

# Twenty-Nine Thousand People Practicing the Art of Radical Self-Expression

## Sounds like trouble? Sounds like fun? Sounds like Burning Man 2002

story by [Carla King](#)  
photos by Mark Bava



It's been called a neo-Pagan gathering of tribes, a drug fest, a concert, a porn show, an art show, a redneck flame-throwing vehicle contest, a rave, a community of utopia-dreamers, a demonstration of liberian freedom. No matter what you call it, it's the best place to get your ya ya's out so you can act normal for the rest of the year. But once you go to Burning Man you know that you can't put a name on it, that none of these descriptions are accurate and they are all accurate. Paradoxically, once you go to Burning Man you know that you can never again act normal for the rest of any year of the rest of your life and feel okay about it.

The first year I attended Burning Man was 1995 when there were only 4000 participants, (there had been 2000 the year before). In 1996 there were 8000 people and in 1997 it grew to 16,000, and then it stopped doubling. This year they estimated a population of 29,000. It was a different event, that first year. My boyfriend Michael and I were invited to camp with friends from the arts community in San Francisco. We arrived in the dead of night and were told to "drive ten miles straight ahead and veer right a bit, and two miles later you'll be there." Some things you have to take on faith. We proceeded forward and then after a few miles raced my mother's Suburban as fast as it would go with the lights off. It was like flying. We could have been killed.

The years I've participated in Burning Man I could have been killed in any of a variety of interesting and non-interesting ways. Least interesting would have been dehydration. Over 100 people are treated for it each day. Most interesting might have been this year's star survival story -- a woman jumped from a plane, her parachute failed and the backup chute only worked for a little while before collapsing.

Miraculously, she limped away happy to have only a few broken bones and a really great story to tell for the rest of her life.



The first year we brought lots of water, as advised (there's none provided), filled a couple of coolers with ice and stuffed a box full of canned corn and ramen noodles. It never occurred to us that it would rain, so I filled my suitcase with colorful sarongs and bikini tops, and a big straw and army boots, as my friend Marcia recommended, to protect my feet from a myriad of foot afflictions that the alkaline playa causes.

But we had not packed the essentials for what founder Larry Harvey likes to call "radical self-expression:" accoutrements like parasols, body paint, six-inch white vinyl platform boots, flame throwers, tightie whities (men's white boxer shorts), carnival beads, funny hats, balloons, carpets, pillows, inflatable chairs, and things that other people thought were essential, such as their grandmother's heirloom bone china for serving a proper high-tea. No matter, our friends had brought all that - pillows and shade structures, the china tea sets, hookahs, and niceties like cookies (in neutral, mild, or strong). We experienced the miracle of ice cream pops from a passing ice cream vendor, and I constructed a parasol of an old umbrellas and fabric to lash onto my bicycle, and when the tightie white guy came around with his bullhorn in the morning loudly demanding donations for his tightie white decorating camp a half dozen sleepy campers ran out from their tents waving tightie whities. These formerly bright white men's undies would later reappear on someone else's body sometime during the festival, painted or bejeweled or fringed or artfully ripped to shreds at the tightie white camp. The citizens of Black Rock City were extremely generous, sharing shade, water, food, and fun, art, music, transportation, hammers and PVC pipe and whatever you forgot or didn't know you would need. You couldn't pay for anything, so if it wasn't free you bartered for it. A cold beer might get you a motorcycle tour of the playa. Some help putting up a tent might get you a massage.



Over the years I have arrived earlier and earlier because I like to watch Black Rock City evolve. An ever-larger circle of friends have become active participants, building pyramids and space ships and light towers, etching crop circles onto the playa floor, organizing post-burn dances, and we've even arranged to bring in camels. (The Aussie who owned them traded rides for sex or beer. Mostly, he got beer.)

This year Michael and I, like our other campmates, decided to take a year off from creating a Big Event, but we still arrived early so to rope off space for and begin work on a cushy camp for about 50 people, and to monitor the progress of the larger art and transportation projects approved by the DMV (Department of Mutant Vehicles). To our surprise The Man had already been erected, this year on a double-tiered lighthouse, and it was outlined in blue by the neon artist. In years past early-arrivers would have been recruited to help erect the man, a procedure involving lots of strong rope, sweat and yelling.

