

So You Want to Go to the Burn

A guide to not just surviving Burning Man, but actually being there.

BY JESSICA GERWIN | ABOUT A 30 MINUTE READ | JESSICAGERWIN.COM

About This Guide

Burning Man is not a festival. It is a temporary city of 70,000 people built from scratch each year in the Nevada desert, run entirely by the people who show up to it, governed by ten principles that function as a shared agreement about what kind of place it is going to be. For one week, it operates by a completely different set of rules. People actually follow them. What comes out of that is a quality of human contact, community, and self-understanding that most people spend their whole lives without ever finding.

A lot of people miss it. Not because it is inaccessible, but because they arrive underprepared in ways that have nothing to do with gear. They show up like they are attending a festival rather than joining a city. They wait to be entertained rather than showing up to participate. This guide exists to close that gap.

What follows covers the principles that actually govern Black Rock City, the practical gear that makes survival automatic so you can focus on being present, the mental and emotional preparation most guides skip entirely, and what to expect when you come home. It is the guide I wish someone had handed me before my first burn.

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The Master Packing List

There is a specific thing that happens at Burning Man that I have not found anywhere else.

It is not the art, though the art is extraordinary. It is not the music, or the fire, or the scale of the thing. It is something that happens between people. Seventy thousand strangers build a city together in a desert, and for one week operate by a completely different set of rules. Rules they actually follow. And what comes out of that is a quality of human contact that most people spend their whole lives without ever feeling. You are fully seen. You are fully welcomed. Not the version of yourself you perform for the world. The actual you, showing up however you are, in whatever you're wearing, with whatever you're carrying.

And the city just receives you.

It's part of the experience for people to have revelations at Burning Man. Not metaphorically. I mean the kind of thing that reorganizes how you understand yourself and what you want. The kind of thing you go back to for years afterward as a reference point. Before the burn, after the burn. People will call family members they hadn't spoken to in years. Decide to leave jobs. Start things they'd been afraid to start. Not because anyone told them to, but because a week in an environment of radical honesty and genuine community stripped away enough noise that they could finally hear what they already knew.

That is what is available at Burning Man. That is the real thing on offer.

And a lot of people miss it entirely.

Not because Burning Man is inaccessible or hard to understand. But because the gap between what Burning Man can be and what it actually is for a given person is almost entirely a function of preparation. Not just what you pack. How you prepare your mind. The internal orientation you show up with. Whether you have thought seriously about what you're walking into and what it will ask of you.

The people who struggle are not underprepared in the way you might expect. They didn't forget sunscreen. They weren't naive about the heat. They showed up philosophically underprepared. Approaching it like a festival they were attending rather than a city they were joining. Waiting to be entertained rather than showing up to participate. Bringing enough gear to survive but not enough intention to actually arrive.

The people who thrive, the ones who come back genuinely changed and still light up when they talk about it two years later, prepared differently. They read the principles before they went, not as homework but because they understood the principles were the actual operating system of the city. They came with something to give. They came with a question they wanted to sit with. They came ready to say yes.

I am a prepared person by nature. I camp. I think about gear. I am intentional about what I bring into any environment, physical and otherwise. Burning Man was still one of the most profound and transformational experiences of my life. And the preparation I put in across every dimension, practical and mental and emotional, is what made space for that. This guide is what I wish someone had handed me.

It starts with the principles, because that is where Burning Man starts. Then the gear: the specific, non-obvious things that matter. Then the parts most guides skip: how to show up mentally, how to participate in a way that

actually opens something, and what happens when you come home and find that regular life looks a little different than it did before.

What I was not prepared for, what I think about more than almost anything else from that week, was watching people bloom. Watching very normal, professional people who I knew in their regular context step out of their tents in extraordinary outfits and become the fullest version of themselves. There is no other word for it. They bloomed. And I bloomed too. That permission to be completely yourself, to be celebrated for it rather than tolerated, is something most of us do not get nearly enough of. Burning Man gives it to you unreservedly for an entire week.

The gear is not the point. The point is arriving as the kind of person who can actually thrive there.

The Operating System

A brief history, because context matters.

Burning Man started in 1986 on Baker Beach in San Francisco, when a man named Larry Harvey built an eight-foot wooden figure and burned it on the summer solstice with a small group of friends. Nobody is entirely sure why. The event grew, moved to the Nevada Black Rock Desert in 1990, and has been there ever since. What began as an impromptu act of expression became, over the following decades, one of the most significant intentional community experiments in modern history: a temporary city that now hosts roughly 70,000 people for one week each year, built entirely from nothing and returned entirely to nothing when it ends.

The ten principles that govern Black Rock City were not written until 2004, by Larry Harvey, as an attempt to articulate what the event had already become. They were descriptive before they were prescriptive. Which is to say: the culture came first, and the principles named it.

Before anything else, you need to understand what you're actually walking into.

Burning Man is not a festival. A festival has a lineup, a schedule, vendors, infrastructure, and a clear division between the people performing and the people watching. Burning Man has none of those things. It is a temporary city, Black Rock City, built from scratch in the Nevada desert each year, run entirely by the people who show up to it, governed by ten principles that function less like rules and more like a shared agreement about what kind of place this is going to be.

Those principles are not marketing copy. They are the actual DNA of the event, and understanding them before you arrive changes everything about how you show up.

RADICAL SELF-RELIANCE

Black Rock City will not take care of you. There are no vendors. No food for sale. No infrastructure that you didn't bring. You are responsible for your shelter, your food, your water, your medical needs, your emotional state, and your exit plan. The fastest way to have a terrible burn is to arrive expecting someone else to handle something.

This principle is also a gift. There is something clarifying about knowing you are entirely responsible for yourself. It strips away the ambient dependency we carry everywhere else and replaces it with a kind of competence that feels genuinely good.

