

AUGUST 31 - SEPTEMBER 6, 2006

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# GetOut

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# BURNING MAN

Valley residents let loose in Nevada wonderland, Page 9

NEVADA'S BURNING MAN  
FESTIVAL IS A WAY OF LIFE  
FOR SOME E.V. RESIDENTS

# Fired up



JOE TREVINO, SPECIAL TO GET OUT

**TRIPPY TROUPE:** Dressed for a party, Ryan Matthews of Mesa, left, Steve Duncan of Brooklyn, N.Y., Jeff Mulryne of New Jersey and Lisa Duchne of Montreal stand under a 15-foot-high geodesic dome of steel tubing, which, once tarps are attached, will protect them from the elements in the Nevada desert.

By CRAIG OUTHIER • GET OUT



The Labor Day weekend offers all kinds of recreational possibilities for hard-working Arizonans. You could take a boat to the lake. You could go camping in the mountains. You could watch a D-Backs game, or have a pleasant backyard barbecue.

Or you could drive up to Nevada, put on a funny outfit and lose your mind in a neo-tribal desert wonderland of art, technology and utopian tolerance, culminating in the fiery sacrificial destruction of a 70-foot-tall neon effigy.

Your call.

For Mesa's Ryan Matthews and several hundred Arizona residents like him, there's really no debate. For the past 20 years, the Burning Man has beckoned pilgrims worldwide to its dusty flats, and they have come by the tens of thousands, enticed by the promise of beauty, community and a fairly robust tradition of debauchery.

And, yes, to watch stuff burn.

## CREATIVE CLASS CACHÉ

Just before the event, Matthews' home resembles the wardrobe department of a kitschy Broadway musical. Swaths of brightly colored vinyl are draped over the pool table, and the couch is piled high with chiffon boleros, faux leopard-skin vests and other sartorial absurdities.

On the floor sits a sewing machine — the favored appliance of the Burning Man enthusiast, or “Burner,” in the common parlance. Inspired by an item he picked up at a thrift shop, Matthews is fashioning an ankle-length battle skirt out of strips of sparkly red vinyl. Standing up, he models the piece: Part samurai warrior, part Scarlett O'Hara. Pure Burning Man.

“It's basically a costume ball out there, isn't it?” says the professional urban planner, who moved to Arizona from Montreal and attended his first “Burn” last year. The outfits are not for him, necessarily, but a camp of six people that Matthews has tentatively dubbed Campus Minimus.

Theme camps are common in the Black Rock Desert, the massive alkaline lake bed about 90 minutes outside of Reno where the weeklong Burning Man is staged. Many of the camps — numbering in the hundreds — are interactive. In past years, one could find karaoke camps, massage camps, crepe camps and, once, a camp devoted to vintage Atari 2600 video games.

In his backyard, Matthews and high school pal Jeff Mulryne — a systems analyst from New Jersey — have constructed a 15-foot-high geodesic dome out of steel tubing. The dwelling — which looks something like the eponymous structure in “Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome” — looks comically out of place in this suburban, cookie-cutter milieu.

On the desert playa, however, it will be but one of untold dozens just like it — shelter against brutal Nevada silt storms and biting nighttime winds. Shortly, Matthews and Mulryne will disassemble the dome, pack it into an RV and drive up to Reno with their friends.

“When I was younger, I used to build stuff, just for the hell of it,” Matthews shyly confesses. “And then you have to hone in on a discipline, and you stop creating just for the sake of creating. This is a return to that.”

Far from the soup-line hippie routinely associated with the counterculture, Matthews is part of what urban prosperity guru Richard Florida calls the “creative class” — upwardly mobile bohemians more likely to wear a necktie

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**FUTURE FUN:** “It's intuitive to me. What could we do that people could participate in, and predict the future with? It fits the theme,” says Kacey Crowley, right, a Scottsdale “Burner” who created a human-scale, 12-by-16-foot ouija board to reflect this year's Burning Man theme: “Hope and Fear: The Future.”

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than a sarong. (Other social critics have dubbed them “bourgeois bohemians.”) They are engineers and software programmers, artists and attorneys, gay and straight, married and single. They're your Valley neighbors. And many of them — by conservative estimates, 400 a year — go to Burning Man.

### BIRTH OF A FESTIVAL

The details are sketchy, but myth has it that counterculture figure Larry Harvey started Burning Man on San Francisco's Baker Beach in 1986 after catching his girlfriend (or his wife, by other, equally specious, accounts) in bed with his best friend. Instead of setting fire to his friend, he set fire to an 8-foot wooden man, invited some of his friends to watch and turned it into a happening.

Over the years, the Burning Man grew progressively taller — from 8 to 15 to 40 feet, with neon tubing — and the party got progressively bigger, drawing hundreds of Bay Area locals. By 1990, the event had moved out to the flat, lifeless, canvas-like Black Rock Desert and become a weeklong camp-out, ending on Labor Day. (Currently, the Man is burned

on Saturday night, leaving Sunday for undercard immolations.)

For a month leading up to the festival, engineers survey the land and zone the campground (known as “Black Rock City”) as an orderly, 1/2-mile semicircle around the Man, with streets and cross-streets and pods of portable toilets. This not only makes the festival safer and easier to navigate, it also helps accommodate more “participants” (never refer to yourself as an “attendee” or “guest”).

In 2005, the event drew a record 35,500 people, making it — briefly — one of the 20 most populous settlements in Nevada. It is the largest annual event held on federally owned lands.

