

Burning Man 2008

A transformational experience

Many have never heard of Burning Man while others have heard about the event but really did not know what it is about. I was in the later group when I decided to buy my ticket and made the decision to participate in Burning Man 2008. If you would like a wonderful in-depth description of Burning Man please check out www.burningman.com. The organization has done a superb job of preparing participants and describing the experience. This report has more to do with my personal Burning Man experience and subsequent re-entry into post burn reality.

Why Burning Man? For a start, the ten Burning Man principles have a very strong appeal to me. The principles seem to embody the strength of self reliance as the glue that holds an interdependent community together. Sort of what our collective society could be rather than what it has become where cash is king and personal liberty is a function of money in your pocket. Below are Burning Man's Ten principles which resonated so strongly with me.

Radical Inclusion

Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community.

Gifting

Burning Man is devoted to acts of gift giving. The value of a gift is unconditional. Gifting does not contemplate a return or an exchange for something of equal value.

Decommodification

In order to preserve the spirit of gifting, our community seeks to create social environments that are unmediated by commercial sponsorships, transactions, or advertising. We stand ready to protect our culture from such exploitation. We resist the substitution of consumption for participatory experience.

Radical Self-reliance

Burning Man encourages the individual to discover, exercise and rely on his or her inner resources.

Radical Self-expression

Radical self-expression arises from the unique gifts of the individual. No one other than the individual or a collaborating group can determine its content. It is offered as a gift to others. In this spirit, the giver should respect the rights and liberties of the recipient.

Communal Effort

Our community values creative cooperation and collaboration. We strive to produce, promote and protect social networks, public spaces, works of art, and methods of communication that support such interaction.

Civic Responsibility

We value civil society. Community members who organize events should assume responsibility for public welfare and endeavor to communicate civic responsibilities to participants. They must also assume responsibility for conducting events in accordance with local, state and federal laws.

Leaving No Trace

Our community respects the environment. We are committed to leaving no physical trace of our activities wherever we gather. We clean up after ourselves and endeavor, whenever possible, to leave such places in a better state than when we found them.

Participation

Our community is committed to a radically participatory ethic. We believe that transformative change, whether in the individual or in society, can occur only through the medium of deeply personal participation. We achieve being through doing. Everyone is invited to work. Everyone is invited to play. We make the world real through actions that open the heart.

Immediacy

Immediate experience is, in many ways, the most important touchstone of value in our culture. We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and a recognition of our inner selves, the reality of those around us, participation in society, and contact with a natural world exceeding human powers. No idea can substitute for this experience. 🍷

After purchasing my ticket on line and doing much research including the mandatory read of Burning Man for first timers, I was concerned about my ability to participate. Participation is a very important principle as I believe life is a participatory experience, not just to be observed. I was not going to Burning Man to observe the spectacle, I was going to participate. Volunteer opportunities for a first time burner did not appeal to me. As a act of participation I decided to leave the comforts of my fifth wheel in Leadville. After reading about the horrendously harsh weather conditions possible, how could I excuse myself from the community to retreat into my fifth wheel cocoon and leave the desert behind? No if it was going to blow dust into every orifice in my body, then bring it on. Other than that, I had no idea how I was going to participate, but I knew the universe would provide. It always does when we let it rather than direct it.

While staying in Leadville I would make occasional runs to Salida Co. Salida is a burgeoning art community that has wonderful energy. While looking around for a few things to go in my fifth wheel I found a store called Spirit Mountain. The store is in a renovated Nash car dealership. The bldg has curved wooden ceiling that cracks and creaks as the sun warms up the embedded memories. I looked around and went to the back of the store that looked very much like my grandfathers wood shop. There were all kinds of machines capable of dismembering any part of your body in a millisecond. There is sawdust on the floor, wood stacked in all corners, various wood projects in various stages of completion and the intoxicating aroma of epoxy and fresh cut wood. Way in the back I saw a man doing something with a piece of wood. It was ken Lindstrum the owner. He was working on a bristle cone table with inlaid turquoise. Bristlecone wood is over 1000 years old. When Ken puts his hands on the wood, it goes from being really old wood to a spiritual piece of global history. Ken and I talked for a moment and then I went on to explore Salida. The fuse was lit.

