



Under the Totem of the Three Rabbits

Where utopia becomes reality – for a week ten thousand people built in the Negev Desert a temporary city, made out of art, love and dreams - a trip to Midburn in Israel

By Henning Kober (first published in German at taz, die tageszeitung)

I'm not quite sure where this story begins. At the bus stop on Rothschild Boulevard, behind the intersection to Allenby Street, I stand. Tel Aviv, Israel. It is Sunday, half past seven in the morning, the Sabbath is over, and there are not many people around. A few last ones from the night, a few early birds and me with my rucksack and the two bags around my feet. The firmer one is filled with water bottles, in the other one are figs, granola bars, olives, suncream. Listening to the feeling in my belly, it is going to start now, there are some shooting stars of excitement burning through. And

back there my bus is coming. I pay the driver six Shekel, and I am about to sit down, when he calls on me in English, where I want to go. To the main station. He drives me, although I'm the only passenger.

Just young soldiers, male and female, so young

We drive over the Boulevard, on whose green centre strip I often was cycling during the last days, and in front of my inner eye the time since my arrival passes again. The wonderful terminal of Mosche Safdie at Ben-Gurion airport, the first cinnamon roll, Shai's balcony at night, my friend Patrick the next morning, whom I hadn't seen for years and whose eyes and voice I had missed.

Neuroscientists say, everything you do for the first time is more memorable to your brain, which is why one feels the time passing as longer. This is my first visit to Israel, always postponed until I found now the good occasion. At Savidor Station I walk across the parking lot, somewhere here a bus shall leave to the Negev Desert, but nothing is to be seen yet. Only young soldiers, male and female, so young. Suddenly there are two like me with luggage. Midburn? Yes, exactly. They are from Hamburg, and it won't take long before someone from Belarus stands with us and suggests a deep hug first. Then one from the US arrives, and there are more and more Burners coming. They all have backpacks and sleeping bags with them, tents and bags with water. We hug each other, not short, long.

Soon enough we drive in an air-conditioned bus through the desert. A huge complex of gray block-buildings shimmer in the heat, looks like a jail. Prison enforcement and the military are classics in deserts, it was similar in the US. In distance the white skyscrapers of the desert city of Be'er Sheva. Next to me sits Mathieu from the region of Rennes, he is a digital nomad, who has worked for the Macron campaign. It will be his first burn. For me it is the second.

Almost fourteen years ago I had traveled to Black Rock Desert in Nevada to visit Burning Man (and to write about it). Meanwhile there is a regional sister-event in Israel, Midburn (a portmanteau from the Hebrew word midbar for "desert" and burn), which is growing quickly - to well over ten thousand visitors this year.

Welcome home

After two hours drive we reach the traffic jam, which has formed before the entrance to the fenced off ground. After two more hours the so-called Greeters enter the bus; costumed and already well decorated with desert dust, they greet us euphorically. "Welcome home!" After the voice of a

handheld has declared my ticket valid, a band is tied around my right wrist, and a little later I stand outside in the dust. It's windy, and fine desert-particles attach on my skin. Also it's already hot, the sun is beating down from the bright, blue sky.

Now I have to go to my camp, "Camp David". 2.30, Esplanade are the coordinates, meaning in first row, to the right of the semicircle-shaped temporary city. An hour later my tent stands next to the others underneath a huge shade sail, and I'm meeting some of the more than fifty other residents of Camp David. Already a girl is painting something in my face. A Burn is not a normal festival. It was founded in 1986 on the beach of San Francisco and it works on the basis of ten principles, of whom the most important are: There is nothing to buy (except for ice cubes). You bring what you need and you are gifting to each other. There are no spectators, only participants. Even if some of the best DJs are there, it is an event of art, fantasy, self-experience and a different approach with each other. All are called to express themselves and to be self-aware. It sounds more esoteric than it is. The painting on my cheek is ready, and I'm allowed to look at it in a mirror. "That's a W," I recognize and she asks: "Do you have a special relationship with W?" "Yes, I do." "Then it's good," says the girl, who acknowledges she thought about a chandelier. Already the magic has begun.

