

Tales of the 'City'



by Christa Martin

Photos by Matt Scott

It's Black Rock City or bust as county residents partake in an annual pilgrimage to the Nevada desert and its most provocative event—Burning Man



MESHED FLESH In one of many gatherings, a group of "Burners" celebrate life au naturel.

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IRVANA OR NUTS — ARE BURNING MAN WORSHIPPERS IN ONE STATE OR THE OTHER?

Those who take their annual pilgrimage to what's become the most eye-opening, "soul-rejuvenating" experience to hit the Nevada desert, claim it's heavenly, but some outsiders may disagree and look upon the festival as just a place for naked shenanigans. What gives? Is Burning Man all about being in a sea of breasts and penises, surrounded by free love, drugs, and transcendental dancing? Or is that just a sliver of what Burning Man is really all about? Whatever the annual fest is, and means, the upcoming week-long "community" will be brim-

ming with so many far-out adventures that even voyeurs will have to avert their eyes from all the nudity, and instead view the art and the personal transformations taking place. And of course, what would be an artistic, "freedom" event without a whole bunch of Santa Cruzans? Not surprisingly, Santa Cruz County "burners," as they're called, are preparing for their trek to the boiling hot state of "sin"—Nevada. In the pentagon-shaped camp called Black Rock City, from Aug. 26 to Sept. 2, these locals will show off their artistic wares, which many have been working on for months. (Some received their inspirations while attending last year's Burning Man.)

One such person is Aptos resident Scott Laurie, a guy with a normal full-time job in sales, but not so "normal" side show art project that he's driving all the way to the fest. When he arrives in the "holy land," which is a fifth of a mile long on each side, he may discover many people going into Burning Man Shock. That's the phrase burners use for what happens when they become giddy or euphoric—when they start prancing and swirling around everywhere.

Shock It To Me Baby

Laurie literally had a vision at last year's Burning Man, which prompted him to sink some dollars and extensive time into an art car, or in his case, an art bus. It's going to be an elongated trek, since his bus is about 60 feet long, and will look like a funky submarine. Think: *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, either the book or movie version. Laurie is seriously "burning" with excitement about his project, which he's dubbed "Nautilus X."

Here's what happened to him last year: It was about 5 a.m. and he was sitting in a giant dome-like structure in the sweltering heat on the sandy desert. He'd just topped off his fourth Red Bull and was staring at the interior roof of the dome, on which was projected a video of the stars. And no, he wasn't on drugs. Then something happened—he saw an open vision (meaning that he was coherent and awake). In it he was driving a bus. As he looked behind him he saw a compartment full of people, including a woman named Erica (whom he would later meet in real life). Then he departed the bus and looked at it from outside on the playa, the land on which Burning Man is held.

Side note: in Spanish, the word playa means beach. It is said that Black Rock City is built upon a dried up lake.

Back to the vision: Laurie was staring at the bus and basically, saw a suped up version of what he is now creating. It looked like a submarine out of Artisan Entertainment's feature film version



ON YOUR MARK ... "Burners" are greeted at the entrance of Black Rock City.

of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. In his vision he ogled at the submarine/bus off and on for nearly an hour and later told Burning Man founder Larry Harvey about the experience, which strangely coincided with this year's Burning Man theme, "The Floating World."

Since then, Laurie knew what he was supposed to do—make that dream a reality. So he began his quest for purchasing a bus, which of course, isn't all that easy, unless, of course, you believe in coincidences. Laurie seems to, as he verbally details a list of strange occurrences that have led him to construct the Nautilus X.

"It's destiny ... I thought, 'I have to build this,'" Laurie says. "It'll be a living machine while we're at Burning Man."

The research began. He traveled to Connecticut to see the military's real Nautilus dry-docked on the shore. Not long after that, he discovered that San Francisco was selling some of its Muni buses. In May he purchased his baby girl, the 60 feet long by more than eight feet wide bus, which looks like two buses—it's attached by giant accordion-like material.

