

AfrikaBurn: Desert of Dreams

 By [Brandon Williams](#)

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Take a moment to think about the world you live in. Think about the vast-and-dense matrix of principles, codes and conventions that govern and maintain its fragile balance. Think about the essential technological tools you've sold your soul to in order to invoke their powers on a daily basis, your means of navigating the world, the lifestyle of instant gratification. Think about the things considered taboo and unspeakable, the things and visuals reserved only for the most secluded and concealed spaces. Think about dress sense and food choices. Think about the systems you implement, the systems you're a part of, the systems that are apart of you. Think about your sense of self-worth; what is it tethered to, the number of zeroes on the 25th of each month?

Now imagine being severed from this world, severed from everything you thought important. Hopping into a time machine (bakkie) and being spirited away down a rustic rabbit hole to a different dimension called Tankwa Town. Along a road of sand and stone, you're engulfed in thick cyclic clouds of Karoo dust and the horizons recede to a stone's throw in length. No sense of bearing, no sense of assurance, you're hurtling through the dirt towards a realm that exists beyond the reaches of the socio-politically clogged breaches of human society. The road's stony teeth shred away at the rubber tyre seams holding together the means on which your dream is coasting. But you can't let a burst tyre deter you; a snapped axle should only motivate you further. For your dream is AfrikaBurn - and you're on the road to living it.



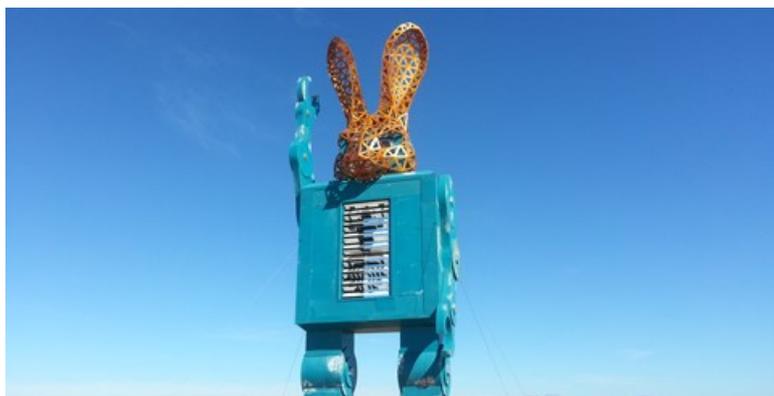
AfrikaBurn takes place at Stonehenge Farm near Tankwa Karoo National Park and is the biggest regional sister event of Burning Man in the United States. Out here everything you thought you knew about the workings of society are a Gaussian blur - stripped of all that is superfluous and self-serving. Driven by participation and progressiveness it is a grand-scale community building experiment that practices radical inclusion, the "decommodification" of capitalist branding and the self-reliance on one's own creativity and abilities. Yes, in this new world, no in Tankwa Town, there is no exclusion - all are welcome, but the event is not for all. The conditions are tough; it will take genuine perseverance to make it through the entire week. The Tankwa is also a sacred space, which means a tremendous amount of self-discipline needs to be practiced. You can't litter at any cost. It gets to a point where people stuff cigarette butts in their pockets. But if you play by the rules and live by the guiding principles; the things you experience will be so memorable, you won't even know where to begin describing the time you had when you get home.

A new frontier

** Day one. I am a virgin burner, I'm stepping out onto the arid stony plains of the Tankwa for the first time; I feel somewhat addled, overwhelmed and maybe even a little panicky. ** - End Transmission.

The abrupt transition from city lifer to earth bender is a drastic change that will certainly test your virtues. There's just so much to see in an environment that can be likened to a cross between films like Judge Dredd, Alice in Wonderland, and Mad Max. Imagine more than 100 different themed encampments each hosting its own parties, gatherings, live entertainment or workshops.

From psychedelic trance tents, to hip hop hamlets. From live band Bedouins to top-notch techno tribes and mellowed marquees. Imagine each theme camp being a different club, with different DJs or performances, different aesthetics, different artworks and different people. You simply walk in and just have of anything being offered - except the people, you'd need their consent to have them. The entire area is so huge it's dizzying. It's utterly impossible to describe the world you just walked into.



