

camp, streets and villages complete with post office, radio stations and a newspaper. However, with the greater numbers of people and tighter structure, Ilona says there are advantages. "The art is better. The cars are better. The music is better. There's just a broader variety of stuff to see."

But Burning Man is not simply a spectator event. People are expected to participate. Participation can mean anything from building an art installment, to organizing a theme camp, to just being open to the experience.

Byrd says, "I really opened my mind up to things I thought I was closed off to. From the music to the art to the people, it really pushes and opens up your boundaries. You could end up having these really intense conversations with people you don't even know out there on the playa, in the dark under the stars. It's this way of connecting with people in a way you can't in everyday life."

Ilona says, "It's a peek into a way the world could be, the way people pull together and work cooperatively. It's a place where people feel safe expressing themselves."

Burning Man is evolving, though. It's gained something of a reputation as a place for people to go "wild," wild in the sense of drinking, drugs, dancing and nudity (see sidebar). Byrd would disagree with this characterization of the event. But he does say that the increased numbers of people requires greater trust — "trusting people to behave and to be informed." He's noticed that Burning Man now includes "lots of younger people, more alcohol," and that after nearly 10 years, he wonders how far along he and Ilona will evolve with it.

For now, though, he will enjoy his tenth visit. "Burning Man allows me to be the person I would like to be, rather than what my job and life want me to be," he says. He and Ilona will anticipate those first minutes at home on the playa, where, after having been car-bound from Eugene, they will ditch the truck, hop on their bikes and ride giddily around Black Rock City before settling into camp. For at least another year, they will find freedom in the desert and celebrate the burn as the end of the old and the beginning of something brand new.

BEFORE THE MAN BURNED

One Burning Man Survivor's Tale

BY KATE STORM

I ATTENDED BURNING MAN to participate in the spontaneous artistic community called Black Rock City, which is created each fall on a flat desolate land known as the playa. I found 25,000 Americans living a consumptive nightmare in the middle of nowhere.

The only thing neon lighting, 24-hour techno, a lot of alcohol and pole dancing women created was an alternative Las Vegas. I left before they burned the Man.

At the center of Black Rock City, the Man hovers several stories above the ground. We are told that he represents the identity of every participant and specifically each person's self that has conformed and been oppressed. The Burning Man website touts, "There are no rules about how one must behave or express oneself at this event." The Man burns in reflection of the shedding of rule-based personalities that supposedly happens here. Black Rock City is the new frontier, complete with the promise of total freedom and a better life. At the gate a woman in black leather and a peacock crown welcomed me home.

Unfortunately, the expressions of Black Rock City citizens looked more like a racy beer commercial than a revolutionary new culture. The majority of participants I met were nine-to-five workers and nightly television watchers. To let loose they drank beer for breakfast. Three days of this and they were despondent and bored. The vacation they sought did not evolve beyond consumption.

Burning Man is a "No vending, non-commercial event," except for espresso and coffee, sold in central camp to long lines of morning hangovers. Participants are told to cover the brand names of moving vans and RV's. They do not. The introduction guide encourages trading of goods and services between community members. I expected art and healing. What I saw were rubber donkeys, plastic tops and cocaine. The most artistic thing I received was a handkerchief scribbled with permanent marker in one corner.

The seven women camped beside me had spent the prior year shopping for Burning Man. Most of the week they admired their purchases, which included several leather couches, an Oriental rug, and a stocked bar. The limousine, moving truck, SUV and two cars they had filled and driven from San Francisco were not excessive to them. In fact, for a year this vision had been their inspiration. It took thousands of dollars

and hours of shopping for seven friends to feel free.

All Black Rock City citizens are expected to identify with the Man. The Woman is not acknowledged as someone who enforces the rules nor as someone who facilitates healing after burning the Man. Femeness is denied both as existing negative and potential positive. A quick search of the Burning Man website shows there are 60 uses of the word "women." A sharp contrast to the 333 uses of the word "bike." "Man" is, of course, prolific. The majority of Black Rock Rangers, chefs, event organizers and creators are men.

Women are encouraged to feel free just like everybody else (men). Free actually means sexy. Many women spend time topless, some women dance naked on buses and there is no shortage of sexual experimentation to partake or observe. But Burning Man does not foster a safe and intentional container for sexual exploration. Participants of the all-women's annual topless bike ride, Critical Tits, recruit men to guard them from the audience. There is no sexual assault support. The Women's Temple is more of a lesbian/bi meeting place than a sanctuary.