One of numerous coincidences that Laurie cites is that on the outside of the bus was a huge poster/sticker advertising the movie *Resident Evil*. When he and his crew peeled it off, underneath was another movie ad, this one of, *Atlantis the Lost Fantasy World*. Laurie can't explain the coincidences, or the source of his vision but what he does know is this: he's supposed to fulfill this "destiny" and

get his submarine to Burning Man. This year it won't look exactly like the bus from his vision, but during the next five years he plans to keep it evolving, eventually adding on an exterior catwalk.

"It (Burning Man) is utopia in a way," Laurie says. "It's a cathartic event to come together, party, create, enjoy and not have the hang-ups (of normal life). It's immensely liberating. We wear clothes like armor. When you're naked, it all kind of hangs out there, you know?"

Just to clarify, Laurie doesn't do the naked thing too much at Burning Man. Last year he cruised around in the buff just in his camp neighborhood. He says he doesn't do drugs there and the sexiest thing he's seen is a couple naked and making out.

"It's an openness and ability to express themselves," Laurie says. "This event is about personal self-expression. Freedom is being allowed to express myself in any way that I want to."

That definition of "freedom" is what will draw about 26,000 people to Burning Man this year. They come from all over the world to live in an environment without luxuries, but with lots of libido. It's a place without showers (unless they're handmade), free of lipstick, and a place where your body hair can get shaved by someone else, and what remains of your pubic hair can get crafted into a piece of walking "art" on your body. It's not uncommon to see nudity, in fact, nearly everyone who chatted with **GT** shared that they don't get "turned on" by the naked folks. Instead, they seem to view it as the absolute state of freedom. So what's so tantalizing about getting naked among a herd of strangers?



THEY DID A Santa Cruz couple ties the knot.



CAR WARS Local resident Carl Deckart's "Space Bug."

"I've never seen a weird interaction and there's an incredible level of respect," says Santa Cruzan Kara Snider, who is attending Burning Man, and admits that she has walked around naked at the festival.

Burning Down The House

Although Snider seems to have a "no big deal" approach to nudity at Burning Man, she says the group she participates with (Santa Cruz-based Nocturnal Sunshine) doesn't go naked as a collective while they are performing, which is probably wise since they're fire dancers.

And that brings up the main theme—the fascination with fire. On the last night, a Saturday, a giant man constructed of wood, is burned. Around him, on the ground, revelers watch the man disinte-



WHAT'S IN A FLAME? Crowds gather to burn the "Man" at the event's finale.

grate deep into the morning as stacks of smoke fly into the sky.

"It's primal ... amazing to see the man burn," says Laurie.

For the 26-year-old Snider, it's her hobby—burning things and spinning them around in a magical way. She and members of Nocturnal Sunshine will join about 300 other fire dancers at the event this year and perform a huge collaborative performance piece before the main man is set aflame.

"Burning and fire has to do with regeneration and renewal," Snider says.

That's part of what is bringing her back to her fourth annual escapade. That, the "freedom" element, and the sense of community, which offers an environment free from inhibitions.

Snider will join about eight other fire dancers from Santa Cruz, and they've been meeting regularly to practice. At Burning Man they'll be decked out in various costumes, swinging poi balls, sticks, swords,

Stand by Your Man

The desert dirt—a 'Burner' confesses



Sure, Burning Man has its fair share of epiphanies, but what about the rumors regarding drug usage, open sex, the wild, kinky stuff? One “burner” was willing to “let it all hang out,” anonymously. He dubbed himself Max for this interview. Max is a 32-year-old photographer who has lived in Santa Cruz County for 20 years. He has attended Burning Man seven times and plans on attending this year.

