

HOW TO DO BURNING MAN FROM THE UK

By Ed Karney (January, 2013)

INTRODUCTION

So you're thinking about going to Burning Man 2013? This might seem like quite a long shot for some of you, others will have wanted to go for years. This guide is intended to help you make your decision a bit easier by pulling together all the info that we've gathered from going to Burning Man for the last four years and being shown the ropes by friends who've been going for a lot longer (so thanks to Duff, Freddie et Al from London/Brighton and Zev, Essem, Chaya, Eli and all the Wolf+Lamb crew for your input and guidance). A lot of the advice contained in this guide can be found on the official Burning Man website/forums but it's not tailored specifically to people coming from the UK. This guide is intended to be pretty comprehensive so only read as much or a little as you feel is useful to you but if you do have any feedback about things you feel we've missed out or questions that you think need answering then please let us know.

The first piece of advice that we can give you is that if you are even vaguely thinking about going to Burning Man then ***do whatever you can to actually make it happen***. I don't mean this lightly when I say that it will change your life and how you view the world for the better and will be one of the most positive experiences that you've ever had. Short of selling a kidney or selling your first-born to Arabs, it's well worth breaking the bank to come to Burning Man.

I ended up going for the first time in 2008 because a friend of mine (Laura Jones) got drunk and ended up booking us all a load of tickets on a whim and so made my mind up for me. To say I'll be eternally grateful to her would be a huge understatement as it turned out to be the best week of my life (that was until I went again the following years) and resulted in two of my best friends getting engaged while we were there.

If you are thinking of going the first, and most important, thing you'll need is a ticket. They tried a new system in 2012. **You will need to register in January** (date tba). The system is open for two weeks only but don't feel you need to rush to get tickets today as the site may crash initially due to all the traffic. To do this go to <http://burningman.com> and register for your 1 or 2 ticket allowance with a valid credit card, one that will still be working in May/June (that's when it will get charged).

If you don't do it now....then no ticket for you....or at least no ticket without a lot of last minute tout hassle. Even if you don't end up going to Burning Man it's still worth buying a ticket if there is even an outside chance that you'll be able to make it as it does sell out quickly, though unlike Glastonbury, tickets don't have a name or address on them so can be easily sold on and there is never a shortage of thankful recipients for unwanted tickets.

2012 pricing -Tickets are sold using a tier system... the first 9,000 tickets cost \$210 each, the next 9,000 costing \$240, the next 9,000 costing \$280 and the remainder \$300. The idea is that you pay whatever the most you think you can afford depending on how rich you are but in actual fact given the vagrancies of human nature this really equates to the cheaper tickets selling out first

THE FESTIVAL

Trying to explain what Burning Man is to someone who has never been to the event is a bit like trying to explain what a particular color looks like to someone who is blind.

A bit of background on the festival, some of which you'll probably already know. **Burning Man** is an eight-day annual arts festival for 50,000 held 90 miles (150km) north-northeast of Reno in the middle of the Nevada Desert. The event happens on an ancient lake bed known as the **Playa** and for the rest of the year the land is not only a registered site of outstanding natural beauty but also sacred holy ground for the local tribe of Native American Indians. Burning Man is a **survival festival** with no facilities (ie no electricity, running water, shops etc), though toilets are provided, so participants are expected to be able to be self-sufficient enough to live for a week in the desert. By buying a ticket to Burning Man you are invited to bring whatever you can give to the festival... there is no set line-up of acts or activities... you, the participants are the entertainment. With this in mind Burning Man operates a **gift economy**; no money is supposed to change hands during the festival with participants encouraged to give whatever they can to the wider festival community. While the festival project is known as Burning Man the temporary city gets built in the desert is known as **Black Rock City**, a fully functioning conurbation complete with its own law enforcement, fire department and postal service. When fully built Black Rock City is the 7th largest city in the state of Nevada. Burning Man is a '**leave no trace**' festival with participants encouraged to leave their area of the desert *exactly* as they found it so all rubbish, waste water, sewage etc has to be taken away at the end of the festival. The event is described by organizers as an experiment in community, radical self-expression, and radical self-reliance and takes its name from the ritual burning of a large wooden effigy on Saturday evening. Part fire ceremony, part party, part indescribable surrealistic insanity, Burning Man began in 1986 when co-founders Larry Harvey and Jerry James constructed an improvised wooden figure in honour of summer solstice, then burned it on San Francisco's Baker Beach. The event is now organized by Black Rock City, LLC, under the guidance of one of the founders, Larry Harvey, and five other board members.

