

Fascination With Chernobyl Inspires Secret Visits

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

by George Johnson

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

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

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

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