GIFTING

The economy of Black Rock City runs on gifts, not transactions. You bring things to give. Coffee, sunscreen, art, a cold piece of fruit, a real conversation. And you receive what others bring. There is no "thank you, what do I owe you." There is no exchange. You just give. This is the principle that most changes how the city feels from the inside. It is also the one that requires the most preparation, because you have to actually think in advance about what you have to offer.

RADICAL INCLUSION

Everyone is welcome. Everyone. You will share space with people who look, live, and love very differently than you do. The principle cuts both ways: you are also welcome, completely as you are. Not the polished version. Not the version that has it together. You, exactly as you arrive. Let that be true. It is one of the rarest things the city offers.

PARTICIPATION

Burning Man has no audience. This is the principle that separates a transcendent experience from an expensive camping trip. If you are just watching, you are doing it wrong. The art is yours to touch and interact with. The music is yours to dance to. The camps are yours to walk up to and engage with the people there. The city only works because everyone is both performer and audience simultaneously. More on this later. It is the most important thing in this guide.

LEAVE NO TRACE

The desert is lent to us. Everything you bring in, you bring out. Seriously, everything. This includes every sequin, every bottle cap, every ratchet strap and tent stake. Matter Out Of Place, or MOOP, is taken seriously enough that the Bureau of Land Management monitors cleanup after the event. Camps that leave a trace can lose their preferred placement for the following year and even be fined. This is not a bureaucratic rule. It is the reason the event still has access to this land, and honoring it is one of the most communal acts available to you all week.

***BEFORE YOU GO:** Read all ten principles at burningman.org. Not as homework, but as orientation. They will change what you notice when you arrive.*

Things You'll Hear and What They Mean

Burning Man has its own vocabulary. Arriving already fluent helps.

THE PLAYA

The dry lakebed of the Black Rock Desert where the event takes place. Fine white alkaline dust, completely flat, stretches to the mountains in every direction. Also used as shorthand for the event itself: "on playa" means at Burning Man.

BLACK ROCK CITY (BRC)

The official name of the temporary city. It has streets, addresses, neighborhoods, infrastructure, and a population larger than many American towns. It exists for one week and then it doesn't. Black Rock City even has a functioning post office. You can mail a letter from the desert to your loved ones.

THE MAN

The large wooden effigy at the center of the city, around which all streets radiate. Its burn on Saturday night is the emotional climax of the week. People have been building toward it all week without necessarily saying so out loud.

THE TEMPLE

A sacred structure built anew each year, designed by a different artist. Where people bring grief. Where they leave notes to people they have lost, photographs, objects that carry weight. The temple burn on Sunday night, the night after the Man, is quiet and collective and often more moving than anything else the entire week. There are no fireworks for the temple burn. No music. Just fire and seventy thousand people watching in silence. If the Man burn is the party, the temple burn is the prayer.

MOOP

Matter Out Of Place. Anything that doesn't belong on the playa. Leaving MOOP is a serious violation of the event's social contract. Camps are mapped and graded on their MOOP footprint after the event ends.

CRUSTY BURNER

A term of endearment for a veteran burner: someone who has been coming for many years, knows the playa like a second home, and has accumulated the particular weathered quality of someone who has survived many burns. Being called crusty is most usually a compliment.

DEFAULT WORLD

Regular life. Everything outside of Black Rock City. The place you came from and are going back to. Used without irony as a geographic and cultural distinction.

DEEP PLAYA

The open expanse of desert beyond the city's art installations and camps, out where it feels most like another planet. Walking into deep playa at night, alone or with someone, is one of the specific experiences available nowhere else.

BURN

Used both for the event itself ("the burn," "my first burn") and for any specific fire event ("the Man burn," "the temple burn").

CAMP / THEME CAMP

A designated camp with a theme, often with public-facing programming, art, or services that they offer to the city. Theme camps apply for placement and are positioned on the city map. Most of the bars, dance floors, workshops, and interactive experiences you encounter are run by theme camps.

THE ZENDO

A space run by the Zendo Project specifically for people who are having a difficult psychological experience. Staffed by trained volunteers. A place of safety, not judgment. Know where it is.

BLOOMING

Not an official term, but you will understand it the moment you see it. The visible transformation that happens to people when they put on their playa clothes and become fully, unguardedly themselves. It is one of the most beautiful things about the event.

Getting There

The logistics of actually getting to Burning Man are their own category of preparation, and they trip people up more than almost anything else. Start here.

Tickets

Burning Man tickets are not easy to get. They are sold through a lottery system, not a straightforward sale, and demand consistently exceeds supply. Here is how it works:

Main Sale lottery: In early winter, you register for the main sale lottery. If selected, you get a window to purchase tickets at face value. This is the primary route for most people.

STEP (Secure Ticket Exchange Program): The official resale program. If you miss the main sale, register for STEP. As ticket holders release tickets they can no longer use, they go back into STEP and are redistributed. It works. Be patient.

OMG Sale: A smaller, last-minute sale that happens a few months before the event. Another chance if you missed the main sale.

Low Income tickets: A meaningful number of reduced-price tickets are made available each year. If cost is a barrier, apply.

Do not buy tickets on the secondary market from strangers without extreme caution. Scalping and scams are real. Use STEP. Use the official channels. The community built these systems specifically so people can get tickets without being exploited.

The Gate Line

You will sit in your car waiting to enter Black Rock City. This is not a minor inconvenience. Depending on when you arrive, the gate line can be several hours long. Some people who arrive at peak times, typically Wednesday and Thursday, wait overnight in their vehicles. I waited several hours in the Burner Express bus while it was sweltering hot, storming dangerously, and generally very uncomfortable. There's nothing you can do about this, so try your best to prepare and accept it.

Know this in advance. Plan for it. Bring food, water, and something to listen to in the car. Perhaps a cold pack or a personal fan. Arriving earlier in the week (Monday or Tuesday) or later (Friday) substantially reduces wait

times. If you have that flexibility, use it.

