Chernobyl & radiation: Is it safe to visit?

For those around at the time and conscious of world events, the images from the 1986 nuclear disaster in the Ukrainian city of Chernobyl are just as memorable as the Challenger Space Disaster and 9/11.

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The catastrophe was caused by an explosive meltdown due to an extreme power spike, and saw over 350,400 people evacuated from severely contaminated areas of Ukraine, Belarus and Russia.

Today, Chernobyl and its surrounds are a ghost town, with only a few thousands souls brave enough to continue to live in the affected areas, which still suffer from extensive levels of radiation.

But it’s this very spookiness that has drawn some travellers to Ukraine to witness its breathtaking desolation.

Some readers might remember the photo-documentation of the area by Ukrainian photographer Elena Filatova. Her website, Kidd Of Speed, showed the eerie, apocalyptic landscape of post fall-out Chernobyl.
It’s not surprising that Elena’s photographs sparked interest in the region- but now that people want to go back to Chernobyl to see what has been left behind, and considering the dangers posed by the fallout, is it really worth the risk?

Is it safe to go to Chernobyl?

The Ukrainian government has permitted entry into the surrounding areas of Chernobyl, but with strict conditions.

To enter the 30km exclusion zone, you will need a day pass to enter- which can be obtained from several tour operators that have been established.

Certain areas, such as the “machine cemetery” of Rossokha village, are forbidden to enter under government restrictions. Obviously, areas marked as radioactive or forbidden entry zones are exactly that. You should stay well away from them- lest you wish to end up another Chernobyl statistic.

Basically, to go into the exclusion zone without either a) a tour operator or b) being a qualified nuclear fallout expert with your own equipment, is attempting suicide. The environment in relation to radiation levels in certain areas is extremely dynamic, and without proper measurement, you could be exposing yourself to deadly material.

Radiation is measured in siverts, and during a Chernobyl tour, the levels of exposure can range from 130 to 2610 microsieverts p/h which is similar to the radiation we would be exposed to on a long haul plane flight.

A lethal dose of radiation is in the vicinity of 3-5 sieverts in an hour period. Outside of a tour, it’s impossible to gauge how much radiation you are being exposed to without professional equipment. Also, exposure to higher levels of radiation puts you at higher risk of having particles remain on your clothes. Sustained exposure to radiation is the greatest cause of contamination.

Another point to keep in mind, many of the abandoned buildings are covered in broken glass and debris, and the floor surfaces can be highly unstable. If you choose to travel inside the exclusion zone, make sure you wear rugged and protective covering, and keep your bare skin to a minimum.