

Freaks in the Desert

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I woke up and winced into the sun. Strange sounds were all around me. Vroom, vroom. "Kill Barney!" "Kill Barney!" "Kill Barney!" Whump! "Yeaaaaaaah!"

I sat up, took a long pull from a water bottle and, crouching on all fours, stuck my head through the tent flap to see what the hell was going on out there.

A Winnebago wove erratically at low speed through a slalom course of nearby buses, tents, vans and Ryder trucks. Behind it, a white sand desert stretched out forever. On the camper's roof rode seven or eight people dressed like pirates, brandishing squirt guns and plastic scimitars. A skull-and-crossbones flag flapped from the RV's radio antenna, and a black cable tied around its rear bumper dragged a large Barney doll by the left leg. The grinning purple dinosaur had seen better days.

A Cadillac covered in spray-on foam that had been molded and painted silver to make it look like a shark circled the stuffed animal once, twice, then attacked, scooping up Barney in its jaws and running over him with both right-side tires.

Whump! Whump! The pirates howled with glee as the Caddy peeled off to recalibrate. I lay back down in my tent. The temperature felt well over 100 degrees. I'd been asleep for a few hours and was sheened in sweat. As I toweled off, a naked couple driving a land sailer—basically an engineless dune buggy with a wind-surfing sail—glided past my line of sight. A long string of firecrackers went off in the distance. It was Saturday. I'd purposely left my watch in Tempe, but I guessed the time to be about three in the afternoon.

Twenty-four hours ago, I'd packed a 4x4 with camping gear, nonperishable food, beer, safety flares, 40 gallons of water and directions to Gerlach, Nevada, population 350. Located 100 miles north of Reno on the southern perimeter of a vast wasteland known as the Black Rock Desert, Gerlach is more or less the last town in the middle of nowhere.

But Gerlach is also the closest year-round settlement to the Burning Man Festival—an annual underground gathering of neopagans, machine artists, ravers, UFO cultists, crystal clutchers, desert rats, pyro-fetishists, hippies, nudists, Web geeks and myriad shades of edge-culture enthusiasts that

takes place during the Labor Day weekend in the middle of a 400-square-mile dry lake bed deep in the Black Rock Desert.

The festival started 11 years ago in San Francisco, where Larry Harvey asked a carpenter buddy to help him build an eight-foot-tall effigy of the man his girlfriend had recently left him for. When it was done, Harvey invited a dozen friends to party at Ocean Beach, and torched the fucker. He did it again the next year, with more friends and a bigger man. By the third year, people started to bring men of their own, along with lots of fireworks, televisions and old computers to blow up.

After the cops shut down the 1990 party before the Man could burn, Harvey founded the Burning Man Project (a San Francisco collective that still runs the festival). He also moved the party to its current, fully permitted location in the Black Rock Desert, which is controlled by the federal Bureau of Land Management.

Attendance at the festival has roughly doubled every year since 1992. Last year, 2,000 people showed up. This year, according to local police and the project, almost 4,000 came—this with no commercial advertising, only word of mouth and the Internet.

It took me almost 17 hours to drive from Tempe to Gerlach and ten minutes to get from Gerlach to Black Rock Station, the Burning Man Festival's entrance outpost. I pulled off the road and up to a shack, where a woman dressed like a Gypsy gave me directions in exchange for a \$40 "donation" to the Burning Man Project.

"Zero out your odometer," she said. "Drive eight miles straight, then turn right and drive about two miles, then just head for the Man."

Using the peak of a distant mountain to hold a course, I started out across the cracked earth. The surface was well-suited to high-speed travel—flat, dry and hard, with nothing to hit for miles in any direction. Pushing 80, I trailed a whirling plume of dust. Visibility to the front and sides was excellent. I could see RVs, school buses, rental vans and trucks on my right and left up to a mile away, and several dust clouds from other vehicles far ahead. The scene looked straight out of *The Road Warrior*.

The sand clouds in front of me started to shift right when my odometer read 9.2, and I followed them at 9.8. A minute later, I saw the Man for the first time—a match-stick figure standing against the horizon. Multicolored tents sprouted like mushrooms at his feet as I got closer.