***PRACTICAL NOTE:** Gates open Sunday evening before the event starts. The exact date changes each year, so check the official Burning Man website for current-year details.*

Getting Out: Exodus

Leaving is its own event.

Sunday and Monday after the Man burn are peak Exodus days, and the line of cars leaving can stretch for miles and take anywhere from two to six hours or more. This is not an exaggeration. People plan around it.

Options: leave very late Sunday night after the Man burn and drive through the night, leave early Monday morning before the main rush, or accept the wait and treat it like you're still at the burn until you're not. Many people find Exodus strangely emotional. The week is ending, the city is dismantling, and you are sitting in a line with 70,000 people who are all feeling the same thing. Have water. Have snacks. Have a good playlist. Say goodbye slowly.

Finding Your Way

Black Rock City has a layout that makes complete sense once you understand it, and is completely disorienting until you do. Learn it before you arrive.

How the City Is Laid Out

The city is built in a horseshoe shape, open toward deep playa and the Man at the center. Streets run in two directions: radially outward from the Man (like spokes on a wheel), and in concentric arcs around him (like rings on a bullseye). The result is a grid that uses a clock face for one axis and named streets for the other.

Your address is a clock position and a street name. "7:30 and Esplanade" means you are at the 7:30 position on the clock face, on the innermost arc. "2:00 and Arcade" means you are at 2:00 on a street further out. The Man is always at the center. The open end of the horseshoe faces 12:00. Once you internalize this, navigation is intuitive. Until you do, you will be lost. Get a physical map at the gate. Study it. Know where your camp is on the clock before you wander.

Key Landmarks

The Man: The large wooden structure at the center of the city. Visible from almost everywhere. Your primary navigation reference. If you are lost, find the Man.

The Esplanade: The innermost arc of the city, ringing the open playa. Most of the large sound camps and high-traffic experiences are along or near it.

Center Camp: A large communal structure at 6:00 and Esplanade. Water, ice, shade, community. A good meeting point.

Deep Playa: The open expanse beyond the city's outermost arc where the large-scale art installations live. The Man is here. The Temple is here. At night, art cars move through it. Walking into deep playa alone at night is one of the specific experiences available nowhere else in the world.

The Temple: Located further out in deep playa, behind the Man. There is a different design each year. Unmistakable when you find it.

What Actually Costs Money

Almost nothing. But not quite nothing. The two things you can purchase in Black Rock City are ice (at Center Camp and a few other locations) and coffee (at the Center Camp cafe). Every experience, every drink at a theme camp bar, every piece of art, every interaction operates on gifting. No cash changes hands anywhere else. You do not need a wallet on the playa. Bring cash only for ice.

What to Actually Bring

Almost everyone brings too much of the wrong things and not enough of the right ones.

The default mistake is to pack for comfort the way you understand comfort in regular life. Burning Man comfort is a different thing. It is about being so well-equipped for the actual conditions, the heat, the dust, the cold nights, the physical demand, that you stop thinking about logistics and can just be present. That is the goal. Everything on this list is in service of that.

Shelter & Sleep

Sleep is what most first-timers sacrifice and then regret for the rest of the week. Protect it aggressively.

Tent: Four-season if you have it, solid three-season at minimum. Playa winds are violent and unpredictable. Extra stakes, extra ratchet straps, many more than you could ever think you could need, nothing left to chance.

Shade structure: Non-negotiable. Without shade over your tent, you will not sleep past 8am and your tent will be uninhabitable by 10am. A 10x10 pop-up canopy with shade cloth on the sides is a minimum. Secure it like your life depends on it. Unsecured shade structures can become projectiles in high winds, a genuine danger to anyone nearby.

Sleeping bag rated to 40°F: The temperature swings are real. 105°F at 3pm, 45°F at 3am. You need both ends covered.

Sleeping pad or cot: Off the ground makes an enormous difference in sleep quality. The playa surface is hard and the cold transfers up.

Loop earplugs (or similar reusable earplugs): Not just for sleeping. You will wear these at sets too. Loops are comfortable enough to keep in for hours, protect your hearing, and don't muffle the music the way foam plugs do. Bring a backup pair or two of disposables as well for when your main pair disappears into the dust.

Eye mask: You may be sleeping at unconventional hours. The desert sun at 9am is not interested in your schedule.

Melatonin: Your sleep schedule will be completely inverted. Melatonin can help you actually sleep when you need to, not just when your body feels like it.

Small bath mat: Place it just outside your tent entrance. Wiping your feet before you come in keeps the playa dust from coating everything inside. An absurdly small thing that makes an enormous difference.

Power tools, lag bolts, ratchet straps: If you are building any kind of shade structure or shelter yourself, you will need these. You cannot hand-tighten something that has to survive a 60mph gust. Bring more lag bolts than you think. The answer to "how many lag bolts do I need" is always more.

Clothing

The playa is a costume party that takes itself seriously. Wear what makes you feel like your most alive self. This is a genuine invitation. Beyond expression, here is what the conditions actually require:

Layers: The full spectrum. Sun-protective long sleeves and pants are great for daytime. A real jacket or heavy fleece for nights. Many burners are fans of "burner coats," long heavy fur in every color imaginable. Everything you wear will get destroyed by dust. This is fine, just know that going in.

Closed-toe shoes, broken in: The playa surface is alkaline and caustic. Sandals feel right until you've walked three miles and your feet are cracked and white. Wear real shoes for walking the playa. Break them in for two to three weeks before you go.

Goggles that seal: Ski goggles are perfect. A whiteout can appear in minutes. Definitely bring sunglasses but know that they are not enough. You need goggles.

N95 or respirator: Playa dust is fine alkaline particulate. Breathing it for a week has consequences. Use a proper mask in whiteouts.

Wide-brim hat: The sun is unrelenting and it comes from above and below.

