

I tumble out of my tent like a pile of unwashed socks into the laundryroom night, where all is dark, whirling and buzzing. In the distance a thousand parties giggle and rumble. Reds, greens and blues pulsate in patterns on the horizon, like a bank of mission-control buttons I can't wait to press.

My tent partner is nowhere to be seen. No matter; she can't have gone further than a mile or two. First things first – grope the foggy earth for dust-crusting sandals, stretch daysleep-curling muscles into the infinite sky. Feel the benefit. Taste the possibilities. Find the flashlight.

Once I assemble torch and waterpack, the two-way radio dangling from my velcro waist-towel starts making noises. When it feels like it, this device is my Plastic Man arm, reaching out into the city, yanking up friends and creating random collisions of humanity. But tonight it just hisses and beeps like a fearsome electronic snake. Clearly, the Universe sees a quest in my immediate future.

It reinforces this point seconds later when my neighbors show up in a chauffeur-driven golf cart with purple fur trim and a naked torso photo collage on the hood. The cart's owner, his delivery completed, is questless and eager; a Sancho Panza seeking his next Don Quixote. I explain my windmill-tilting desire: to venture deep, deep into the playa until we reach two 16-foot-high red dice. Though Sancho has never seen the dice, there is no need to argue over their existence or explain their even more improbable contents – a prohibition-era casino and jazz club (where, if all goes well, my tent partner will be found). Sancho accepts and understands implicitly. In fact, he's so jazzed he wants me to drive. All of a sudden this total stranger and his mutant purple torso chariot are mine to command. I drive gleefully, like I've never driven before – indeed, I have never driven a mutant vehicle before – in seasick waves and the occasional loop-the-loop, savoring the drive more than reaching the destination.

Outside the Dice is a parking lot of exotic, anthropomorphic people-carriers: dragons and butterflies and winged dinosaurs, oh my. Inside is the usual crowd of thirsty crazies, all of whom have latched on to the premise – for the gift of a drink, they must offer a gift of their own. We make them do magic tricks or spin fire naked; whatever talent they have to offer, we tease it out. Right now one of the good doctors from Spock Mountain Research is dispensing his patented Hyperwhisky while a guy in moth wings and fez is regaling the crowd with tales of his childhood. My favorite customers are the ones who have the chutzpah to walk into the Dice for the first time, size up the situation, and without batting an eyelid ask the barkeep for “my usual.” **That's what Burning Man is all about: instant participatory fantasy.**