The Road Warrior aesthetic only slightly diminished once I rolled into Black Rock City, the largest settlement in Pershing County, Nevada, for three days a year. People raced around on bicycles, skateboards, land sailers, roller blades, scooters and motorcycles. An ultralight copter buzzed the

camp, as a large remote-controlled plane turned loops in the sky. I even saw a hand-painted sign for "Bartertown."

Too wiped out to assimilate, I went to the media trailer in search of a schedule. The guy there said there are no schedules at Burning Man, "per se," then told me to put my left hand on a picture of Richard Nixon and read an oath: "I will not merely observe, I will participate."

Duly sworn, I drove around the festival, trying to select a campsite. There were several organized theme camps—White Trash Camp, Tiki Camp, Winter Wonderland, NY Playground Camp and Celebrity Crucifixion Camp. I settled on a spot about half a mile southeast of the Man and pitched tent in the shadow of a massive green army tent. Its center pole was capped with a Kentucky Fried Chicken sign, which belonged to the residents of a psychedelic co-op house in San Luis Obispo, California, called The Moon.

The Moonies welcomed me to camp and assured me I was now within the aura of protection. I saw their camp's perimeter was defended by a wooden catapult and a CO2 water cannon. Two topless women with pierced nipples rode by on a motorized couch. A surfer guy sat between them.

I was not in Arizona anymore.

"Devil's Delight"

"That'll teach you to fuck with the government." The envoy from the Disgruntled Postal Worker Camp fired two shots from a Supersoaker into my tent, dousing me and Ian, a self-described "mushroom philosopher" camped next to me. It was about an hour after the Barney incident. Ian had been describing his theory that ideas act like viruses in the way they spread through the collective conscience, when a group of men and women dressed like postal workers came by, handing out copies of the *Black Rock Gazette*, one of the festival's two daily papers. (*Piss Clear* billed itself as Black Rock's alternative paper.)

A black Lab mix had bounded toward the mail carriers, who shouted a mock warning: "Dog! Dog!" Then Ian had yelled something like, "I hope he bites you in the ass, you lackeys," and the closest postal worker turned her gun on us.

At least she gave us a newspaper. An item under Rumor Control read, "The two gentlemen walking around camp in blue POLICE jumpsuits are NOT pranksters . . . they are Nevada state narcotics officers. The correct way to greet them is NOT 'Hey, dudes, wanna bong hit?'"

Saturday's lead story, "Super-Stoked VW Bus Gets Down and Dirty in the MUD," detailed how five guys in a '75 VW bus got turned around out in the desert on Friday night, mistook the lights of a distant sulfur-mining complex for the Burning Man Festival and got stuck in a muddy wash 14 miles off course. They left their van at 8:30 p.m. and stumbled into Black Rock City six hours later.

The Black Rock Rangers, a volunteer desert rescue team led by the quasi-superhero figure Danger Ranger, went out with the group the next morning and winched their van free. ("Danger Ranger" became famous after several dramatic rescues during the 1995 Burning Man Festival. Legend has it he would go wheeling out into the desert, be gone for a while, then come wheeling back in with some dehydrated, bad-tripping urbanite. After he delivered him or her to the medical tent and peeled off his night-vision goggles, the grizzled "man with no name" would utter his motto: "Danger Ranger always brings 'em back.")

The high on Friday had been 107 degrees Fahrenheit.

As I was reading the paper, a young woman wearing an orange Lycra shirt with a chartreuse daisy iron-on decal on its front walked up and knelt down in front of my tent door. She was carrying a red umbrella dotted with white flowers and looked like Mary Poppins gone Merry Prankster. "Excuse me," she said, "I was wondering if you needed any doses for this evening?" I politely declined, and she went to the next camp.

Narcs or no narcs, scoring LSD or mushrooms at the Burning Man Festival was like buying hot dogs or popcorn at a baseball game—you just sat around and waited for the vendors to come by. Ecstasy and pot-butter Rice Krispies treats were specialty items, like snow cones and ice cream drumsticks.