GT: *Why do you go to Burning Man?*

Max: *It's so much fun and there's great art. It's inspiring. There's a lot of freedom there.*

GT: *Do you sweat a lot?*

Max: *It's dry so you don't sweat a lot but it can get over 100 degrees.*

GT: *Why do people take their clothes off?*

Max: *Because you can, it's accepted and it feels good.*

GT: *Do you take your clothes off?*

Max: *I think I'm more comfortable not naked*

in public. There's a time and a place for it and I'm not into strutting my stuff in the buff.

GT: *What's the percentage of people walking around naked?*

Max: *Depending on the weather, it varies. Now there are more perverts there. One to five percent.*

GT: *Is that weird or no big deal?*

Max: *It's nice to see naked people. You don't see people naked a lot. Clothing optional (in society) would be a really good thing.*

GT: *What do you do there?*

Max: *Pedal around, walk around, visit theme camps, volunteer in other people's projects, set up your art.*

GT: *What's the coolest thing you've seen at Burning Man?*

Max: *I've really enjoyed the Tesla Coil and Mr. Mega Volt. A Tesla Coil is a man-made lightning machine. Mr. Mega Volt has an*

insulated metal suit and he gets close enough to let the electricity arc to his suit or objects that he holds. The sound is great. People come running when they see or hear it. It's always a crowd pleaser.

GT: *What's the drug scene really like there?*

Max: *I think it's safe to say that one-third to one-half of the people there are on drugs. You can see it in their eyes. It's happening there. People are getting supplied, but if you don't know the person, that's sketchy. People do get busted there.*

GT: *Have you done drugs there?*

Max: *Everything but heroin: Weed, alcohol, mushrooms, acid and ecstasy, but not all at once. I've realized I'm more comfortable not high on drugs. I feel you miss it (the experience of being there). There's more to enjoy straight. You don't need drugs there.*

GT: *Why is the drug scene a big thing at Burning Man?*

Max: *It's a vacation for a lot of people and it's a fairly safe place to do anything,*

although people do die there most years.

GT: *What are some of the incidences of death?*

Max: *Someone who was high on drugs jumped off a scaffolding three or four years ago and died. One year somebody in a Winnebago rolled over a tent with people sleeping in it.*

GT: *Have you ever seen people having sex openly?*

Max: *I saw it once. It was night and there was barely anybody around and I biked by a camp. It might have been a couple of guys, but I'm not positive.*

GT: *Why do you keep going back?*

Max: *I realized as an artist that it's essential for me to go and be inspired by so much good art, and it's only one week out of 52.*

GT: *What's the draw/attraction to Burning Man?*

Max: *That almost anything goes. No rules—the all-inclusive community.*

GT: *What are people's biggest misconceptions about Burning Man?*

Max: *That it's a bunch of druggies at a music rave in the desert. It's not a music festival but an art festival. I call it the post-nuclear anti-rainbow gathering. Burning Man has the road warrior element. There's so much air pollution—it's wasteful. People bring in their SUVs and tow in a ton of stuff out there. They burn wood and fuel for their sculptures and use gas. It's not a real PC event.*

—Christa Martin

fans and more that are on fire. The other dancers they'll perform with are from all over the map and include a group of about 55 people from San Francisco. They practice as small groups in their own regions, then join together at the blazing festival for one big group rehearsal on Wednesday night, before their Saturday evening performance. Often, on that final night, many artists will also burn their art projects.

"All art produced there is for art sake, it's not for sale," Snider says. "It's art because art is beautiful and art makes the soul come alive."

The fire dancer also notes that she's "more open to people, and meeting people (at Burning Man)—anybody could give you a hug and it would be fine."

Perhaps Snider will end up hugging her soul mate. Don't sneer, it's happened before. After all, this is Burning Man. And she just might hook up with her one and only if she stops by Wes Modes' camp, called "Costco Soulmate Outlet



BUS STOP The Nautilus X crew with Scott Laurie (far right).

Center."