Exhausted from the eight hour journey -- much of the last couple of hours creeping at 25 miles per hour through tiny Nevada towns whose law force threatened a near certainty of lengthy, tedious drug searches if pulled over for any reason -- we arrived at the gates where at 11pm a gaggle of ticket takers and greeters dressed in evening gowns and clown suits, cowboy gear and Darth Vader costumes, were enthusiastically going about their duties of giving us maps and rules (if it doesn't come out of your body it doesn't go in the potty, no feathers or loose glitter, piss clear - hydrate regularly - and make sure that your form of radical self-expression doesn't interfere with somebody else's form of radical self-expression, unless they want it to.)

"Welcome to Burning Man. Could you open the back of your truck please?"

"Sure...What are you looking for?"

"Aliens. There have been a number of alien invasions into the city today."



Once cleared of suspicion of harboring aliens, (or guns or people without tickets) we were let through to the ticket takers, one a fat, hairy Santa wearing only the top half of his costume, the other a lithe Catholic school girl lookalike wearing only the bottom half of hers. Tickets to Burning Man cost from \$130 to \$200 (the longer you waited to buy them, the higher the price). The fee pays the Nevada Bureau of Land Management for land use, and ever more money to the Nevada police who insist upon monitoring a situation that doesn't really need monitoring. Black Rock City has extremely little history of crime, much less crime than in nearby Reno, and if the community hasn't been able to take care of any problems, the [Black Rock Rangers](#) have been. I've seen them settle camp boundary disputes and eject people overtly selling drugs, identify and secure dangerous structures, and confiscate firearms. Other money gobblers are medical facilities (mostly victims of dehydration and minor lacerations from tripping over tent stakes), a year-round staff that plan the positioning of the city and the large art projects, handles media, creates a huge, comfortable center camp, an airport, and provide for clean up after the event to catch all the stray boya feathers (now banned, like loose glitter), blown-away paper, tents, hats, and clothing, and to fill tent-stake holes from campers who didn't really get the leave no trace message.

Participants bring their own water, food, shade, garbage bags (pack it in, pack it out) and must be completely self-sufficient. Shower structures are popular building projects, but Burning Man has hired trucks that regularly come by to spray water onto the streets to keep the dust down. I remember when these truck drivers were grinning from ear-to-ear from the sight of hundreds of naked women chasing them all day, and I remember fondly the days when you used to be able to get them to stop for you to take a shower standing still. But now the drivers hardly look at the women, they're more interested in the camps and the art, which is how most Burning Man participants feel after the very short acclimation to nudity and . These trucks blow their horns when they're coming and in hot dry years its like a mating call to water, causing everyone nearby to shed their clothing and run for it, trying not to loose their footing in the slippery playa mud, and being careful not to get any of the non-potable tepid water in their mouths. Trotting along, nearly blind from the water shooting out straight behind the truck just about at your heads, ducking and turning so that you can get all of your hair wet, sometimes holding hands with the unknown person next to you so that you can both keep your balance, is exhilarating on many levels. When you're soaked, you try to inch out of the path of others who are running for the truck, and walk back to camp with a smile, heart pounding from the run, dripping with water, your feet collecting an inch or more of mud and thinking heaven help you if you'd slipped and fallen, because you'd have taken down half a dozen people with you, inevitably beginning a mud fight ending up with you all walking around as mud

creatures all day long. I can tell you from experience it's not so bad, and besides, mud is a natural sun block.



We hoped that this year the weather would stay hot and windless and dry and that some camp nearby would be building an Olympic-sized swimming pool. There's nothing like arriving at Burning Man in a dust storm or a rain storm or a combination dust and rain storm, but a clear still night is beautiful. The stars practically sit on your head as you look for your camp armed with a [map of a city](#) that is still in the construction stages that is being heartily built by people working with PVC pipe, rope, fabrics, wood, and power tools run by generators. There is no time here. A romantic notion until you want to sleep. For this I bring a large bottle of earplugs.

We drove slowly around toward the center camp structure, luckily the street signs were already up, and then out toward Mizzen and 90 degrees where our group had planned to camp. We didn't find them there, but at Midship and 100 degrees because someone else had come even earlier and squatters rights rule unless you are a [theme camp](#). Theme camps are located on the esplanade, a noisy, blinking, flashing waterfront that looks out on the island of the Man - this year mounted atop a three-tiered pedestal resembling a lighthouse - lined with storefronts, club fronts, domes, mazes. For example, there is a tunnel of tinsel lit with Christmas lights to walk through wearing 3D glasses, a Death Guild Thunderdome where people strapped to bungee cords bash the crap out of each other with foam swords, a Pamper Camp where you can get your toes painted in sparkly colors, a miniature golf course, a dark drum 'n bass club lit only in black light, and a drive-in theater showing sci-fi or porn, depending.

