

And now for something completely different

A six-day do-it-yourself Cirque du Soleil of 29,000 people in a Mad Max setting, orchestrated by a fascinating American social thinker. Welcome to the wondrous world of Burning Man.

The day starts around 3.30PM, before that it's just too hot on the endless sand plain, a dried out lake in the middle of the Nevada desert. The temperature reaches 40°C, while at night it easily drops below freezing point. I was lucky to spend the hottest hours in the air-conditioned comfort of the RV. When you finally do open the door the dry heat slaps you in the face. So does the light, the sun reflecting hard on the white sand. You put on your shoes, colour invisible under a thick layer of sand dust. You climb on your mountain bike. Get off again, to fetch the water bottle you forgot. NEVER leave without water. Slowly you bike towards the road, along the tents and cars of the neighbours. The road is the same desert plain, delimited by small flags. It describes a soft curve of four kilometres long around the central point of the area: the statue of The Man. You are about to discover the wonderful world of Burning Man.

Most people you meet are dressed up in the most remarkable way, while others are simply not dressed at all. Meet the naked, overweight man, painted in bright green and wearing an orange wig and red and white striped socks. On the road you give way to *art cars*, vehicles of all kinds and forms, from golf carts to buses. They have been mutated into the most remarkable objects: a tropical island, a skull on wheels, a big transparent plastic water bag on wheels with submerged diver inside. Along the edge of the road are the attractions. Those can be literally anything. To pick a few: the human carcass wash, a communal shower; the chill-out tent with comfortable armchairs and relaxing music. In a tent a long plastic canvas that is kept wet with a manual sprayer. You're more than welcome to take part in the belly-sliding contest. Further down road a slide in cast-iron of at least 6 meters high, built by a group from Detroit. On the corner a bar for some 200 people, in the middle a tabletop dance area. As you can see, Burning Man is a firework of uninhibited creativity. A *laid-back* crossing of Monthy Python, Jheronimus Bosch, Hustler and Mardi Gras.

Gradually you cycle towards the inner part of the immense circle, the sand plain of the Playa. The Statue of the Man stands in the middle of it, while the surrounding plain is scattered with art objects of all sizes and nature. You visit the grass field of a couple of hundred square metres decorated with metal plate work sculptures, and the body paint factory where you can get treated to a deep colour. The largest mutant vehicles reside here, such as the white whale and two pirate ships. They're made of wood and cloth, built around a bus. The Playa stretches a couple of miles further where it is delimited from the rest of the Black Rock desert by an orange fence.

In the middle of the Playa stands the statue of The Man, a stylised wooden sculpture mounted on the top of a lighthouse. You can climb the tower. This is the ideal timing to take a moment to realize where you are. Around you the most bizarre collection of

people. Scattered on the plain before you the oddest vehicles and art objects. In the distance the low level constructions of the camp, covered by a mist of sand that lights up under the sun. Further the endless plain of the valley, all around the mountain ridge. Magical.

It's not just the firework of extravaganza and creativity of Burning Man that make it a fascinating event. The whole concept of the event is just as intriguing. Take the setting; at that very moment Black Rock City, the tent city of Burning Man, is the seventh largest city of Nevada. It appears out of nowhere, in the middle of nowhere. The city of 30.000 exists for six days and then disappears completely from the globe, down to the last cigarette butt. The layout of the city is impressively harmonious, as you can see on the map. The London Observer described the town as a '*beautifully zoned tentopolis designed with a precision of which the Renaissance city state idealists would approve.*'

Not only the city plan reminds of the Renaissance. Larry Harvey, the inventor and the man behind the Burning Man organization, reminds me of the Renaissance. You can find his thought on the very comprehensive website www.burningman.com. For Harvey Burning Man is far more than a festival. It is a political statement, a sharp criticism on contemporary American society. He has few kind words for present day America: '*a nation of poseurs caught in a great national séance*'. What bothers him most is the gradual destruction of social capital in American society, the informal network of contacts, family or social, which makes the world a liveable place. The commodification of society, lonely people sitting in front of television screens, paralysed by an empty lifestyle invented by slick marketeers. '*It's not a life that's lived or shared, but an imitation of life, a kind of commercial for self.*' Burning Man wants to be an antidote for this over marketed, sterile society. '*We need to re-establish contact with our inner selves. We need to reinvent a public world. We need immediate connection to the natural world of vital needs.*'

Burning Man has anarchistic roots. It is a so-called *Temporary Autonomous Zone*: an area that is occupied for a limited period of time to create an utopian society. Different rules of conduct apply here, in this case set by Harvey and his team. The way they shape Burning Man through these rules is amazing. You can consider Burning Man as a temporary societal experiment, an enormous conceptual artwork, intended to make an ethical point. Says Harvey: '*I confess it's one of my goals to prove that civilization is possible.*' And according to the results of the survey held in 2001 Harvey seems to succeed in this attempt. More than half of the people answered on the question how Burning Man influenced them: '*I am a changed person.*' So very American...

