Burning Man has the reputation for being a crazy week-long rave in the Nevada desert. It’s not that; it is so much more. It is a radical lifestyle-as-art experimental community governed by 10 principles. Key among them are radical self expression and radical inclusion, which means that not only are you allowed to live your fancies but others celebrate and thank you for doing so, for bringing your personal art, your fantasy, to the Playa. Imagine a world where you can be who you want to be (as long as it isn’t hurting others); where you don’t have to dress or do things in certain ways, because those rules simply don’t exist. That is Burning Man.

Burning Man is a world where nobody tries to be normal, because nobody is even pretending that there might be such thing as normal.

Everybody who comes to Burning Man is changed by the experience. Nearly everybody discovers new things about themselves: superpowers they didn’t know they had, new interests and new perspectives that change their point of view forever.

Most contra dancers are aware of the “endorphin buzz” often experienced at the end of a particularly intense dance evening. The Playa (aka beach or desert) has a buzz all of its own. Brain researchers tell us that on the Playa nearly everybody’s brain activity resembles being on Prozac. Everybody is seriously high on life, no artificial help required.

Another Burning Man principle is “Leave no trace.” People start building Black Rock City (another name for the Playa) in the middle of an empty desert sometime mid summer. The main event opens Sunday August 25th, but by Tuesday after Labor Day (Sept 3rd) it will be nearly completely erased.

Mark Stowe and I run a contra dance camp at Burning Man. We have an experienced, well functioning team, supporting a dance floor and soundstage under a 30’x60’ shade tent (from Pinewoods, by the way). Camp includes a meal plan, produced by an efficient shared kitchen, and shade for camping. Last year we were nearly 100% solar powered. It has taken a number of years to work the kinks out but, knock on wood, every year we only make new and smaller mistakes.

Why do we do this? Well, for one thing, there is a huge overlap between the sensibilities of the contra dance community and Burning Man. Contra dancers think about the communal common good and are leading the way in such areas as inclusiveness nonbinary genders. Our mission is to cross fertilize these communities: to bring a little Burning Man to every dance in the default world, and to bring as many Burners to contra dance as we possibly can.

Most people on the Playa are special in some way. Although I was perhaps a bit tongue-in-cheek about discovering our own super powers, my favorite tale from
camp suggests that it is true. One year, a returning dance visitor told us that our camp was their favorite experience on the entire Playa the previous year; that they had so much fun that they resolved to find a contra dance in their hometown. But doom and gloom, there were none. So our intrepid dancer then STARTED ONE FROM SCRATCH, where there had been none before.

We are looking for additional contra dancers, musicians and callers. If you (or somebody you know) wants the adventure of a lifetime, send them our way. The hardest part is is getting Burning Man event tickets. Start NOW. If you are at all interested, please visit contraburners.org and we can help to guide you through the process. To participate in the main ticket sale (lottery) you must apply before March 23rd. There are low income options for both camp and the event itself. Camp also has very limited budget to help needy campers.

How better to ease into Burning Man than in the company of a flock of contra dancers?

To learn more about Burning Man, search YouTube for “Burning Man”, and maps for “Black Rock City NV”. Add words “people”, “art”, “art cars,” and “installations” to see additional perspectives.

Matt Mathis is a long term contra dancer and dance organizer who migrated from Pittsburgh, PA, to the the San Francisco Bay area in 2011. During the day he helps Google make the Internet faster for everyone.