But only a few of these had yet been built, so we drove along with the windows open to the dry playa dust in the night air to the sound of sledgehammers pounding rebar and the sight of figures scurrying about making their camps or socializing, asking directions here and there and quickly learning the parts of a ship from bowsprit to fantail. The theme was The Floating World. Most people know their planets better than the parts of a ship (Bowsprit, Forecastle, Mainmast, Midships, Mizzen, Wheelhouse, Fantail). The cross-streets were marked in degrees, and we found ours at about 100. Several camp members had roped off a rectangle with stakes in the ground topped with our marker for WOW Camp.

Exhausted, we set up a small tent and slept. In the morning we would put up our big tent and shade structure and make a plan for camp with the rest of the members who had already arrived. Our group created central plaza constructed around a two-story wooden tower (the better to see the playa with). From that we attached a sixty-five foot parachute secured in a circle around the tower with eight-



Photo by Bruce Damer

foot pieces of PVC pipe secured atop three-foot lengths of rebar pounded into the playa. All this was further secured with copious lengths of rope and our structure was either a fabulous sun shelter or an enormous kite, that is, if we'd designed it wrong and the wind came up. (One year our friend's twenty-foot high wood-and-fabric pyramid was lifted up and placed gently across the street right next to a dozen people who were sleeping in their dome.) With a lot of sweat and water and salty foods and beer, we raised our landmark touchstone, a gentle green and white mottled shade under which we spread tarps and tattered Persian carpets and pillows covered in bright fabrics. Over the next days our town square overflowed with an abundance of dancers or sleepers or food; trays of fruits, dates and nuts, breads and cheeses and grapes, wine, tea, and a giant hookah from which wafted the scent of tobacco and other herbs flavored with fruit.



A smaller blue dome was erected next door. This became the costume dome one day and girlfriends enticed me to work with them amongst a pile of tulle and netting and various buttons and shells and strings. This year I had come somewhat prepared, and I sewed fishnet on my white tutu and glued jewels and shells to my mask, painted white vinyl boots with blue and green bubbles and, with much consultation, created a costume. The next day I was walking down the runway in center camp at the fashion show, something I would have never guessed that I would do, but I have pictures to prove it.

Breakfast in camp and the creation of a parasol for my bicycle occupied most of one day. At around ten o'clock the sun made our tent a sauna and so I made coffee and began work. It took most of the day to do it, but my parasol was fringed and mounted securely behind my seat. I took an experimental ride to the Porto potties a block away, accepted compliments, and then took a nap.

Prime time for exploring the playa begins in the late afternoon when the air becomes cooler and the light softens and the big art projects in the playa begin to light up. You would think that on a moonscape-flat playa that you'd be able to find all of the art projects because most of them are huge, but humans become confused in large expanses of empty space. The Man and Black Rock City are always visible but how to find that piece that looks on the map to be about 90 degrees northwest of the Man? Especially when you are distracted by the opera rehearsal, something about monkeys and aliens on a ship in the middle of the ocean? Or when you find an acre of grass -- real grass -- planted with a garden of metal flowers.



The feeling of grass in the middle of a dead ocean is a revelation. "Do I live with this every day at home?" I ask myself, face down in the green green grass. "Why haven't I always considered it a miracle? Why don't I appreciate it, lie face down on it to smell the greenness and the dirt, not caring if it stains my white tutu or smears my makeup?" And then, on the grass, you might meet someone dancing amongst the flowers, or a small orgy that needs an audience, or a monk chanting in baritone. All distractions from your destination.

I never made it to the [Demon Containment Unit](#) or Pinwheel Oasis or the [Mystic Mermaid](#). But one evening at dusk I admired the [The Egeria Firefall](#) and the [Lily Pond](#), and just before sunset there was a mist of dust two feet high from footsteps and bicycle wheels and suddenly cheering from twenty thousand people in appreciation of the sun disappearing over the mountains so far away. It will be light for an hour more and then the night begins, a completely different planet.

