

## TRAVEL CORNER



### “Baby Burners” – The Next Generation Arrives

Burning Man, infamous for its drug-fueled debauchery in the wind-whipped Nevada desert, may seem like the last place to haul the kids for a family vacation.

But the annual experiment in radical self-expression, communal living and massive interactive art is becoming something of a counterculture Disneyland as increasing numbers of Burners from the Bay Area and beyond are bringing their young ones to Black Rock City.

To the uninitiated, a dry lakebed in the middle of nowhere -- plagued by dust storms and extreme temperatures and inhabited by no small number of naked people -- sounds like no place for children.

But devotees of Burning Man, which starts today and culminates Saturday night with the torching of the eponymous man atop a geodesic dome, say there really is no better spot for kids to learn about living and working together in an environment where they can be totally free.

"It's a very magical place," says Berkeley sculptor Andrew Harth, whose 21/2-year-old son, Felix, is making his third trip to the festival. "I want him to grow up with different sorts of people. I want him to have a place, even once a year, for a totally unique, creative experience."

While no firm number exists, a survey of the 30,500 people who converged on the playa last year found 2 percent had brought children under 18.

That's more than 600 kids, a number organizers say has increased steadily every year since the festival moved 120 miles north of Reno in 1990 after four years at San Francisco's Baker Beach. Kidsville, a camp devoted to families, grew from eight families seven years ago to more than 50 families with 100 children last year.

It was bound to happen as the event, and its participants, get older.

"It's a sign of a healthy community. People met at the event and fell in love, even married here. They have kids and want to bring them because it's part of their life," says Burning Man organizer Harley Dubois, whose 8-month-old daughter, Eva, is with her for the first time at this year's festival.

In fact, organizers say, there were kids at the first Burning Man. While founders Larry Harvey and Jerry James built the first man in 1986, their sons used glue guns to build the man's best friend: Burning Dog.

"If you took the roof off the average American home, you'd see mother, father, sister and brother in separate rooms, watching their own TV sets. That is obscene," says Harvey, director of the San Francisco-based Burning Man Project. "Everyone at Burning Man is engaged in playing together and creating the world they inhabit together."

Harvey and others say the festival's reputation for sex and drugs has been overblown.

"It's easy to assume someone painted in polka dots and sporting a leopard tail is on drugs," he says. "Chances are it's a perfectly sober stockbroker having the time of his life."

But no one denies adult entertainment is available.

This year, participants can get their picture taken at the Genital Portrait Studio or learn a new trick at the Orgasmateria Tactile Playground and Pleasure Lab.

But one could just as easily steer toward the myriad theme camps that appeal to the kid in all of us, from the giant LiteBrite and kite-flying to Muppetville and the Evil Sock Puppet Camp.

Some say the party has mellowed as the participants have aged.

Harth, 35, and his wife, Helen Alvarez, 36, have been going to Burning Man for nine years.

For the past seven, they have set up Camp Sunscreen, a shelter where "buck-naked people, sometimes high on psychedelics, take turns slathering on sunscreen," Harth explains.

This year, they have traded in their lotion for Play-Doh and Pedialyte popsicles to keep the kids hydrated. They're organizing a toddler playground called Kiddie Korral after a smaller play area they created for Felix last year was a hit with other parents.

"We had friends staying away (from Burning Man) because of children. We thought, 'Wait a minute. We can do this with children,'" says Harth, who has created an undulating 22-foot sculpture for the camp with West Oakland steel fabricator Tom Dias.

One of their friends, Rebecca Bleau of Grass Valley, is taking her 5- and 3-year-old children. She says she appreciates the commerce-free atmosphere at Burning Man, where nothing but ice and coffee are sold, and participants trade "playa gifts" and take care of each other.

"The roots of what you want to teach your children are out there," Bleau says as she wires battery-powered neon balls to a chandelier for Harth's sculpture at Cool Neon in West Oakland.

Burning parents say the sex camps are easy to avoid, and they're not bothered by the ubiquitous nudity. Neither are the kids.

