

UKRAINE

THE ZONE



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parallel zero



The ferris wheel in the ghost town of Pripyat.



In the apartment of Jimmy, an old USSR poster hanging on the wall shows Soviet astronaut Valery Bykovsky and his GDR colleague Sigmund Jähn, who were on the Soyuz 31 mission together in 1978. Jimmy is a "Stalker", one of the Ukrainian youngsters who enjoy a trendy and dangerous activity: illegally entering the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone to play survival games. The name comes from Tarkovsky's film "Stalker" and from a survival-horror videogame also called S.T.A.L.K.E.R., released in 2007 and set in the Zone.

Life after death in Chernobyl

After the Chernobyl nuclear accident, which occurred on 26 April 1986, the Soviet government created a 30 km exclusion zone around the plant and evacuated the 116,000 residents. The area thus became a dead zone. Yet the area around the plant, despite being one of the most contaminated places in the world, is far from deserted.

For the last 20 years, Pierpaolo Mittica has dedicated himself to documenting what happens inside the area known as "The Zone." In his long-term project he has collected the stories of those who gravitate to this place: those who have always refused to leave, those who have returned to live there or the 2,000 people who continue to work there to keep the plant safe. There are the tourists, the smugglers of radioactive metals, the young people who practice extreme trekking, along with the pilgrims who come to visit the tomb of Menachem Bochum Twersky, the rabbi founder of Hasidism, buried here in 1787.

"Before the 1986 accident, the people of Chernobyl talked about space exploration and the triumph of communism around the world" says Yuriy Tatarchuk, former manager of the Chernobyl Information Center. "Pripyat was the city of dreams: today it is a desolate urban landscape, where the inhabitants burn firewood to keep warm. But I still think it is a damn fascinating place, which can be of inspiration for every one of us."



Students during a break at the school of the contaminated village of Radinka, situated 300 metres from the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.



The harbour of Chernobyl with some half-sunk ships ready to be dismantled. There is still a million tons of rusty metal abandoned in the Exclusion Zone. It comes from Reactor No. 1, but also from ships, vehicles, rails. Recycling all this metal is a billion US dollars business, something handled for decades by smugglers, and only since 2007 legalized and regulated by the Ukrainian state.



Igor with his father Sasha in their home in the contaminated village of Radinka, situated 300 metres from the Chernobyl exclusion zone.



Inside Reactor No. 3 of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.



Chernobyl City. Jews pray on the tomb of Rabbi Menachem Bochum Twersky – the founder of Hasidic Judaism – buried here in 1787. They come on pilgrimage every year to honour his memory and that of the confreres who lived here until 1920, when, due to pogroms and persecutions, the Twersky dynasty left the Ukrainian town (once the “capital” of Hasidic Judaism) moving primarily to Israel and the US. The tombs, forgotten for many years, were recovered in the early 90s thanks to the Jewish community that restored and preserved them.



Workers at the end of their shift, at the bar in the main square in Chernobyl town.



Jimmy preparing dinner and warming himself in the abandoned village of Rudnya Veresnya. Jimmy is a "Stalker", one of the Ukrainian youngsters who enjoy a trendy, dangerous activity: illegally entering the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone to play survival games and undertake trips to reach the ghost town of Pripyat. The name comes from Tarkovsky's film "Stalker" and from a survival-horror videogame also called S.T.A.L.K.E.R., released in 2007 and set in the Zone.



The "Zolotoj Kluchik" kindergarten, the golden key, Pripyat, Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.



Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. The Duga 3 military antenna is a huge radar antenna 150 meters high and 500 meters in length with buildings, and was part of the anti-missile defence system that would track any missiles from the USA.



Posters of Soviet leaders in the abandoned "house of culture" in the ghost town of Pripyat.



The hangar close to Reactors No. 5 and 6 where the scrap metals are cleaned of radioactive particles and recycled. There is still a million of tons of rusty metal abandoned in the Exclusion Zone. Recycling all this metal is a billion US dollars business. Workers operate with minimal protection, even though it is mandatory, moving around for hours in the middle of toxic clouds. Their work is terribly dangerous, almost a death sentence in slow motion.



A military company celebrates the delivery of medals to former liquidators (clean-up workers) in the main square of the town of Chernobyl.



The post office in the town of Chernobyl, in the Exclusion Zone. A telephone cabin from the Soviet era, no longer in use also due to the advent of mobile phones.



The Izumrudny children's summer camp is located a few kilometres from the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. It consisted of colourful houses with characters from Soviet children's tales and was used during the summer by the children of the workers at the plant. In recent years it had become one of the places most visited by tourists, but in April 2020, in one of the worst arson attacks to hit the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, the Izumrudny children's camp was completely destroyed.



Celebrations on April 26, the anniversary of the Chernobyl accident, in the main square of Chernobyl.



A fox in the main square of Pripjat, Exclusion Zone. Thanks to the absence of humans, wild animals have taken possession of the environment.



Inside the Chernobyl nuclear power plant.



Vladik sleeping at his home in Radinka, a village of 1200 inhabitants located near the Exclusion Zone. Here the border is only 300 metres away. The village is highly contaminated and for this reason part of the population has left it.



The entrance arch, submerged by vegetation, of the abandoned town of Poleskoe, located within the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.



A game of ping pong at the gym in Chernobyl. Many workers come here to exercise after their shift in order to keep fit.



Jimmy welcoming his friends invited to a party in his apartment in Pripjat. They are "Stalkers", a name given to Ukrainian youngsters who enjoy a trendy, dangerous activity: illegally entering the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone to play survival games. They seem to be organized in paramilitary groups with symbols and rituals. The name comes from Tarkovsky's film "Stalker" and from a survival-horror videogame also called S.T.A.L.K.E.R. released in 2007 and set in the Zone.



Chernobyl Exclusion Zone.



Igor and Vladik at the school in the contaminated village of Radinka, located 300 metres from the Chernobyl exclusion zone.



Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Tourists visiting the control room of reactor number 2 take selfies.



Sasha, a stalker, while escaping from the police inside the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. "Stalkers" is the name given to Ukrainian youngsters who enjoy a trendy, dangerous activity: illegally entering the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone to play survival games and undertake trips to reach the ghost town of Pripyat. The name comes from Tarkovsky's film "Stalker" and from a survival-horror videogame also called S.T.A.L.K.E.R. released in 2007 and set in the Zone.



Kupovate, Chernobyl Exclusion Zone. Hanna with her sisters Sophia and Maria in her home while she is preparing lunch.



Selfie from the roof of a building in the city of Pripyat with distant views of the nuclear power plant, Exclusion Zone.

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