Back to camp for scarves and leggings and hats and coffee and champagne, a makeup touch up (redder lipstick, heavier eyeliner, lots of glitter) and flashlight batteries, coffee and champagne and a snack, then back to the playa. Everyone was laughing by now. Everyone was awake. Everyone went out on the esplanade or to the desert. We headed out into the desert.



Michael was attracted by a groovy trancy thump and we dumped our bikes and went to see what the crowd was looking at. People made way for us as much out of generosity as to watch the delight come to our faces, to re-experience their own delight. It was a man swimming through the desert.

In reality the swimmer was made from plaster-casting; a man imitating a sequential swimming movement. These dozen stark white casts were set around the perimeter of a wooden turntable. The turntable was rotated by hand-cranking an attached bicycle wheel, and when the speed of the turntable reached the speed of the strobe light flashing the figure really appeared to be swimming.

Everyone cheered in the moonless night and then we were silent in awed contemplation. For a long moment we were the swimmer swimming to groovy, trancy music in a dead inland sea. The moment was a construct of the artist but also a construct of an audience willing to revel in fantasy. I will never forget it.

The moment at the "Sisyphus" installation was a favorite, along with the nearby Aural Reef, a UFO-shaped building containing art objects including sea plants, octopi, jellyfish, Atlantean mannequins, and a captain's wheel. The place had been described as "a fully interactive sonic playground." Inside was a large open room with a mazelike path through it so people could touch, poke, rub, spin, or bend things. Each touch would cause a musical tone, voice, a loop, bang or crash. I took the captain's wheel for a while and as people next to me pushed buttons the sounds I was making - or thought I was making - changed. Behind me a man sat with his head back in his hands listening to the cacophony. As I twirled the wheel a group of guys in their early twenties bounded in, pupils dilated with ecstasy. They asked me how it worked and I told them which sounds I was making and which buttons and knobs were making other sounds. We played together and they believed me for a while. I think I liked this installation best because people were interacting, playing with each other and thinking about what they were doing in an active way. I liked it because it incorporated so many different elements: architecture, art (wood, sculpture, fabric, plastic), music, and technology, and counted on participation to work at all.

Goals are futile because the diversions take all night. There might be a fire dance, an opera, or a musical performance, and it was usually by surprise that I discovered it was four or five in the morning. Back at camp there was music and champagne, a dozen little parties in tents and in trailers, and strangers under the parachute and up on the tower. Conversation was about the finds of the night, the opera or the art or the little camp down at the end of the street with black light paintings, or how a Native American drummer had freaked out and stomped in the coals in his bare feet - just a show, we all agreed - or about the Queens dressed in French maid uniforms who came through camp in uniforms armed with feather dusters. Too soon the sun came up. We cheered it and then slept, but not too long because time sleeping was time wasted.



In the morning I woke to a yoga class being held under the parachute, but Burning Man isn't about consistent practices, I argued to myself, making coffee and drowning my cereal with tepid soy milk. The water truck came by I shed my clothes and ran after it. After yoga class, one of our deejays, who had both brought their huge music collections, began the day's groove, along with a series of guest deejays who found our mellow scene and offered to give them breaks. We all agreed that this was the best camp ever. There were no slackers in the group, everyone pulled their weight building camp, going for ice, entertaining or being entertained, painting, teaching yoga, fabricating masks, making music and food and complicated drinks with rum and mint and lots of ice. But the most memorable moment in camp was that sunset in the light rain that beat the dust down, that sunset in the light rain on the day that the women painted their breasts and rode together on bicycles two thousand strong through the streets in a traditional Burning Man parade called Critical Tits, a parody of the Critical Mass bicycle protest in San Francisco. This was my first year in the ride, not that I hadn't wanted to join before, but who wears a watch at Burning Man? It's nearly impossible to plan anything and usually I'm absorbed in some other activity when the parade rides by. But this year I did see somebody's watch and I had a half an hour to spare so I rode back to camp, found Michael there, and yelled, "Hurry! Paint my breasts! Critical Tits is in half an hour!"



With the paint barely dry I grabbed a water bottle, got back on my bike and rode furiously toward the Man under the three o'clock sun to find the parade already in motion. I found a place to cut in and yay! I finally did it! My temporary compadres were a group of women with parasols who were very creative in coming up with tit-related chants: What's the best? Breasts! What is "it"! Tits! We rode and shouted funny slogans, and grinned back at the spectators who lined the road, the women who waved their bras in the air, and the men whose grins would last for days more.

