

# feel the burn

HOT PARTY

A newbie sees the light at Burning Man, the Nevada desert revel turned global movement



A laser-lit dance party draws some of the 70,000 attendees at Burning Man, a week-long celebration of creativity in Nevada's Black Rock Desert.



A new generation of Burners flips for the oversize art found on the Playa, the dusty expanse at the center of Black Rock City.

## “WELCOME HOME!”

boomed the burly, bearded man in hiking boots, an olive green kilt, and nothing else, as he smiled at my wife and me.

“How many times have you been to Burning Man?”

“This is our first time,” I said.

“Ah, virgins!” He smiled even more broadly. “Come on out of your car. We have a special ceremony for you!”

He wrapped me in a hairy hug, then pointed at some other newcomers in the lane next to ours, sprawled on their backs, flapping their arms in the dust. “Do you want to do a dust angel?”

No, no. I’d been driving for six hours, the sun was setting, and we still had to find a place to set up our camp. I did not want to do a dust angel.

“OK. That’s fine,” he said cheerily. “How about kissing the dust?”

That didn’t sound very appealing either, but OK. I knelt and



puckered my lips toward the desert floor as Kuniko, my wife, snapped photos.

Kiltie clapped approvingly. “Now you get to ring the bell!”

He handed me a metal wand and led me to a two-foot-long suspended bell. I thwacked it three times. The vibrations surged with an electric sizzle up my arm, and the tones rang pure and clear over the dust-baptized cars, trailers, and RVs that snaked behind us, into the dusky Nevada desert.

About an hour later, after we had finally found a congenial place to park our camper and had set up our half-dome day-tent, we were huddled out of the wind eating dust-coated bread and cheese when a middle-aged man and his young daughter on their way to the Porta Potties spotted us and immediately detoured toward our tent.

“Welcome home!” he said and gave us both big hugs. His name was Tim, this was his fourth Burn, and he and his campmates were setting up a bar at the end of our block. “We’ll have it up by tomorrow night. Come on down, and have a drink!”

He paused. “I’m not going to try to give you a lot of advice about Burning Man. You need to experience it your own way. But if you don’t mind, I would like to mention one thing. The wind comes from that direction, so you might want to move your car to the other side of your tent. That way it’ll create a natural windbreak. The wind can get pretty intense out here.”

With that, he bowed and disappeared into the dust.

A half hour later he reappeared, holding a tiny vial. “I wanted to give you something to start off your week,” he said, handing the vial to Kuniko. “That’s got Playa dust from 2013, the Burn that changed my life.” And with a wink, he disappeared again.

Welcome to Burning Man.

DESPITE THE EFFUSIVE welcomes, this pop-up metropolis in the Black Rock Desert didn’t feel like home. For one thing, dust was everywhere. It coated my face, hands, arms, clothes; my bread, cheese, salami, soup, beer; my towel, sleeping bag, pillow. It penetrated into places I didn’t even know I had places. Sleeping was a challenge too. *Thumpa-thumpa-thumpa* music emanated from somewhere throughout the night.

I’d been hearing about this festival for years. And some of my friends had attended numerous times since Larry Harvey and Jerry James first burned a wooden man in a spontaneous ceremony on San Francisco’s Baker Beach in 1986. For me, though, Burning Man had always seemed a bit too cultish—and yes, a bit too primitive. A week in a desert, enduring blazing days and frigid nights, with no showers, freeze-dried camping food, and stinky Porta Potties? No, thank you.

Yet here I was, awaking on our first morning to music pumping from the camp half a block away and a couple

dancing in the street out front—he in a fetching black dress, she in a sparkly blue-and-green bra and bikini bottom and a long, flowing head scarf. The Burning Man dress code might best be termed “Come as you wish you were.” The styles ranged from beach to boudoir, Moroccan bazaar to intergalactic bizarre: Think bikinis and big furry boots, medieval robes and Middle Eastern veils, Victoria’s Secret meets *Star Wars* cantina meets *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*.

Dressed in Japanese pilgrims’ outfits that were tame in comparison, Kuniko and I hopped on our bicycles to explore the Playa. The setting for the event was a stunning tract of 4,400 acres of arid alkali flatness about 110 miles north of Reno. On this expanse, where a month ago there had been nothing, a C-shaped city grid had been laid out, consisting of 12 semicircular streets alphabetically arranged from Arno to Lorenzo, with neighborhoods demarcated in 15- or 30-minute intervals from 2:00 to 10:00, each one filled with tents, trailers, RVs, canopies, campers, and slow-rolling art cars.

**P**edaling past Arno, we stopped at the inner ring called the Esplanade. Beyond that a khaki-colored plain stretched to a range of gently serrated mountains, scattered with gigantic artworks. There was an arcing 50-foot-tall humpback whale mother and calf made with tens of thousands of tiny pieces of stained glass; two wooden gorillas about five times human size, sitting contemplatively in the dust; a bristling metal boar about 20 feet tall and 30 feet long, over whose spiky sides adventurous Burners were clambering. The Playa was studded with more than 200 such pieces, each one seemingly set at random, each one inviting—almost requiring—interaction.

To our left a road had been created by two rows of regularly spaced light poles that led from the city’s central plaza to the Man himself, designed in accord with the 2016 theme—Da Vinci’s Workshop—to look like the “Vitruvian Man.”