HOW TO GET THERE

There are four obvious ways to get to Burning Man and all depend on what you plan to do before and after the festival, how big your budget is and where you're planning on renting your RV. These are as follows:

Fly to Reno: indirect flights from the UK with a number of different carriers

Reno is the closest town to Burning Man and so is the natural jump-off point for most people going to the festival. Reno is a hilarious little city, rather like Las Vegas' seedy crack-head younger brother... it's not much more than a large cluster of huge casinos and an airport surrounded by built up areas, surrounded by desert. That's not to say that you can't have lots of fun in Reno, there are loads of enormous casino hotels offering really cheap rooms and every facility you can imagine to cater for the entertainment obsessed US public. You can't fly direct from the UK to Reno in summer time (in winter you can because of the skiing at Lake Tahoe) but you can fly via a number of US cities including Dallas Fort Worth, Chicago and New York. Expect to pay between £300-£400 indirect with one of the US carriers like Continental or United. The only problem with flying straight into Reno is that because it's a relatively small city in US terms, but the closest to Burning Man, it's very hard to find RVs to hire because they tend to get booked up anything up to a year in advance. If you are planning

on not taking an RV to the festival then we'd strongly recommend for simplicity that you fly into Reno and rent a car from the airport. If you are you may be forced to look further afield.

Fly to San Francisco: direct flights from the UK with BA, Virgin, United, Continental

San Francisco is the nearest city with an international airport and, as it is much larger than Reno, you've got a much higher chance of being able to rent an RV from here. It's a four to five hour drive to Reno in an RV (depending on whether you get stuck in the Burning Man exodus of RVs coming out of the city) or a six to seven hour drive direct to the festival site. It has a number of large RV rental companies based in and around the city and is very much the spiritual urban home of Burning Man so this where most of the major compression and decompression parties are held before and after the festival. All the major UK and US carriers (BA, Virgin, United, American, Continental fly in and out of San Francisco International airport, expect to pay between £400 and £500 for a flight if you book in plenty of time.

Fly to LA: direct flights from the UK with BA, Virgin, United, American, Continental

If you want to live up your Hollywood fantasies beforehand then LA is about a about an 8 to 9 hour drive from Reno in a car. You can hire RVs from LA but you'd need to be pretty brave/stupid or have loads of time on your hands to attempt this in an RV. All the major UK and US carriers (BA, Virgin, United, American, Continental fly in and out of San Francisco International airport, expect to pay between £400 and £500 for a flight if you book in plenty of time.

Fly to Las Vegas: direct flights from the UK with BA, Virgin, United , American, Continental

Some people like to start or end their trip living it up in Las Vegas but only plan to do this if you can handle a 10-11 hour drive before and/or after the festival (and that's from Reno, factor in 13-14 if your going direct from the festival). All the major UK and US carriers fly there. Expect to pay £450.

ACCOMODATION IN RENO

Wherever you decide to fly in and out of, the chances are that you will want to stop off in Reno en route to the festival to break up the journey and buy last minute provisions. Reno is chock full of huge casino hotels where you can very cheap rooms for very little based on the fact that they hotel hope that you'll make up for this on the casino floor. We've stayed in a few and best of the lot does seem to be the **Grand Sierra Resort and Casino** at 2500 East 2nd Street (www.grandsierraresort.com, + 1 775 789 2000) where you can get a double, double room (ie one that sleeps four) for \$119 or a junior suite for \$149. If for any reason the Grand Sierra is fully booked the you could also try **The Eldorado** (www.eldoradoreno.com, + 1 775 786 5700) or **The Peppermill Casino** (www.peppermillreno.com, + 1 775 826 2121).

RV RENTAL

Bearing in mind that you're committing to spending a week camping in the Nevada desert you're going to need somewhere to sleep/eat/escape from the sun/shelter from the cold etc.

If you're either really hardcore/skint or experienced then you could consider camping but if you're going for the first time then an air conditioned RV is a luxury that you'll really appreciate. All our friends from New York camp rather than take RVs but then again they are super-organised and have been going to Burning Man for nine years. Last year they were still pulling out fresh meals from cool boxes on the Saturday of the Burn having been in the desert for well over a week but this takes quite a bit of experience/planning to pull off and it helps if you have a lock up in Reno to leave all your camping stuff in after the Burn otherwise you'll have to take it with you on the plane or give it away at the end of the festival (which would defeat the object of saving money by camping).

Given that most first-time Burners do decide to rent an RV we've done some shopping around on your behalf in search of some of the best deals. We are assuming that by the time you get round to booking all of the available RVs in Reno will have been booked months ago so you'll be renting from San Francisco or Oakland just across the bay. We've found an excellent RV rental search engine called www.cheap-rv-rental.com which searches across all the RV companies offering RVs for rent from a particular town so try this first. Alternatively we've also found that by using the UK website of El Mote RV Rental (www.elmoterv.co.uk) booking RVs out from San Francisco you get some really good deals, though for some reason if you use their US site (www.elmonterv.com) you get charged almost double what the UK site has to offer. We'd strongly recommend that you book your RV as soon as you've bought your ticket as most RV companies only require a £100-£250 reservation deposit upfront (which is hardly the biggest kick in the pocked) and this will give you full peace of mind.