I went back to the fifth wheel and decided I was going to ask Ken if he would make a small table top and cover for the countertop hole where I put my kitchen trash. I wanted some of the energy of Ken's shop in my life, in addition to the beauty of a piece of wood. A couple of days later I went back to Salida and asked Ken if he would build my pieces. Cathi, Ken's wife joined in the negotiation and mentioned that Ken was really booked up and was going to leave for a well earned vacation. She was concerned he was overworking and would not get the project completed. During the course of an hour or so conversation I mentioned that I was going to Burning Man. Cathi perked up again and said, that is where Ken's going. Could it be? Yes it could. Ken who is a brilliant artist was going to Burning Man for the 11th time and invited me to join their camp and participate in the installation of a sculpture he made. Could it be? Yes, I have gone from going to Burning Man alone to becoming part of a group enabling me to participate in ways I had yet to imagine. Will the universe provide? Yes if we let it rather than direct it.

Was it coincidence that I have gone from being alone to being a part of Ken's team? Was it the Burning Man experience taking shape and affecting my life even before I arrived? Was it quantum physics and our ability to create our own reality and enabling the universe to deliver life strategies? This was so good, participation, new friends and a team to help a first time burner. Will the universe provide? Yes if we let it rather than direct it.

I left the RV camp in Leadville in my shiny new GMC with XM blaring great tunes on a beautiful day. I called Ken on the cell and confirmed I was on the road and would be meeting them on the Black Rock Desert. The ride from Leadville has just been a whole lot of fun. My two favorite XM channels pound out great music with NPR in the background when my head aches from rocking. XM commercial free radio is so liberating. Screw Clear Channel.

I made good time and rolled into the little town on the Utah, Nevada border outside the Bonneville Salt Flats. The sand, which I later learned was salt, is really something to see. The snow white salt stretched out as far as I could see with brown mountains on the horizon, blue sky and white puffy clouds. The white clouds above and white salt on the ground with the brown mountain in the middle made for a stunning landscape. It seemed like every mile was a Maynard Dixon painting, <http://www.maynarddixon.com/> painting. Maynard Dixon is infamous for his paintings connecting western landscapes and the human condition. His ability to paint emotion made him very special. Clearly the western landscape is good for the soul and strikes an emotional chord.

I checked into the hotel asked the clerk where to get some food. He said go to the casinos. About ½ mile down the road was Nevada and casinos. So I stepped across the Utah Nevada border and headed down and into large typical desert casino. I swung open the doors and went from 99 degrees to 50. The plastic wisteria was in full purple bloom hanging over the massive genuine imitation marble check in counter. The genuine imitation stone floors lead to a hand carved plastic wooden walkway taking me over a beautifully crafted plastic water fall. And for the truest essence of a casino, I was confronted with a full on frontal assault of billowing cigarette smoke clouds.

The sights and sounds of casino life are the same everywhere. There was the four armed lady playing two slot machines simultaneously while smoking a cigarette and sipping a drink. There was the 900 year

old lady with oxygen connected to her nose trying to juggle her cigarette in order to avoid being an involuntary casino suicide bomber all the while sipping her drink and pushing slot machine buttons. There were a couple of guys with looks of sheer desperation putting their food, clothes and kids education into machines in hopes of joining the folks pictured on the “wall of winners”

Making my way thru the casino I found the taco bar. I had two huge tacos, two soft shelled kind of Mexican things and a bottle of water for a grand total of \$5. Pretty good gambling food.