Night came and the temperature started to drop. By midnight it would be in the low 50s. Airburst fireworks and parachute flairs punctuated the sky every few minutes. Blue-neon tubes inside the Man fired up, and I headed for their glow like a moth.

A short distance from camp I got sidetracked by a cocktail party at Spiral Oasis, a theme camp organized by Mark Pesce, a hotshot in the Bay Area Web scene (Pesce invented VRML, a Web language that allows users to program elaborate 3-D virtual-reality models onto their Web sites).

The party looked like a cross of *The Great Gatsby*, *Blue Hawaii* and *Blade Runner*. Flappers mingled with tiki lounge lizards and ravers in clear plastic suits and bondage gear. Pesce paraded around in a red feather boa. The centerpiece of the soiree was a high-wattage sodium bulb inside a large, opaque globe. A deejay spun a kaleidoscope of Dixieland, hip-hop, Coltrane, trance, techno and dance hall through a phat sound system.

I stayed about 15 minutes, then succumbed to wanderlust and slowly zigzagged toward the Man. Whisking past me on roller skates came a bald freak with a long beard, thick-framed glasses and a

light-bulb suit, being pulled by a small machine that looked like the security robot that Chewbacca roared at in Star Wars.

A remote-controlled lamp with wheels whirred toward me, stopped short, a foot away, then skittered off at a 90-degree angle. I looked around but couldn't spot its operator. A billow of flame went up at ten o'clock on the horizon. I and everyone around me made for it at a trot. Soon I could hear the whine and clang of heavy machinery, growing louder. As I got closer, I saw that a miniature city of strip malls and franchise stores was being systematically destroyed by monster robots.

The machines spat fire and battered the plywood buildings into kindling. One robot consisted of a massive hydraulic arm protruding from a metal platform on tank treads. At its end were three hooked claws that would swoop down, snag a plaster model, lift it in the air, swing it back and forth and, finally, rend it to pieces. Sometimes the claw would brood over its fallen prey like a T-rex, jaws dripping viscous fluid.

Obviously patterned after the performances of the infamous San Francisco machine-arts coalition Survival Research Laboratories, the spectacle was the work of the Seemen, a lesser-known Bay Area troupe. For the finale, a man in a red suit and cape scaled one of the last standing structures—a 30-foot-high corporate tower emblazoned with a logo that spelled "Hellco" in the same yellow font Payless Shoe Source uses for mall signs.

When he got to the top, our hero popped a flare, threw it into the belly of the building, then grabbed ahold of a zip wire and flew away 007 style as the skyscraper exploded into flame. Cheering, the crowd hastily backed away from the intense heat. Several drum circles began a frantic, tribal beat.

A man in shorts atop an RV to my left stood up from his lawn chair. "Yes!" he shouted. "Yes! *The* best place for psychedelics!"

I made for the Man again. Up close, he looked about five stories high. His body and upraised arms were made of lumber scaffolding, and he had what looked like a giant Japanese paper lantern shaped like an upside-down triangle for a head. He was standing on a pedestal of hay bales. A smoke detector was glued to his belly.

"Fire in the hole!" One of the things you learn quickly after dark at the Burning Man Festival is to pay heed to warnings like "Fire in the hole." That, and to keep a wary eye out for the sparking orange glowworm of a lighted fuse. I twirled to face the direction of the shout and saw a man drop what looked like a mortar shell into what looked like a mortar. Whoom! The cylinder belched blue flame and a white streak made an arc high across the sky, then burst into a shower of purple shooting stars.

"Ooooooh!"

To my direct right, I heard the Warner Bros. cartoon theme song speeding up and slowing down like it was being played on a haunted Victrola. I gravitated and came upon a scale model of the HOLLYWOOD sign surrounded by Tinsel Town icons. Posters of James Dean, Tom Cruise, Steven Spielberg, Mickey Mouse and John Wayne were mounted on stakes and stuck in the ground like hasty gravestones. I looked closer at a mannequin dressed and posed like Marilyn Monroe in the subway-vent scene from *The Seven Year Itch* and noticed she had sticks of dynamite strapped to her inner thighs. An attendant stopped anyone with a cigarette from getting close, and said a group called the Los Angeles Cacophony Society had built the exhibit. (Later that evening, I heard and felt a series of concussive explosions come from the direction of Tinsel Town, but only got there in time to see one of the Cacophony Society's members do some mop-up work with a flame thrower.)

