

The Magic of Burning Man

(A Chronicle of my first year (1999) at Burning Man)

Leanna Wolfe

Several years ago I was invited me to watch a video that a local cinematographer shot of “Burning Man.” The footage was messy and he rambled on about young people, drugs, and that while it was a one-of-a-kind experience, he had little interest in attending again. I absorbed his point of view. Why I affirmed would anyone want to journey up to Northern Nevada’s Black Rock Desert to brave intense midday sun, freezing nights, possible wind, rain, and sand storms, to party with a bunch of 20-something kids?

Sometime last summer my interest began to grow. Several of my friends were buzzing about going. I explored the organizing web site (www.burningman.com) and my intrigue increased. I sensed that a critical mass of people were being drawn in...and I wanted to sense why. The encampment seemed to be growing exponentially—several years ago 800 attended, last year 15,000 attended, and this year over 23,000 would attend. And the attendees, while originally connected to San Francisco’s Society for Creative Anachronism, were now journeying from New York, Texas, Florida, and even Europe. I figured Burning Man had an appeal much bigger than a drug crazed party out in an otherwise remote desert. And so I decided to go.

The Journey

No journey to Burning Man is simple. And for most attendees the journey is part of the experience. For me it meant a meeting at my friend Alex’s home, Gemini Manor, where I connected with Kim who was in search of riders to help her drive her VW van. The meeting was otherwise tedious. Having done years of wilderness backpacking and having lived in remote Indian villages in Mexico and tribal villages in East Africa, “surviving” Burning Man sounded like a piece of cake. Kim and I briefly discussed food, water, and supplies and figured we were set.

We decided to leave LA on Wednesday night following my evening anthropology class. That afternoon I loaded Kim’s van with a tent, several sleeping bags, clothes, food, water, and a rather rusty bike. She spent the evening organizing the van and around 10:30 PM we set off for points north. The van

made strange noises, barely ascended hills, and its clutch would sometimes freeze. Moreover, Kim and I hardly knew each other. Luckily, we (she, I, and the van) never overheated. We occupied ourselves with hours and hours of girl talk—discussing the ins and outs of our current and previous relationships as well as our dreams for how our love lives should really be.

As it turned out our journey was relatively painless. We took turns paying for gas, shared food, and slept for a couple of hours at a roadside rest area on Highway 5. For others getting to Burning Man was a huge undertaking. A group from Colorado broke down in some hinterland town in Eastern Nevada, had to rent a truck from a place 100 miles further, and got in days later than expected. Several people (Alex among them) decided to refurbish old hippie vans and suffered innumerable breakdowns. Perhaps the most efficient trip would have been to fly into Reno, rent a vehicle, and travel just the last three hours by land...Later I discovered an even more efficient trip was to land one's private plane onto the far end of the Burning Man site.

Arrival

As the roads away from Reno became more remote, more and more of the vehicles looked Burning Man-bound. Gallons of water hung from the edges, bikes clung to the backs, and their engines, too, perilously sputtered. As we pulled onto the site's dirt road, we joined a line of cars that also managed to arrive at 3:30 PM on Thursday. A 20-something guy with a huge nose piercing greeted us with a map and a rambling spiel about water, garbage, and camping.

Kim and I were so exhausted that it took us nearly two hours to locate the Gemini Manor encampment. The "address" we had was wrong...and our efforts to get help were more intriguing than helpful. We met a motor mouth who had hauled nine truckloads of supplies from San Francisco over the last couple of weeks, looked over yards of message-covered bulletin boards, and surveyed a messy looking hippie town. Everyone looked hot and lazy...my initial impulse was to leave as soon as we could.

Out of luck more than good information, we located Gemini Manor and began to unload. I pitched my tent, pumped up an air mattress, and laid out what would be my home for the next four days. The site was filled with friends and soon-to-become friends. That evening we witnessed a wedding, shared in a community potluck dinner, and headed out on our bikes to explore the village.

The Village

Burning Man sleeps late into the morning, simmers in the hot afternoon sun, and comes alive as night falls. All assembled, it becomes the fifth largest city in the state of Nevada. The village circles a huge desert playa, a dusty dark lakebed from another geological time. The center is dotted with sculptures and installation art. Some of it burns to be beautiful and some of it eventually burns to a crisp. The art is to be engaged—walked through, crawled through, sat in, touched, banged, and danced around. Being at Burning Man is being in motion. Taking pictures was such a static spectated experience that I took relatively few. I mostly biked (even my rusty 10 speed did great on the desert playa), talked, danced, and absorbed.

Sometimes I explored with friends from Gemini Manor and lots of the time; I wandered off on my own. Each night I explored art, dance clubs, and conversation with a different guy. Each of their rhythms was fun—their newness to me added to the wonder of being there. After awhile being part of this dynamic village really grew on me. I loved jumping on my bike and cruising until something drew me in. Then I'd slowly engage. There might be food, drinks, music, conversation, massage, dancing, or just grabbing a seat and grokking the mood. There were so many moods and it was so easy to jump from one to another. Sometimes I'd be sitting in a New Age Temple talking about spirit, other times I'd survey S&M paraphernalia, dance to techno-music powered by huge generators, take a yoga class, or sit in Bianca's living room and eat quesadillas and fruit.

