

S.T.A.L.K.E.R. Shadow of Chernobyl

Chernobyl Diary - the inspiration and the reality

Introduction

The following events are true. They are written here as a precursor to the STALKER experience insofar as our entire Chernobyl journey has affected the game more than anything we could have expected. How were we to gauge the intensity of the feelings that still linger in that place without going there? And how could we then ignore them once we had?

We have permission to access the Chernobyl zone and the promise of a guide. It is March 29, 2002, nearly seventeen years after the world's worst nuclear power accident.

March 29, 2002

09:58

The day does not start well. Approaching the Chernobyl Zone or 'Dityatky' post the expected guide is nowhere to be seen. True, we are two minutes early but memories of a previous, abortive, attempt to make this journey still looms large in our memories and the strange excitement and anticipation of our journey begins to falter. Suddenly this bright sunny day just seems hot.

10:00

There is still nobody to be seen who can help us gain access to the Zone. The Kamaz trucks loaded with waste begin to leave and a soldier checks them over carefully. As everything seems to be leaving this place, only we are trying to get in.

10:12

Every second in this limbo seems to stretch into hours. Dust and heat do nothing to help our comfort as the wait continues. Arranging this visit was difficult enough without the added inconvenience of a delayed schedule.

We are, however, being needlessly pessimistic as a khaki clad woman in her late thirties soon approaches us. Our guide, Rimma, has arrived and the team begin to move towards the first check post.

Our newfound enthusiasm is dented only slightly when the routine document check reveals my own documents have been left at home. Rimma, our guide and lady Stalker somehow manages to convince the administration to let us all through. The Zone awaits.

10:30

We must travel into the Zone in an old Puz minibus. Vehicles travelling in Chernobyl become contaminated with microorganisms and must be discarded when the count becomes too high. As we rattle along the road we learn that such vehicles are stored together to form a sort of vehicle cemetery. It isn't the most reassuring thing in the world to know you are being driven around in a soon to be condemned contaminated bus.

10:45

Our bus approaches an abandoned village. Disused electric pylons lie broken by the roadside and weed-ridden huts sag and shrug upon the landscape. It makes for poignant viewing and seems an excellent place for photographs though we are warned to get into overalls and boots. This area is 'dirty', we are told. 'Dirty' is a term used by locals (if you can be termed as a 'local' in these solitary parts) to indicate areas of radioactive contamination. Grass and plants are particularly dirty and brush off against other objects easily.

As we take our photos it becomes hard not to be affected by the region. All around nature is dismantling the village; one road is completely grassed over – preventing any regular transport from approaching. The sight of a deer prompts Rimma to tell us about the affect the catastrophe has had on the wildlife in the region. Contrary to what one would expect, the wildlife has flourished – not because of the radiation of course but because of the removal of human activity. Boars in particular have flourished owing to their natural resistance to radiation.

However, with our guide's warnings about 'dirty' vegetation still ringing in our ears we take our photos carefully and return to the bus.

11:10

The heat of the day bears down heavily on our close-knit group. Dense woods press in around us and we are told how after the catastrophe, the heavily contaminated 'red' forest nearby was chopped and buried. The effect this had upon the local water table was measurable. The radiation made its way into potable water running underground. If the forest had been left, if nature had been allowed to remedy the situation then this would not have happened.

It further interested us to learn how to detect the symptoms of radiation poisoning in ourselves. Should any of us experience a bitter metallic taste in the mouth then it is advisable to leave the area immediately. Failing to do so will bring on nausea and headaches. It's not something any of us are keen to try out – not even in the name of realism.

Yet there is a lulling calm to this place, like the welcome sleep of a sick man it hides the dangers inherent and tempts you to try eating the large, juicy berries weighing down the bushes. Some workers are reputed to shoot roe deer, hare or boar and eat it (after roasting it thoroughly). It may be harmful but it's tempting.

11:30

When we boarded this bus and were told of its impending fate in the vehicle cemetery it never occurred to us of the scale of such a place. If such a place existed that is. It does.

The vehicle cemetery is an immense graveyard, imposing in its scale and terrifying in its execution. It is as if the entire 20th Century came here to die. Armoured troop carriers, trucks, ambulances, fire engines, buses, excavators, robot bulldozers and even the bloated forms of cargo helicopters have been left here to decay.

Two of us climb a twenty metre tower in order to take scaled shots of the landscape whilst our guide attempts to negotiate full access.

From the top of the tower a large panorama of the cemetery opens up. The rows of vehicles are bones bleaching in the harsh sunlight and the tower on which we balance shifts uneasily in the wind. Returning to the ground seems like a good idea – especially as Rimma is now back from her discussions with the guard.

We have been granted access to the site provided we stick to the pathway and avoid contact with the vehicles. We take our time and soak in the atmosphere of the place. These disused carcasses are the least contaminated as the real problems have been buried deep beneath the surface. Before us, however, are clear lines of history as each decaying husk served its part in cleaning up the Chernobyl catastrophe. The invisible enemy took its toll here in huge numbers. The rescue brigades, firemen and soldiers that drove to the burning reactor that night has left its mark here. Today the sunshine is almost too bright for the cameras but we manage to take some good shots.

As we shoot I remember the television pictures of the robot bulldozers attacking the open reactor with lumps of radioactive graphite. There are memories also of humanoid robots working the scene and falling from the roof as if suicidal.

There are too many memories here.

12:30

After a short while we approach the city of Chernobyl itself. This is 18 kilometres from the plant and there are people living and working here – though not many. At this stage of our journey we must admit ourselves to more checks and further arrangements for the remainder of the journey.