### ALMOST ANYTHING GOES

In keeping with Harvey's ethos of “radical free-expression,” most anything goes at Black Rock City. (Except for money transactions — but for a single coffee shop, the event is purely noncommercial and barter-based.) You will see a family of cupcakes file past you on electric scooters. One industrious art collective converted a school bus into a full-scale, motorized Spanish galleon. There are stilt-walkers, fire-breathers, post-apocalyptic commandos and enough raves to fill a dozen Ibizas.

The pluralness of Burning Man was a key selling point for Mike Lundquist, a computer network supervisor from Mesa. Lundquist is a practicing

### MORE ONLINE

Get more info on Azburners, who will hold a local mini-Burn next month, at [azburners.org](http://azburners.org).

“naturalist,” which is a slightly more polite, European term for nudist. A six-time Burning Man veteran, Lundquist runs a camp for naturalists in Black Rock City and spends most of his time there in the glorious, pony-tailed buff.

The Burning Man has garnered a reputation for nudity, but only about 10 percent of participants actively practice it. The point is, no one cares, which is fine with Lundquist. He prefers the festival to nudist retreats, anyway.

“Obviously, I can't go nude in the default world,” he says, using the favored Burner term for everything that's not Burning Man. “But over there, in the desert, I can be the way I want to be in society. A real, diverse society.”

Other Burning Man participants prefer to express themselves mechanically, or conceptually. Richard Wizardry, an artist and former real estate investor based in Scottsdale, specializes in “pyrophones” — devices that make musical notes by shooting fire through tubes. His latest creation, a six-foot pyrophone named Toaster Boy, will make its second trip to the desert.

Kacey Crowley and his wife, Juli

Ohman, both of Scottsdale, wanted to create an interactive art piece that reflected this year's Burning Man theme: "Hope and Fear: The Future." After much thought, they came up with a human-scale, 12-by-16-foot Ouija board.

To the uninitiated, the next question is obvious: Why?

"I haven't really thought about that," Crowley, making his third trip, admits. "It's intuitive to me. What could we do that people could participate in, and predict the future with? It fits the theme."

On some levels, Burning Man is designed as a parody — or celebration — of mainstream culture itself. There are several radio stations in the camp, a few news rags, even a dating service. Past Burners tell of a visionary participant who started his own Guinness Book of Burning Man Records.

At night, swathed in dust storms, with a horizon of artificial light, the settlement gives off an eerie, apocalyptic aura. It is, quite palpably, a city on the edge of time.

Many who come to the festival — especially those who come later in the week — limit their participation to exploring, partying and ogling. Certainly, the atmosphere is bawdier than, say, a Joel Osteen telecast, but devotees claim the culture isn't as lawless and relentlessly narcotic as some outsiders assume. Liquor rules the day. Local and federal law enforcement routinely patrols the campground.

If it were a movie, Burning Man would most likely rate a hard R. There are family-only campsites, and in 1999, the event was listed in AAA's RV guide under "Great Destinations." How more middle-American can you get than that?

## SERIOUSLY SEDUCTIVE

For many Burners, the event is anything but a once-a-year goof. Scott Platski, a Phoenix-based computer programmer who helps manage the Arizona regional chapter of Burning Man, estimates he spends \$4,000 to \$5,000 a year on his theme camp and donates "hundreds if not thousands of volunteer hours" to the cause.

Platski believes it has changed his life for the better.

"I'm a former New Yorker," he says. "I always worked for gain. I do this now for other people. All it takes is one (person) to say thank you, and it's worth it."

In the 51-week lull between festivals, Platski and his fellow Arizona Burners do what they can to keep the good vibe going. They hold a mini-Burn in Flagstaff in April and a "decompression" get-together in October. Some Burners report having difficulty re-acclimating to the world at large, so profoundly sheltered and alien is the noncommercial, nonjudgmental Burning Man culture.

Burning Man isn't cheap. Ticket prices have steadily risen the past two decades and now top out around \$300. Add to that transportation and shelter costs, and it's easy to see why the event has swelled chiefly with young urban professionals, particularly dot-com types, many of whom trace their initial interest in the festival to an article published in Wired magazine in the late '90s.

Whatever the cost, Arizona Burners aren't quitting their habit anytime soon.

"Some people go to Bermuda," Platski says, with utmost seriousness. "I go to the Nevada desert."



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**HOT TUNES:** Richard Wizardry, a Scottsdale artist and former real estate investor, created Toaster Boy, a six-foot-tall creation that make musical notes by shooting fire through tubes. This year will be its second trip to Burning Man.

## Beyond The Burn

Burning Man isn't the only poly-pyrotechnic outdoor arts festival on the block.

### THE DREAMTIME FESTIVAL

Live music, theme camps and art installations, with an emphasis on magic and transformations. Held in the Rocky Mountains outside of Paonia, Colo. (July)

### ZOZOBRA

Held during "Fiestas" in Santa Fe, N.M. Revelers burn a 50-foot effigy to commemorate the retaking of the city by 18th-century American Indian peasants. (September)

### XARA DULZURA

Burning Man off-shoot festival. Takes place on property owned by a Theosophical monastic order near the San Diego-Mexico border. (April)

### PAGAN SPIRIT FESTIVAL

Music, drum circles and a "Magical Gift Exchange" in the forests of Ohio. Offers day care for the little pagans. (July)

### TOAST!

Arizona's own regional Burn. Held in Witch Well. (May)

» Burning Man runs through Sept. 4 at Gerlach, Nev. (about 100 miles northeast of Reno). \$280 and up. [burningman.com](http://burningman.com)

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