Bandanas, several: Dust protection, sun protection, gifting item, general utility.

The Survival Basics

Water: More than you think. One gallon per person per day minimum, 1.5 gallons in peak heat. The air is so dry that you sweat without feeling it. Hydration is a job you work every single day, not something you do when you're thirsty.

Electrolytes: Water alone is not enough. You are losing minerals constantly. LMNT and Nuun are both good. Take them every day, without fail.

Sunscreen SPF 50+: Bring more than you think. Reapply constantly. The reflective playa surface means you're getting UV from both directions.

Food: Simple, high-calorie, minimal prep. Nuts, jerky, protein bars, canned goods, instant oatmeal. Bring food you actually want to eat. A lot of people just bring whatever without considering that morale is a resource and it depletes.

First aid kit: Blisters will happen. Include blister bandages, ibuprofen, antihistamines, antiseptic wipes, and any prescriptions you take.

Menstrual products (if applicable): The playa has a documented effect of triggering periods, even if you are not expecting one. Come prepared regardless of where you are in your cycle. Feminine wipes are also worth bringing. Gentler than baby wipes for that purpose, and they pack small.

The Hacks

These are the things veteran burners will tell you about that you will wish you had known. I am telling you now.

Body wipes: Your primary hygiene system. There probably is no shower at your camp. A thorough wipe-down morning and night is the difference between feeling human and not. Buy them in bulk. You will use all of them.

Instant cold packs: Crack one open and put it on the back of your neck on a 105-degree afternoon. It is such a luxury. Bring a whole box if you can.

Blister patches, and go heavy: Hydrocolloid patches (the foot-specific ones) and regular Band-Aids, lots of them. The playa will find every weak spot on your feet. If you are wearing platform shoes (playa stompers), wrap Band-Aids around each toe preventatively before you go out. Not reactively. Before. Your future self will be deeply grateful.

A bike: Black Rock City is a mile and a half across. Without a bike you are walking in the heat for every single thing you want to do. Bring a beater, decorated however you like, with a U-lock, a basket, and lights for night riding. Know that the dust will get in every crevice and rust the gears.

Wearable lights for night: EL wire, LED strips, fairy lights, anything. You need to be visible at night for safety, both from other bikes and from art cars. This is not just aesthetic. It is serious.

Collapsible water bottle: A rigid bottle takes up room in your day bag all day. A collapsible one packs down to nothing when empty.

Personal fan: Normal, battery-powered or USB, on you or clipped to your tent ceiling. Makes afternoon napping possible. More important than it sounds.

Multi-tool: You will use it for things you cannot predict.

Small folding knife and scissors: Not a multi-tool substitute. Just useful. Opening packages, cutting cord, food prep.

Soap wafers: Dissolving paper soap sheets. Lightweight, no spill risk, minimal water required. Keep a pack in your day bag.

Sour candy: This sounds frivolous. It is not. A quick sugar hit when you're running low, something for dry mouth from the dust, and a genuinely excellent gifting item. I am partial to Sour Skittles and Trader Joe's Sour Jelly Beans. Something about the sour hit in the heat is excellent.

Caffeine mints or gum: When you need a boost at 4am and coffee is not an option, these are the things. They hit faster than coffee anyway. Keep a tin in your day bag. I'm a fan of Neuromints.

Breath spray or mints: You will be talking to a lot of people, often at close range, in a dusty environment. Take care of yourself.

Petroleum jelly: Apply to your nostrils before sleep. The alkaline dust desiccates the tissue. Trust me on this one.

Small broom and dustpan: Sweep your tent floor every morning. Playa dust gets into everything and a clean floor is an unexpected morale lift.

Day bag / hydration pack: A small backpack you take everywhere. Water, snacks, sunscreen, goggles, a layer, your ID, cold packs, a power bank.

Large power bank: Charge your phone while you sleep. Keep it in the tent.

Zip ties and bungee cords: The duct tape of the playa. You will use them for shade structures, bike repairs, gear failures, things you cannot predict.

Lip balm with SPF: Your lips will crack without it.

Moisturizer for face and body: The air is aggressively desiccating. Moisturize every day. Do it all the time. Do it when you are bored.

Ziplock bags, quart and gallon, as many as you can fit: This is one of those things that sounds mundane and turns out to be endlessly useful. Keeping dust out of things, protecting items from unexpected moisture, organizing gear, making impromptu trash bags, storing wet or smelly clothes, protecting your journal. Bring more than you think.

Wet bag (REI or similar): For smelly or damp clothes. Keeps the rest of your pack from absorbing the smell. Invaluable.

Dry bag for your jacket: A bulky fleece or puffer compressed into a dry bag takes up a fraction of the space. Makes packing and repacking your day bag much more manageable.

Packing cubes: For keeping your bag organized across a week of chaotic living. The point is being able to find things without unpacking everything.

Small gifting items: Think small, personal, and ideally handmade or meaningful. I was giving out little bottles with origami cranes inside and locally made glass figurines. You can bring hand-painted rocks. A poem on a

card. The gift does not have to be expensive or elaborate. The gesture is the thing. Having a pocketful of small tokens means you are always ready when a moment of connection calls for it.

Jackery or off-grid power station: If you are camping somewhere without power, a Jackery or similar lets you charge everything without hunting for an outlet. Worth it for the freedom alone.

The Journal

I am putting this in its own section because I mean it more than I mean most things on this list.

Bring a physical journal. Keep it in a gallon ziplock bag to protect it from dust and any unexpected moisture. Do not skip this.

The obvious reason is that Burning Man is introspective and you will want to write things down. That is true. But that is not the whole reason. You will also want to make a note of something that hit you at 3am. Make an impromptu sign. Write a note to a stranger. Jot down someone's contact information when your paths cross for a moment but both your phones are dead. Record the name of an artist whose set changed something in you. Capture a thought before it dissolves back into the noise.

