathers (because of the litter).

\$250 dollars gets you in, and being mean or hostile is the greatest sin.

Any exchange of goods or services is done on an entirely “gifting” basis with no expectation of something in return, although trade is also allowed.

The music is thunderous and constant and coming at you from every corner in every genre but dominated by several techno beats that might drive you mad if you don’t have earplugs to sleep.



Groups of people organize together to form “Theme Camps”. This can be as simple as 2 cars of friends who park next to each other placing a plastic flamingo and an abstract painting in their ‘front yard’ to become the “Pink Plastic Abstract” camp. This is primarily done for fun and the expression of personality, but also serves the functional purpose of the “camp marker” so they and their friends might identify their car from the many thousands of others. Like tying a ribbon to your car’s antenna so you can find it in a crowded parking lot, but much more fun. Some other theme camps are significantly larger becoming a mini community of dozens or even hundreds. All unified under one common banner such as “Disorient”, “Automatic Subconscious”, “The Karma Chickens” or “The Barbie Death Camp” which decorates it’s front yard with a collection of thousands upon thousands of Barbie dolls. All of which have been burnt, decapitated, shredded, or in some other way tortured in a thumbing of the nose at the modern day values of what beauty is or is not.

The largest of these Theme Camps are located on the

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“Esplanade”, the inner most ring of Burningman’s camping area. These are large public spaces that are the loudest and brightest inviting all to come join their party while attempting to create something more interesting or impressive than the other large camps. This seems to take the form of a friendly competition between neighbors with no first place, simply fueled by the mindset of “Hey, look what we can do... pretty cool huh? Come check it out.” On this inner ring you will find enormous geodesic domes transformed into 24-hour nightclubs, steel scaffolding becoming art galleries, or circus tents designed as “chill spaces”. Such as the Hookah Dome that offers a quietly lit atmosphere with wall-to-wall pillows and water pipes containing flavored tobacco allowing you to relax the night away when the chaos outside becomes too overwhelming for your delicate senses.

The ground is affectionately and geologically known as “The Playa”. An alkaline clay like substance that is the modern day remnant of a prehistoric lake. Water turns it to mud, and walking or driving breaks it into a fine powder that can result in massive dust storms getting “playa” into every nook and cranny of everything including you. In a dark space, if you brush the playa from your heavily dusted clothing, it will make little

blue sparks like biting into a wintergreen lifesaver. Absolutely fascinating.

Only “Art Cars” may cruise the playa. An “Art Car” is any vehicle that no longer resembles a car, but has been transformed into a rolling party, a light show, or a flying pig of some sort. Feel free to hitch a ride and let it take you wherever it may. You’ll probably make many new friends whose names you will forget as they hand you a free drink before disappearing into the night.

At night the entire event is decorated in every color and manner of light created by man. From people in elaborate glow stick and EL wire costumes to stadium sized spotlights illuminating large installations to roaring displays of open fire being spun by a master juggler as green laser beams travel limitlessly overhead into the furthest reaches of outer space.

If the burning of “The Man” is Saturday’s climax, then “The Temple” is Sunday evening’s cuddling afterglow. Every year, a monumentally solemn and beautiful temple is expertly built deep in the desert, further out than the centrally located “Man”. All week visitors are invited to participate in the Temple’s meaning by writing their thoughts, feelings, hopes, dreams, poetry, and things left unsaid to loved ones across the face of its incredible design. In a week that has been screaming at you from every angle in every color of the double rainbow, the profound silence of the Temple Burn is truly deafening as the deepest sorrows of thousands are released to the heavens before kissing you good-night. Until next year my friends.

This year’s unique highlights included a complete double rainbow in the desert, a full lunar eclipse, a successful eyebrow singeing attempt at the world’s record for “largest non-military explosion”, and an act of premeditated arson on a sculpture that was going to be burnt anyway. Debate and litigation are currently ongoing.

But beyond such cold facts, such surface descriptions of things and events, what is Burningman?

What is Burningman to the people who know it, love it, and make it what it is? What are people finding here that is causing this cultural phenomenon to grow ever larger with each passing year?

Several “Burners”, as they are lovingly referred to, have been asked the single question: “What is Burningman to you?”

The testimonies are as basic and spectacular as the event itself.

“[Burningman] is frickin’ funny!”

Says “Neon”, a 46-year-old female from San Francisco, CA. She goes on to say, “To me, the event itself is a chance of a lifetime to live my dreams, and watch others live theirs. But then, year round, it spurs me to dream more and to create those dreams as well, both in and out of Black Rock City.

It is also an opportunity to connect with friends on a creative level and to create together a home, a neighborhood, and a community.

It is a vacation. It is a camping trip. It is BRC - the city of dreams. It is an art show of the most surreal kind. It is entertainment 24/7. It is inspiration. It is an audience. It is challenging. It is a mirror. It is a magnifying glass. It is temporary. It may disappear entirely one day, so I appreciate it while it lasts.”

Larry, described by his friends as a ‘washed up hippie’ had this to say, “To tell you the truth I’m not all that eager to get there. I mean... what happens when you get there? The whole thing is a very childish idea I suppose, but maybe we’d be better off if we did that more often. The trick is to find that point where “what you are” coincides with the world in some way. Where, it could possibly fit in. And then suddenly, your dream is there, and as in a dream you just step into the frame, and suddenly everything in your world is meaningful.”

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David, a 61-year-old male from Petaluma, CA responded, “Like we go there for some reason, but we’re not sure what we worship. I have no idea about Burningman, in terms of what it means. People say ‘hey, I’m thinking of going. Should I go?’ (pausing) I wouldn’t. (laughing) If I were you, I wouldn’t.” **

Ross, self-proclaimed “lower cased architect” expresses, “Just about everything about Burningman is hard, but everything about it is beautiful.” **

Todd, a 37-year-old entrepreneur currently exploring the south Pacific, asked, “Would you like a popsicle?” He seems to have not heard the question properly from such a distance.

“Tron-ee”, a 39-year-old male from Los Angeles, CA had to get this off his chest, “To me, Burningman quantifies the REAL American experience, not the government’s bull-shit or all the foreignista notions, just the core American ideals. I tell people that I believe that “Burningman” is the American Festival, to me it is freedom to express ourselves as we choose. “



“Mr. Bear”, a 49-year-old male from Sacramento, CA with an affinity for large plush costuming had this to say while he danced across broken glass, “I love learning about how people tick and why we do what we do. Then finding ways to push ourselves to be the best we can be. And yes someday BM will disappear. As with life, enjoy it while it is here.”

“Still Jill”, a highly talented graphic designer and gentle spirit from Sacramento, CA who does not discuss her age says, “briefly, Burningman to me, at best, is my childhood revisited embellished with community, ritual, and all the stuff that dreams are made of.”