Walking back to the hotel I had to step over and around big chunks of salt that cars and trucks pick up on the flats then deposit on the street. It is sort of strange, but I made it back stepping over salt mounds in 95 degree dry heat.

This morning I took off with a diet coke, box full of macaroon cookies, XM radio and a tank full of diesel. The ride over to Reno on 80 once again proved to be a western landscape lover’s delight. Around mid day I pulled into a rest stop and spotted a young man with a Mohawk haircut and a 15 year old Honda stuffed to the gills. A pattern clearly has been developing over the last two days. The most recognizable burner feature so far is a terribly old piece of crap car or RV of some sort. If it is an RV it will be packed so high in the air with crap that the thing can’t get over 50 mph in a 75 mph zone. Normally these vehicles are held together with stickers and tape. I have been passing them too quickly to get a look at the occupants so my rest stop encounter will be my first real life burner exposure.



Are you going to BM I ask the youngster? How is he going to respond to an old guy who looks like he sells insurance for a living? Yeah man I am going, he replies. Me too, I said. Wow cool that is great. How many times have you been? I asked? I love that question. That question always makes experienced burners feel special about how cool they are and talk about how many times they have attended, and it gives the opportunity for first timers to feel special that they have finally come.

I have been three times, he said. How can that be? The guy can't be 18. What the heck, did his mother bring him? Then he said, Yeah me and two girls slept in the bushes last night and are going to get in line so we can get in around 2:00 AM. About that time a girl with multicolored pink, blue, red hair, and rings in many different body locations with a huge smile, comes out of the bushes. Hi I'm Amanda. How are you? I'm fine and headed to burning man too. Wow cool, glad to hear you are coming to BM she said. After exchanging our BM addresses, and showing them my custom shaker can hand painted BM Burner bike, they were most impressed, we parted ways. I must say that went pretty well. These kids did not demonstrate one ounce of negative energy and I really enjoyed talking with them and learning more about BM.

I tooled down the road for a while and made my last provision stop. This is the last stop for stuff. Money is no good at BM, you can't purchase anything other than ice. If you don't have what you need, you do without or beg. I understand it is the culture of BM to give stuff away. You know, things like your body, booze, drugs, art, I guess pretty much whatever. My BM wish list does not include these things, but I thought being prepared to give away some practical stuff would be a good idea. I put together a list of things to give away and bought a small supply. My give away list includes pencils, rubber bands, and an abundant supply of cereal. No not really, I bought a bunch of chap stix, booze, tons of water, fruit, all kinds of other foods, and a huge thing of sun screen.

Now totally stocked up I got back on the road which took me to Fernley NV. The hotel is filled with burners and I must say I have not seen one burner that looks like me. Maybe that is why Ken, my camp mate and art friend asked if I would mind if he introduces me as the Senator from the Great State of Florida. He told me nothing is what it appears and for me to believe nothing I hear. With that in mind it sounds like I am going to adopt a political persona. Hey it sounds like fun.

Most of the folks I have seen around the hotel appear to be somewhat outside society's norm. Tonight I walked over the KFC for dinner. On the way over to KFC I stopped and talked to a lady whose car was completely covered in stickers and would be her home for the night. I talked with a guy from Ga who had a 20 year old micro camper that required him to get into a ball shape in order to sleep, and I met four very young people that probably won't be working for corporate America anytime in the near future.

On the way out during my NPR break they had a great and appropriate story about not judging people by appearances. After living on this planet as long as I have and being exposed to so many things, I like to think I keep an open mind to discover what is behind the external. Much of the fun is getting behind the mask. I just hope and I do think, Burners will accept me in the same manner as I accept them.

The ride along into the Black Rock desert paints a canvas of desert colors and is very isolated. I suspect the road is pretty lonely ride most of the time, but not today. A slow procession of burners is making their way out to the playa forming a burner conga line, only to be interrupted by the local sheriffs stopping poor souls who exceed the 25 mph speed limit in the few little towns on the way. What a complete bummer getting within 60 miles and getting busted.