You will be on your phone very rarely if you are burning correctly. Which means the journal is not a backup. It is the primary tool for this particular kind of thinking. The playa has a way of producing thoughts that deserve to be caught.

Bring the journal. You will thank yourself.

A few other things worth noting: a watch, if you like. Your phone is less useful than you think out there and checking it constantly breaks the spell. A physical map of the city, handed out at the gate, grab several. A reusable cup or mug, because many camps and bars will gift you a drink but you need your own vessel to receive it. A rain poncho, because a playa rainstorm turns the ground into something between clay and glue and makes the city briefly impassable. And more socks than you think. Twice what you would pack for any other trip.

Things That Sound Useful But Aren't

Water purifier tablets or purification straw: You are not in the backcountry. There is no water source to filter. You are bringing all your water in. Leave these at home.

***PACKING PHILOSOPHY:** Every item you add is weight in your car and clutter in your camp. The goal is not to bring everything you might need. It is to be so well-equipped for the actual conditions that you stop thinking about logistics entirely.*

Your Body Is the Instrument

Burning Man is a physical event. You will walk and bike miles every day, in extreme heat and pervasive dust, while sleeping less than usual and eating irregularly. Your body is not the background to the experience. It is

the instrument you are playing the entire week. How well you've tuned it before you arrive matters.

Before You Leave

Sleep bank: In the week before you go, build up a surplus. Go to bed earlier, sleep in when you can. You will run a deficit on the playa. Arrive with a buffer.

Hydration: Start increasing your water intake a full week before. Your cells will arrive better prepared.

Break in your shoes: Whatever shoes you're planning to live in, wear them for long walks for two to three weeks beforehand. This is the single most underrated piece of physical preparation.

Walk more: If you are not an active person, 30 minutes of walking a day in the weeks before will meaningfully help your body handle the mileage.

On the Playa

The heat is serious: 100+ degrees is normal. The playa surface reflects heat upward. Learn the signs of heat exhaustion: dizziness, nausea, headache, stopping sweating. Get to shade immediately, drink water with electrolytes, use a cold pack. Do not try to push through it.

Playa dust is not regular dust: It is fine alkaline particulate that dries out your sinuses, throat, skin, and eyes. Blow your nose regularly. You will be shocked at what comes out. This is normal. Moisturize aggressively. Use your respirator in whiteouts.

Pace yourself: This is a week-long event, not a weekend. The people who blow everything on the first two nights are miserable by Wednesday. Nap during peak sun. Nothing much happens between noon and 4pm anyway, and you want to be alive for the nights.

***KNOW THIS:** Rampart is Burning Man's medical services. It is excellent and free. Do not be a hero. If you are injured or genuinely unwell, go.*

The Arc of the Week

Burning Man is not the same event on Monday as it is on Saturday. The week has a shape, and knowing that shape in advance helps you move through it with intention rather than just reacting to it.

Build Days (Before the Gates Open)

Some camps and early arrivals come days before the official open to build structures, run power, and set up the bones of the city. If your camp is involved in Build, this is some of the most bonding time available: sweaty, unglamorous, necessary work done alongside people who are becoming your village. One of the most unexpectedly joyful parts of my burn was the months of prep that preceded it and the shared satisfaction when we finally saw everything come together. The camp builds you as much as you build it.

Early Days (Monday – Tuesday)

The city is still filling in. The population is lower, the energy more spacious, and the encounters tend to be more intimate. This is when you are most likely to have a genuine one-on-one moment with a stranger in the middle of the desert, to stumble across an art piece completely alone, to feel the scale of the place without being in a crowd. Some people love early days most of all. Savor them. The city gets louder.

Mid-Week (Wednesday – Thursday)

The city hits full population. The art cars are all out. The sound camps are running at full capacity. The programming is in full swing. This is also when the physical and emotional toll starts to accumulate. The sleep deficit compounds. The unexpected feelings surface. Pace yourself. This is not the time to push harder. It is the time to go deep with what is already in front of you.

The Man Burn (Saturday Night)

The emotional climax of the week. The Man, the wooden effigy at the center of the city, burns on Saturday night surrounded by fire performers, art cars, and the entire population of Black Rock City. There is collective anticipation building toward it all week, whether people are consciously tracking it or not. The energy is electric, ecstatic, communal. It is the party the week has been building toward.

The Temple Burn (Sunday Night)

The day after the Man burn is quieter. People are processing. Many have begun to grieve the end. And then on Sunday night, the Temple burns.

The Temple is the sacred counterpart to the Man. Where the Man burn is a celebration, the Temple burn is a release. People spend the week leaving things there: photographs of people they've lost, letters they needed to write, objects that carry grief or love or unfinished things. When the Temple burns, it takes all of it. There are no fireworks. No music. Seventy thousand people stand in silence and watch.

I have not met a person who watched the Temple burn and felt nothing. Go. Stay for the whole thing.

Two Cities in One

Burning Man is almost two different events happening in the same place, running on different frequencies. First-timers often miss one of them entirely by not understanding this in advance.

Daytime

Daytime on the playa is for art, wandering, and rest. The large-scale art installations that take up deep playa are best experienced in daylight, when you can see their full scale and detail. The mutant vehicles move more slowly. The city feels spacious. Some of the best camps run workshops, lectures, yoga, sound baths, and other programming during the day that disappear into the louder energy of nighttime.

Daytime is also for recovery. The most experienced burners treat the hottest part of the afternoon, roughly noon to 4pm, as a rest window. Nap, eat, rehydrate. Nobody misses much between noon and 4. You will miss a lot if you run yourself into the ground by skipping this.

Nighttime

Nighttime is a completely different city. The art installations light up. The art cars pour into deep playa, massive elaborately decorated vehicles with sound systems and fire effects. The sound camps hit full power. The playa becomes a landscape of fire and light and music that has no analogue anywhere else. This is the version of Burning Man that defies description, and it is the one that most people mean when they say they cannot explain what it is like.