CAMPS AT BURNING MAN

While it is quite possible to go to Burning Man solo, you'll get the most out of the festival by being part of a theme camp or an informal camp of like-minded Burners. Being part of a theme camp will require **a fair amount of commitment** (both financial and physical as the camp will need to be paid for and built) but then you get to enjoy the camp for the rest of the festival until it's time to remove it completely on the Monday. There are an number theme camps based in the UK plus a few friendly US based ones that we know of so if you've like putting in touch with one then please drop us an email and we'll do our best to hook you up.

BURNING MAN ON A BUDGET

The perceived wisdom is the Burning Man will cost an arm, a leg and at least a kidney, and will eat up all your savings leaving you eating beans on toast for months when you get home. If you box cleverly it won't. If you've got your act together enough to do even a bit of pre-planning/booking (ie not just sorting it all out one month before) then you can do the whole trip (ticket, flights, RV, everything) for something in the region of **£1,500** for the actual trip itself, that's if you are prepared to really scrimp and save, factor in **£2,000** if you're not. This is based on a group of 4 to six people sharing an RV. If you think what you could easily blow on a week in Ibiza or on a snowboarding holiday then this is actually quite a reasonable amount.

Also however much you like raving on the White Isle or boarding in the Alps I'll wager that you'll have ten times more fun. Put it another way, amazing though they may have been how many holidays have you been on in the past that you could genuinely describe as life changing? Also remember that once you get to the festival you will not have to put your hand in your pocket and pay for anything (except bags of ice) for a whole week, this should hopefully make a pleasant change from the usual constant drip feed of cash outlay on most other holidays.

Our budget break down 2012 something along the lines of his:

Burning Man ticket:	£200
Flight to the US:	£550
RV Rental (based on six sharing):	£300
Hotels in Reno, food etc:	£100
Food/booze from Walmart	£150
Bike:	£50
Petrol:	£100
TOTAL:	£1,450

(So budget for £1,600 once you've factored in buying costumes, survival gear, shopping in the UK etc etc)

HOW MUCH TIME DO I NEED TO TAKE OFF WORK?

Given that Burning Man 2012 ran from the 27th August to 3rd September the absolute minimum amount of time that you could get away with taking off work would be seven days. This would involve flying out to the US on the Friday night of the 24th and hot footing it back to the airport to fly home on the Tuesday night after the festival. To give yourself a bit of breathing/compression/decompression time then we'd recommend that you take nine days off work and go from the Friday to a week after the following Wednesday (5th Sept).

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WHAT YOU NEED TO TAKE WITH YOU

While probably the most fun it's possible to have on a holiday, a trip to Burning Man is not something to be taken lightly and a reasonable amount of pre-planning will make for a much more calm/comfortable life in the desert. With this in mind you *need* to bring the following:

A ticket (see above): don't bother trying to wing it pre-2000-Glastonbury-style. While the festival site is right in the middle of the desert the area around it is full of large burly Bay Area dudes with beards and Land Rovers plus police stopping you from blagging in.

Photo ID and order confirmation number for presenting at 'Will Call' which is where you collect your tickets when you get to the festival. Burning Man doesn't send tickets in the mail to people who have bought them from the UK so you'll need to pick them up when you arrive at the festival at the 'Will Call' booth.

An RV or camping equipment (see above)

A bike. Burning Man is huge and very flat so the only way to get around quickly is by bike. Bikes can be bought for \$50-\$100 in Walmart but it's worth picking one up at the first possible opportunity as they tend to sell out in some of the Walmarts in Reno.

Medical and travel insurance. This is America. There is no NHS, and you are in the middle of a desert surrounded by 50k of the most stark-staring crazy people imaginable. Be prepared.

Goggles (and sunglasses) to keep the dust out of your eyes when the wind blows. You might think about getting two sets, one dark for the day and one light for night time

Scarf/respirator/gas mask for your face so you can breathe in the dust storms. Bandana, radiation suit, piece of cloth, tights will all do

A hat... it's hot out there in the middle of the desert

Cup or mug so you can drink at other people's bars/camps/RVs etc... ie there are no disposable cups given away anywhere

In addition we *strongly recommend* that bring the following

A 'Camelback' backpack for carrying water around in... this is one of the most useful items you'll need

A fleece or something equally warm to wear under your clothes at night. I cannot stress how cold it gets when the wind blows at night. You might even consider thermal tights/long-johns for your legs as well

A head torch. You can't ride a bike and hold a torch at the same time. We strongly recommend: <http://www.petzl-head-torches.co.uk/elite%20headtorch.htm>

Loads of glow sticks, E-wire, flashing stuff etc to decorate your bike so you can find it at night. At night it's really, really dark and you need to make yourself and your bike as obvious as possible, otherwise you will both lose all of your mates in about 25 seconds flat, and then to compound the trauma you'll be ridden into by a huge fat American driving a car looking like a small duck. Its pitch black at night and very easy to lose people when they ride off, and also

crash into them at high speed. At some of the bigger sound systems there will be around 6000 people, and consequently 6000 bikes. From experience you may not necessarily remember what your bike looks like and then spend 5 hours trying to find it. Glowing stuff really helps you here.