Next, I set out for a giant, glowing ruby that shimmered like a mirage in the distance. It turned out to be a red gel light reflecting off several hundred compact discs strung together inside the frame of a skateboard half pipe. I noticed the Man had changed color from blue to yellow.

Scattered howls sounded across the city, all human. The moon was rising—an orange orb that sat low on the horizon like the gleaming eye of a horned god, lifting up the curtain of night with one finger to peek at his followers.

Maybe all the Satan shit was starting to get to me.

Over a PA that carried to most of the festival, the lead singer for the "Rock Against Rock" band Idiot Flesh was exhorting the crowd to "Sell your soul to the devil, give yourself to the dark lord," with all the fevered delivery of a televangelist. I saw several people carrying goat and cow heads on tall staffs, and a popular look at Burning Man was to stick two plastic glow sticks in your hat or hair like horns.

Finally, there was the ghoulish chorus to the northwest. What sounded like a coven of witches chanting "Devil's delight/Fire tonight" over another powerful PA was actually the climax of *The Arrival of Empress Zoe*, a "rock opera" staged on and around a three-tower castle made of rebar, wire mesh and mud. As I melded into the audience, menacing male voices joined the chant and the castle went up in flames.

The opera had employed more than 50 characters, many of them extras wearing animal masks and tails, who danced naked around a massive bonfire waving sticks and raising their arms to the stars as the castle burned and the chorus chanted.

"Devil's delight/Fire tonight." "Devil's delight/Fire tonight."

I decided that if Ralph Reed had been savvy enough to dispatch a Christian Coalition camera crew to '96 Burning Man Festival, he could have made a fund-raising video that would have had God-fearing folk everywhere scrambling for their credit cards.

The castle burn was anticlimactic after the Seemen's Hellco tower demolition, and I left before it toppled. I tried to orient. I'd walked miles in random patterns, and didn't have a clue where my camp was. Then I spotted the fluorescent white glow of a tiny Kentucky Fried Chicken sign at three o'clock, and gratefully accepted Colonel Sanders as my savior.

The Burn

Ian went to Bartertown Sunday morning, and traded two bundles of sage and a joke for breakfast and a bowl of high-grade marijuana to see in the day. His joke went like this:

Q: What do you call a psychic midget who escapes from prison?

A: A small medium at large.

I munched a plum and got in the long line at the closest of several dozen Porti-Sans scattered around Black Rock City. Ian barked at the green cubicle through a megaphone. "We're not sensing any movement out here." I gave up and walked to Spiral Oasis, where Mark Pesce was presiding at a wedding. After the ceremony, about 40 people joined hands and walked in a complex spiral pattern around the bride and groom as they kissed, held hands and smiled at each other. I lazed over to the center of camp and bought an espresso at Atomic Cafe, where a nude woman in red-and-black body paint was chatting with a cop in uniform. "Hey, you guys," she called over to her camp. "This is the sheriff." The cop grinned and waved.

A dust devil touched down and danced over the ten-foot-tall gas generator that squeezed out the juice for Black Rock City's rudimentary power grid. Last year's festival was disrupted by high winds and a rainstorm, but the weather at Burning Man '96 during the day was calm and hot. Like most people, I lay low during the brutal heat of the day on Sunday, staying under shade and drinking water. I made one afternoon expedition through the smoldering ruins of Hellco to the far southeast perimeter of the festival to see the "Piano Bell From Hell."

The Bell was 88 gutted, old pianos trucked in from Oakland and bolted together into a hollow oval by found-object artist Steve Heck. I picked a stick out of a kiddie pool full of striking devices and joined about 50 other people in banging on the rusted strings and wood. It sounded like the din of a thousand poltergeists.