The road winds down through the mountains slowly leaving the old world behind creating a gateway to the world of Burning Man. The paved road gives way to a dirt road which serves as the entrance. Cars start to back up and the playa dust starts to fly. Playa dust is like talcum powder and concrete dust. I notice the wind is picking up making visibility a problem. I find will call, park, and walk over to the ticket window. No problem getting my ticket and back in the truck I go. Now the wind is becoming a problem. Visibility is down to about 25 feet. Complete dusts white out conditions are not far away. I crawl along the playa meeting my greeter. His name is Precious. Wearing pretty much nothing at all and totally helpful, I am sure his name is appropriate. Unknown to me, my virgin burner ritual is foregone due to impending total white out conditions. While making my way to meet Ken at the appointed address the road is lined with great sayings. The one that really resonated with me was the one from the movie, *The Fight Club*. "We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires, and movie gods, and rock stars. But we won't. And we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off."

While that makes a nice quote, it totally misses the point. They were all raised to believe that being a millionaire, movie gods or rock stars would be the answer. Poor souls don't realize they were sold a load of crap. If pissed off is what they want, they should be pissed they were sold an answer i.e. money, fame, glory that if achieved would still leave them wanting. Now that is something to get pissed about.

In near white out conditions I head out to 9:00 and Outer limits.



Burning Man is organized in a big circle with the center being open space for the Burning Man and huge art work with streets radiating out from the center like a clock. I proceed on to outer limits and 9:00 and no Ken. Geez here I am and no Ken. They were supposed to come in very early in the morning and set up camp. I get out of the truck and white out conditions take completely visibility away. It is hot and the dust is complete. I tried sitting in the truck but the temps goes to nuclear in a minute or so. I start the truck to run the a/c but that probably is not a good idea. Sitting idling in a dust storm has got to be bad for something. Plus here I am in the cocoon, isolated from the experience. Screw it, I get out of the truck, get on my bike and start looking around. Within about three minutes the only moisture left in my body is in my kidneys. Every ounce of body fluid has been convection oven air dried out of me in astonishing speed. Damn this is harsh.

Back to the truck to get water and fill my Camelback. Out I go again looking for Ken and Company. The playa is starting to fill up, I think, I really can't see. I make a friend and we head over to center camp. Center camp is a circus tent affair where folks sort of get in the center and self perform to blaring music. All kinds of folks doing things there thing. The song from Three Dog Night immediately comes to mind. "My Momma Told Me Not To Come, this is the craziest party I've ever seen." Momma was wrong, dang I like it here already. I am starting to get a sense of the place, as much as one can with about 10 feet of visibility. Folks are dressed in every manageable costume you can or probably can't imagine.





Folks are milling around in this massive dust storm which gives the place a surreal image.

Bob the pasty man is set up on one the couches that surround the center of the tent. This guy has it figured out. He has a box full of various size and shaped pasties. Girls come up and he so kindly custom fits pasties for them. I notice he applies the pasties with a real loving touch. All this service free of charge!!! People are laid out on the couches relaxing while getting completely covered in playa dust.

After a while I head back to the car. It is kind of easy to get lost in a dust white out, but I got back ok. Hey look at that. Someone has been writing on my new truck. Hey someone has written in the ½ inch

coat of playa dust making my new jet black truck totally white; we are at 8:30. There it is again on the windshield and once more on the tailgate. Clear as can be, there it is. I walked over to 8:30 and there they were. Ken and company completely hunkered down in the one shelter they managed to erect. I went back, pulled up my tent and joined Ken. We all gathered under their little shelter to breath playa dust and endure 40 mph winds for the next 10 hours. After a dinner of dust and food, I crawled in my dirt bag and went to sleep. It is good to participate. It is good to be home. The universe will provide if we let it, rather than direct it. Tomorrow will be another great day. I can't wait.