Any required prescriptions, contact lens supplies (disposables work great), or whatever else you need to maintain your health and comfort in a remote area with no services

Ear plugs, sleep mask, Valium. Depending on where you camp it can be pretty much a 24/7 rave so you may need these if you want to sleep

Cigarettes/tobacco/Rizlas etc if you are a smoker. There no money in burning man so you can't buy anything once you're there

Fancy Dress - Walking around in your normal clothes makes you feel like a freak. It's really hot during the day, and its freezing at night, so bring some warm stuff for the evening

Zip lock bag with single change of clean clothes for once you get out of the desert. If you don't zip them away then the dust will get to them

A printout of the Burn camp layout so newcomers can find their way around

Cash. While the Burn is a totally cash free festival certain 'restricted items' will still need to be paid for with hard cash

Bikini/swimming stuff... once you get out of the desert you feel this strange pull to jump in any large bodies of water that you come across

THINGS TO BUY IN WALMART

Though many view the continent spanning Behemoth that is Walmart to be the retail embodiment of pure capitalist evil, before Burning Man, Walmart is your best friend. There are four large Walmarts dotted around Reno, loads in San Fran and a number in towns along the highway between the two. When I've got time I'll scan in a map that I've got of Reno and mark where the various Walmarts are so they are easy to find. Before Burning Man it's worth putting aside at least 3-4 hours time to shop for food, booze and provisions as the Walmarts are all the size of small aircraft hangers and it takes ages to find everything. Walmart is generally super-cheap so with a bit of prior planning you can do all of your shopping for the week for around £100 per person.

Here's what we strongly recommend you buy in addition to your choice of food:

1.5 gallons of water per person per day

Mountain bike. Costs around \$50-\$100

Bike lock as bikes are the one thing that seem to get borrowed/misplaced at the Burn

Sun cream. As you'll be covered in this pretty constantly you might want to consider getting the non-sticky spray-on variety

Rehydration powder, like what you take when you have diarrhoea, to mix with your water

Thick bin liners. Remember you have to take all your rubbish away with you at the end of the festival... ie there are no bins on site like at Glastonbury

Cardboard. As much as you can get. Use this to cover every available surface in your RV thus increasing the chance of getting your deposit back

Duct tape to tape the cardboard over the inside of your RV

Wet wipes. There are showers but they last about 30 seconds so wet wipes will be your friend especially if you're planning on pulling

First aid kit which hopefully you'll never have to use.

Lip balm. The desert eats your lips

Ear plugs. See 'Valium' above

Portable ashtray if you are a smoker so you don't leave ash on the Playa

A shed-load of booze, mixers etc. Try and buy the large plastic spirit containers and no glass bottles if you can manage it. If you want nice/special booze then you must bring a secret stash too. Cider is good in the desert as it stays drinkable even when its warm

Food for those rare times you decide to eat. Dried stuff is probably the easiest as things don't stay fresh that long in the desert. Last year we ate a lot of pasta with meat chopped into it as this is pretty sustaining

Beef jerky. This was pretty much our main food source the first year we went

Lemons or Limes... the desert isn't sand, it's an alkali flat with alkaline dust that messes with your skin. Buy loads of limes and rub lime juice on yourself once a day. Sounds weird but it really works. Vinegar is also good but doesn't smell as nice

Loads of AA and AAA batteries to power torches, E-wire, radios etc

THINGS NOT TO BRING

As we've mentioned before Burning Man is a 'leave no trace' festival... ie you are expected to leave the desert exactly as you found it. With this in mind the following items are prohibited/thoroughly frowned on/sensible not to bring:

Feathers of any kind, e.g. Boas (they shed, no matter what you do - try marabou instead)

Glass containers of any kind

Excess packaging from foods (for example, remove outer box from cereals and just bring the inner bag)

Loose glitter

Nuts in their shells

Excessive fresh produce – too many melons end up as stinky, messy trash to haul home at the end of the week

Styrofoam coolers (they don't hold up and will break into a million bits)

Gravel (makes for nasty time-consuming MOOP)

Straw or hay bales (messy, messy, messy)

Big thanks to Ian Duff, Nick Ladd, Big Al, Freddie Fellowes, Richard Smith, Zev, Eli, Chaya, Gaid, Deniz, Ety and Essem for all they have taught me about surviving Burning Man both on and off the Playa