

The Ultimate Destination for Doomsday Preppers

The Daily Beast (<https://www.thedailybeast.com/chernobyl-is-the-ultimate-destination-for-doomsday-preppers>) · by Bradley Garrett



opinion

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A few years ago, some friends and I spent four days trespassing on blasted land through the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone to the exploded nuclear reactor at the center of it. I had been doing research with doomsday preppers, people who imagine the world is entering a terminal phase, and though I justified the trip as “research,” it still felt a fool’s errand, a rash attempt to get a glimpse of the post-apocalyptic world the preppers were so infatuated with. Yet in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, I’ve come to understand that our journey was less about adventure, or the aesthetics of decay - it was training for world we now inhabit. Nuclear catastrophe taught us that the apocalypse could be invisible. The climate crisis offered a more sluggish variation on the end times. The virus makes clear that we are disaster’s intimate host. Everywhere I turn now, I see disaster stalking us, and I court it.—Bradley Garrett

Popping the hatch at the top of the stairwell on the fifteenth floor of the abandoned tower block, we were greeted with a rare spectacle: lightning forking over the most dangerous place on Earth. We were at the center of the doomed city of Pripyat, an hour’s walk from the Chernobyl nuclear reactor that exploded in 1986. The red lights along the spine of the new sarcophagus encasing that seeping radioactive tragedy seemed to dance with the bolts streaming down from the ether, performing an atmospheric ballet.

“Is this what the world would look like after the apocalypse?” I asked my fellow trespassers.

Aram panned the ruins. “Yeah, that’s the world without us.” Every window, in a city built for just under fifty thousand people, was dark, with trees wagging from rooftops like hair. Tidy human time had given way to rapacious vegetable time. Visiting Chernobyl was a chance to look on a post-apocalyptic world; to see what hope had taken up residence in the ruins of our failed ambitions as a species. It was a stress test of the prepper’s fantasies of life after a “hard reset.”

“It’s not empty, though,” Kirill said, sweeping his beer can across the horizon. “There are dozens of stalkers out there.” We hadn’t seen them because they didn’t want to be seen. Once the lights go off, the world becomes a place for those willing to take great risks for little reward. Stalkers—as the guides for illegal trips into the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone are known—were the explorers after the end of the world, temporarily repopulating the abandoned landscape in methodical raids. Local knowledge and stealth were their greatest assets.

Four of us—Darmon, Wayne, Aram, and me—had paid Kirill to take us into the Zone. I’m reluctant to call our four-day walk a death march, given how much radiation we absorbed trespassing into the Zone, but by the time we reached the rooftop in Pripjat, we were all pretty worn down.

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From this height, the disaster felt proximal. It wasn’t malice that produced these ruins, as in so many apocalyptic fictions, but the flick of a switch, a thirty-second error, an exercise gone wrong. When Reactor No. 4 overheated on April 26, 1986, a super-heated fuel fire chewed through the concrete-and-steel containment shell, collapsing the floor and melting a twelve-hundred-ton core full of radioactive isotopes that exploded like spores, blowing the four- million-pound roof off and seeding almost every country in the Northern Hemisphere with stardust: fissioned nuclear material.

The explosion released four hundred times more radioactive material than the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. Nearly one hundred thousand residents were evacuated, half of them from Pripjat, and all of them too slowly, while Soviet officials tried to spin the story. But when radiation sensors went off as far away as Sweden, there was no possibility of toning down the severity of the calamity.

After a stream of remote-controlled bulldozers had their circuitry fried by radiation while trying to clean it up, the Soviet Union sent more than half a million citizens in to battle the disaster. The liquidators, as they were called, were tasked with putting out fires, shoveling radioactive soil, and burying cars, machinery, furniture, and food—all the trappings of the once-wealthy city of Pripyat—in massive concrete-capped pits.

With the Soviet Union already sliding into collapse, the liquidators were not provided with necessary equipment, despite being bombarded with alpha, beta, and gamma particles being disgorged from the reactor daily. Many of them slept in the open and wrapped their boots with plastic tape that they changed daily, since they couldn't afford to throw the boots away, regardless of contamination.

