

Transcript of Podcast 074: Chernobyl

{Intro:

JANE: We rounded off our visit with lunch in the staff canteen right next to the power station, which was a surreal experience, then it was time to leave, just time to purchase a glow-in-the-dark Chernobyl fridge magnet.

}

{intro music - jaunty, bouncy}

{Intro standard announcement:

Hello. Thank you for tuning in. You're listening to Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure, a podcast looking at unfamiliar places across the world, and aspects of travelling you may never have thought of. I'm your host, The Barefoot Backpacker, a middle-aged Enby with a passion for offbeat travel, history, culture, and the why's behind travel itself. So join me as we venture ... beyond the brochure.}

{Music fades. Podcast begins}

Hello :)

Right. Housekeeping. Important. My time in Glasgow is, barring nuclear meltdown, coming to a possibly temporary end. For many reasons, not all of which are to do with anything in my own life or circumstances, I'm moving to Manchester the middle of next month. It's going to be a complete change of vibe, lifestyle, and livelihood, mainly because I'm once again going to be living in the same apartment as someone else. And by someone else, long-time listeners will know there's arguably only one person I know in my life who's got the wherewithal to cope with me being close by, and this time she's going to make it last longer than two months. Otherwise I'm stuck in an even more expensive flat than I am now, in an urban area I have less vibe with. No pressure.

Ha. Yeh, there's a number of reasons for the move to be honest; for me the main two are a combination of convenience and accountability. I really like it here in Glasgow; it's quite green (like, Queen's Park is a few minutes away and I've been wandering round it early doors a couple of mornings a week with my backpack and listening to podcasts), it's a very chill place, and, you know, it's a short stagger for me to get to both a craft beer shop/bar and a Greggs. And supermarkets don't close at 4pm on Sundays, because we're less stuck in the 1800s up here. And lots of other things and reasons that make Scotland culturally and socially more on my wavelength than England. And where I'm moving to, uhm, let's be honest, it's less than pretty.

Buuuut. With regard to convenience, remember that as a Travel Podcaster, there's fewer opportunities to meet with brands and organisations and, indeed, other travel podcasters and the rest of the community up here. Most of the get-togethers are in London, and those that aren't, they tend to never go much further north than Manchester or Leeds, and even they are a good 3½-4½ hours away by train or coach, whereas from Manchester, even the London events won't be much more than 2½ hours away, so it makes it a lot easier for me to, well, socialise. Also, within an hour of Manchester Piccadilly, there's pretty much the same number of people as in the whole of Scotland. Including possibly my mother. Shame I can't drive. And where I'm moving to is very central, like, I can walk to Manchester's Arndale Shopping Centre in less than ten minutes, which ... I mean Shawlands is very nice and convenient but that's a freakin' city centre right there, with all that entails. Things may be slightly further, but I already know there's a brewpub, not just a craft beer shop, but an actual brewhouse, about one kilometre away, and that surely counts for something. And my nearest Parkrun's starting point is a mile away, rather than the kilometre it is now, so slightly further but still not two buses away like when I lived in Kirkby-in-Ashfield (or Sheffield, tho the latter was my choice). I've no idea if that Parkrun's suitable for barefoot running, mind, because I've never been there. "Good Quality Paths" says the blurb. Not that I'm running much at the moment anyway, but you get the idea.

As for accountability, having someone there who can mentally push me to socialise, to write, to keep fitter, will be a great benefit, because it's so easy to just lounge back into 'meh I don't feel like doing this today' mode if I don't have that external push (as y'all know, I find it difficult to push myself internally). It also means going straight into somewhere where I already know someone. As it happens I know quite a few people in the Manchester area (more than I knew even in the Nottinghamshire area despite living there for 14 or so years!, never mind Glasgow), so that'll also help. I've also started to make connections for other hobbies, mainly on

Discord, oddly, well I need a social media change if Twitter becomes completely unusable or empty in the near future, but having Laura around will help me more for that. And, regarding my personal identity, it appears Manchester is used to people like me, who don't conform to many societal norms, so that's good to know.

