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TASTE

Desert Wanderers Find Their Promised Land

By **TRAVIS KAVULLA**
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Gerlach, Nev.

So bizarre, so immense is the Burning Man Festival that it is, as its adherents take pride in claiming, a difficult thing to describe. But let me try. Annually, during the last week of August, some 50,000 people descend upon Nevada's remote Black Rock Desert, 110 miles north of Reno -- the type of place that gives meaning to the idiom "middle of nowhere." There they engage in a weeklong bacchanal that mixes Woodstock with Mad Max and, in toto, resembles a kind of surreal, sprawling state fair.



Chad Crowe

Burning Man is not for the timid. The camping conditions are horrible; daytime temperatures reach well over 90 degrees Fahrenheit, and two eight-hour dust storms struck during the course of this year's festival, reducing visibility to 10 feet and covering everything with silt. Public nudity is in vogue, and the practice of toplessness (and sometimes bottomlessness) extends from small-town teenage girls -- one was seen calling out, loudly, for the services of a body-painter -- to the 60-somethings clutching each other in a fully nude embrace at the "Polyamory Paradise" camp. Finally, the place is utterly saturated with drugs. Everything is available, from alcohol and cannabis to Ecstasy and research chemicals with names like 2C-I.

Uncomfortable with at least a few of Burning Man's debaucheries, but curious about this fabled slice of the American counterculture, I decided to go, joining a camp that included two semi-itinerant Wesleyan grads, a McKinsey consultant, the daughter of a British peer and an editor of National Review. Burning Man lures some very strange types to its brand of escapism, but they are strange *affluent* types.

After entering the festival gates, one passes into a demonetized society where the rides on the giant seesaws, the rounds of miniature golf, the costumes, the body-paint jobs and everything else are dished out gratis. Still, merely to participate in this bout of unreality comes with a high price tag. Gate admission is \$295, and the rental RVs in which many "Burners" stay go for \$2,500 for the week. And then there is the cost of airfare, gas, food and other substances. Flying from Montana, staying in a tent and splitting expenses, I spent just north of \$1,000.

At the beginning of its 22-year history, Burning Man was a small and informal affair featuring self-described "redneck" libertines. Now it is an intricately planned 168-hour-long rave. The demographic of those who attend these days became obvious while I gambled in my Reno hotel-casino, awaiting the arrival of the biofuels bus that would take me into the desert for \$78, one way. Next to me at the roulette table, it turned out, was another Burner, still in civilian garb. Rather outdoing my \$5 wagers, he was betting recklessly. But he won big and walked away from the table \$20,000 richer.

This introduction to Burning Man was apropos of the festival's many internal tensions. It is a society that prides itself on a back-to-nature freedom, but it caters to people who will go back to the office when the festival is over. It is also flavored by the fashionable environmentalism of the West Coast, even though the festival, because of its far-flung location, has an appallingly large carbon footprint. Last year's festival theme was environmental sustainability -- "The Green Man," as it was called. But when asked about the seeming contradiction between that environmental motif and Burning Man's consumption, many of the people who attended last year seemed to believe that, regardless of what they were actually doing, the event had at least "raised consciousness" about the ecosystem.

This year's festival was styled "The American Dream," and various, occasionally puerile displays could be scouted out: Tocqueville quotations about the virtues of America on placards lining the road leading to the campgrounds; a man in a George W. Bush mask being led around in chains by a dominatrix; a Guantanamo Camp offering the waterboarding experience to all comers; and an abundance of American flags, half flying the right way, the others upside-down. Yet for all this, there was little in the way of formal politics. Abiding by the mood of escapism, only a few Burners donned the paraphernalia of the Obama campaign. They were frowned upon by seasoned Burners, as if it were declass  to introduce mundane partisan politics into Burning Man's sacred cloisters.

What politics did exist were off the charts. Enttheon Village, a klatch of latter-day hippies and New Agers, was a choice example. There I heard "The Secret History of the War on Drugs," a lecture delivered by Charles Shaw, who was introduced as a "regular contributor" to the Huffington Post (although he has posted on the site only twice). To a hundreds-strong audience, he delivered witless one-liners about the Bush administration (the predictable exception to the Burners' aversion to partisan politics) and wove a preposterous conspiracy theory that blamed every evil on, and attributed every power to, the American government. According to Mr. Shaw, the powers-that-be had hooked GIs in Vietnam on heroin to tamp down the risk of mutiny, and the Reagan administration had introduced crack to urban areas because the president "didn't really like black people."

In the course of the week, I returned to Enttheon Village once more, seeking refuge from a sandstorm. During my first day at Enttheon, I had overheard an organizer telling volunteers that their job was to "make the space more sacred." Sanctity had been otherwise in short supply at Burning Man, so I made my way past the encampment's lecture hall, past the inflatable Buddhist temple, past the "Sound Healing Yurt" to the God and Goddess Dome, where I took out my rosary -- my costume for most of the week was a Friar Tuck outfit -- and began to pray. When I opened my eyes, I found an erotic massage going on next to me. Apparently I had misunderstood the dome's name.

I exited, but not without a sense of revelation, one that was confirmed in a visit to the Relaxomatic Plushitorium -- a camp filled with recliners and settees, all of them crowded with bodies. There was also, when I went, a generous supply of In-and-Out burgers brought in from Reno for the occasion. On one side of me sat Dan, a Manhattan hedge-fund analyst and self-described conservative; on the other, a girl who gave her name as Orange, a California-based environmental consultant. These two -- one would think them diametrically opposed -- had nonetheless come together in the spirit of getting away from it all. Reluctant to discuss the outside world, they both seemed to find pleasure in the do-what-you-like libertinism of Burning Man and its separation from the outside world. Dan even noted with obvious pride that, three years ago, when Hurricane Katrina struck, few Burning Man revelers learned about the disaster unfolding on the Gulf until they left the desert.

The festival ended in the traditional way: with the ritual incineration of a four-story-high wicker man. As I watched the flames shoot up and consume the looming figure, I found myself standing next to a grotesquely muscular Slav dressed in a faux white fur coat. He periodically pushed a button on his dragon-inspired modified sedan, causing it to spurt an enormous plume of fire into the air. A female retinue loitered nearby, tittering endlessly. This was not a festival about deeper understanding or spiritual hokum. The pretense of a demonetized society notwithstanding, consumption was king at Burning Man. The gargantuan pyrotechnics, the drugs, the sex -- this was just wanton hedonism. Ordinary and not-so-ordinary people gave the finger to "the man," shirked responsibility and behaved recklessly.

And then it was over. Back in Reno, decompressing from the experience, I found that my hotel was filled with burned-out Burners plummeting back to reality. I overheard one girl in the lobby Starbucks having a phone conversation filled with worry about missed work. She began crying and between sobs said into her cellphone: "I don't want to lose my job."

The hotel was happy to host the Burners: A cocktail waitress told me that, despite their shabby appearance, they seemed to have more money to tip and gamble than the usual tourists. Money to burn, you might say.

Mr. Kavulla is a Phillips Foundation journalism fellow.

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