With ski goggles in the holy desert

"Camp David" did sound good to me right away. I had thought of Maryland and the peace negotiated there, but this derivation turned out to be a misapprehension. Because the name goes back to David Ranch, an hour north of Tel Aviv, where Ethan, Sharon and some others live, make art and hold horses. Since a week a small group had already set up the camp, which is now entered through a Saloon door. To the left is a bar, on the right a stage, in the middle sofas and behind a visual cover wall are our tents.

At this first midday the camp feels like an anthill, and because I am tired and curious, I walk out onto the Playa, as the desert is called. I walk up in the middle the small hill to the man, the central sculpture made from wood, which will be burned in the end and who got Eve at his side this time. Since my arrival the wind has gotten stronger, now dust is flying everywhere and I wear ski goggles over my eyes and a bandana over my mouth, but it still crunches between my teeth.

The holy Negev, from here you can see everything in a 360-degree view. The town is horseshoe-shaped, open to the north, there it goes far out, over a hundred works of art are distributed. But I'm going to the center camp to have a bit of sleep on a mattress. Fine water dust rains from a sprinkler system, Depeche Mode sing *Enjoy the Silence*, and from the side sand blows in. On the way back to Camp David there is suddenly loud noise. Two military planes cut the sky and their supersonic

bangs explode loud.

Every evening there is a warm meal in the camp. We are not sitting at a large table, as I had imagined, but in the setting golden sun.

Gleaming boys, artists and pillows

The night comes, and the difference compared to the day could not be more impressive. Everywhere there are colorful lights, at the one hundred art installations and at the people wandering around. With Ethan and Tomer I walk up to the lighthouse, all the way north. From here you can see all the madness, it looks like we are on Mars. There are all the lights, as well as all the sounds of the now tuned up sound systems. We move over to the cLOUDs, a large field of cotton-wool-clouds at the height of our heads, in between there is dancing. Everyone has put effort in their outfits. In Tel Aviv there was talk of queues in front of Secondhand and 10-shekels stores. Many guys wear a skirt or a tutu, their girls leggings and boots, traditions twisted, pretty playful.

I've already lost Ethan and Tomer, but I've met Vaki again, the young Belarusian from this morning. Together we go towards the next eye-catcher, an interchanging red, blue, green illuminated dome, from where harder techno breaks - ironically it wants to be called Tech(no) Drome and is inspired by the Ninja Turtles. This is too much for Vaki, and we say a light-hearted goodbye. Another guy takes me to Cookie Kingdom, on whose dancefloor the boys and their eyes gleam like during the right hour at Panorama Bar.

After a bit of sleep, a breakfast bread with tahini, avocado and tomato. Michael, to whom I owe Camp David, tells me about his job as a teacher for the children of refugees. In Israel they are from Eritrea and Somalia. I find Shai again on a wooden construction, reminiscent of Baywatch and Malibu. In the tent next to it artists do gymnastics. At Shoobi Doobi I have a little nap between giant teddy bears. In a boxing ring there is a pillow fight. Soon it is already evening again, and with Tom, Monkey and the others from Camp Radi-Cali, our neighbors, we are the Five-Minute Party. We go from camp to camp, from party to party, as an ever-growing group, which moves on at the latest after five minutes and takes more and more with us. It's a nice, funny prank.

This is not the Easyjetset here

With Eyal, whom all call Markus, I walk in the morning sun to an artwork, that just rises to the sky and reminds me of the light-artist Otto Piene. For Markus it is the fourth Midburn, he was part of it from the beginning. It's a difference, whether everyone knows each other, or if it is ten thousand, he

says. In relation to the population of the country (about like the State of Virginia or of New Jersey) many come to Midburn. "Yes," he says, "we want to live differently." This does not necessarily include the neighbors. About the funny Egyptians I suggest as possible guests for the future, he only says: "Difficult." Actually the participants are mostly Israelis, there are a few Europeans, French and Germans and also US-Americans, but this is not the Easyjetset here.