Ground zero had to be contained. Over 206 horrific days, the first sarcophagus was constructed over Reactor No. 4 using four hundred thousand cubic meters of concrete and 7,300 tons of metal framing. This was, however, a wholly inadequate quick fix. A second vault called the "New Shelter," finished just before we arrived in the Zone, has been superimposed over the first, both to contain the original container and eventually to pull apart the old one, continuing the process of cleaning up the perpetual decay of 180 tons of radioactive material within it. This is the best plan human beings have come up with so far: to layer sarcophagi like murderous Matryoshka dolls, stacked encasements that will dismantle the older structures they contain. At the center of this perpetual activity sits the most dangerous object in the world: the "Elephant's Foot," a solid mass made of corium nuclear fuel mixed with concrete, sand, and graphite that's been melting since 1986. Just pausing next to the still-hot foot for three hundred seconds would offer up a lethal dose of radiation.

The second sarcophagus is expected to last for a hundred years before it, too, begins to leak. So, barring some radical advancement in containment technology, the vault will need to be rebuilt by generation after generation, potentially for thousands of years. Reactor No. 4 will be a managed disaster until the money runs out, or the human will, at which point its horrors may again escape into the world—a literal Pandora's box.

People have largely been excluded from the Zone of Alienation since 1986. It's a sixteen-hundred-square-mile area, containing two rings of exclusion at a six- and eighteen-mile radius from ground zero. As a consequence of keeping humans out, an area the size of Luxembourg has turned into what science fiction author Bruce Sterling calls an "involuntary park"—an accidental nature preserve now bristling with wild fruit, boar, wolves, deer, lynx, beavers, elk, bears, even a herd of rare Mongolian horses.

We undertook the twenty-five-mile journey in the Zone on foot.

Milky skins of birch had herded us, single-file, into the unknown. Night pressed in as we waded through the soft sand of the trail, stumbling over unseen patches of grass. The forest canopy inter- wove over the path in places, blocking out what little assurance the stars offered. I progressed almost wholly by the swishing sound of Aram's trousers in front of me, aurally measuring pace and direction, supplemented by ghostly images I wasn't sure I could trust. Branches smacked and scraped our arms and legs. Clearings would periodically open where I could just make out Kirill's tall silhouette stroking tall grass, his infrared headlamp a bobbing beacon among pulsing green fireflies. Negotiating space with little visual reference was a skill I suppose most people lost with the invention of electric lighting. Despite having spent a decade as an urban explorer sneaking around in dark corners of cities, it had really never occurred to me to go hiking in the wilderness at night without a light.

On the other side of the Uzh River, Kirill flipped on his dosimeter, which measured the biological risk of exposure to radiation, for the first time. He showed us that the reading was a relatively negligible 12 millisieverts (mSv)—about twice the exposure the average American soaks up in a year, most of which is accumulated during medical procedures. The leap of faith we'd taken by crossing into the Zone was that we had the right genes and would be subjected to low enough doses of radiation that we wouldn't develop cancer. But of course, even with science beeping assurance at us, we were confronting the unknown minute by minute. We did by choice what everyone might one day have to do by necessity, should great disaster strike.



A view of a hotel at the Chernobyl exclusion zone in the abandoned city of Pripyat.

SOPA Images/Getty

We slept in the abandoned houses of evacuated residents, climbing in through empty window frames and clearing broken glass and debris from the floor in rooms filled with splintered furniture and rusting box springs with tattered yellow fabric hanging from them. We rolled sleeping bags out onto black garbage bags laid over an ominous patina of dust I imagined was deadly. The background reading showed only 15 mSv, but it was impossible not to coat your hands in the stuff. And washing them wasn't an option. Water was too precious.

The days of walking were dominated by private struggles—adjusting to the weight of a heavy pack, kicking free of vines, rubbing at sweaty nettle burns. Fruit dropped from trees in irregular thuds as we passed them. The Zone felt dangerously fecund, wild and overripe.

Taking a break near an apple tree, Kirill plucked one and ate it greedily. “Delicious! A little radiation is good for you!” He smiled at us through blue gums.

Kirill Stepanets had the mannerisms of someone who—at twenty-eight—had spent a great deal of time alone. A lithe machine trapped in a soft body, with boundless stamina and appetite—for dense bread, sweets, rehydrated fare, chocolate, cans of raw corn, and whatever else was at hand. When you live out of a backpack in an irradiated landscape for most of the year, you make do. In his perpetually smudged, delicate frameless glasses, he was the only person in the group without hiking boots. Instead, he wore floppy, filthy faux Adidas. He paired camouflage pants with a snow-white tank top that screamed from the forest. His army backpack was often draped with a lime-green sweater. With a sitting pad strapped to it and the sweater arms dangling, the backpack looked like a modern-day totemic standard, leading us to our doom.