Anyway. I've been taking advantage of my last few weeks in the area, and some 'it's not actually raining' weather to keep on my walks around the Greater Glasgow area. Last week for instance, I headed up to Cumbernauld, because I'd never been and one of my travel tweeps said she'd changed trains there a few months back and was curious to know what it was like. I have now been there. Then, on Saturday, I ventured back into Inverclyde to see if I could get to a peculiar railway station. Called IBM Halt, or later simply IBM, it serves, or served, the Spango Valley Business Park, just south of Greenock, and is, or was, one of those special-purpose railway stations that serve a specific entity rather than a town centre or residential area. There's a handful of similar stations around the country, including Lymstone Commando (in Devon) that serves a Royal Marine training centre, and Stanlow and Thornton (in Cheshire), which serves an oil refinery. Public access to these stations is technically possible but generally unlikely since there's no actual reason to, and the access paths or roads are generally within the confines of the complex they serve. IBM Halt, named because the Business Park was mostly an IBM centre, is a little unusual though, and not just because for some of its life its existence wasn't even acknowledged in timetables or station announcements. Throughout the 2010s IBM slowly moved out and while new businesses moved in, slowly less and less of the complex was being used. Indeed the entire business park had been demolished by late summer 2020. Meanwhile due to falling passenger numbers, and increased levels of vandalism, Scotrail stopped serving it in December 2018. They didn't close it, so it's technically still an open station, but no train stops there now, neither scheduled or unscheduled. I did manage to reach it; the business park is now a derelict mess of broken concrete, cut-through chicken-wire fencing, generic rubble, and metal shards. I was not barefoot on this urbex adventure, you may be relieved to know. There's three roads in to the business park itself (it's quite a long space); all three are blocked off with a mound of rubble to prevent cars going through, and one of them has a huge locked metal gate, preventing access. Or would prevent access if someone hadn't cut the wire fence next to the gate. Inside the complex you can clearly see where the buildings once stood - the foundations and layouts would make the whole thing look from above a bit like a floor plan. The roads are mostly obviously laid out, and some of the car parking still has the delineations painted on the tarmac. In fact, the hardest part was finding a way to get to the station, no signposts, no obvious access point, no maps, but I made it to the bridge (down a weird forest road covered in what might have been slate, which came off the main station car park and looked for all the world like it just went to a farm. Which, to be fair, it does), and looked out over it. It's a single platform, still in pretty good nick, but access to it specifically has been fenced off. It's going to need a lot of renovation if they ever reopen it.

You might be sat there wondering, hey BB, why are you talking at so much length about a derelict business park in Scotland? Well, given the subject of this pod, if you're interested in abandoned places and urban exploration, it's proof you don't have to always find the site of an ecological disaster to do so. Though, for legal reasons, I ought to say I'm not influencing nor recommending you do this. Especially in a country that is not your own. Just because Spango Valley doesn't seem to have security patrols doesn't mean everywhere is equally as simple to access.

I am not a role model.

-- {section separation jingle} --

Anyway. This podcast episode is all about Chernobyl. It's an episode I've had pencilled in to do for quite some time, if in part because I went there in 2014, and never wrote anything about my visit at the time so I felt I ought to, you know, get round to it at some point. I even mentioned this in a podcast I did last year, *Back In The USSR*. Didn't do it then either, because, and I quote, *I think if I did it would make the pod much longer than I'd intended. In any case it probably deserves its own discussion.* I guess this is that discussion.

Now I'm sure y'all know about Chernobyl. It's one of those places and events that's become significant in culture as well as history, like Pearl Harbor; even if you don't know the precise details you know the basics and the significance, regardless of how old you are or where you live. But just in case you need a refresher ...

Chernobyl, the name coming from an old Slavic language 'chorny' (black) and 'byl' (grass) and meaning, not at all ominously but conspiracy theorists will theorise, 'wormwood', which in normal people's everyday life is more commonly associated with absinthe rather than falling stars or angels turning a third of the world's water bitter and green. Though, again, absinthe does fit that bill. In this case, it's a town, and previously a Rayon (the Soviet

and post-Soviet admin level roughly analogous to a district, which makes Chernobyl City, with a population of about 14,000, analogous to, and half the size of, my old hometown of Kirkby-In-Ashfield, capital of Ashfield Borough).

Anyway. It's a mostly forested region near the Dnieper River, slightly 'out of the way' (90km north of Kyiv in a straight line, a signpost at the 10km exclusion zone says by road it's 131km) border region with, what was at the time, the Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). The area has been definitively populated since the end of the 12th Century, but its location was seen as ideal for construction of a nuclear power station in 1972, the first such in what was then the Ukrainian SSR; near a river, easy to get to by land, yet far enough away from major population centres like Kyiv for there ... to belay the fears of a minority of people who insisted that a nuclear power plant wasn't what you wanted directly on your doorstep, because even though nuclear power is perfectly safe and nothing can go wrong with it, some people are just insistent and even in the Soviet Union, sometimes the government listens. Or something.

