

2017 Hottest Year Ever

The Playa was so hot this year even genetically born cisgendered females were manspreading.

All week long the hardest drug I consumed was the heat. The highest I got was from the heat. The worst hangover I had was from the heat.

Thermometer watching was a thing this year. One afternoon I had a reading of 119°F in the shade. I swore my thermometer was broken, it only goes to 120. Next time I'm bringing more thermometers for more accurate readings. This was the same thermometer that read 35°F on Tuesday morning after Exodus last year.

Sleep is hard to come by at Burning Man. Generally, 7am to 9am are one of the few sleeping slots available; you've had a chance to see sunrise and it's not deadly hot out yet. One morning early in the week I forfeited my morning sleep in honor of a playa gift. A young fellow on the nearest soundsystem gifted us the moment of his life, a touching musical tribute to trainwrecked deep tribal house. Fist pumping like he's in the DJ Olympics and twitching faster than the Energizer Bunny™ on steroids, he redlined that PA like there was no tomorrow. Musically, it might have made sense if it was a 6am Sunday set in a crowded underground club in Chicago in 1990. Instead, there were some dazed, hapless souls to witness the occasion, slumped over on cushions attempting sleep. There were two people standing, a woman who was smiling terribly and also twitching like the DJ, and another person who was ostensibly their physician. Based on the side effects of their prescription, the woman probably would have been smiling just the same if there was no music. Nevertheless, our bold DJ-dressed in carefully selected Mad Hatter tribal gear- is banging track after track of the exact same sort of bassline, not letting up for air. Over the years I've learned that a DJ is best if they're actually paying attention to their surroundings, including the people hanging around and the rest of the setting. No wonder that a specific genre of 'playa tech' has evolved over the years, which favors atmospherics and eclectic ambiance over incessant pounding rhythms; out on Black Rock you're having to contend with great volumes of space and distance and climate, you're not dancing on a jam packed brick-lined urban basement dance floor. I didn't have the heart to

tell the DJ that he would never make it out of the prelims to the medal round in the DJ Olympics. He had so much gear with him, his own DJ coffin and everything, it would have been cruel to tell him the truth: anyone with a smartphone and a spotty data plan could have put on better tunes. I hope he lives really, really far away, like in Wellington, New Zealand or something, so I never have to hear him spin again.

If at any point there is a contest to come up with a Burningman theme for 2018, my entry is this: “Not Affiliated with ShiftPod™”

Burningman themes can have such a profound effect on the outcome of the event. 1996's theme- which I will always remember as the HellCo year- conjured such a horrific set of catastrophes that one of the main BM protagonists John Law quit forever and 1997 almost didn't happen. When I first saw the “Radical Ritual” theme for 2017, it reminded me of an obscure, tepid flavor of Celestial Seasonings™ brand tea, and more than one commentator online criticized the man for mailing it in with this one. Yet when the man burned, and Aaron Joel Mitchell self-immolated in the inferno (link: <http://www.rgj.com/story/life/arts/burning-man/2017/09/03/man-runs-flames-during-burning-man-airlifted-burn-treatment-center/629576001/>) the ‘Radical Ritual’ theme had a ghastly aftertaste.

Word of the runner death had got to us before we left the Man Burn, even though no one I was with actually saw it. It was great to see the swift response from the organization, there was a very deliberate fence all around the Temple Burn the next night and extra security staffers in redundancy. In the early days on the playa, when the Man burned, there was no perimeter established, and I remember dancing right up to it while it was on fire, trying to gauge if I was too close, maybe it might fall on me, maybe step back a bit, maybe step forward. And then a mosh pit would ensue after the man fell, running counterclockwise. Those days are long gone. Even before getting to the playa this year I had made a new rule for myself: do not go on, up or in any structure intended to be burned. This was based on a number of things, like my experience feeling claustrophobic inside the Lighthouse last year, where there was no way to go forward or backward once inside because of the crowds, and it was so funhouse rickety inside I stumbled and cut my arm and wound up in the medical tent days later because of an infection. Or thoughts of the Oakland Ghost Ship Fire. Or Paul Addis. Or being lost in the labyrinth in the base