It's an old story. The Woodstock generation equated sex with freedom. The media equates sex with freedom. Beer commercials insist upon the freedom of sex. Making space for women to feel sexually free provides men with something they can use. Sex is another commodity to be consumed. Walking down a Black Rock City street often meant deflecting a chorus of hoots, derogatory comments and come-ons.

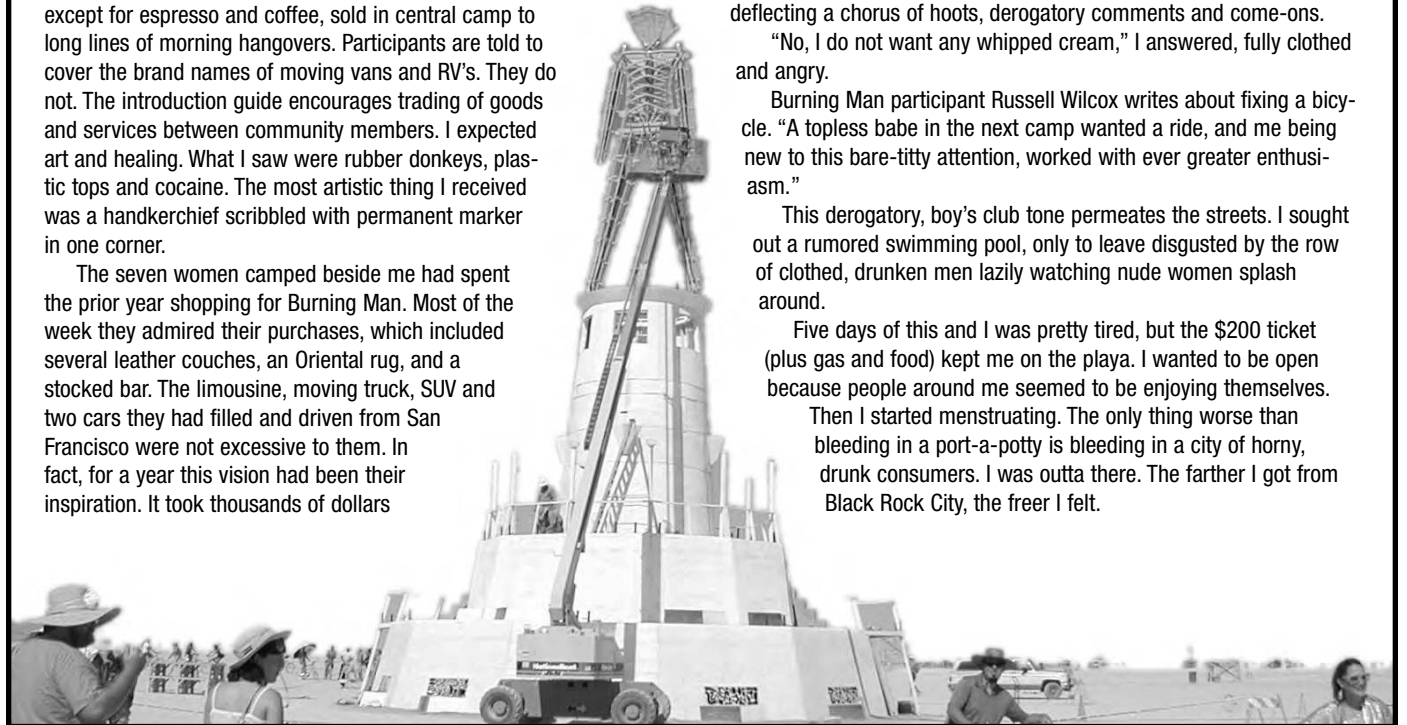
"No, I do not want any whipped cream," I answered, fully clothed and angry.

Burning Man participant Russell Wilcox writes about fixing a bicycle. "A topless babe in the next camp wanted a ride, and me being new to this bare-titty attention, worked with ever greater enthusiasm."

This derogatory, boy's club tone permeates the streets. I sought out a rumored swimming pool, only to leave disgusted by the row of clothed, drunken men lazily watching nude women splash around.

Five days of this and I was pretty tired, but the \$200 ticket (plus gas and food) kept me on the playa. I wanted to be open because people around me seemed to be enjoying themselves.

Then I started menstruating. The only thing worse than bleeding in a port-a-potty is bleeding in a city of horny, drunk consumers. I was outta there. The farther I got from Black Rock City, the freer I felt.



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