Hot Stuff

At this Outlet Center, Modes, his chef and a gang of others sort of play God. They help mankind out by matching together lovers and friends. Their Heaven is their camp, a few tents that house personal shoppers (computers and crew people), but this isn't where you'll find organic lettuce. Instead, people drop by, have their photo taken, and fill out an application. Later, when they return, they're handed a piece of paper containing information about their soul mate. Their mission is to find and connect with this person, who is located somewhere at the fest. Some people have met their mates and others have made dear friends.

"With Costco we were thinking, 'how can we connect people who wanted to find friends on the playa?'" says Modes, referring to the birth of his camp five years ago. "What would be the most

soulful thing you can get? A soulful relationship with a person.”

It took Modes and about 30 other people to launch Costco, which becomes more popular every year. Modes can cite plenty of examples of the system working and says they find about 1,500 people’s soul mates each year. But he won’t clearly explain how it works. He’s a little shifty with the details. (Why spoil the mystery?)

“Costco has a whole legion of brilliant computer geeks and the computers make the ideal match,” Modes says. “What I do with Costco is the hardest and most meaningful work. What could be more fun and engaging than connecting people to other people?”

Trying to stay out of a lawsuit—that’s what could be more engaging. Modes admits that the real Costco, the giant super grocery store has become aware of his knock-off group, and at times has threatened a trip to court. But eventually the conglomerate backed off.

“Costco realized it had nothing ... by harassing us,” Modes



BOOB JOBS The all-women topless bike ride is a trek in self expression.

says. “Costco sees the humor and understands the joke, but they’re obligated to protect their trademark. ... We’re protected by parody. I don’t suppose at Costco (the store) you’d be greeted by naked people.”

That naked thing—it keeps coming up. Modes pooh-poohs talking extensively about nudity

and drug usage at Burning Man.

“Naked is almost passé at Burning Man; it’s not that big of a deal,” Modes says. “That’s not the focus ... of the event. Freedom is to be as erotic as you feel or the freedom to use recreational drugs whenever ... but there are authorities around. The misconceptions are that it’s a drug-