Many aspects make Burning Man special. The setting of course: a gigantic desert plain under a burning sun, endless and remote from everything. It is one of the most striking aspects of the Burning man experience: the immediate contact with the elements: sun, sand, heat and cold, drought, fire, human flesh. Nearly all materials used in vehicles and attractions are natural: wood, cloth, cast-iron. You're completely isolated from the world, and there are no public utility services at Burning man: no water supply, no electricity, no garbage collectors (except for public toilets), no

mobile or line phones, no radio or television. You really are cut off from the world during a whole week.

The location requires a great sense of responsibility of all the participants. Of course you have to take good care of yourself: drinking water, protecting yourself against sun and sand. But you have to take care of the environment too. The spot has to be left absolutely exactly as it was on arrival. The owner, the federal Bureau of Land Management, controls the scene very carefully after the event; even a pistachio shell will not escape their eye. There are no garbage cans on the location: everything you brought along has to be taken back home. *Leave no trace* is one of the codes of good conduct of Burning Man. And it works.

Harvey and his team set other rules too. The most spectacular one is without doubt the ban on money. You read it correctly: 25.000 people together for six days, and not a single commercial activity (buying and selling, advertising). These are punishable by eviction. Money is replaced by the '*gift economy*', one of the cornerstones of Harvey's way of thinking. "First things first: 'we recommend to people to consider *themselves* as a gift. Then we ask them to project this to the outside world in a gift that they can share with others. As nobody directs this way of self-expression it leads to a tremendous variety of gifts: bizarre ones, charming ones but also many very practical gifts. It nurtures a multitude of artistic expressions. But we also organise the whole public service thanks to the gifts of the participants. Nearly all members of the organisation are volunteers.' There are about 30 activities that are open to the volunteers. According to the survey around 85% of the participants did some voluntary work during the stay. Attractions are the most appreciated gifts of course. So you build a chill-out tent, keep a plastic cloth wet during a couple of hours or you forge a cast-iron slide, transport it over four thousand kilometres to assemble and operate it. Then dismantle and carry it back a week later. Sometimes it takes you months, in a group of up to 200 people, you cover all costs yourself (the organization sometimes sponsors the out of pocket expenses). This is a way to accumulate social capital, friendships.

Slowly the sun sets. The dust over the camp lights up some more. The shadow of the Man grows longer. The Lamplighters start their procession, volunteers crisscrossing the area to lighten hundreds of gasoline lamps. The sun disappears behind the mountains. Then the last sunlight disappears from the eastern cliffs. As darkness settles the lights of Black Rock City appear. And you discover the flames of Burning Man. The metal flowers that looked so peaceful during the day, shoot enormous flames high in the sky. One of the most typical things about Burning Man is the *whoocch* and *hmmmmff* of the flamethrowers. It is striking how dark it remains.

You admire the procession of the five sea horses, lighted in colourful neon, that parade down the Boulevard from Centre Camp. After some three hours you finally climb down from The Man and bicycle home. You stop to join the crowd around an artwork. Several statues of a swimmer are mounted on a round plate. By pedalling on a bicycle you make the plate turn and a stroboscope light up. It looks like there are several swimmers that swim faster as you bicycle harder. Finally you tear yourself away to go home.

Home, that is Peter, Helen, Nikki and Mark. The Danish adult website developer, the English lesbian couple, and the unemployed dot.commer from San Francisco. Only Helen and Nikki knew each other beforehand. Very appropriately for these cyber times we met over the Internet. *Rendezvous* in San Francisco, in Marks apartment. An art deco apartment with a grandiose view over the city, San Francisco at its best. Packing for Burning Man is no small feat: eight days worth of food and drinks, all the necessary desert survival gear, Marks gift (a *shadow box* that never got assembled). We spent three hour in the supermarket: three chariots full. Then, after picking up the RV, we pack everything. Not easy in San Francisco: you are free to choose the orientation in which the RV leans over: to the front or sideways. In both cases 20%.

We finally left the city on Friday evening. Night stop in Reno, where we picked up the bikes. Then 120 kilometres straight ahead on a small road, while the landscape become dryer, more desolate. Arrival in Black Rock City, 520 kilometres from San Francisco. Other crossed the whole continent to get there.