The alluring beckons of the majestic artworks towering hazily around the desert against a backdrop of a crystal-clear azure sky; only makes the decision of where to go first more complex than South African democracy. If an orientation strategy isn't formed fast, the merciless land will consume you. Traversing the scorching plains by bicycle or mutant vehicle (mobile art) would see you conserving precious calories. But donning your flip-flops of fortitude and missioning by foot to find the local ice retailer is probably the best place to begin. That way you really get to immerse yourself in the whimsical swirling mass that is AfrikaBurn; your Viennas might also live to see another day and you'll be able to enjoy a beverage that doesn't taste like hot spit.

So, in effect, you'll be killing three stones with one bird, I mean three birds with one stone. "Nyaaarg," at this point you may begin noticing slight glitches in your sentence structure. Don't worry, when the sun's photons begin to feel like a seamless stream of shimmering sabres across your skin, a few bouts of dyslexia forgivable are. Just don't forget to marinade in SPF whenever the opportunity presents itself, for once you enter the sheer madness of AfrikaBurn, you likely won't be seeing your tent again anytime soon.

As you explore you'll encounter a three-storey robot bunny with drum circles at its feet. You'll pledge your vows and marry a complete stranger in full-on wedding outfits before consummating your union in the Tardis. You'll build a kite and watch your creation ascend into the blue yonder. You'll find your centre in a Tai Chi class, then have your inner peace shattered by a passing topless parade. You'll play on a surreal wooden structure with swings and hammocks. You'll make a pilgrimage to a shrine to meditate. You'll throw your hands in the air to stretch your back and when you drop them they'll bear free food and drinks. You'll dance on boat, you'll dance along to countless performance acts, you'll dance even though

you're about to be run over by a group of people riding on a giant peacock. You'll get so caught up in magnificence around you that you'll . . . "OMG wasn't I supposed to buy ice? Oh well, too late now; Ooooh what's that thing over there?"



The massive energy experienced during the day, despite the searing heat, is only amplified by the costumes and the mutant vehicle, into which people invest a great deal of effort. The costumes can be whimsical, naughty, trippy, free spirited, steam punk, hilarious or even non-existent (naked people everywhere). It's so funny to see a butch hairy male fairy in a luminescent tutu having the fattest chat of his life with an armoured camel beneath the old oak tree made of creepy-crawly pipes. Or two noble sirs in top hats whizzing by on a nippy little couch with wheels, as if it's totally freaking normal! Even the security guards have funny hats on, which ironically enough makes it very difficult to take them seriously.

There's no schedule, no reason, and no time like the present. Parties spring up left right and centre, where they want, when they want. You are a Burner, you are the party. A man blasting delicious drum 'n bass drops from his solar-powered bicycle sub collides with a bakkie that has been spraying overheated party-goers as it progresses down the dusty path. The result of the collision? A "see the rainbow in the water" drum 'n bass shower party in the middle of the street. A giant wizard hat floats on by spinning beats from within. Like the Pied Piper, where it floats people follow; and where it stops a party ensues. Same goes for the giant cup 'n saucer. Have I been using the word giant too much? From here on out just assume everything I speak of is larger than life. As the days roll by more and more Burners arrive. More burners mean more spontaneity, which means more parties. Everywhere! They're just everywhere. The place is infested with festivity! If you aren't careful about where you walk, you run the risk of bumping into something completely unplanned and awesome. And when I say awesome I mean it in the proper sense of the word and not the colloquial sense that is so loosely thrown around in pubs, clubs and social media.



Delight in the night

At AfrikaBurn there are only two times, day and night, with each spanning an eternity. Breathtaking fiery sunsets with beaming golden auras and vivid twilights give way to a moon full, bright and fitting of a vampire/human interspecies love story. This is when the party goes beast mode! The darker it gets, the more people coming flooding out of their burrows. As lively and vibrant as AfrikaBurn sounds during the day, at night Tankwa Town becomes something truly magical. Everything, and I mean everything, lights up in dazzling display of lights, as if it was will 'o the wisp mating season.

Suddenly, large fireballs pierce the night sky as the smaller artworks are set ablaze, lighting up the way for one of the larger transient artworks to go to its fiery demise. As the time nears, the crowds flock towards the art structure by the hundreds. A lumo purple-and-green double-decker bus pulls up and the middle section of the top floor converts into a DJ box from where a DJ then proceeds to spin some sweet sounds; transforming the entire area into a huge dance floor. A colossal 800-metre-long multi-coloured nodal worm just soars forth from the darkness. It's so freaking massive it appears to be swaying over the whole of Tankwa Town. Fire dancers, twirlers and a man with a flame thrower put on a performance to amplify the build-up to the big burning. When the universe can't contain the suspense any longer - a silent pause, the dancers sit down and, bang bang bang - whoooooosh! The giant art structure ignites in a fireball that roars through the sky. As the inferno rages people cheer as the structures flaming fragments fall to the floor.



