

ON RETURN

Alright, so: I'm back from Burning Man. Mostly.

I'm not sure that any introduction given by a veteran (which I am not) to a virgin (which I lately was) can possibly impart exactly what I experienced; I was unprepared. That wasn't necessarily bad, in this case.

Watching the playa transformed from flat expanse of featureless dust into brightly lit, surreal metropolis in the space of a week and then back down again to dust was mind blowing. The amount of effort that 60,000 pseudo hippies put into creating so much and then destroying it all and leaving not a trace was astounding.

On return, it took some time to reacquaint myself with socially acceptable circadian rhythms and nearly as long to clean the dust off my belongings and person. I likely ate more dust out there than food, but again: not a complaint; well worth it.

I highly recommend the whole experience. Eight days in the desert, away from cell phones and the internet and all manner of unconnected connectedness, was refreshing and rejuvenating. And it certainly didn't feel like eight days. It felt fleeting. A brief flit filled to the brim with glimpses of the dreams of others made real. Now that I'm back, it seems so far away and unreal.

I camped with folk who've been time and again, year after year and I think that made the trip much easier. We had a full kitchen and shower, though I admit I utilized the latter less than required of polite society. In any case, we certainly weren't roughing it.

But here is what I learned. Consider this a primer:

There are two types of camps at Burning Man. There are those who simply come, with neither rhyme nor reason, and plunk themselves down in unreserved spaces. And then there are those who have prepared something and arranged to have space allotted to their endeavor, whatever it may be.

Each reserved camp has something that they do; a theme. Our camp was called Holi High Camp after the Hindu festival of colors, Holi. Rather than accosting passersby with colored dust, as is Hindu custom (there was plenty of dust out there already, though it was all disappointingly beige), we constructed a number of pneumatic, body paint cannons. I reached out to mom about sourcing paint

on this in our preparatory stages.

I rode in with my friend Jose. By friend, I mean that we're friends now and that I'd met him once before. The drive there took ten hours; friends by necessity. That's six hours on the road; one hour under the intense scrutiny of Nevada law enforcement keen on nabbing druggie burners over miles of frequently changing speed limits; and three hours waiting in slow moving line.

We had heard that, due to the reputation that attendees of the Burning Man festival had fostered in locals, we should be particularly mindful of local law enforcement. We stayed five miles per hour under the limit on this last stretch. That was tough, not because we were in any particular hurry, but because the speed limit was arbitrarily (and perhaps capriciously) changed from mile to mile. This wasn't enough for the headlights behind. We were frequently passed. Though, down the road, we often found those who had passed pulled over, their gear strewn beside the road under the glare of red and blue flashing lights, being torn through by uniformed officers and twitchy canine units. I felt a bit vindicated then. They had cheated and my slow, plodding pace was justified.

Though, that pace was not easy. We were stir crazy and grasping for conversational topics near the end and then we saw a light. A blinking light. Riding down the single lane highway, middle of the road. It was a bike. As we came abreast and passed this biker, we saw that he was wearing just short shorts, smudged with dirt and pedaling furiously, intent on some unseen goal.

That freaked us both out but I figured that meant we were on course. Neither I nor Jose were into the kind of drugs that might make a man engage in that sort of endeavor, but lordy lordy, we knew we were in for a show.

That was thirty miles out at 11pm.

And then we got to Gerlach. Last stop for gas, food and civilization. Speed limit: 10mph (which is tough downhill).

We're rolling through town, pedal as far from the metal as possible, and some kid crosses our high beams. He faces us and pulls a gun from his sweat pant waist band. Looked like a .22 pistol. Maybe an air gun. Flashes it and walks away. Again, weirded us out.

That was ten miles out around midnight.

Those two incidents comprised the entirety of my 'weirded out' phase at Burning Man. Funny that,

for all the furor over this supposedly drug addled festival, the most terrifying experience I had was in getting there and in rolling by locals with tiny guns.

And then we were there: Black Rock City, the temporary metropolis surrounding the Burning Man.

There are two primary structures in Black Rock City. First is the titular Man. The city itself is built on the hours of clock around the Man with attendees camping from 2 o'clock to 10 o'clock. The rest is left for art.

The second main structure is the Temple, which is built in the 'Deep Playa', about where 12 o'clock would be. Each year, the Temple is built by a different architect, though some are asked to return. The Temple is meant as some sort of quiet space for remembrance and solitude. This year was notable because the three story high Temple was constructed sans nails sans bolts sans screws; just interlocking wood.

The Temple is a weird place. On the one hand, you have sobbing hippies lamenting the loss of their father or child, taken too soon, and on the other, you have pictures of cats who ran away (and also, inexplicably, a picture of a horse). I couldn't help but think that, if the worst part of your life is a wayward feline, you're doing pretty goddamned well, compared to these others. It seemed odd to see those diverse laments all pasted in the same place.

The scope of the installation is beyond belief, but I saw it myself. Black Rock City is situated within a border, called the Trash Fence, that covers an ovoid five miles in diameter on the major axis. The city itself is only a small part of that area and in the outlying regions artists are free to construct their installations. Imagine wandering through the doodles of half remembered dreams made real and constructed in large and carted out to the desert to be later sacrificed to flame.

The most impressive installation that I saw, in terms of wherewithal in delivery, was a scaled down replica of the Mir space station. Built and machined in Russia by Comrade participants, it was shipped to Nevada, piece by piece, painstakingly reconstructed and set up in a sort of dusty museum, replete with informational plaques and diagrams. At the end of the week, they burned the entire structure down.

There was a thirty foot tall Pachinko game, played with balls dipped in kerosine and set alight.

There was a cathedral: middle of the dust, flying buttresses and all. Inside: a confessional and nun listening to sins and dolling out Hail Mary's and other, less traditional, reparational punishments.

The ichthyosaur, for some reason, seemed a vibrant motif. I saw a number of structures that featured life sized, neon lit skeletons of these Mesozoic beasts.

There was a man doling out slices of cold pizza in the middle of no where.

There was a front porch, replete with rocking chair and banjo playing hillbilly.

There was opera and polka and heavy metal and a violin concerto. Thank God, because the wide representation of various electronic music genres became old quickly.

And then it was done.

Our departure was nearly as nerve wracking as our arrival. Sixty thousand exhausted campers all attempting to leave on the same single lane highway. I could have walked faster. Would have walked faster, but I was so goddamned tired. We were lucky, though. Those who left after us had an eighteen hour drive versus our twelve. I don't think I could have handled that. Would have cracked. Would have thrown noisy tantrums and flung my remaining fruit cups in faces.

I had a lot of fun, though, it is a bit troubling that all this effort, all this creativity, all this gusto is being funneled into something that, ultimately, means nothing. That doesn't mean Burning Man isn't a good thing. It just means that I wish that perhaps a smidgeon of that effort had been diverted into making something more real and lasting. Feeding the poor. Rescuing wayward kittens. Whatever.

Oh, well. I guess that's the state of things, isn't it? Those devoted to making a lasting impact are those least likely to care about that long term impact.