"If you really want to bring your kids to Burning Man, you should just deal with having to see people naked. What do you expect?" asks Oakland fifth-grader Cypress Lynx, 10. "I think it's natural."

Cypress, making her seventh appearance at the event with her mom, Kidsville organizer Jennifer Lynx, says she loves Burning Man because she can wear fuzzy costumes and hang out in camps with trampolines.

"I can make up my own rules. I can do things I'm not normally allowed to do at home. I can express myself," she says.

Parents are more concerned with the harsh elements, making sure their kids can handle 100-degree heat during the day, near-freezing temperatures at night, dust storms and downpours.

Burning man poses other hazards.

Its Web site warns parents: "Talk to (children) about commonsense safety, like not looking into the mouth of a fire-breathing dragon. ... Advise them to be cautious about getting too close to aggressive art, destructive robots and moving vehicles."

But parents say they love watching their children in a wonderland of giant sculptures where they don't have to tell them not to touch.

Berkeley resident Jonathan Jaffe watched his daughter, Knoa Tsang Jaffe, take her first steps in a colorful fabric sculpture two years ago when she was 11 months old.

While his wife recently had a baby, he and Knoa are returning to the desert at her request.

Still, Jaffe says, "I don't know if I'd want to see it taken over by families, because it would change the whole feel of it."

That concern was echoed by other Burners who chafed at new rules brought on by the increasing presence of children and concerns from local law enforcement. "Adult-oriented" theme camps, for instance, have been asked to post bouncers at the door to keep youngsters out.

While some Burners have complained of censorship, organizers say it's just common sense as the number of kids continues to climb.

"It won't be a community without the children," says Jennifer Lynx. "They're the next generation of Burners."

*Based on an article by Janine DeFao, San Francisco Chronicle, August 30, 2004*

## Burning Man FAQ

When: Labor Day Weekend each year

Where: Black Rock Flats, Nevada

### Directions To Burning Man from Reno, NV:

From Reno, Nevada, take Hwy I-80 east for approximately 30 miles. Take the Wadsworth/Pyramid Lake exit #43 to Hwy 447.

Go 1.0 mile to Wadsworth and turn left, staying on Hwy 447 north. It's 75 mls to Empire, NV where gas and supplies are available. Continue 3.0 miles to Gerlach where gas is also available.

From Gerlach, go northwest on Highway 447 for one mile to the fork. Take the right-hand fork, Hwy 34, and continue 11 miles to the Burning Man entrance. Note: The 3-mile playa entrance (first turn-off) used in previous years should not be used. The 12-mile playa entrance just beyond ours will not take you to Burning Man and will be patrolled by BLM Rangers.

Distance from Reno: 107 miles.

Driving Time: Approx 175 minutes

### Admission Price:

Tickets are sold on a first come, first serve basis and are NOT refundable if you leave the grounds.

All Tickets Currently Cost \$250 (available through 8/13/06) by mail order, Internet and walk in outlet. Unlimited tickets at \$280 available 8/14/06 – 8/25/06 at Internet and Walk-in Outlets only.

**What to Bring:** Everything you need to survive 4 days in the burning desert! Including:

Water, food, shade, sunblock, comfortable clothes, and knowing your) limits are all important to being able to enjoy the experience. Bag or box juices are great, because the containers are easy to pack back to camp when they're empty. Bring energy snacks. The heat can keep hunger down, so snack frequently. Bikes are good for older kids and adults, and wagons or bike trailers are good for younger ones.

The playa can get very hot during the day, and quite chilly at night. Loose, breathable clothes provide comfort and protection from the sun, and can be layered with warmer things as the sun goes down. Hats are a good idea, as are sunglasses. The dry, alkaline playa dust can be hard on tender feet, so socks are a good idea, even with sandals.

Don't forget medicines! Bring the things that make little discomforts easier to deal with, such as chewable acetaminophen, stuff for tummy upsets, aloe sunburn lotion with lidocaine, cough syrup, bandaids, moleskin for blisters, and so on.

Be sure to bring your "comfort icons" along, such as pillows, books, iPods (don't forget extra batteries!) etc.

**What Not to Bring:** Inhibitions