To experience both versions well, you have to manage your energy deliberately. Sleep when you can. Rest in the afternoon. Go hard at night when the city transforms. This is not about discipline. It is about not accidentally sleeping through the thing you came for.

The What Where When

The What Where When, usually called just the guide, is the physical booklet listing every scheduled event, workshop, set, and experience happening across the entire week. It is handed out at the gate and it is enormous. Every theme camp with programming, every DJ set, every workshop, every guided experience is in it.

Use it. But use it lightly. The best practice is to scan it the night before for a few things you genuinely want to find, mark them loosely, and then leave the rest to the playa. The guide is for orientation, not a schedule. The moment you start optimizing your burn like a calendar, you stop being present in the one you are actually having.

The best things are usually not in the guide anyway.

How to Show Up

This is the section most guides skip. It is the most important one.

Burning Man will surface things. It is a highly stimulating, emotionally permissive environment where your usual coping mechanisms are gone. No scrolling, no work, no busyness to hide behind. What is available instead is presence. Real presence. And presence, for a lot of people, means things come up that have been waiting.

People cry at Burning Man. People have revelations. People call their estranged siblings. People fall in love. People also have panic attacks, or feel profoundly lonely in a crowd of seventy thousand, or get hit with grief or anxiety they weren't expecting.

None of this is failure. All of it is the point.

Give Yourself Permission

When we go on vacation, we break the rules we normally live by. We sleep in. We eat things we normally don't eat. We stay up past our bedtime. We let ourselves be somewhere else entirely. Nobody questions this. It is understood that the point of a vacation is to step outside the constraints of regular life and give yourself room to breathe.

Burning Man is this, but so much more. It is not a vacation from your life. It is a week in which a completely different version of your life becomes available. One where the rules are different, where expression is celebrated, where generosity is the operating norm, where you are not performing for anyone. The permission to be fully yourself is not implicit. It is explicit and universal and absolute.

Take it. You came all this way.

The Collective You Are Part Of

Here is something that hits differently once you are actually there: every single person in that city is carrying something.

Someone near you is processing a breakup. Someone else just lost a parent. Someone is celebrating a promotion, or leaving a job they have been too afraid to leave, or newly sober, or newly in love, or newly out of a relationship that needed to end. Someone is there because it is their last chance to do something like this before their life changes permanently in a way they do not know how to feel about yet.

We are all, always, negotiating with our identities: who we have been, who we want to become, what we are holding and what we need to set down. That is just life. But at Burning Man, you are doing it alongside seventy thousand people who chose this specific place and this specific week to do it in. That is not random. That is a collective act of intention at a scale that is genuinely rare. You can feel it in the air.

It is why the Temple feels the way it does. It holds all of it: every piece of grief and love and unfinished business that seventy thousand people carried across the desert. When it burns, the release is collective. You are not grieving or releasing or celebrating alone. You are doing it with everyone.

Go In With an Intention

Before you leave home, ask yourself what you actually want from this experience. Not "to party" or "to see the Man burn." What would make this week feel meaningful? What are you carrying that you want to set down or let go of? What do you want to understand better? Write it down or internalize it. Give yourself a north star. The city will meet you where you are pointing.

The Overwhelm Is Real

The first day on the playa is an assault on the senses, in the best way and sometimes in a hard way. There is so much art, so many people, so much music and stimulation and spectacle that some people completely shut down. Give yourself permission to move slowly on day one. Sit in one place and let the city come to you. You

have a full week. You do not have to see everything on the first afternoon. The moment of biking out and seeing the playa at night for the first time, a million lights and the full hum of the city alive around you, the sense of the scale of what's been built. It resists description.

The Emotional Arc

There is a rhythm to how the week tends to unfold. The first day or two are high and exciting. Around the middle of the week, when exhaustion starts to compound, some people dip. The unexpected emotions surface here. By the end of the week, many people feel a profound sadness about leaving, not just because the experience was beautiful, but because they have glimpsed a version of community and society they didn't know was available and don't want to let go of.

All of this is part of the arc. Trust it. Do not manage it. Let it happen.

***KNOW THIS:** The Zendo Project has a space at Burning Man specifically for people who are having a difficult psychological experience, whether from substances, overwhelm, or anything else. If you or someone near you is struggling, Zendo is a safe, supportive place to go. Know where it is before you need it.*

Talk to People

This is the one place on earth where strangers will have a genuine, deep conversation with you in under ten minutes. Not small talk. Not networking. Real conversation, where people say what they actually think and ask what they actually want to know. Let that happen. It is one of the specific gifts of the event and it is not available anywhere else at this scale.

Put the Phone Down

Your phone is useful for navigation and safety. Beyond that, it is a barrier. The most profound moments of Burning Man are not photographable. They happen in the in-between: in the dark, in conversation, in stillness, in the moment when you stop documenting and start being there. The memories you make in your body will outlast any photo.

The Participation Gap

Here is the single biggest differentiator between people who have a life-changing burn and people who have a confusing, expensive camping trip.

Whether they participated.

Burning Man has no audience. Every single person there is both performer and audience simultaneously, and the magic of the city is a direct function of collective participation. When you opt out, when you hang back and watch from the edges and wait to see what happens before you commit, you are not just missing the experience. You are slightly reducing it for everyone else. The city works because everyone shows up.

A Note on Camps

Let's clear something up: you do not have to join a theme camp to attend Burning Man. Free camping, setting up without affiliation with any theme camp, is completely valid, widely practiced, and for some people genuinely preferable. I have friends who free camped their first burn and had extraordinary experiences. I have friends who opted for RVs instead. There is no ideological test at the gate. You do not need to identify 100% with any camp's ethos or vibe in order to show up.

That said, for a first-timer, I still recommend finding a camp if you can. Here is why.