Even though we had such a comfy camp lounge it was difficult to stay put because of all the stuff you just knew was going on outside. With the best of intentions, you may be on your way to see a fabulous art installation, but get waylaid at Pamper Camp for

a pedicure, or for a massage in Sunscreen Massage Camp, or a 'rest with a view' in a hammock three stories high up in the snooze tower. And accidents will happen. I crashed bicycles with a drunk neo-Nazi who had "I hate cops" tattooed across his chest. He said he was sorry and that he loved me, and then rode on to crash into the playa floor all by himself. On my way home I called out to some neighbors who were in the habit of running out from their tent to mist people with lavender-scented ice water from a garden sprayer, and when I got home I made peppermint tea, someone served prosciutto and melon, and we rested again.

Though some certainly argue this point, I believe that at Burning Man, drugs are redundant. Especially this year when every day was hot and still, there were no rainstorms or dust storms or whiteouts lasting for hours to create any down time. This year there were only a few dust devils passing through to keep you on your toes, and one hour-long dust storm. Just enough to remind you that nature's in charge.



Yep, in this scene, drugs are redundant. Imagine that the stars are crystalline points of light on a stark black night where on the playa there sails a Spanish ship manned by a dozen sailors followed by a bright red lobster that holds two people in its belly crawling slowly amongst the cracks, followed by a fish made of blue fur swimming through the shimmering dust. What hallucination can top that? A gigantic bright yellow rubber duck floats in the giant tub that is the playa surrounded by purple mountains. It glows in the distance, a beacon for dancers and adventurers looking for love or sex or company, or another way to get high if that only means twirling outside under the starlight. Imagine that if you walk back from this place, fifteen minutes toward Black Rock City, you find yourself in a pond of metal lilies floating knee-high on nearly invisible stalks, each one lighting up as you pass by, or a grassy patch of playa planted with flowers ten feet tall and the Man in Blue Neon standing guard beyond it all, waiting to be purified in flame.



By now we were in the groove of the art and fashion and time warp, and into being neighbors, friends, lovers, sharers of energy and food and gifts the way children share. There were more children than ever this past year, wide-eyed at men and women in the nude, painted bodies moving joyfully as the mood shifted ever farther from the past into the now. WOW! "Mommy, why is that naked man's skin all green?" and "Daddy, why is that lady wearing a blue penis on her hat?" and "Can we ride our bikes to that camp that does the face painting?"

The tightie whitie man drove round with his bullhorn scolding us for not running out to meet him with dozens of whitie tighties like in the old days. I don't know if anyone ever gave him any, if I'd had any I'd have run out just to shut him up. I put my earplugs in and slept in bliss until the tent became too hot and it was time for coffee and a run to the water truck passing by, then onto the more serious business of trade. No commerce is allowed and so if you want glitter you go to glitter camp and barter for it. Maybe somebody there needed an extra toothbrush or maybe a shoulder

massage, a poetry reading or dance performance, glue or water or miraculous cold beer or a slice of watermelon.

By this time the playa, dry and cracked like a turtle's shell, was holding us hostage to our own creativity, no longer a luxury or an effort but an obligation to improvisation and no longer limited by the opinions of the world outside. The Floating World encouraged light and life in a dead sea and we gave it life if life means wheels and bare feet and bodies covered in mud or in blue and green tulle, sparkling beads, hats with lives of their own, glittering whitecaps of sunlight on pieces of welded metal, sparks of real flame and the darkness of smoke, of illusions galore fashioned by minds newly challenged to survive and entertain. Never was the world both so simultaneously light and so dark and at night the earth twirled so fast that the stars began falling, drawn to our luminescence.

The Man burned into a pile of ashes for a crowd that had reverted to the wildness of being human. What we created, and what we burned! We burned the Man, three stories high on his lighthouse floating in the desert sea, and the next night we burned a temple lovingly built to celebrate joy. We cried with joy as the white flame licked the stars and burned away plodding spirits, our sadness about death and love, and then we returned renewed to create again, crawling at 25 miles per hour past the tiny Nevada towns and news of a coming war on the radio, and we knew that if 29,000 people can make a vastly diverse group of people cooperate happily with one another in the stark reality of the desert then a solution is possible.