And nothing did go wrong, until late April 1986. Actually, that's a lie. At least two incidents had occurred at the power plant earlier in the 1980s, unreported at the time and largely ignored by those few who knew about them. And while both are reported to have resulted in the release of a noteworthy amount of radioactive material, the powers-that-be seemed to think that either nothing else would go wrong, or, that if it did, they'd be able to manage it as easily as they'd managed these two. Ah, the naivety of humanity.

Anyway. When it went wrong, it certainly went wrong. In late April 1986, one of the reactors, number four, exploded after a critical meltdown, caused because of user error during, of all things, a safety test, followed by a whole series of preventable occurrences, any one of which not happening would have stopped it there and then, leading only to a minor incident, a hushed disciplinary, prevented the USSR from disintegrating five years later, and causing this podcast episode to have been about something mundane like, I don't know, Dead Railway Stations or Hiking Barefoot In West Germany, or the Rwandan Genocide or something.

The timeline of the explosion and the immediate aftermath is deserving of an episode of its own, though it's far beyond my scope. The BBC World Service did one though if you're interested. indeed I'm certain there must be a podcast all about Chernobyl specifically, and by that I don't necessarily mean the one connected with the recent TV miniseries on HBO.

There are a couple of important things to point out about the timeline and events though, and this says something about human nature to never admit that things have gone wrong, or that someone's made a boo-boo, especially if that someone happens to be you (though the actual users who erred in the safety test would not have been called in for their disciplinary afterwards, for ... sadly obvious reasons).

Firstly, the explosion took place on 26 April 1986, a Saturday, at a local time of 01:23am. Most people in nearby Pripyat were asleep, and didn't notice anything was amiss until many fell quite ill later that day. The fires at reactor 4 spread to reactor 3, whose roof had been built with a combustible material. Presumably because it was cheap, and who'd've thought nuclear reactors would catch fire. These fires were put out by the local fire brigade (many of whom died either on the day, or within a couple of weeks, from radiation-related effects) by 5am, but note that this was also the time that management finally agreed shutting off reactor number 3 was A Good Idea. Yes, what happened was bad, but it could have been twice as bad. As an aside, the fire in the original reactor took around two weeks to burn out fully, all the while burning radioactive material. Also, while there was official denial that any radioactivity had leaked out at all (despite, you know, eye-witness reports that the thing was *glowing* blue at the time), the radiation detectors didn't function accurately. Whether this was because they were badly-configured, or the levels of radiation were so high they couldn't function, is unclear.

It wasn't until the evening of the next day, 27th, that high enough officials in the USSR felt a need to discuss matters, and, after visiting the site, suggested that maaaaaybe they ought to contemplate evacuating Pripyat, just as a precaution, just temporarily, while the metaphorical and literal dust settled. By lunchtime the next day, coaches were on hand to ensure everyone could move and by about 3pm the city was deserted, for what was advertised as being 'about the next three days'.

They never returned, obviously, and over the next couple of days the evacuation area got wider. You might wonder what happened to all these people, by the way, as Pripyat wasn't a small town by any means - at the time of the explosion it had a population of about 50,000 people, which would make it the 13th biggest town in Scotland as of now, larger than Perth and just slightly smaller than Cumbernauld, a New Town of similar period and provenance, although having now been to both I can honestly say that an explosion causing nuclear

fallout could only improve the ambiance of Cumbernauld. It's by no means the worst place I've ever been {cough} Luton {cough}, but it might rank as the ugliest, but anyway. 50,000 people is a lot to just dump on surrounding villages, and as the evacuation was deemed 'temporary' I guess it wasn't ever suggested they move everyone down to Kyiv. In fact they stayed in villages for a couple of years but a New Town was built to the east, called Slavutych (after the local name for the Dnieper River), and people started moving there in October 1988. Interestingly, though connected by a direct rail link to Chernobyl, the line crossed the border with the Byelorussian SSR twice, which was fine at the time since, you know, it'd be like going from New York City to Albany via New Jersey Highway 17 rather than the Taconic State Parkway. But three years later and the breakup of the Soviet Union makes that an international border.