Theme camps come with infrastructure you would otherwise have to build from scratch: shade, power, community, and very crucially, people who have done this before and will openly, enthusiastically share everything they know. Veterans in a camp are one of the best resources available to a first-timer. They know where things are, how things work, what to do when something goes wrong, and they want to help you.

But there is something else, something harder to name in advance. The experience of building camp together, the months of group chats and supply runs and logistical prep, creates a bond before the burn even begins. And then when you arrive and see very normal people from your regular professional life transform into extraordinary, costumed, fully bloomed versions of themselves, when you see the thing you all built together become real, that shared joy is its own kind of gift. The prep felt arduous. The arrival felt like a payoff that was worth every bit of it.

Join a camp if you can. Free camp if that is what works for you. Either way, show up ready to be part of the city.

Show Up for Your Campmates

Your camp is your village. The people you sleep next to, share meals with, and navigate hard days alongside are the core of your burn. Help with setup and breakdown. Volunteer for camp shifts. Look out for each other. The bonds that actually last, the ones that become long friendships and the kind of trust you call on at 1am in the default world, almost always grow out of shared labor and proximity, not the scheduled moments.

Bring Something to Give

Think about this before you go. Gifting does not have to be elaborate. Some people make hundreds of custom trinkets. Some people bring a cooler of cold fruit. Some people offer tarot readings, or massage, or just genuine undivided attention. What do you have to give? Something actually yours: a skill, a thing you love, something you know, a piece of yourself. Bring that. It will matter more than you expect.

Say Yes

When a stranger invites you to see an art installation you've never heard of, say yes. When a camp is serving something strange at 3am, try it. When the music is good, dance. When you're tired and part of you wants to go back to camp but something is happening, stay a little longer.

The best things that happen at Burning Man are the things you didn't plan. There is an expression I love: you will never get the burn you asked for, but you will always get the burn you need.

A Note on Photography

Burning Man has a culture around photography that is worth understanding before you arrive with your camera out.

People at Burning Man are often more vulnerable and more themselves than anywhere else. They are wearing things they would never wear in regular life. They are in emotional states they would not necessarily choose to have documented. The default on the playa is to ask before you photograph someone. Not after, not "I'll just take it and see if they notice." Ask. If they say no, put the camera down. If they say yes, great.

This is not a strict rule with enforcement. It is a cultural norm that reflects what makes the playa feel safe. People bloom at Burning Man in part because they trust that they are not being permanently recorded for someone else's content. Honor that trust.

The broader version of this is the phone point made earlier: the most profound experiences at Burning Man are not photographable. They happen in the moment, between people, in ways that a camera interpolates rather than captures. Bring a camera if you want, but I recommend you use it infrequently. You will be glad you were present.

Leave No Trace

We've already covered MOOP, which stands for Matter Out Of Place: anything that doesn't belong on the playa. When you leave, nothing should belong on the playa.

The Bureau of Land Management monitors post-event cleanup with aerial photography and on-the-ground inspections. Camps that leave a MOOP trail lose their placement. Repeat offenders lose their invitation. This is the social contract that makes the event possible, and honoring it is not optional.

The Daily Practice

Keep a small trash bag on your person at all times. Every sequin, every cigarette ash, every wrapper is your responsibility.

Sweep your tent floor each morning. Shake tarps and rugs downwind and away from camp.

Do not shake or dump anything onto the ground. Not water, not food, not ash.

Use a burn barrel or ash catcher for fire. Take the ash home with you.

The Final Sweep

On your last day, before you load the car, get on your hands and knees and do a slow methodical sweep of your entire camp footprint. Pick up everything. Every zip tie, every fallen bead, every piece of food. Leave the ground looking like no one was ever there.

This is one of the most communal acts of Burning Man. The collective commitment to leave no mark, in a city of seventy thousand people, is genuinely remarkable. Honor it.

When Things Go Wrong

They will. Not catastrophically, probably. But something will not go according to plan, and knowing that in advance, and knowing roughly what to do, is exactly the kind of preparation this guide is about.

Radical self-reliance does not mean handling everything alone and in silence. It means coming prepared enough that you can handle what comes. There is a difference.

Your Tent or Shade Structure Collapses

This happens. A sudden windstorm at 3am can take down a poorly staked structure in minutes. The prevention is everything described in the gear section: deep stakes, extra guy lines, ratchet straps, nothing loose. But if it happens anyway, your camp neighbors will help you. This is a community. Ask. People show up for this.

You Lose Your Bike

Bikes get lost, stolen, and impounded constantly at Burning Man. Lock your bike every single time you leave it. If it disappears anyway, check the impound lot at Center Camp. Bikes found blocking pathways or left in restricted areas get collected there. If it is truly gone, you are now a walking burner. It is fine. It changes your experience but it does not end it.

You Get Completely Disoriented in a Whiteout

A whiteout is a full-on dust storm with near-zero visibility. It can appear in minutes and make it genuinely impossible to see more than a few feet in any direction. If one hits while you are out on the playa: stop moving, put on your goggles and respirator, pull a bandana over any exposed skin, and either wait it out or walk slowly and carefully toward the nearest light source or sound. Do not try to navigate at speed. Do not panic. Whiteouts pass. The city is still there underneath them.

You or Someone Near You Hits a Hard Wall

Physically, emotionally, or otherwise. The playa brings things up. The combination of heat, sleep deprivation, sensory intensity, and emotional openness creates conditions where people sometimes reach their edge.

If it is physical: get to shade, hydrate, use a cold pack, and go to Rampart if needed. Do not try to push through heat exhaustion.

If it is emotional or psychological: the Zendo Project has a space specifically for this. Staffed by trained volunteers, a place of genuine care and not judgment. If you or someone near you is having a very hard time, this is where to go.

If it is a friend who needs support: stay with them. Do not leave someone alone in a difficult state. The burn is an extraordinary experience partly because people genuinely look out for each other. Be that person.

