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Playa Posh: Luxury Living at Burning Man

By Renée Davidson 08.19.08



The Indian Desert Tent (pictured above) is popular with burners. Made of heavy-duty cotton canvas and lined with printed sheeting, the yurt-shaped tent repels water and wind and has plenty of room inside for guest seating.

Courtesy of John "Joeko" Magadini

If you plan to not only survive but thrive in the harsh environment of Burning Man, you'd be well-advised to rise above your REI tent.

Luxury living on the playa requires relaxing in the heat of the day and staying warm on cold nights. You've got to be able to transport the structure in and out of Black Rock City, Nevada -- the temporary city that rises out of the desert each year during the mammoth art festival -- and assemble it in unpredictable conditions. It must be able to survive brutal dust storms that can arrive without warning and last for hours.

Last year, I discovered some clever options for living large on the playa without leaving a big footprint. Though all three solutions were rather low-tech, none would be accessible to Burners without the internet or open source.

Hexayurt

Originally designed as refugee housing, a Hexayurt can be built for \$200 from fire-safe insulation boards and industrial tape. The [Hexayurt Project](#) follows a free and open source model; plans can be downloaded at the project's website.



I visited two of these innovative shelters last year at Burning Man. One belonged to Lindsey Darby, a 21-year-old college student and co-designer on the Hexayurt Project. The other belonged to Kevin Price, a 47-year-old computer technician from Mesa, Arizona, who said he discovered Hexayurts two weeks before Burning Man. "I was thinking of all the ways the tent would be awful. I went right to it: no prototype." He bought all the parts, cut them in his driveway and assembled them on the playa.

Inside, both Darby's and Price's Hexayurts were spacious, quiet and cooler than expected in the hot afternoon sun. According to Darby, her fold-up Hexayurt took only 30 minutes to assemble on the playa, and its impressive [R-value](#) allowed her to sleep later than her neighbors.

"I've always stayed in a Hexayurt on the playa, never in a tent, so I've always been able to stay in bed until 10 or 11 [a.m.]," she said. "But I did notice that I was always the last one up!"

Vinay Gupta, the Hexayurt's inventor, said: "It's like having an entire extra day at Burning Man. You can go to bed at 3 or 4 in the morning, get up at noon, and you're still human at the end of the week."

Indian Desert Tent

After a decade of camping in tents and borrowed camper trailers, San Francisco burner John "Jocko" Magadini decided to treat himself to a little bit of luxury in Black Rock City. Though the camper -- with its stove, running water and cushy seating -- was comfortable, Magadini said it left him feeling "not as one with the playa."

"I felt a bit removed and also maybe a little bit common because so many people do that," he said.

Following an extensive online search for tents of all sorts, he stumbled across an [Indian Desert Tent](#). It cost just under \$1,000 for the tent, and another \$500 for shipping, which took six weeks.

"They told me it would take a little over an hour [to set up], and one person could do it," said Magadini. "It took two people and three hours. But once I got it up, I couldn't believe it. It was so absolutely bomber."

Made of heavy-duty cotton canvas and lined with printed sheeting, the yurt-shaped tent repels water and wind and has plenty of room inside for guest seating, Magadini's queen-size inflatable bed and a full rack of costumes. Plus, it stood up to Burning Man's rugged environment. "After a week and a half and many dust storms, there was close to no dust inside," he said.

Playatech Furniture

Arthur "Sunshine Dreamer" Zwern, a 48-year-old entrepreneur and inventor from San Jose, California, got tired of seeing so many sofas going into the landfill after Burning Man, yet his wife, "Glimmer," said she wanted extra seating on the playa. So he designed a line of DIY "period furniture" made from 4-foot-by-8-foot sheets of plywood. Plans for cutting the plywood to build a [Precarichair](#), a [Ploset](#), a [Plantry](#), [Plykea Shelves](#) and many more Black Rock essentials are available at Playatech for a small donation, which benefits Black Rock Arts Foundation.

Once cut, Playatech furniture requires no tools or hardware for assembly and can be stacked flat for transport before and after use. "If you have to rebuild everything again each year, it gets a little tedious," said Zwern.

"We burn a little bit of our furniture each year, as it wears out," he admitted.

Describing both the Hexayurt and Playatech, he said: "We wanted to develop the technology to build a city in a week, with no infrastructure, and with two to three natural disasters a week." He insists his furniture is sturdy enough to dance on and to have sex on -- perhaps the next most important qualities in Black Rock City.

Bonus: Five Items a Burner Can't Live Without

- 1) **Glow:** Being seen at night is the best way to avoid getting crushed by an art car or T-boned by another biker. Bring enough glow sticks for you and your bike to wear several pieces each evening. Better yet, get battery-powered EL wire and reuse it every night.
- 2) **Bicycle:** You can't drive on the playa, and there's never an art car when you need one. So gussy up your bike and bring it along. The more elaborately it's decorated, the less likely it is to get lost.
- 3) **Dust mask and goggles:** Fierce dust storms are the norm at Burning Man. These [Steampunk goggles](#) from the Neverwas Haul crew look cool, but standard-issue eye protection from Home Depot will do the job. Carry goggles and a scarf or dust mask, and be ready to put them on at a moment's notice.
- 4) **Earplugs:** The party never stops at Burning Man, but sometimes you'll wish it would. Earplugs actually make it possible to sleep, for a few hours at least.
- 5) **Water:** No water is provided at Burning Man. Bring all you'll need to drink, bathe, cook and wash dishes: an estimated 1.5 gallons of water per person per day.