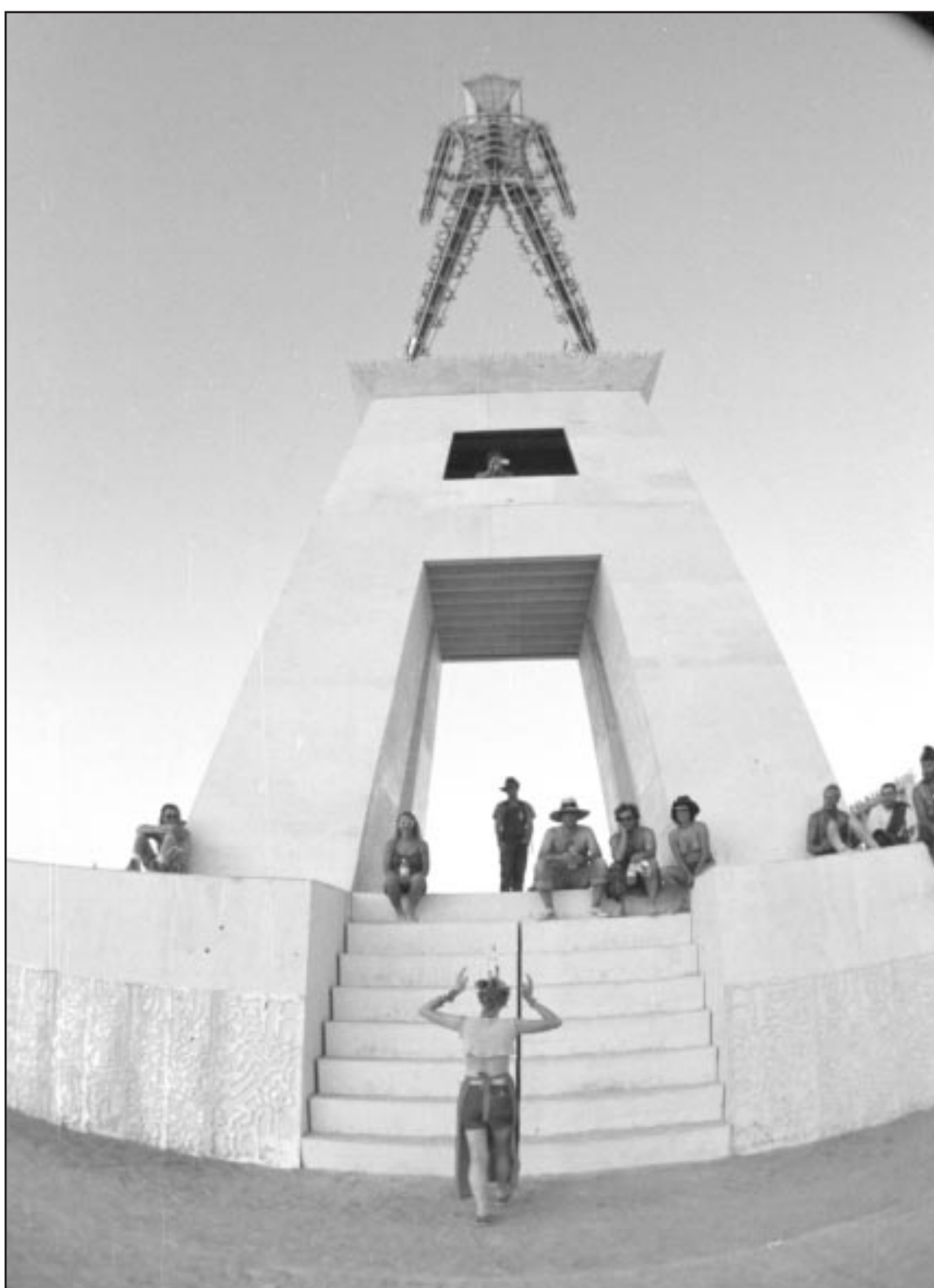
induced orgy. It’s about radical self-expression. Some express it through sexuality and some through drugs, but those are probably just the most sensational aspects.”

For the record, Modes says he doesn’t do drugs at Burning Man. He’s in the ‘don’t do them, don’t need them’ camp—apparently a popular belief among the Santa Cruzans who were interviewed for this article.

Just Say No?

When you’re out at night in a surreal environment, [drugs are] the last thing [you need]; and it’s illegal and it’s dumb,” says Jim Graham, Santa Cruz’s Burning Man regional coordinator.

For Graham and a lot of burners, going to Burning Man is about freedom and experiencing something called a “gift economy” which means there’s no selling or buying allowed. Instead, as



ALTARED STATES "Burners" hang out at the Burning Man "altar."

a burner, you give for generosity's sake.

For example: One year Graham was in the mood for some morning caffeine when his Coleman stove broke. He sat there brooding about not having any coffee when a neighbor stopped by and they chatted for a bit. The next day the neighbor showed up with a pot of coffee for Graham.

Also, something burners boast about is meeting some extraordinarily creative and artistic people that they otherwise wouldn't meet. They clarify that it's not a giant hippie fest, rather, a gathering of bona fide artists. And the festival isn't a gallery—spectators aren't allowed. Everyone must be a participant. (That's a quasi Burning Man rule.) That includes organizers like Graham, who functions as the current point person for locals before they get to the festival. At the actual event Graham manages media operations and keeps an eye on the press peo-

ple who attend Burning Man. And he even tries to get the reporters and photographers to participate in the "experience." He remembers a photographer from New York came one year and by the end of the week he was cruising around with a fanny pack, his camera and nothing else.

"You walk around with your jaw hanging open," Graham says. "You can do whatever you want as long as you don't interfere with someone else's experience."

Bring your own meaning; that's Burning Man's unofficial motto. For many, that's what Burning Man is all about.

Are you ready to tap into your inner Burning Man? Visit www.burningman.com