Kirill navigated us through dozens of kilometers without ever referring to a map, phone, or GPS, while clearing spiderwebs from our path with a stick, waving it like he was casting a spell. He would periodically stop and point out a feature: a depression in the tall grass where a giant boar had slept, wolf shit with hair in it, or a distant moose mating call. At other moments, he seemed to use superhuman senses to navigate us over areas where police patrolled. He heard the sound of rubber on tarmac long before anyone else, a critical skill cultivated during more than a hundred illegal visits into The Zone.

As we crossed the threshold from the eighteen-mile Exclusion Zone into the six-mile Exclusion Zone, where we anticlimactically stepped over a downed barbed-wire fence, Darmon told us about new techniques being developed to hasten the radioactive waste cleanup.

“Mycologists found that some fungi actually absorb radiation,” he said. “The research is still in its early days, but if that’s true, maybe someday we’ll develop spore bombs full of mycelium that can be shot into radioactive danger zones by autonomous vehicles. Let the fungus do its job, scrape it off, then ship it to safe storage.” Mushrooms were among the first organisms to return to the Hiroshima blast zone as well.

“It seems more realistic than some technical solutions,” Aram said. “Mushroom bombs are about as analog as it gets.”

“It’s worth a try. That reactor’s going to be dangerous for more than ten thousand years,” Darmon replied. “There might be a sarcophagus over Reactor 4 for longer than the pyramids at Giza have existed. That’s a long time to brainstorm alternative solutions. Imagine it . . . the sarcophagus is going to be an ancient structure someday. One of the wonders of the world, a metal tomb taller than the Statue of Liberty. It’s going to fascinate future civilizations. Let’s just hope they remember why it mustn’t be opened.”

Soon we came to the Duga-1 Radar System (also known as the “Russian Woodpecker”): a giant, mysterious antenna array that had emitted a powerful anonymous signal between 1976 and 1989 somehow meant to detect a ballistic missile launch from the United States. It had also had the unfortunate effect of disrupting global radio and television stations during those years, with a pecking sound. This had spawned all sorts of conspiracy theories involving weather—or even mind—control. The five-hundred-foot-high wall of plaited metal seemed to lean against the sky as we approached it. It made disconcerting creaking noises. The others hung back while I crept from tree to tree to get a closer photo of it. When I returned, they were debating various theories about the military object.

“There were going to be twelve reactors in all. Some people believe they were all being built to power the Duga,” Aram was saying.

“Even if it was designed to do more than just detect incoming missiles, maybe those extra functions never worked,” Darmon commented. “At least, that’s what some people reckon . . . There’s a whole conspiracy theory about how the disaster was a cover-up to hide the Duga’s design failures.” Darmon told us about a slightly dubious new documentary that claimed that Vasily Shamshin, the Communist Party bureaucrat who commissioned the Duga, had pressured the head engineer of Reactor 4 to sabotage it, deliberately engineering the crisis as a cover-up.

Kirill was picking his teeth with a dirty fingernail. “I can’t believe you guys don’t want to climb it,” he said, staring up at the tower of metal.

Our next stop was an abandoned rocket base inside a massive bunker with a blast door two stories tall. If the Duga was built to detect a launch, this was the Soviet surface-to-air response system. Stalkers had been camping inside the bunker, evidenced by the tagging on the walls from various groups including “Dark Stalk” and “Geo Stalk.” Waving the dosimeter over the remains of a recent fire, it pinged at 1,500 mSv.

“Those idiots committed suicide burning radioactive wood here last night,” Kirill said. The dosimeter’s alarm would not stop going off, so he eventually took out the batteries.

Thousands of dark tourists every year fly to the Ukraine and pay to tramp around the site. Their numbers only grew after the Fukushima meltdown in 2011, almost exactly twenty-five years later, the only other Category 7 nuclear disaster in human history. In 2017, fifty thousand tourists entered the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone on official tours. Each of them forked over good money for a satisfying illusion of freedom. Many of them swanned around staged sets of the tragedy set up by guides and photographers who’d preceded them, thinking they were snapping photos of the “untouched” remains of the evacuation.