Note also that part of the reason for the delay in evacuating was not just because of a downplaying of the severity but also a reluctance to admit there was a problem at all. Indeed, famously, the world (and by inference the Soviet Public themselves) only found out about it because the Swedish government noticed a couple of days after the explosion - one of their power plants reported higher-than-expected levels of radiation on the 28th April, did a reccy, realised it wasn't coming from their site, worked out it had drifted westwards, and asked the Soviet government nicely if there was a problem. The Soviets said 'niet' obviously, and the Swedes said, 'ah well in that case you won't mind if we raise it with the International Atomic Energy Agency then, at which point the Soviets went ... 'well, funny story actually, ...'

Additionally, and also famously, a series of flights in helicopters took place over the burning reactor to dump as much sand and other radioactivity-absorbing material, in an effort to, if not quench the fire, at least prevent as much radioactivity leaking out as they possibly could. After a fashion, it worked, at least long enough so they could put a hood of concrete and steel on it. This stayed in place until after my visit (they were building its replacement while I was there), when it was replaced with a more modern structure scheduled to last until the mid 2060s. By which time it becomes Somebody Else's Problem.

Despite some of the land being reclaimed by farming in the decades since, much of what became known as the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone (originally all points about 30km from the power plant, but now covering an area of just over 2,500 km², or slightly larger than Dorset). At the entrance to this (still-called) 30km zone there's a checkpoint along the road, making sure everyone who goes in is registered, and legally entitled to, and on leaving, that everyone who entered in that party or group is still with that party or group, and that no-one is sneaking out with any radioactivity on them. I'm not quite sure what happens if you have. While it's beyond my pay grade and responsibility to cast aspersions on the security at the 30km border, it's notable that there are a number of villages inside it which are still populated, despite everyone having been evacuated. I'll mention this more later, but I wonder how many cuttings in the wire fences there are. Or even how much of it is fenced.

There's another zone, a far stricter one, located 10km or thereabouts from the power plant that's much stricter in scope - while there are justifiable reasons to be in the 30km zone (Chernobyl City itself is here, for instance), the 10km zone includes pretty much only the power plant itself and the town of Pripjat, so there's no reason for anyone to be there who isn't either working at the plant, or a tourist on an official group visit.

As to how long the area will take to return to safe levels for human agriculture and housing, although some tentative steps have already been made, including the manufacture of vodka, and excluding those people who returned despite the restrictions, no-one's really quite sure, since we don't have a control cell. Obviously. The Ukrainian government have suggested a few hundred years, while environmental organisations have put a figure of 100 times that. Either way, it won't be in your lifetime.

Pripjat itself was built out of concrete, mainly, and, without maintenance, that tends to have a lifespan of around 100 years, although given the lack of structural integrity (as in, there are trees growing through it, and the place is in a region that gets cold, snowy winters so ice will form, expand, melt, and crack the concrete still further), it's likely many of the buildings will collapse much sooner. Indeed, as you'll hear, some of them are already too dangerous to visit inside.

Even if we did.

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It was a bright, but overcast week in Liverpool, following the explosion at Chernobyl, with occasional rain showers. I know this as I distinctly recall having a PE lesson in the large playground, and sheltering under the canopy of one of the doors in when it started raining, and us all wondering about whether it was acid rain or

not. Future me was aware of the very great differences in environmental problems between radioactivity and dodgy chemicals, however contemporary me was 10 and three quarter years old and was aware of buzzwords but not how they all fitted together.

I don't recall how we knew of what had happened, in the sense I knew it was on the news but I don't remember how the storyline developed. Of course everything in those days that came out the Soviet Union was subject to a layer of 'we have been informed', with added 'people monitoring things are reporting' - obviously this means spies but also places closer who were picking up radio signals from behind the Iron Curtain etc.

Disappointingly for this podcast, apart from the acid rain confusion, I don't seem to remember anything else about the incident at the time. Not because my memory is lacking from that period, but more because ... it was An Adult Thing to worry about and I, as a mere child who had grown up with news reports and documentaries about where, if the Soviets launched their nukes, they would aim for (close to home, this would have been the Stanlow Oil Refinery near Ellesmere Port. Anyway, I was a kid, and I had other things to think of. Primarily - would I manage to fill my Panini football sticker album (spoiler: I did), and how was I going to feel at leaving primary school and go to big school after the summer holidays. Spoiler: badly enough about it to need to be in therapy thirty-five years later.