The music comes back and you dance. And then tornadoes, yes people, tornadoes just materialise! They literally generated mini tornadoes. You take a panoramic look around you at the thousands of different coloured lights surrounding you, the huge flames of the burning art, the freaking unreal 800-metre worm, the hundreds of people in their bright-and-trippy outfits, the swirling vortices on either end of the dance floor and, oh my garden - when you look up and you truly see the stars for the first time in your life you just f*cking take it in bra, it's like "yaw!" For me, personally, I just felt this tremendous sense of privilege wash over me. At that moment, I couldn't believe how happy I was to be standing in the middle of the desert. Then I simply lol'd when in the corner of my eye, I witnessed a joint being lit in the fire spewing from the horn of a behemoth mobile LED rhino. This is how it goes pretty much every day. As the days roll by the atmospheric charge manifests into pulsing energy which literally becomes tangible.



When you eventually make your way back to your camp site/theme camp with the genuine intention of having a non-alcoholic beverage, grabbing a snack or getting a jacket due to the fact that the temperature has plummeted to freezing; you'll be utterly taken aback to find complete strangers, who don't even know each other, packing bongs, sharing food and drinks and just chilling outside your tent, on your chairs, around your table. The amazing part of it all is that once again this is considered wholly and utterly normal.

You just have to love the immense feeling of freedom you get being able to wander into any theme camp knowing that inside you'll be met with people who are friendly and generous in the sense that they will welcome you and offer you things without ever expecting anything in return. Sometimes the gestures are small, but they hit the heart in a big way! Like someone offering you a tube of lip ice when your lips are dry or someone walking up to you saying: "Hey man, would you

like an ice-cold orange," when well, every other part of you looks dry. A community from across the globe sustained by, and thriving on, the goodwill of one another -absolutely unheard of. Even the friendliness experienced at trance festivals cannot compare to the level of selfless human nature experienced at AfrikaBurn.



A bio-hazard

There are only two complaints I can think of, which is pretty darn swell considering the magnitude of the event. The first is the fact that the toilets did become quite an archaeological stew, with layer upon layer of "history" accumulating over the days. This is not okay; in fact this is a bio-hazard. In the eight years of AfrikaBurn's existence, surely event organisers should have realised that toilet maintenance crews either need to be on-site or beamed in every single day. When they are brought in, though, they should totally have funny hats like the security guards; that would be dope. The other complaint, well it's more of a suggestion really, is that event organisers constantly monitor Tankwa Town weather patterns.

I waited all week long to see the Subterfuge burn; the pent-up excitement was causing my skin to shred. Imagine the massive anti-climax when hundreds of people mission all the way out into the desert to see a structure burn, only to be told the structure won't burn due to turbulent wind speeds. If the weather was monitored, the burn could have taken place an hour earlier before everyone began eating dust. I'm no meteorologist, I'm no Derek van Dam but I do know that monitoring weather patterns in-depth is as simple as downloading an app. Considering the massive costs incurred to get to AfrikaBurn, and enter it, such an anti-climax really isn't acceptable. Like I said though, as off-pissing as these issues are, you have to admire the fact that these are the only issues.



AfrikaBurn is truly the spectacular result of creative expression, hard work and the beauty of the human spirit. It's the kind of event that could and should change the way you live your life. Despite the constant madness around you, you can gain a tremendous amount of perspective when you're taken away from everything you once knew. You could see sides of yourself you never knew existed. You will find yourself doing things you never thought you could. Most importantly, when you're out there revelling in the glory of it all, you'll realise just how fortunate you are. You'll leave with a greater sense of appreciation for the things you have in life. And you may even find yourself striving to become a more compassionate, more creative, more generous, more tolerant person. Once the magic has you, it has you. AfrikaBurn, hands down the best jol I've ever attended in South Africa. But one of the best parts about leaving is that when it's all over, there'll be no trace on the land that the festival ever existed. While it is bothersome to take all your rubbish back home with you, as Burners we

should commit to this practice as a means of conserving and thanking the sacred Tankwa space for all it has given us.

Photography by [Juliette Bisset](#)

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