12:45

The checks have been made and we are declared clean. Our journey resumes and the bus carries us closer to the reactor. Along the way we stop to photograph some abandoned barges along the bank of a river. The shift between worlds has begun as nature is ever so slightly warped this close to the affected Zone. The normally ordered structure of the pinecones is now twisted and irregular.

The mood of the group is growing decidedly darker.

13:00

One more check is required before we can gain entry to the ten kilometre zone. We are ushered into the Sanitary Inspection Room where we are examined and issued with special overalls. These have been designed not to allow any ‘dirty’ particles through to skin. Even with all the warnings we have been given it seems that this physical layer of protection is a far greater reminder.

13:10

The radiation warnings are everywhere. This, and the huge empty plains before us give new meaning to the term ‘invisible enemy’. It is strange to look across the landscape now and understand the potential power of radioactivity. Our guide tells us the hill to our right was actually a village covered over in its entirety; silently hidden by the authorities.

13:30

We have arrived at the Chernobyl atomic facility. This is it. This is ground zero. Judging by our silence its presence clearly overwhelms everyone here as we slowly pick our way through the Zone. To our right is a water channel, issuing from the power plant cooling pond. There are fish beneath the calm water and we are told that if we had bread to throw in we would see catfish rise to feed. The fish here are radioactive of course, dangerous to touch and grow to gigantic proportions. The aforementioned catfish can reach three metres in length.

13:50

Our photographic records continue to take shape as we get even closer to the facility. The importance of mapping this region in the greatest possible detail weighs down on us all. The effect this terrible accident has had on so many people deserves the utmost respect and we proceed with care.

14:10

Just three hundred metres from the sarcophagus we stop. This was constructed around the damaged reactor in a measure designed to prevent the spread of radiation. The cracks and holes are beginning to show and there are measures being taken to rebuild.

We don't stay long here as the radiation count is up to 1000 microrentgen per hour. Besides, we have a great deal of work to at our next stop: the city of Prypjat'.

15:10

This is Prypjat', city of Stalkers. Before its evacuation fifty thousand people lived and worked here. Now it is empty.

Many residents tried to stay on here after the catastrophe and it took several months for them to be found and evacuated. Even knowing the danger they wanted to remain in their homes. Once they left, however, the city died. It is difficult to imagine this place returning to life. Moving the 'dirt' and contaminated objects into special cemeteries couldn't take away the deeper plight this place now suffers from.

Prypjat' has been thoroughly gutted. Every wall, ceiling and surface has been cleaned and the floors opened so that what remains is a physical as well as spiritual shell. The entrance to the city is guarded but we were allowed in to stand surrounded by silence.

Silence. Prior to this none of us could have comprehended the meaning of silence in a city. It is altogether different from the absence of sound in the countryside. Our knowledge and respect for this place gives it a weight few places on earth could match. We plan to reproduce this eerie atmosphere even down to the subtle chirping of birds that are nowhere to be seen. Wolves and boars live here now and we take care as we stalk the streets. Rimma, our guide, tells us how she once encountered two one and a half metre boars. The fear gripped her but she kept her senses about her long enough to make a non-aggressive retreat from the building.

15:30

The nuclear spring is in evidence around us. Weeds are in advance again after the winter, pushing their way through every road and wall. Trees grow where they want, no longer held back by human design and windows have long since been shattered by whatever plant life is hardy enough to survive this environment.

15:35

There is wrecked furniture in every dilapidated building. Signs of what life was like before the evacuation are also clearly visible. We enter the house of amenity services where, even the day after the explosion, parents and children enjoyed ice creams and drinks. Life in these places seems to have been abandoned in full flow. You almost expect to hear the sounds of a television in one of the rooms but of course sound is a stranger here.

15:45

Our next stop in Prypjat' is the local stadium. Construction had only just been completed when catastrophe struck but now the pitch is covered in trees. The seating is blackened and covered in moss. A child's doll lies on one bench, her arms missing - a photographer's attempt to impose some kind of symbolism on the place. It seems unnecessary to set anything up here. Even the moss soaks up radiation.

15:55

In the nearby sports complex is a swimming pool, empty of course and gripping in its domination of the hall. It is a vast, sculptured hole filled with light splintered by the broken windows above. Our time is running out but we linger a while longer to photograph the basketball court and the dressing rooms.

16:10

Our bus takes us to the children's playground where we are warned not to touch the small, electrically powered dodge 'em cars. They are too 'dirty' but for some

reason have not been taken to the vehicle cemetery. They would make an unusual sight alongside the bulldozers and helicopters that's for sure.

16:15

No one wants to stop the work but everyone is getting tired and hungry. My head begins to hurt and I worry whether this is down to radiation or fatigue. It is easy to succumb to the drama of our surroundings but the pain is real.

16:20

In the library we witness a mess of books and unrolled tape. Either somebody was in a rush for answers or the wild animals have been in here. It's an impressive sight that seems more attached to the reality we are familiar with. Maybe it is the great paintings that still grace the walls or maybe we are just used to libraries being this quiet. From the balcony we manage to photograph a panorama of the square and the 'Polissya' hotel.

16:30

Our final stop of the day, and of the journey, is a delicatessen. Thankfully no food lies rotting in the grates and basins as the shop is dark and grim. Poor lighting picks its way across peeling paint and unkempt surfaces. Moving through the room we make our way out to the back alley and into a neighbouring street whose buildings still bear the names of one-time tenants. This is Lenin Avenue and is as neglected and abandoned as the rest of the city.

The day has taken its toll on our small group. We started out eager adventurers. Keen to experience the devastation of Chernobyl. What we found was more than we anticipated. If all we do is represent the truth then the reality of this region will make its way into every facet of our work. There is little need to embellish what we find. Though we leave this city and this entire Zone in good health and free from any effects of the radiation we will all, I think, be marked by its legacy.