of the man a few years ago, not knowing which way was out. Also remarkable were how few burns there were this year, less than ever. It seems sculptors would rather use dazzling LED effects, or create pieces for civic commissions later, as opposed to working so hard for something to simply go up in smoke. It's not hard to imagine a future where the only burns on the Playa are the Man Burn and the Temple Burn, and both of those structures being closed to the public for the duration of the event, behind one or more fences the entire time. In 1995 I was able to climb to the top of the Kulkulkan Pyramid at Chichen Itza in the Yucatan, but now- decades later- that is closed to foot traffic, it's a world heritage site. I could see the same future with the Man: do not touch the historical artifacts.

It was great to run into Burning Man Founder Larry Harvey. He seemed to have a steady helm and deft sense of the pulse of the event, like what you'd want out of a professional baseball manager, calmly saying all the right things exactly on cue. Harvey's sartorial Guayabera shirts exude a carefree, elegant flair missing from most people's overdone playa wardrobes.

First Camp is easily home to the greatest conversations you'll ever have out on Black Rock, and their careful balance of old timers and gifted Burgins makes it all super interesting. There's a great slogan in First Camp: "There's a Camp for That." As in: when you stand in line for 20 minutes to get flogged by a dozen costumed clowns to have a shot of warm salty whiskey... "There's a Camp for That."

This year I started jokingly telling people that "I don't go to that side of 6th Street," and why would you, when your neighbors are people like Tony Robbins and Cirque de Soleil. But to tell the truth, on my first bike ride out on the Playa this year, I rode the full 20 minutes across town to go pay my respects to 'Voted Best Camp,' who really are the Best Camp out there.

Did any of you get your 2017 Burning Man toothbrush from Mental Dental over on 3:20 and K? I did!

The most talked about art on the playa this year was the work of Android Jones. And it wasn't a sculpture or a burn or a theme camp or an art car or DJ set. People stood in long lines to enter planetarium style domes to lay down on the ground and look up at an amazing 15 minute video. It was as

if Alex Grey paintings of a pantheon of deities were animated by the people who made the Avatar film. It was so intense, my date for the showing I saw had to close their eyes for huge chunks of it, the 3D flying sequences were gut churning doses of dizziness. Oh, on topic: someone said they talked to Alex Grey out there- who was doing live art- I wasn't lucky or cool enough to stumble into that.

The amount of food and drink gifted on the Playa hits new heights each year. If you have the nose for it, there are foodie excursions all around. By midweek I had dined on salmon three meals in a row at three different camps. I ate food from a Beverly Hills caterer and a top-ranked Manhattan restaurateur. I had Indian Food, cucumber sandwiches, ceviche. And BACON. Lots of BACON. And grilled cheese. Burners do it right. Bloody Marys and Mimosas were commonplace. I had a Piña Colada and it was amazing. I couldn't help thinking, what if you spent all year planning Piña Colada camp, and then it's one of those years where we're all dressed up like Eskimos and it's 37 degrees Fahrenheit outside before calculating the wind chill factor?

Costume Camps really are awesome and a bunch of people I know really upped their game with some sublime playa-acquired burner threads this year. I hope this trend continues and proliferates, I would hate to see these secondhand playa clothing stops gentrified out of existence.