Spending nine days this way with perfect strangers is quite an experience. You really get to know each other. You easily spend some hours together each day, waking up, cooking, eating, just hanging around. The one takes a nap in the back, the other snoozes away on the bed above the driver compartment, while the airco keeps it liveable. Climbing on the roof of the RV is a pleasant occupation too, an ideal spot for some meditation, or an elaborate massages of Nikki by Helen. You get to know your neighbours with American ease. You select some, and avoid others. Lisa, the Lady Di of the neighbourhood and her friend are very welcome, while the dark eyed young man, who loved our company and especially Nikki's, was kindly but firmly avoided. And then one evening, when you're home alone, he enters unasked. *Why doesn't Mark want me in.* Then you discover solitude, rootless ness. Even on Burning Man.

Slowly the team prepares for the night ahead. This time we all dress up. We spent an hour going through all the disguises and dress objects. I settled quite rapidly: the purple wig was a perfect fit for my green dress. First destination is Centre Camp, the immense Bedouin-tent at the centre of the Esplanade. A quarter of the tent is reserved for a stage and a collection of irresistibly cosy and dusty armchairs. The audience sits, hangs, lies, listens, and chats along. Elsewhere in the tent meditation courses, an African drums band. A beautiful girl dances topless on the rhythms. A naked New York lawyer painted in purple, looking exactly like a naked New York lawyer painted in purple joins in to observe.

We visit the photo studio in front of Centre Camp for a shoot. Nikki lets it herself go, Peter gets away with a bitten nipple. The square around Centre Camp is full of the most surprising things. The very well-shaped man performs the weirdest trick ever with a hula-hoop. He lets his impressive organ swing up and down, luckily for him in perfect harmony with the hoop.

Burning Man at night feels like a medieval feast. A whirlwind of sounds, people, things. The dust, the fire. From the Esplanade you have a magnificent view on the Man, lighted in Blue neon, and the laser beams that shine in the four directions. Along the Esplanade you find the greatest attractions. The Death Guild Thunder dome comes straight for Mad Max 2. Volunteer contestants hang by elastic ropes and battle each other with long radiator brushes. The crowd climbs on the immense dome to

watch the spectacle. A much younger version of Tina Turner, perfectly dressed for the occasion, arbitrates the fight. Strolling along the Esplanade you discover the wildest things: immense open-air dance temples, quiet and cosy corners, fire spectacles, Mutant Vehicles acting as bus service. You lose your friends while strolling around to run into them again later. After a long night you gradually head home. Chill out in one the quieter spots in the Camp. I spent an hour watching the original Wizard of Oz on the tunes of Dark Side of the Moon, in the company of man wearing only a rubber chicken. Last stop is the RV. Exchange impressions; last drinks. A perfectly quiet and warm moment to end one of your weirdest days ever.

And the following days the scenario repeats itself. Things do change gradually: more people arrive, new attractions open. Some only occur at given times; the program booklet handed out by the greeters at the entrance contains an approximation of the agenda. There you find all about *the great Canadian beaver eating contest* and the *Santa Humiliation Hour (an engaging hour of rude Santa abuse)*. Very popular is the *critical tits parade*. Hundreds of women bicycle topless, chest painted creatively, through the village. Mark was too fascinated to hold his camera correctly. He filmed his feet instead. Others might prefer the *Moon Time Circle, where together we will create a ritual and nurturing space for women who are bleeding. Feel free to come if you are not bleeding as well.*

Some events are unplanned, such as the sand storm. The weather had been a little different, more clouds than usual. But nothing warned us sudden gust of wind, and the sand it carried along. The loose sand on the ground is blown up in the air. Visibility drops to nearly zero. Goggles (spontaneously offered to me by a stranger) become lifesavers. Life slows down, as you can hardly breathe or see. The lens needs cleaning every few minutes. Life in Centre Camp goes on, be it with an extra touch of surrealism. You climb on the construction of a slide, ten meters high. The owners welcome you with a glass of champagne. You spend the next hour there, seeing the storm gradually die down. We were lucky: a one-hour dust storm is the ideal scenario. Previous years this weather lasted nearly the whole week.