The cool of dusk was paradise. Back at camp, The Moonies were shooting potatoes from their CO2 cannon at a stacked pyramid of empty water bottles. A few minutes later, they set a couch on fire and started shooting at that instead. As the curtain of night came down, I hiked to the center-camp stage, arriving for the last song by the Mermen, a bitchin' space rock/surf band from San Francisco.

An emcee in a wizard's costume took the mike. "All right, everybody," he said, "it's just about that time. To the Man!"

The crowd in front of the stage dispersed to join the small clumps and caravans of people approaching from all directions and filing onto Black Rock City's four primary internal roads, all of which led to the Man. The pathways were lined on both sides with tall flame pots, and many in the mob carried torches, like peasants out to storm the palace.

"Don't burn the Man! Don't burn the Man!" A single-file line of protesters passed me by. It was the Kentucky Fried Chicken tent people again, carrying placards that read, "Save the Man" and "Flaming Men for Burning Man."

Slowly, all the people formed a circle around the Man, with a safety radius of about 75 yards. The Man's arms, which had been at his sides, slowly began to rise until they locked above his head. Fire twirlers and jesters on stilts entertained the crowd. Twenty-five minutes later, I was feeling irritable and impatient, like a little kid waiting for the fireworks in a small town park on the Fourth of July.

I want it go boom, mommy. Make it go boom now. Finally, with no fanfare, a woman walked up to the Man with a tall, skinny torch and lighted a fuse on one of his legs. A flame shot up and spread through the Man's torso. His head exploded. Blue fireworks shot out of his eyes. He raged in flames for five minutes, then his skeleton collapsed and he crumbled into a fiery heap of wreckage. The hay bales that had defined the viewing perimeter were put to the torch. Drumming and dancing began.

A rave started up around the center stage. Techno pounded through the speaker stacks as a woman in a bat-winged, black-leather dominatrix suit sucked her fingers and danced erotically on a runway. Three men rode by on a mechanized metal cart with four high wagon wheels and a long snout that spewed flame.

Like the night before, I started moving through the madness at random. I took in the first act of a rock opera that featured an actor playing the Unabomber strapped to a cross, then stopped in for some free chai and tabbouleh at the Nub Galactic Tea Kitchen camp, where a deejay inside a tent decorated like a hashish den played hip-hop and dark ambient music. Warmed and fed, I stopped by a nearby camp that was sponsoring an independent film festival, then another showing Mystery Science Theater 3000 episodes on a sheet tacked to the side of a camper.

"Avert your eyes," a man called out behind me, seconds before a pile of magnesium ignited 100 feet away and burned with an intense, white heat. My legs ached from walking, and I drew a bead on Colonel Sanders. As I approached the Spiral Oasis, I saw a group of people pushing an oil drum on a freight dolly. One of them carried a rifle. "Come on," someone said, "we're gonna take a barrel of gasoline out into the desert and shoot it with a tracer round."

Turned out the sniper had a night-vision scope. Ten minutes beyond the northeast apex of the festival ground, the group stopped, then retreated about half the distance. The rifleman took aim and fired a green phosphorescent round that streaked into the desert, struck the invisible drum and detonated the gasoline in a most gratifying mushroom-cloud explosion.

"Aaaaahhh!"

Nineteen hours later, I was on the Las Vegas strip. I drank coffee and played blackjack at Luxor, a megacasino/hotel shaped and decorated like an Egyptian pyramid. I decided Vegas was just as surreal as the Burning Man, but with inferior taste.

I poured quarters into a slot machine and tried to assign a meaning to the place I'd been. Was Burning Man a postapocalyptic party before the apocalypse? A dress rehearsal for a spiritually chaotic, hedonistic, creative, communal way of life for after the crash? An exercise in freeform art? A techno-pagan quest for the cathartic release of tribal ritual? Or just a good excuse to load up on drugs and blow up shit?

Purely subjective, I decided, and cashed in. Outside, Dole voters bloated on cheap buffet food strolled from casino to casino, killing time in the garish lights before their redeye flights back to reality.

Their reality. Not mine.