But back to Chernobyl. While it itself didn't seem to enter my consciousness much as a public event at the time, it did lodge itself in there as an indexable event. By which I mean, it's one of those events that I lived through which I had a reference point for, and which I always remembered having happened years after. This may have been helped by the many charity events and collections that took place both in the immediate aftermath and in the years beyond - I moved to Ashfield in 2005 and even then, in Sutton, there was a charity shop on the main street calling itself 'Chernobyl Children', raising money for people who, by then, would have been having their own children.

And if you start thinking to yourself, surely every event that happens leads you to having the same levels of recall, I'd like to point out I have more memory of Chernobyl than of the 2001 UK General Election. While I don't recall much of the story from the time, I do recall the 'what', in the same way I can remember John Lennon being shot (and JR, but not the pope, nor Ronald Reagan, despite them all happening within a short timeframe), whereas with many stories I don't even remember the headline.

To be fair, the 2001 UK General Election was pretty boring and inconsequential.

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Irrespective of Chernobyl, and my memories of it, I've always had a fascination with what you might call 'dark history'. Visiting places where people had left a stain on the world, mainly; a couple of years earlier I'd been to the Killing Fields in Cambodia; later in 2014 I visited both the newly-independent state of Timor-Leste, and what remained of the Aral Sea in Uzbekistan. I always found it both fascinating and slightly soul-destroying to stand in the spot where something important or catastrophic had happened, not just for reasons of seeing the places for myself but also to get a greater understanding of the context - something it's hard to get from just a history book or a TV documentary.

As for Chernobyl, I never really gave it any thought, mainly because I always assumed it was a place I'd never be able to go. Then, when it became clear that I could *and* that there were tour groups offering the service, it quickly became a 'I need to go here' spot. As you'll already know, I visited while travelling across the westernmost part of the former Soviet Union, in May 2014, on a trip from Bucharest to Vilnius, as detailed in my previous podcast episode, and because it was literally directly in the way, it made sense to go.

Three of my Tweepers who've also been to Chernobyl gave me contributions for this episode and you'll hear them scattered about. But they firstly said why they wanted to go. First up is Helen Matthews, travel writer and Bradt Guide author.

{HELEN: I visited Chernobyl in August 2017. I was a 6th former when the disaster happened in 1986. Later, someone I know hosted children from Chernobyl for holidays. So I was always quite intrigued by Chernobyl, but I think it was seeing some images of the abandoned amusement park that finally spurred me on to see for myself.

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My second contributor is Jane Spurin, who can be found online at [JanesMidlifeJourney](#).

{JANE: I visited Ukraine in October 2019, my last trip before Covid hit. We stayed in Kyiv with a friend who's married to a Ukrainian. I'm a history nerd; I love to visit places where key events in history, events that shaped the world we live in took place, so obviously Chernobyl was right at the top of my bucket list.

I was 19 when the Chernobyl disaster happened; I was at University studying East European Studies. I can remember watching events unfold with horror. Over thirty years later and the area is still pretty much uninhabited, and inside a heavily-guarded 30km exclusion zone. Estimates on when it will be inhabitable again range from 300 to 20,000 years.

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Finally we have Jess Harling, who blogs at [JessTravels](#).

{JESS: The reason I wanted to go, well first of all I wanted to visit Ukraine, I'd heard some really good things, so we spent some time in Kyiv as well, but also I just like to learn about various parts of history that I feel ... you know ... the Chernobyl disaster wasn't covered at school, I think I just learned about ... I dunno, it's one of those things you just know, and you don't know how you know about it; I must have seen a TV documentary about it, and it's just something you know happened, but I kind of wanted more details and it's kind of how I use travel in general; I like to learn about history and cultures by actually visiting the place cos I think there's no better way to learn. So that was my main reasons for going. And then the other reason I suppose is, I have a bit of a fascination with what most people would call probably dark tourist sites, so I find abandoned places just fascinating, and obviously Pripyat's an entire town that's abandoned which you can visit, which normally you don't get an opportunity to do very often.

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I went with an organisation then known as Chernobyl Welcome (branded as ChernobylWel dot com), who have since rebranded as ChernobylX. There were a group of 16 of us in total, mostly, if I recall, people around my age, who'd been alive at the time even if they didn't necessarily remember it. I do recall one chap from Czechia who had a 1960s camera, a bulky thing with film that took only 10 pictures. He'd take a pic with a digital camera, make sure it was right, then take a shot with the film camera. Yes he agreed it was awkward to carry and expensive to use, but he assured us the quality of the final picture was excellent. We never saw if he was right or not, obviously.