The light pole-framed road continued beyond the Man toward the Temple, which would be burned the night after the Man, the contemplative counterpoint to the bacchanalian revel of the Man’s burn. Built all of wood and embellished by more than a hundred decorative wooden lanterns, the tiered Temple soared to a spire in the Buddhist style. Inside, the atmosphere changed from delight and awe to grief and yearning. In the center was an altar where photos and messages scrawled on paper had been left. “To Lauren, Thank you for a golden friendship. See you in the Next. Love, your Best friend Susan.” “Eric and Austin, I can’t believe that cancer took away both of my beautiful boys. I hope you’re raising hell in heaven! Eternal love, Dad.” “We all miss you Jeff. Shine on you crazy diamond.”

AS THE WEEK PROGRESSED, we were pummeled by the wind, pounded by the sun, lathered by the dust, and overwhelmed by

**Goggles search:**  
Dressed for maximum style and protection against the elements, returning Burners often adopt “Playa names” for the week. Clockwise from top left, meet No Name and William the Wizard, both from L.A.; Fire Goddess, from Moscow; and Playa Maya, from Seattle.

**THE PLAYA WAS** studded with more than 200 artworks, each one seemingly set at random, each one inviting—almost requiring—interaction.

Music-blasting art cars and climbable sculptures—such as Lord Snort, a wild boar made of steel by artist Bryan Tedrick—transform the Playa into a 24/7 playground.





Before and after burn: Mike Cline of the Great Sammich Ride hands out free grilled PB&J sandwiches; people gather around the burning remains of the Man (below) to dance, pray, and make dust angels.



JIM URQUHART/REUTERS (AERIAL)

the sheer scope and spectacle of the scene—and yet we found ourselves surrendering to Burning Man’s alchemy.

Since using cash was forbidden except to purchase coffee, chai, and lemonade at the Center Camp Café and ice at three ice-dispensing stations, a culture of giving had been instilled and nurtured. As we pedaled through the city, we were invited to stop for chilled white wine and ice-cold beer; mojitos, mimosas, and margaritas; s’mores, hot dogs, and grilled cheese sandwiches; bacon, pancakes, and pizza. All for free—and it wasn’t just the food and drink. Everything was given away: the all-night dance raves and sunset jazz sets, the yoga sessions and chakra meditations, the talks on mindfulness and space-time physics, even the Introduction to Bondage sessions. Watching a city of 70,000 people function without the use of currency was mind expanding; Black Rock City began to feel like a socioeconomic Galápagos.

I was shy on my own first foray into gift giving. It just seemed odd to stop people I didn’t know and thrust a gift upon them. But when I saw a woman traipsing across the Playa in a lacy black gown and opera gloves, carrying a matching parasol, I impulsively pulled from my backpack one of the beach ball-style inflatable world globes I’d brought. “Excuse me, but I’d like to give you the world,” I said. Her face broke into a dazzling smile. “I’ve got the whole world in my hands!” she sang.

I BEGAN TO UNDERSTAND how this experience could truly be life changing and why so many Burners could be inspired to come back year after year. It coalesced for me in one small but pivotal moment when we dropped in on an open-air session called Meditation Through Movement. Eastern music filled a canopied space, and a woman with a dulcet voice was encouraging three dozen people to move however they felt comfortable. At dances I’m usually the person behind the punch bowl, but somehow in this setting, my balletic baggage was left in the dust. Before long I was swaying through the space, dipping and twirling, feeling liberated and embraced by all the people dancing around me and throughout Black Rock City.

I wasn’t quite ready for my naked torso to be covered in shimmering body gel at Glittercamp or to have a team wash it all off at the Human Carcass Wash.

But maybe next year.

Traveler editor at large **DON GEORGE** (@don\_george) is the author of *The Way of Wanderlust*. Whenever possible, photographer **AARON HUEY** (@argonautphoto) wears gold shoes and a rhinestone-encrusted lion headpiece.



**LAY OF THE LAND**  
The Temple stands in the center of the circular Playa, surrounded by a 4,400-acre temporary city.

## Get Your Burn On

### PLAN AHEAD

#### 2017 Dates

The next Burning Man takes place August 27-September 4, with the theme “Radial Ritual.” The Man will burn on September 2, the Temple on September 3.

### Buying Tickets

Options for purchasing tickets are detailed on the Burning Man website (see below). In 2016, the basic ticket cost \$390. If you’re parking a vehicle, you’ll also need a vehicle pass.

### Survival Essentials

Water! (Veterans say 1.5 gallons per person per day; we used about a gallon per person.) Enough easy-to-prepare-and-eat food for your entire stay. Sunscreen. Sanitary wipes. Hat. Headlamp. Dust mask. Goggles. More than one pair of sunglasses. LED lights. Festive attire. Gifts. Trash bags (leave no trace).

### ON THE PLAYA

#### Getting There

Most Burners drive, but you can also arrive by bus, taxi, or plane (a temporary airport

operates at Black Rock City during the festival)—and every year at least a few people parachute in. The website has detailed information and directions. Traffic tip: Expect to wait in line many hours while entering and leaving the festival. For a shorter queue, arrive a day or two after the opening or stay an extra day.

### Camping Options

From pitching a tent to parking a luxury RV, attendees have a spectrum of options. We rented a camper van from JUCY ([jucyusa.com](http://jucyusa.com)) and found it extremely comfortable and convenient, and comparatively affordable. (Note: The camper doesn’t have a toilet or shower.)

### BEYOND THE PLAYA

#### Burning Man Around the World

Festivals based on the Burning Man ethos and experience are now held throughout the U.S. and around the world, including Australia, Austria, France, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, South Africa, and Ukraine.

### More Information

[burningman.org](http://burningman.org)