At Camp David I get to know more and more people. All the unfamiliar names, not so easy, and I also often have to spell my name. But Berlin turns out to be a great luck. With everyone I talk, the city is positively associated, whether they were there or not. Am I even a little proud of this? For sure I'm happy about it. With Amit, Doobo, Matan, Hotam and Ariel I have to prepare dinner. Cutting vegetables for over fifty hungry is a task, and a sandstorm hinders us, but we make it.

I take my first shower. There is that much comfort at Camp David, from a water bag trickles the arduous carried water. Noam tells me of his Plato reading in the afternoon with his friends Ron and Jacob at the temple, beneath the lighthouse, whose walls are filled with thoughts by visitors. With Shaqed I get ice cubes. On our stage the band The Flaming Sattles has its debut gig. Markus sings in his yellow speedo. On the other side of town there is a drag-show.

Eventually I get homesick and a longing arises, and so I wander through the desert in search of a wireless network for internet access. There must be one. Exit Cyberspace, the world of social media - this is a difference to 2003 - layering itself like cotton candy as second reality over the real world. But there is no net, no connection. There only is the Burn, the third reality. Suddenly everything is too loud and too much. Exhausted I howl up in my tent.

Into Sunrise Kingdom

But already, it's still dark, I'm awake again and outside. Brightness creeps in over the desert from north. Sunrise Kingdom is the place with the big boxes. There I dance in a crowd, and suddenly the sun rises and floods us with their rays. The skating rink is already busy. With a boy in a fur coat I play Checkers on a large field. His pink buckets beat my blue ones. In low-altitude a small plane appears and circles over the city. With Russo, Sergio and their friends we are dancing at the Jerusalem market. Nisan, who introduces himself as a reporter for Fake News, is interviewing me and I photograph him. With Ariel, who was discharged from the army last week, I drink a beer. "I'm so glad to be here," he says. A few days before his dismissal, he had been under attack. "Oh no, shit", he had thought, "this is such a classic, the soldier who is shot just before his discharge." And now? "I want to help other people." But first he has to experience himself.

Although I have developed a feeling of time without having a watch, the moment has come

surprisingly and too fast: On the fourth evening we sit around the man who is then lit on fire. Bright flames eat into him and into his Eve, but then it takes a long time for the two to fall. Back then at Black Rock Desert in Nevada this evening was the highlight of the week, but here at the Negev I'm so tired and exhausted, I'm falling asleep while sitting there.

When the temple is set on fire the next and last night, it also feels strange. Despite all the cleansing. The hypnotic character of fire and how people react to it, even if they are as nice as here, their wolfish howl as a part of the temple collapses into itself. In order to eradicate this impression and because it is the last night, I go party, once again at all places, further and further. I quite like it a lot, also more towards the end, when already everything is getting quieter. I like to be still part of the last, the stupidest, worst, but also best party.

Under the totem of the three rabbits a group of chemical conspirators stirs up dust once again. The DJane looks desperate, but she pushes her music hard and spins yet skillfully. I also like that all friends and acquaintances are gone. I am alone here, as I used to be in the past, that's also a feeling of home. Then I discover him - Shai - who dances elegant and with all one's heart with a white scarf in his hands. Very remote. Also the great Vincent from Berlin appears again.

Create a better society

What I just didn't know: A little later the dismantling of Camp David begins. It will last all day, and because of a persistent sand storm (and my exhaustion) this will be the most exhausting day at all.

Around noon I steal away to speak with Nir Adan. The former presidential bodyguard presides over the NGO, which organizes and arranges Midburn. He too had gone to Burning Man for the first time in the 2000s. Today he says, "It took me some time to understand the potential of this idea, how from this culture a better society can emerge."

I ask him for his résumé of the week, and the good news is: Everyone is going home well. No one has died, as it sometimes happens in the US. There were also fewer treatments at the medics, compared to last year. However the number of participants shall rise more slowly in the coming years. "Perhaps we have grown too fast." In the long term, says Nir Adan, he has a dream. "I'm dreaming of people coming to Midburn regardless of religion and politics." Also from the neighboring countries.

On my way back I think about my résumé of the week. It was great. Above all I have met fantastic humans, I partied more than I had expected, and again I did not start with yoga. Next year then, at the latest.