

DIVERSITY

A Tale of Two Cities: Ticket Pricing and Diversity at Burning Man

by Jeff Voss



Despite lofty aims for inclusivity, Burning Man has done little to curb the steep rise in ticket prices, and critics view the annual event as a playground for California's affluent professional class.

✓ **INSIGHT** | NOTE 03 Apr 2018

1. The first Burning Man (BM) principle is “Radical Inclusivity.”
2. The first tickets available to purchase for BM 2018 are \$990 or \$1,200 each. Purchased during the “Pre-Sale,” one can buy up to four tickets at each price. A vast majority of tickets are sold for \$425 in later sales. One can buy a maximum of two

tickets at this lower price (this year 26,000 of these tickets sold out in less than half an hour). There are no special privileges awarded to more expensive tickets. A vehicle pass is \$80.

3. BM says it offers the higher priced tickets for “Burners” who can afford to pay for them, in order to offset the costs of renting the land from the Bureau of Land Management (approximately \$4.5 million for the month), set up Black Rock City’s temporary and massive infrastructure, raise funds to give to Burners building art installations, and offer a limited number of “low income tickets.”
4. BM offers 4,000 low income tickets for \$190. One must provide proof of financial hardship and can purchase one ticket, if approved. Approximately 70,000 people attend BM every year. $4k/70k = \sim 5.7\%$
5. In 2016, 1.1% of Burners identified as black, 4.3% identified as Latino, 5.7% identified as Asian, 79% identified as white. 71% of Burners held at least a Bachelor’s degree. 43.1% had a personal income under \$50,000 per year. 27.4% had a personal income over \$100,000 per year.
6. Thought experiment: How would Nevada law enforcement and news media react if the festival of 70,000 people was 79% non-white? What would happen if BM’s board democratized the organization of the city to the entire Burner community?
7. Michael Mikel (from an unpublished interview with Jennifer Walske) “Burning Man is open to everyone. And I think the statistics of the population and the types of people have a lot to do with culture that’s already embedded in the world at large. So there are a lot of inequalities out there in diversity—diversity in culture, in people, in finance—that are in the system that we are already in, and we can’t change that. So part of that is reflected in the people that come out. But anyone is welcome to come to Burning Man.”
8. According to BM, nearly all of the revenue for BM comes from ticket prices. They do not allow vending nor any kind of corporate sponsors on-site at Black Rock City. Though there are many vendors hired to help the event, the only things actually sold on-site are ice and coffee.

9. Questions: What if BM charged less for the tickets and took more donations from sponsors/patrons to make it more affordable? What might be the negative or positive impact on the ethos, logistics, and spirit of BM with this change?
10. BM does not authorize the upselling of tickets. Tickets are supposed to only be allowed to be resold at face-value. However, there are numerous luxury travel firms that market and sell pre-packaged BM “experiences” for thousands of dollars, such as one by Classic Adventures RV who say they were hired by Elon Musk at \$5,500 to \$10,000 per RV to provide luxury amenities on the playa.
11.
 - Many Burners stay in a “camp” in order to pool resources and stay with friends. There are generally camp dues, the median reportedly around \$300. Money magazine estimated that it likely costs the average Burner around \$2,000 to attend. Though not common, there are also camps called “turnkey” or “plug-and-play” camps who hire outside help for the week called “Sherpas.” They are essentially employees of the camp, performing services as varied as bartending, cooking, cleaning, and security. These “plug-and-play” camps can charge up to and in excess of \$25,000 in camp dues for its members.
12. The eighth BM principle is “Gifting,” and back in 2013, six founders of BM (then an LLC) sold their shares in the company for \$46,000 a piece in order to convert the organization to a nonprofit. The shares were estimated to be valued at up to \$1.2 million each. Though the numbers are unknown, each were eligible for a tax write off for this move.
13. Most camps at BM are designed to be communal spaces where any Burner can stop by for a refreshment, dance party, chat, camp gift, ride on an art car, or even informational workshop. Que Viva!, a camp committed to social justice and cultural diversity, has held a workshop on “Being an Effective White Ally,” created hangouts for “Biracial Burners,” and hosted sangria-fueled dance parties.
14. Though not common, some of the “plug-and-play” camps form an enclosed space by linking together their luxurious tents or RVs in order to prevent non-members from wandering in. In 2015, unnamed Burners snuck into the notoriously exclusive White Ocean camp and glued trailer door shuts, dumped water in the common areas,

among other pranks. BM organizers condemned the move, but many Burners praised the attack on the wealthy “parasite class” they claim is commanding an overwhelming presence at Black Rock City.

15. Lee Harvey, BM co-founder, “If Burning Man is about anything, it is about affording individuals as much liberty as possible, and critics who call for drastic and punitive measures are acting as if the Ten Principles are the Ten Commandments – but these principles are in no way commandments. They represent an ethos that arose from the lived experience of a community; this means these values need to be internalized, they should become a kind of second nature, not a set of literal and unyielding rules that are imposed upon us. The only thing that our tasked government can do is create new social contexts in which people can connect and meet on common ground. That is what we’ve always done, and will continue to do in the future.”...“We’re not going to judge people in terms of the amount of wealth they bring to the event.”
16. Steven Thrasher, a writer for the Guardian and veteran black Burner who has written deftly for years about BM’s racial and financial stratification, “Burning Man literally is a gated community. I don’t like myself for paying money to enter the gate to be in a racially exclusive space. But I do it.”
17. Tension: Can “Radical Inclusivity” be a part of an organization that does not regulate or democratize the structure of their city? Where does BM fall on the scale from liberating to libertarian?
18. And how to reconcile Spencer’s notion with this story by veteran black Burner Marlon Williams? (as told to Steven Thrasher): “Burning Man is a space where race still exists. It doesn’t disappear, but it’s a magic place. It doesn’t solve everything, but it helps you go through it. I had a night where I was dancing, and I was feeling beautiful and strong, and then I tried to find a friend in their camp at a party, and a man came up to me and asked, “Are you with this camp? Security is here.” And I felt sad and dark and deflated. He used the word “security”, he said I wasn’t supposed to be there. I had triggered someone’s fear again. That could have broken me. But part of being here is being able to develop your own strength, to look at a person and say, “You are talking from your fear.” I went back to dancing, and I felt beautiful again.”



Jeff Voss

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Jeff Voss is a human person living in Berkeley, California. He is currently working on a book exploring the connections between comedy and contemporary masculinity.