It's great to see the burner culture transition from rebar to lag screws. 2017 was my first time doing this in my own camp. If you don't know what this means please study this BURN.LIFE article for next time: [link: <http://www.burn.life/lag-screws-101.html>]

However you want to classify this growing melange of plug-and-play, turnkey or fashion model camps- whatever you want to call them- I'm enjoying it. It's easy to make friends with these folks, especially if you know how to interact with the various staff. There's a careful balance some of these groups are missing however. If you're serious about flying scores of people to the Black Rock Desert who don't know how to install a Zip Tie and think a Phillips Screwdriver is the name of a cocktail- people whose only contribution is buying custom bedazzled aviator goggles in SoHo- you're going to need a lot of support staff. There seems to be a happy balance in the best of these large, unlimited budget camps where there's

one staffer per four guests. One camp I witnessed this year had a 1/15 ratio and the poor crew were very overloaded, by their own estimates they were going to have to remain until Friday after Exodus to finish clean up. All week long in this one camp it was easy to gauge the strain, seeing the workers coping with water leaks from their shower trailer where an endless parade of Sparkle Ponies were taking three showers each per day. At least they were all getting paid. I hope.

In one of these huge, newish big budget camps, I met one of the organizers and we had a nice chat. When they realized I had a quarter century of history attending the event, they got apologetic about their excesses and I immediately corrected them. From as far back as I can remember, Burning Man has been proudly populated by pranksters, people who would wear a tuxedo in the desert to drink out of martini glasses. The more extravagantly absurd and impossible the better. Carry on.

The situation with bicycles on the playa is horrible. With these big camps full of jet setters- who are provided bikes that are not theirs- these bikes never seem to be locked up, and when that camp guest's first bike is stolen, all bets are off and there's this cascade of random bikes being stolen and gifted to the playa. While MOOP in general is lower than ever, the abandoned bikes left behind are getting worse and worse; a few days after exodus the playa is a macabre bicycle graveyard. Sunday night after Temple Burn in the front lounge area of our camp, a gorgeous young woman marches up, picks out a bike and mounts it, and a number of us start yelling HEY HEY HEY and I run up and say 'that's our bike' and she replies 'someone took my bike' and I'm all 'you can't take ours' and after a few more back and forth bits of dialog, this unbelievably beautiful woman marches off on foot, ostensibly in search of another free bike. Immediately afterward some vicious bits of wind blew through our camp and I wondered if the Playa Gods were upset with us (the Playa provides after all). Even worse, the next day when we were packing up, we loaded up about 15 bikes to be donated, bikes that had been abandoned in our camp and didn't belong to any of us after a careful inventory. While retelling this story to one of our campmates later, they explained that I should have told the young woman: "someone slept with my girlfriend. Can I fuck you?" Sadly, I am not that quick witted in person. Anyway, the Burning Man community is great at solving horrible problems. There's got to be some way that these big turnkey camps start off with clearly labeled recycled yellow bikes or

green bikes, bikes that boldly say 'free to ride' on them or something, so it's clear which ones are okay to hop on without warning. Maybe they have a yellow and green light or something, a clear identifier that this specific bike is not loved and cared for by somebody in particular. And everyone, if you don't want to lose your bike to the harsh reality of the gift economy, remember to lock it up at all times. It can be a really long walk back to camp.

Let's talk about foot care. A number of my campmates needed help with their feet this year, things like sterilizing and lancing painful blisters, asking around for fresh socks, in need of toenail clippers, foot lotions, vinegar for playa foot. Look, the playa is super hard on both shoes and feet. If you don't march around in the real world in impossibly uncomfortable boots, it's not going to be a good idea to do so in a 110 degree salty and dusty setting. I've been out there enough times to know that comfortable shoes are more important than anything else, period. Larry Harvey himself- a veteran of more than a quarter century of playa burns- is known to wear simple, basic sneakers out there. A good habit: before throwing out your comfiest worn out shoes over the course of the year, save them to take out to the playa to kill them for good and toss them out when you're done. Your feet with thank you.

For all of you people scrambling to get the heck out of Dodge before the Exodus wait times, BMIR radio was reporting a zero minute wait at 2pm on Monday, and no waits longer than half an hour after that. If you had stuck around, there were lots of interesting things happening Monday night: some stray art cars were still out and about; great food was still flowing for those still there to eat it; loud shots of flame were still blasting into the air from various camps. If you stayed long enough for any sort of cleanup, you missed an epic dust storm Tuesday at sundown.