The photographer Andy Day, a friend who was meant to join us on this excursion, had taken one of these tours previously and felt that the overwhelming drive to see the place dovetailed with the doomsday fantasies of preppers. He wrote that we all “harbour a secret desire for our own apocalypse. . . . Quietly we crave a future where man’s capacity for self-sabotage undermines this regime, bringing both liberation and destruction, finally providing that conclusive, fundamentally authentic and terminal experience that creates the ultimate story and, fatally, allows us to know truly who we are. With apocalypse comes meaning.”

Meaning at Chernobyl is more than a reflection on the disaster lurking in the fragility of our creations. Cosmological and scriptural references were seemingly fulfilled by the explosion of Reactor No. 4. The word “disaster,” originating in the Greek for “bad star,” comes from an imagining of an astrological calamity triggered by the position of planets, not unlike Robert Vicino’s nefarious Planet X. A supernova, or exploding star, within fifty light-years of Earth could saturate us with radiation, just as the explosion of No. 4 did. In fact, the word “Chernobyl,” translated from Ukrainian, means “wormwood”—this is also the name of a star prophesied to fall to Earth in the Book of Revelation (8:10–11), poisoning a third of the Earth’s fresh water.

And then there are the science-fiction-come-to-life prophecies. In 1972, almost fifteen years before the disaster, the Russian Strugatsky Brothers wrote *Roadside Picnic*, a sci-fi novel in which an ambiguous disaster creates “The Zone.” In the novel, The Zone is a ruined landscape patrolled by armed guards around a secure

perimeter filled with weirdly mutated, if not alien, creatures, and magical, often deadly, artifacts—including one which will apparently grant wishes to whoever finds it at the center of The Zone.

According to Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker*, adapted from *Roadside Picnic* and made less than a decade before the Chernobyl explosion, the magical artifact at the center of The Zone is located in "Bunker Four." Reactor No. 4 is now the epicenter of the sixteen-hundred-square-mile Zone of Alienation, and at the center of Reactor No. 4 stands the Elephant's Foot, the solid mass of corium nuclear fuel that has been melting since 1986. In the film, one of the Stalkers has a dream in which that sixth seal from the Book of Revelation is read out. The Stalkers themselves are apocalypse fantasy characters come to life. One of the Stalkers in the book, who meets a grisly end by backing into a spiderweb, is named Kirill. Living out these fictions on the ground was, by far, the most surreal experience I'd ever had. As was the later realization that the paranoia about contaminated surfaces that developed on our journey through the Exclusion Zone had trained me well for the future global disaster that awaited us: the COVID-19 pandemic. Radiation and viruses are cousins in disaster.

After sunset, we'd make the final push into Pripjat. The only viable path to do so was down the central road, through the highly irradiated Red Forest. Half an orange moon hung over the asphalt. As we tromped, we got our first glance of the sarcophagus, a pulsing red speck on the horizon.

Three times Kirill sent us into the woods—twigs scraping our limbs and faces—as vehicles passed by. The first was a truck heading toward the reactor, the second was the police, and the third, he reckoned, was an illegal logger. During this third dodge, in an unfortunate area of the Red Forest, he estimated we sopped up 500 mSv apiece.

As we entered Pripjat, gorgeous specimens of Soviet modernist architecture with zigzagging exterior concrete stairwells emerged like exoplanetary ruins, slowly replacing the clusters of pines. After the terrifying exposure of the central road, the buildings afforded a comforting sense of enclosure. To fully apprehend the empty sprawl of the city, however, we took to the rooftops.

"This has been like a dream," Aram said to no one in particular, as we watched lightning bolts dance around Reactor No. 4 from on top of the abandoned tower, "like walking through a lost civilization, except it's our own." We'd survived traversing the ruins of the future; we'd followed the performance of the bug out to its logical terminus.

Before leaving the Zone, the last thing I saw from the backseat of an SUV driven by a smuggler whom we'd paid to extract us was a giant concrete egg in the middle of an intersection.

"Oh, that," Darmon said, noticing it had caught my eye. "That's the 'Chernobyl Egg.' It's by an artist called Armin Kölbli—he filled it with letters and mementos, sealed inside a radioactive waste storage drum. The egg's not supposed to be cracked until the year

3000."

"A time capsule?" I asked.

"Yeah, like a cocoon waiting for the future," Darmon said as he stared out the window.

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