

1 Fascination With Chernobyl Inspires Secret Visits

2 Nuclear meltdown leaves a vast, empty land overtaken by vegetation.

3 by George Johnson

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5 Dmitry was a child when he first heard stories of a mysterious place called Chernobyl, not far from his home
6 in Chernihiv. Something strange and dreadful had happened there: an explosion, an **evacuation**, **poisoned**
7 water, poisoned air. He didn't understand that the catastrophe was **caused** by a nuclear reactor, just that it was
8 something frightening. As he **grew older**, his **fear gave way** to fascination. By the time Dmitry was a
9 teenager, he knew he wanted to **explore** the **exclusion zone**, an area of about a thousand square miles that
10 **surrounds** the epicenter of the meltdown. I met Dmitry in Kiev after my own visit to the zone in 2011 after
11 guided tours began in that empty, ruined world. I understood the **attraction**. But the most **keen** are the
12 "stalkers"—people like Dmitry who sneak their way into a **forbidden** land. Long before his first adventure
13 there, he began searching for information on the Internet: maps, history, descriptions of buildings. In 2009,
14 he and some friends started an Internet forum, which soon attracted about 20 members, one of them, Igor,
15 had already sneaked into the zone twice. "He seemed like a god to me," Dmitry said. (Their surnames have
16 been **omitted**, since their explorations of the zone are **illegal**.) Igor agreed that on a future trip Dmitry and
17 another friend could come along.

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19 Though the area is surrounded by a **fence** at the 30-kilometer **boundary**, it can be crossed by those
20 **determined to get in**, like Dmitri and his friend. After swimming across a river, they came to Pripyat, a ghost
21 city two miles from the ruined reactor. What Dmitry had **expected** to be a **wasteland** was instead a rich
22 forest. That first night, his feet blistered and **bleeding** from his stiff, new boots he lay **awake** listening to wild
23 boars and wolves, **clutching** a knife in his hand. "In the morning I told my friends I'd had the first **sleepless**
24 night of my life, they hadn't heard a thing!" By the time they **emerged** four days later, they had walked about
25 60 miles, **avoiding** capture by the police. Soon Dmitry was leading his own secret expeditions. He **estimates**
26 that he has been to the zone at least a hundred times. The name "stalker" comes from a Russian movie by that
27 name, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky. Released in 1979, the film describes a bleak, magical place called the
28 Zone, **abandoned** after a meteor strike. **Despite** or because of the danger, a few brave people are attracted
29 by its power. A man called Stalker acts as their guide. "It's the quietest place in the world, it's magical." one
30 of the visitors says in the movie, as he views the **decaying** industrial **landscape** overgrown with vegetation.
31 After the Chernobyl explosion in 1986, Tarkovsky's film became an allegory for the real-life zone. Dmitry
32 found his own magic on that first trip with Igor in Pripyat. They were not using flashlights, for fear of being
33 spotted by the police. "It was a full moon, and when your eyes **get used to** that kind of light, you can see
34 everything," he remembers. "Your vision sharpens. We were trying to step very quietly, but every step seemed
35 so loud in the quietness of the night. Suddenly we emerged from the bushes onto a street. An open window
36 was swinging in the breeze, the moon **reflecting** on the glass, giving the illusion for a hair-raising moment
37 that someone was inside.

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39 On an earlier trip Igor had found a hiding place in an apartment in one of Pripyat's tower blocks. Sitting on
40 the balcony and sipping cognac, Dmitry and his friends looked out at the moonlight ruins. The next day they
41 were surprised to **encounter** another group of stalkers. "We never thought this was possible," Dmitry says.
42 Over the years, with the help of a Geiger **counter**, he and his friends have learned not to linger in the most
43 radioactive places. But the contamination is impossible to **avoid**. "I have breathed in a lot of radiation and
44 have drunk a lot of irradiated water. You get into situations where you don't have fresh water but are very
45 thirsty." The highest radiation level he has experienced is at least 0.01 sievert—the maximum **amount** his
46 meter could measure and roughly what a person **receives** from a full-body CT scan. That hot spot was in the
47 hospital where the firemen who had **responded** to the explosion were **treated** for radiation **sickness**. But,
48 Dmitry says he isn't worried: "I look at all the people who went through those horrible times and are alive
49 still and have a good life. I am not a radiophobic person." He said smiling gently.

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52 Adapted from [National Geographic](#)