On the way into BRC, it was great to hear the timeless Adrian Roberts from Piss Clear and BRC Weekly fame going over the various BM lingo to get you into the mood. Words like 'burnicle' make a lot of sense once you've had to deal with it first hand as we did in our camp this year.

Speaking of playa lingo, I'm wondering if there's a word for the hallucinations you get after a full day of MOOPING with a wide rake in 100-degree-plus searing sunshine. One moment, you're convinced you're the

Mars Rover. The next moment, the rake tracks look like rows and rows of undulating cigarette butts that vanish like a mirage when you reach out to grab them. There's a camp for that.

Speaking of MOOP, fishing line is MOOP. Campmates would return from bike rides with fishing line wound around their shoes, their lower legs, their bikes. While dragging a rake across every square foot of our camp after everyone had left in "Last Man Standing Mode" I kept raking up bits of fishing line, invisible to the eye. My MOOP bag was full of fishing line medusa dreadlocks. Look, if you bring fishing line to Burning Man, you are a fucking asshole. There's no fish there. Calling out the camp on 7:00 near the shitters. I thought I was clever by biking around your cast fishing lines into traffic which you thought were so funny. Next time I get off my bike and dress you down in person. FISHING LINE IS MOOP. FUCK YOU.

Burning Man is at its best when it conjures creativity, inspiration, ingenuity and problem solving. No matter how many times you've been there- or if it's your first time- this is going to be forced on you with unexpectedly great results. Burning Man is at its worst when it's a bunch of paint by numbers cookie cutter conformity. Do we really need to see another Captain Unicorn Tutu marching around? How does that 'Steampunk Circus Daredevil in the Sahara Circa 1911' costume bring anything new to the table? In general, you don't want to tell anyone how NOT to express themselves, but is copying that outfit you saw on Instagram last year- down to the exact boots and goggles- really adding to the culture in any significant way? By the way, you can break lots of the written and unwritten rules. I made a deliberate, ceremonial ritualistic celebration of shirt cocking at least once a day out there this year, even if only for a brief moment.

If you've been out to the playa enough times, the likelihood of having x amount of exes there is pretty high. One ex told me this week that she'd never sleep with me because of the outfit I was wearing. That was a great feeling.

After all of my exes had left the desert- the last day I was there- I had been interacting with a beautiful sexy young woman who had been variously hovering around my camp during the day. Near sundown she left to go

take a shower and promised with a long, lingering hug that she'd be right back. Then an epic dust storm hit, flattening much of my camp. She never did make it back. The Playa is like that: never make plans.

The Black Rock Desert and Burning Man will test your physical limits. Sometimes it's an endurance test, pushing your boundaries. I know I hit the wall more than once this year. But the turmoils we endure- whether it's being stuck in traffic; having your gear break or get lost or stolen; suffering in the face of weather conditions or sleep deprivation- all of this hardship makes those brilliant moments even more beautiful when we finally make it there.

About the storyteller:

Terbo Ted [[link: http://www.terboted.com](http://www.terboted.com)] first visited the Black Rock Desert in 1992 when there was no gate, no perimeter, no road, no trash fence and you could drive your car as fast as you wanted in any direction. Terbo was the first DJ to play in Black Rock City, with no one there to hear his set on a dusty Friday afternoon. Later, in the early years he was the only one ever to be called "Mayor of the Techno Ghetto [[link:https://thump.vice.com/en_us/article/9avb9a/death-and-ecstasy-the-rise-and-fall-of-burning-mans-original-rave-ghetto](https://thump.vice.com/en_us/article/9avb9a/death-and-ecstasy-the-rise-and-fall-of-burning-mans-original-rave-ghetto)]" His playa self and default world self can be remarkably similar these days.