Everything (other than the \$100 admission ticket) was free. And much of the exhibition spoofed corporate America and organized religion. Pleasure was accessed in a person-person way—by giving, getting and/or trading. No one was there to focus attention on themselves or draw money to themselves. It was so refreshing!

While there were scheduled events like the burning of the man on Saturday evening, much of what engaged me was unscheduled and spontaneous. There was so much going on that wherever you were was just right. There was so much motion that there was little need to be in the center. While unpacking back at home, I found a schedule of events and a directory of art locations. For a moment I felt a bit bewildered that I hadn't looked it over earlier. Then quickly I surmised that engaging who and what I did was just perfect. I'd discovered things and people just as they came to me.

Discoveries

Many of the artists who come to Burning Man go to tremendous efforts to create environments and amazing moments. People trucked in live camels, a piano, huge living rooms of furniture, and gardens replete with fresh sod, flowers and small ponds. After our first night out we sat around camp and raved about our discoveries. There was a light tunnel which fit purveyors with special glasses that made everything delicately swirl, huge metal drums with great designs carved into the edges with fires burning within, and an awesome green laser that danced in the night sky. There were also the things I made up like the 20-jet Jacuzzi, the guy that was dressed in a business suit and handing out \$100 bills, and the blow-job parlor. And for a moment my friends believed just about everything!

The next night featured an opera, which of course went up in flames, and then Saturday night featured the burning of the man. For a group that claimed to be anti-organized religion, I was astonished at the ritualistic approach to the big burn. The crowd gathered and waited and waited. I nearly slept in my crouched waiting position. Then torch-bearers filed in, making fantastic swoops in the air with their lit flames. Finally the man, which was decorated with neon lights, was lowered to the ground and fit with starry pyrotechnics. Then it was raised and ignited. It crackled and spewed out flames and the crowd went mad. Within minutes all order ceased and a wild dance around the flames ensued. Each time I attempted to edge in to snap a picture, a crazed dancer would crash into me. If I dared step closer to the flaming mass, I'd certainly burn, as well.

A group of neo-statisticians were gathering opinions of everything from the sublime to the truly ridiculous. They displayed bright colored pie charts with such findings as whether witnessing a burn brought on erotic desire. Maybe because I was amongst the 2/3 of attendees that couldn't claim so, I was bemused that anyone did. Still, burning captivates. Perhaps it's the heat, maybe that primal campfire smell, and certainly the transformation. Witnessing all matters of art indelibly transform through the burning process was truly amazing. And I remained amazed at the religion of disorder, rebellion and ultimately community that ensued.

Community

I became enamored with Burning Man because of the way community occurred. Nothing was forced; no workshop leader told everyone to put on a nametag, create a "heart connection," or tell a stranger a secret. Conversation,

food, and play were shared spontaneously. I had great chats while waiting in the long latrine lines (they were a dream compared to the East African hinterland) and while waiting to have my hair washed at the “Astral Head Wash.” Sometimes I found myself seeking long lines so I might be able to chat up a new person.

As for “cultural rules,” they were pretty basic. People asked permission before spritzing others with water though the heat made such offers a delight... Food was freely offered; Orrin and Justeen made amazing meals. If I wasn’t camped so near them, I might have subsisted on balance bars, cantaloupe and organic grapes. Instead I gained several pounds feasting on barbecued chicken and steak, couscous, salads, omelets, and bagels with lox, onions and cream cheese. “Freezing Man” featured an old ice cream truck replete with eskimo pies, ice cream sandwiches, and plenty of popsicles and dreamsicles. Spontaneously the truck would cruise around offering treats to those who had “tickets.” (I managed to score one from talking up a friendly guy from San Francisco who thought I looked familiar.)

What really made Burning Man work for me was that there were so many ways to be. There were lots of possibilities and hardly one agenda. One could spend the whole week stoned, on ecstasy, on acid, or on whatever else appeared. One could spend the week naked, provocatively naked, or provocatively clothed. And one could engage everyone and everything erotically. All agendas were fine. I never for a moment felt I wasn’t fitting in because I hadn’t imbibed, disrobed, or flexed my inner or outer self. Whatever I did and whatever those around me did worked. Then, on Sunday evening Kim announced to me it was time to pack up.

Leaving

I wasn’t ready to go. Even though at least half of the encampment had disassembled – I wasn’t ready. It reminded me of the time I left summer camp before the session was over. In my mind the camp continued on forever. While we drove through the night into Reno and along Hwy 80, I imagined that last night there were amazing burns, fabulous food, and all the dancing I hadn’t completely done. The next day we had lunch at Harris Ranch; despite the friendly servers and good road food, it barely registered a bleep on my happiness scale. The next week in LA felt flat. Community wasn’t a bike ride a way; no wonder when I was in my early 20s and studying the ins and outs of Mayan pueblo life, I promised myself I’d some day return to a day-to-day-face-to-face village.