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Utopia Is Nowhere

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"He could have easily been dead," said a British musician who helped pull one bloody body from the rubble. Of the nine people in the hammock when it collapsed, most were just bruised and shaken, but a few were sired away to the local hospital. Doctors removed one man's tiger suit to staple his scalp.

It was the second night of [Nowhere](#), the European outpost of the [Burning Man](#) festival. Over a couple weeks this July in the desert of northern Spain, 631 individuals from 23 countries, six to 60-something years old, built, inhabited, and destroyed a glittering city of light and steel.

Like Burning Man, Nowhere upholds the principle of radical self-reliance. Put yourself in an environment that wants to kill you, and make magic. That's the game.

Like [old time hippies](#), Burners shun money and the Man, and promote community and environmental ethics, obeying the [rules](#) of no commerce, gifting, and leave no trace. Participants salute the sun like [yogis](#), meditate in mosque-like domes, share their skills and belongings like early-day [kibbutzniks](#), beat bare feet into the dust like ancient tribes, and don the saris, sarongs and other international/indigenous/light-weight accoutrement beloved by hippie culture.

But when the sun sets, attendees wrap themselves in lycra, leather, and luminescent wire, strap on fairy wings, capes, and bunny ears, duct tape nipples, and snap on glow sticks in a collision of [rave culture](#), [Xanadu](#) and circus sideshow that might leave your average hippie mildly confused.

Burners don't want to be one with nature; they want to beat it. During the day, hung-over revelers hide out in the shade, swearing at the heat and dirt that sticks to every surface. No one kumbaya-ed with the dust tornado that whipped someone's tent a hundred feet in the air. Rather, technology is used to overcome and augment nature, building a cybernetic metropolis of decadence and dance in the harsh [Aragon](#) plains.

No camp at Nowhere attempted techno-mastery more mightily than Ubertown. Its residents filtered out the algae and pesticides of the nearby river water to fill a sizeable swimming pool and built a sky-scraping DJ tower, topped with an "UBERTOWN" befitting [Gotham City](#). And completing their complex, raised high above the ground: an oversized hammock filled with plush baby blue pillows.

The hammock's collapse was a real test of the radical self-reliance idea. When a structure folds with you inside it, the natural urge is to find somebody to blame. But when that Nowhere band is clipped around your wrist, you agree to assume any and all risks. From then on, the only person responsible for you is a probably intoxicated you.

And for good reason. Nowhere's [all-volunteer organizing team](#) would never vet every building project, and take on that crushing liability. Unlimited expression qua insane, monumental building projects in hostile climes wouldn't work if compensation were offered for every scratch and scrape.

"There's always a trade-off between security and experience," explains Nowhere's Build Manager [Alan Belardinelli](#). "This is a place that isn't totally sanitized and safe. And that creates opportunities for personal growth. It's the difference between Nowhere and a shopping mall."

It's the difference between Nowhere and almost everything. When someone asks Belardinelli what Nowhere is about, he replies, in Bob Dylan's [trademark winking way](#), that the event is "about seven days long."

The experience makes you realize how often we entrust our lives to complex structures that we don't understand and could easily destroy us: elevators, cars, airplanes, prescription medication, readymade meals, buildings, the government. But when these systems fail in reality, we call a lawyer. At Nowhere, however, you have to judge for yourself what may or may not lead to internal bleeding.

Self-reliance means something different in the U.S. and Europe. As the children of [settlers and frontiersmen](#), Americans have self-reliance coded into our DNA. We tame wildernesses, [strike gold](#), pull ourselves up by bootstraps, and [self-make their millions](#), which the government can pry out of our [cold dead hands](#). Self-reliance for the early-day Burners, in true American style, meant [shooting guns at high speed](#) in the desert sun and not dying.

The last frontier Europe had, on the other hand, as Belardinelli points out, is America.

But Americans also love to sue each other. Our take-out cups warn us that coffee is [HOT](#) and playgrounds get carpeted with [weird spongey rubber](#). Two years ago, one man sued the Burning Man organizers after he was burned by the bonfire that ends the eight-day festival. "[Man Sues Burning Man for Getting Burned](#)." He lost. "[Burned Man Lawsuit Extinguished](#)."

Making a sport of torts may feed the nanny state. But in another sense, it's an extension of the rugged individualism of our prairie days. If you get hurt, find some individual on whom to seek revenge.

Nowhere, I've been told, is much more community-oriented than its American cousin. The size of course plays a huge role. It's much easier to create that family feeling among 600 people than [50,000](#), and there are no [rangers](#) or [undercover policemen](#) patrolling the grounds. Nowhere participants can happily smoke-up in the open sunshine, without fear of the \$600 fine that Nevadan narcs might hand you. This might be why [John Law](#), one of Burning Man's founders, lamented over a decade ago: "[I never wanted to encourage growth.](#)"

But there's a cultural aspect too. At Burning Man, people are more concerned with their own camp, Belardinelli explains, and making it the [awesomest](#). Nowhere is more about the collective. It's like a bizarro European Union; British camps offering up afternoon tea and evening [Dub Step](#), the Italians getting fresh tuna belly delivered daily, the Berliners driving around the desertscape in a [GDR living room](#). Waving to your Swiss neighbors, you really feel part of [Marshall McLuhan](#)'s "[global village](#)."

But with a couple differences. For example, McLuhan believed the globe-turned-village would embrace small town conservative sexual mores. The residents of Nowhere, on the other hand, embrace the sexual mores of the apocalypse.

But it's the sense of community that regulates the place. Every time self-reliance fails, the gifting impulse of others takes over, to feed and clothe you, wrap your wounds and paint your torso. Capitalism creeps in a little more at Burning Man; citizenship at Black Rock City has a pretty [high price tag](#) and its size requires a [fulltime paid staff](#). And although the organization is becoming a nonprofit, the board members will probably walk away with a [sweet six or seven figure sum](#). The organizers of Nowhere, on the other hand, who spend hundreds of hours planning and building it, keeping its books and filing its taxes, do so entirely for free.

So when the boy in the tiger suit ended up in a hostel for the week, recovering from vicious whiplash, a Nowhere board member paid his bills, out-of-pocket. Not because it was his responsibility, but because it was his gift.

And because it was a gift, because the hammock was a gift, because the whole thing was a gift, the boy in the tiger suit plans to pay that board member back.

This symbiosis of gifting and self-reliance, of expression and bodily injury, of no commerce and the need to buy stuff, inevitably teeters on the edge of impossibility. [Utopia](#) after all means "no place," which is almost, but not quite, Nowhere.

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