The apotheosis of Burning man is on Saturday night: the burning of the statue of The Man: *The burn*. During the late afternoon the place around The Man is closed off by the Rangers, the volunteers who act as the local 'police'. They keep the crowd behind the imaginary fence. The art cars assemble behind them. The whole community gathers gradually around the statue, rows and rows of people. At the entrances to the inner-circle the largest concentration of fire spitting objects you will ever encounter. The impressive Mad Max mobiles, populated by dark looking figures in combat dress spit threatening flames. The spectacle starts, the artists are allowed in the circle: the portable flamethrowers, the flame throwing vehicles, and hundreds of *fire spinners*. Then fireworks from The Man. Finally the big moment: The Man is set to fire. First the fire spreads slowly around the statue, then very rapidly the complete construction is in flames. The hypnotized, motionless crowd is bathed in a surreal light. An unreal moment of absolute primitive forces. Whirlwinds of dust and heat sprout from the top of the burning statue and find their way to the public. The Man collapses. Everybody rushes to the middle, to the enormous heap of burning wood. They retreat rapidly because of the enormous heat. People stream closer and closer again, until the

unbearable heat stops them. They runs in circles around the ashes, ten of rows thick. Men and women forge themselves a way to the centre, move back and disappear in the swirling crowd. *La fête du feu*. This is primitive, speechless. Many call Burning Man a pagan feast. It certainly feels like one.

After quite some time the fever finally diminishes. You can walk up to the gigantic heap of glowing ember in the middle. This is a moment of intense emotions for many. A forty-year-old shows me his baseball cap with the inscription "Cutty Sark", the whisky brand. *It's my gift to The Man. I don't need it anymore*. He throws his cap into the fire. The following night the Temple of Joy is burned. It is built of puzzle *cut-outs* and burns as torch. I didn't go, one burn was enough. I climbed on top of the RV and watched from a distance. The biggest flame I have ever seen.

The next day you take the time to wake up. After a long breakfast ritual you finally start packing. You spend two hours of your time looking for garbage on the plain: didn't find much. Then you start the ride home. First in a well-organised queue to the exit, then in a long column along the only road that lead to Reno and San Francisco, back into the real world.

And yes, you feel good. The event leaves a sweet aftertaste that lasts for weeks. You're ready to face the world with a little more benevolence. And you really have something to look back on. You have been an active participant in what is to my knowledge the most creative and wild feast of this scale on the planet. At the same time you behaved as a responsible citizen in what is probably the most "civilized" place of the country, measured in terms of volunteer work, non-violence and ecology. Harvey has proven it empirically: *civilization is possible*, also in the America of today.

Notwithstanding the extreme character of the event, especially to American standards, Burning Man has received positive coverage in the media. The relationship with the press says a lot about the philosophy of Harvey and his team. "*We create a lot of context for them*. They call and say "we need a press kit and would like to talk to Larry". We say that we don't have a press kit and if they want to talk to someone they should visit the website first. And we test them upon this, we talk to them for a couple of weeks to create a connection. And then they have to camp with us for some days, live, survive there. *This is radical inclusion - very Burning Man. And they actually wrote more incisively. They delved beneath appearances. By every intelligent standard, they created better stories.*" The big media do not always participate and they want to impose their rules. Result: CNN is not welcome. MTV was even kept out with a lawsuit. *Not selling out*, one of the basic attitudes of the punk movement still applies. Burning Man has no sponsors, has even never spent a dollar on advertising. Burning Man remains credible after all these years.

Quo Vadis, Burning Man? Is this event a one-week curiosity or does it carry the seeds of something more important? Harvey has plans. In his most recent speech (Viva Las Xmas, see website) he says that he sees Burning Man grow. "*I want it to feel like a complete model of civilization, so that people can go back home with the confidence that they can change the world.*" Today he keeps clear from any political

statement; he limits himself to be ethical-social considerations. It would not be bad if thinking behind Burning Man had some influence on the American political agenda. *Larry Harvey for President*. After all, if Joshka Fisher, the agitator of May '68, can become the most popular politician of Germany...

And how does that translate onto me, as a Belgian, a European? I think that most Europeans live in a slightly less alienated world. We we're still allowed to party, during the summer music festivals for instance. Television is less sleek than in the US. We still cherish our social capital somewhat, be it over a drink in the football cantina. Chances are smaller that your family lives across the continent, because you really needed to move for that job opportunity. But even for Europeans Burning Man is a quite exceptional and rewarding experience. And one thing's for sure: you do have something to talk about for the rest of the year.

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For all questions: www.burningman.com

Caution! This is not a Sunday stroll. Be conscious of what you embark on; do take enough time for preparation and go for the whole week. You can't go on your own, get in touch with others via one of the mailing lists on the website. The best way to get there is to fly to San Francisco and to leave from there.

All quotes from Larry Harvey are excerpts from documents from the website. Recommended are: *Viva Las Xmas* (2002) and *La Vie Bohème* (2000). Also worth reading is the: *Burning Man Survival Guide*. If you want to see some more: www.goldchstein.com