

Writers on the Range: Report from Burning Man 2023

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After a quiet year of preparation and premature eulogies, Burning Man roared into the news this August. There were unplanned fires, protesters and three hurricane-fueled rainstorms that turned the Nevada desert into a sea of mud.

Before it even got going, the event known for its whimsical art, leave-no-trace ethos and sharing economy began with a brief disruption by climate activists blocking its entrance. The 10 protesters from the “Seven Circles Alliance” chained themselves to a trailer in the middle of Highway 447 and put up handmade signs proclaiming “Abolish Capitalism,” “Burners Unite” and “Ban Private Jets.”

In other pre-event excitement, I saw an SUV and attached trailer burst into flames due to some bad choices in gasoline storage. Then a campmate of mine fell off one of those electric, one-wheel skateboards, breaking several ribs and other bones.

Within minutes, Josh, who had come from Mexico, was picked up by a playa ambulance. Within hours he was flown to Reno for a better diagnosis and surgery, and within days, repaired Josh was back with one steel plate and six screws. Mere seconds after returning, he was back at work with his one good arm.

This was his first time at Burning Man, but like me, he was there to help get its basic structures ready to welcome this year’s 73,000 people, all coming to the middle of nowhere in Nevada.

In my 26 years of helping out and writing about Burning Man, I've talked about its art that you'd see nowhere else, a clown committing a felony, clothing-optional celebrators, flaming objects and soul-crushing dust storms. It still is all that times 10, but this year it added several days of mud to the mythology.

You may think you know mud, but there is no mud like the playa mud of the Black Rock Desert, some 100 miles northeast of Reno. Once it was part of Lake Lahontan, which was more than 500 feet deep about 14,000 years ago. After its water evaporated, a deep layer of silt got left behind, and now even a small amount of rain can turn that silt into a mud bog.

Around midnight on August 20, Hurricane Hilary sent a lot of rain our way, and by morning the water was ankle-deep outside my trailer. The sun did not shine for 36 hours, roads were closed and nobody could get in or out.

As people finally emerged from their shelters, looking relieved, the sound of squelching filled the air. Playa mud is mean. It aspires to be quicksand, but it is not quite as cinematic or deep enough. It can only eat shoes and tires. The best way to get around on foot seemed to be bare feet protected by plastic bags.

What is the opposite of sticky? Slippery. The mud, angered by not being able to eat shoes, turned slick and big splashes could be heard. A flop in warm mud might sound like a pleasant spa experience until you realize there is not enough water in Nevada to get it off. And a flop can leave bruises.

Playa mud also does not want you to drive. Either your wheel wells fill up with a chocolaty donut of collected mud or you will spin holes axle-deep. In either case you will be laughed at first and rescued much later.

This happens even in the summer when wet mud lurks under a dry, cracked surface, daring you to cross it. I took the dare one July and sat there for a long day until someone more experienced pulled me to solid land. Lesson learned, mud respected.

Astute Burning Man historians will also remember the great rainstorm of 2014, though this year was different. This downpour lasted much longer and put a stop to everyone's setup schedule as hundreds of postholes sat waiting for their posts.

Finally, the sun did shine and people rejoiced on their islands. They shared food and drink. Animals crawled up on shore, traded their fins for legs, stood upright and continued their journeys. The playa mud had exacted its price and let humans roam free to return to their off-playa lives.

Weeks after the great splashing, it had all become an embellished myth with wild exaggeration and heroic stories to be shared. Some will claim it was epic.

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