You Lose Something Important

Check the Burning Man Lost and Found, which operates throughout the week and after the event. The community is remarkably honest about returning found items. If you lose your phone, your ID, your medication, or something genuinely critical: go to Center Camp, talk to a ranger, ask for help. The city has infrastructure for this. Use it. There is also a website that lists all lost and found items after the burn.

***RANGER NOTE:** Black Rock Rangers are community volunteers, not law enforcement. Their job is to help people navigate difficult situations. If something is wrong and you do not know what to do, find a ranger. They are identifiable by their khaki and are genuinely there to help.*

Coming Home

Nobody talks about this enough.

Coming home from Burning Man is hard. Not always, not for everyone, but more often than not, and harder than people expect.

Why?

You have spent a week in a city that runs on radical honesty and genuine care. You have been seen and welcomed exactly as you are. You danced until sunrise, had conversations that felt more real than anything in regular life, watched the sun set over mountains in a place that doesn't look like Earth. And then you just drive back. And the grocery store is fluorescent and nobody is giving anything away and everyone is looking at their phone and your apartment is small and quiet and the week already feels like it happened to someone else.

The playa blues are real. They hit most people between two days and two weeks after returning. It is not depression, exactly. It is re-entry disorientation, the way your eyes have to adjust when you come out of a dark movie theater. The world hasn't changed. Your nervous system is recalibrating.

Landing Well

Give yourself a buffer day: Do not go straight back to work if you can help it. Give yourself at least one day to shower, sleep, eat real food, and do nothing.

Be gentle with yourself: The post-burn crash is partly physical. You are sleep-deprived and your body has been through a lot. Eat well. Hydrate. Sleep.

Write it down: The details fade faster than you think. In the days after returning, journal about what happened, what you felt, what surprised you, what you want to take back into your life. This is how integration begins.

Stay connected: Reach out to the people you met. The community does not have to end at the gate. Many of the most lasting changes made at Burning Man are nurtured in the months that follow.

Let it change you: This is the whole point. Burning Man will show you something about yourself, about what you're capable of, about who you want to be, about what actually matters when the noise of regular life falls away. The work is integrating that back in. Not waiting to return. Bringing it with you.

You're Going to Be Okay

If you've read this far, you are already far ahead of most first-timers. Not because you have a better packing list, though you do. Because you understand what you're actually showing up to.

The reason Burning Man is profound is not the art or the music or the spectacle, though all of that is extraordinary. It is seventy thousand people who chose to opt out of ordinary life for a week and build something together. Who give without expecting anything back. Who welcome strangers as neighbors. Who create beauty in a desert and then leave no trace.

Burning Man makes one thing undeniable: how interconnected we all are. It writes it on you in a way that regular life tends to obscure. That feeling of genuine belonging, of being in a room where everyone is actually present, is something most people have felt only in glimpses. Burning Man gives you a whole week of it. And then you understand, in your body, what you have been missing and what is worth building when you get home.

You are about to become one of those people.

Prepare well. Show up open. Bring something to give. Say yes.

Welcome to Black Rock City.

The Master Packing List

Print this. Check it twice. The people who are fully equipped are the ones who get to be fully present.

Shelter & Sleep

- Tent (four-season or solid three-season)
- Extra tent stakes and guy lines (buy the deep ones; lag bolts are even better)
- Shade structure or pop-up canopy 10x10 with shade cloth
- Power tools, lag bolts, ratchet straps (for shelter build)
- Sleeping bag (rated to 40°F)
- Sleeping pad or cot
- Loop earplugs or reusable earplugs
- Backup disposable earplugs

- Eye mask
- Melatonin
- Small bath mat for tent entrance

Clothing

- Daytime sun-protective layers
- Warm jacket or heavy fleece for nights
- Costumes or fashion that makes you happy
- Closed-toe shoes (broken in)
- Sandals (for around camp only)
- Dust goggles (ski goggles are ideal)
- N95 or respirator
- Multiple bandanas
- Wide-brim hat
- Socks, more than you think
- Rain poncho

Survival Basics

- Water (1–1.5 gallons/day minimum)
- Electrolyte packets (LMNT, Nuun)
- Sunscreen SPF 50+ (more than you think)
- Lip balm with SPF
- Moisturizer (face and body)
- Food for the week
- Cooler and ice plan
- First aid kit (blisters, pain relief, antidiarrheal, antiseptic)
- Prescription medications
- Menstrual products + feminine wipes

The Hacks

- Body wipes / baby wipes (bulk)
- Instant cold packs (bulk)
- Hydrocolloid blister patches (foot-specific)
- Regular Band-Aids (lots)
- Petroleum jelly (Vaseline)
- Bike + U-lock + lights + basket
- Headlamp + extra batteries
- Wearable lights for night (EL wire, LEDs, etc.)
- Collapsible water bottle
- Electric personal fan
- Multi-tool

- Small folding knife
- Soap wafers
- Sour candy (Sour Skittles)
- Caffeine mints or gum (Neuromints)
- Breath spray or mints
- Small broom and dustpan
- Little trashcan for inside your tent
- Ziplock bags, quart and gallon, lots of them
- Physical journal (stored in a gallon ziplock)
- Wet bag for smelly/damp clothes
- Dry bag for compressing bulky jacket
- Packing cubes or toiletry organizer
- Small gifting items
- Day bag / hydration pack
- Large power bank
- Jackery or off-grid power station
- Zip ties and bungee cords
- Reusable cup or mug
- Watch
- Physical map of the city (grab extras at the gate)
- Small trash bag to carry on the playa

Leave No Trace

- Trash bags (many)
- Burn barrel or ash catcher if having a fire
- Portable ashtray for smokers

The Intangibles

- An intention for the week
- Something to gift
- A willingness to say yes
- An open heart

See you on the playa.

with love,

jess

Jessica Gerwin

