How can I visit Chernobyl, and is it safe?

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Can there be a more unlikely location for visitors than the corner of Ukraine that was the site of one of the most notorious and disturbing incidents ever to cast a shadow across our planet? Cast your mind back, if you will – and if you are of a suitable age to remember – to the bleakness of the east European spring three decades ago, and ask yourself: Could you ever imagine that the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant would be a tourist destination?

This was certainly not a question that anybody was asking on April 26 1986 – or in the weeks that followed the explosion in Reactor Four, on the outskirts of the city of Pripyat, in the encrypted spaces of the Soviet Union. This was not a location that the rest of the globe had thought about at length – even now, its sits on the edge of the known Europe, 100 miles north of the Ukrainian capital Kiev, but only six miles south of the border with outsider state Belarus – and yet the news travelled fast. Or, at least, it did once the story was out. The secret did not break beyond the Iron Curtain until, on the morning of April 28, some 50 hours after the accident, radioactive particles were detected at Forsmark Nuclear Power Plant in Sweden (near Stockholm on the east coast), 680 miles from the disaster zone – and the realisation dawned that something dark had happened in the East.

These alarming tidings were accompanied by a toxic cloud which, by now, was seeping across the continent. Belarus suffered the worst of its effects – poisonous rain; damage to plants and crops; in some cases, the birth of mutated animals – but the impact was also felt in Scandinavia, Switzerland, Greece, Italy, France and the UK. Newspaper features gasped, headlines fretted – as the nuclear age sent its deformed chickens home to roost.

That "only" 31 people were killed directly – mostly staff who were in the immediate vicinity, or the brave souls who effectively sacrificed themselves in the battle to encase the bleeding reactor in concrete – has created the impression that, for all its notoriety and its pan-European aftermath, the Chernobyl Disaster was largely a localised affair. A more chilling
figure is 400 – the number of times more radioactive material that was released into the atmosphere on that inauspicious April night than by the bombing of Hiroshima. Chernobyl was a moment when humanity considered the prospect of its own extinction.

And yet, fast forward 30 years, and the heart of the panic has become a hotspot for men and women with cameras and selfie-sticks. More than 10,000 tourists now explore the disaster site every year, snapping photos at the stricken power plant, and wandering the empty streets of Pripyat – which was evacuated on April 27 1986 (far too late in terms of the health of its citizens), and has lain abandoned ever since.

Visitors are screened before they enter the Exclusion Zone – the restricted space, 19 miles in radius, which surrounds the blast area. They are told not to sit down, or touch items within this cordon – and are checked for radioactive particles when they leave again. But the tour operators – mainly based in Kiev – who run trips to Chernobyl, insist that the site is safe to see, and even offer overnight stays at a hotel which has been freshly built to house these holidaymakers.

Should you consider following in their footsteps as this sorrowful birthday arrives? There are two points to think about. One is your safety in Ukraine – which is a less dangerous place to visit at present than news bulletins might hint. This vast country might be at war with its neighbour (even if Vladimir Putin will not acknowledge Russia’s involvement with the nominally civil conflict in the east of the state), but Kiev, a full 450 miles north-west of troubled Donetsk, is not in the line of fire. Current Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) advice says that "the situation in Kiev and western cities is generally calm."

Then there is the issue of your safety at Chernobyl – where the waters are murkier. Local tour companies insist that, after 30 years, the site is safe to visit. By contrast, Ukrainian officials have suggested that Pripyat will not be inhabitable for another 20,000 years. The crews which maintain the concrete sarcophagus that keeps the exploded reactor in check work strictly monitored five-hour days over the course of a month, then take 15 days off. Whether or not you consider any possible impact on your health to be worth the risk of proximity will depend on how much you want to see a place that has become not just a time capsule but a remnant of the Cold War era beyond the scope of anything that can be created in a museum. Simply, Chernobyl is 1986, in all its suspicion, frisson and atomic fear. Wander the dead streets of Pripyat and you are entering the realm which caused Bonn, Washington DC and London to gnaw their fingernails – still in thrall to Lenin and the ghosts of 1917. It is all still there in its rusted swimming pools and dusty gymnasium; in the giant ferris wheel which has become a symbol of the disaster – a motionless circle which was never permitted to turn. The amusement park of which it is the most visible ride was due to open four days after the explosion. It has never welcomed a paying guest.

Add in the fact that the east European forest has reasserted its authority and you have a location to fascinate. Unchecked by man’s hand in 30 years, the trees have begun to reclaim Chernobyl. Wildlife skitters and darts in the shelter they provide. Wolves, lynx and brown bears have returned to the area, finding it blissfully free of human footprints.

Intrigued? It is not difficult – if you wish to place caution to one side – to book a guided visit. Chornobyl Tour (0038 44 221 1986; chernobyl-tour.com) offers a potted one-day foray to
both the power plant and Pripyat (from US$89/£62 a head) – as well as detailed five-day itineraries (from US$519/£361 per person) for those who want to view the site and its sad tale in depth. Welcome To Chernobyl (00421 902 654 876; chernobylwel.com) specialises in two-day trips which stay overnight (from £240). All tours leave from Kiev.

If this feels a little like strolling blithely into a lion’s mouth, you can find a compromise of sorts in the Ukrainian capital. The Ukrainian National Chornobyl Museum (0038 44 482 5627; chornobylmuseum.kiev.ua; 10 Ukrainian hryvnia/27p) charts what it describes as “the most severe radio-ecological disaster of the 20th century” – and does so via exhibits which are both unnerving (gas masks; images of deformed animals) and moving (the corridor of name-signs for villages around the plant which were all but deleted from the map when Reactor Four burst is a reminder of how many Ukrainians were displaced).

Is visiting Chernobyl like staring at a car crash from the opposite side of the motorway? Perhaps. But, 30 years on from a catastrophe which, until the Japanese earthquake and tsunami of 2011 triggered a similar situation at Fukushima, was without comparison, Ukraine’s northern frontier still casts a sickly light to which the curious may be drawn.

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