They offered a few different tours of varying lengths, from a day trip to a specific trip for photographers; I think that was just under a week. I chose one that was two days, pick-up and drop-off at the main railway station in Kyiv, with one night spent in a hotel in Chernobyl City. I don't now recall much about that hotel, save that we were in twin-bedded rooms (sharing a room! How uncooth!), and it had the vibe of a glorified youth hostel. Beige/brown wall colours and décor, two storeys, a rectangular box. Forgettable, but we weren't there for a hotel exploration. Additionally the road there is quite long and straight, and mostly there's nothing to see but trees, so this is one place where the excursions are definitely the most exciting bits.

There were a number of rules and regulations around the trip, the one that most affected me was that you had to wear closed shoes, long sleeves, and long pants – sandals were banned, never mind bare feet. I'd thought this was down to preventing as much chance of radioactive particles getting onto the skin, and while this might have been true, not long after arriving I realised another reason too – debris and broken glass everywhere.

While I went with an organised tour company, and it wouldn't have occurred to me to do it any other way, Jess had a more intimate and personalised experience. She also points out something important to be conscious of when visiting places like this.

{JESS: I went to Chernobyl in Ukraine in December 2017. I was with my boyfriend at the time, and a friend, and we used a private tour guide who was a young Ukrainian guy, and so it was just us three and the guide, so that was really great and it gave us a lot more flexibility. We stayed one night, so it was two days one night, the tour, so that gave us plenty of time to see all the main highlights.

Something I'd like to note is that obviously when visiting places especially like Pripyat and Chernobyl, I always

have to keep in mind that this is a site of a disaster where people died, and people had to flee their homes at a moment's notice, so there's a lot of pain linked to these places for people, so I do keep that in mind when I visit. So yeh, my brain's kind of torn between wanting to learn about things but also like 'wow, look how nature takes over buildings that's left to decay'; I just find that really interesting.

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Despite what happened here, it may surprise you to know the power plant was still in use in some form until a couple of years ago - it was decommissioned in 2015, the year after my visit, though the other reactors in place had been switched off by 2000. Reactor number 2, incidentally, was shut down due to a fire in 1991; an incident that ended far better than its neighbour.

The explosion took place in reactor number four; while this put one reactor out of action quite terminally, it didn't stop operation of the other reactors even at the time, save for the brief shutdown of number 3 in the immediate aftermath, although as the incident happened under the overview of the Soviet Union, a government notoriously reluctant to tell anyone what was going on, especially its own citizens, the exact operation schedule of, say, reactor number two, at the time, may well never be known. But anyway. Operationally, there was nothing fundamentally wrong with the rest of the power plant (other than, you know, having been blasted with lethal radiation, but since when does that stop The Workers?), so in the medium-term, it was business as usual, Although since all the surrounding towns and villages had been evacuated, one wonders where everyone lives these days,

After the explosion, as part of the clean-up, a 'covering' was placed over the reactor to contain it and prevent further radiation from leaking out. At the time of my visit, this cover was coming to the end of its effective life (a maintenance issue more than anything else), and they were building a more solid and secure 'coat' that would be effective for the better part of the 21st Century. Nine years later and nothing's gone wrong yet, though who knows what the radioactive equivalent of anti-vaxxers that make up an influential part of the Russian state will do.

One thing about power plants in general, and nuclear power plants in particular, is their need for a good supply of water - it's no co-incidence that the major nuclear power plants in the UK (Sellafield, Dounreay, Sizewell, Oldbury?), are by the sea, Chernobyl is very much inland, but it's built next to the Pripyat River, and surrounded by a huge lake. One of the interesting points about this lake is it's filled with catfish. The workers will sit on the quayside and go fishing for them, and there's even a sign - in English - explaining how to feed the catfish. This opens the question of 'would you eat any fish caught in the surrounding waters of a nuclear power plant, especially one in a country whose commitment to health & safety is somewhat dubious'?

You may be pleased to know that the food we ate in the canteen on-site was chicken. Well, I assume it was chicken; that's what it looked like at any rate, Chicken with rice, salad, bread, and juice. The canteen looked exactly like the canteen at any other industrial building - plain and formica, The only difference between it and the average works unit in the UK is the turnstile on entry that's attached to a radioactivity detector, making sure that you yourself are not bringing any contaminated particles or dust into a clean area, Because electrons respect man-made borders, obviously,

Outside the reactor that blew up is a memorial. It's two hands holding what appears to be a cuboidal building, below a bell. It was installed in 2006, on the 20th anniversary of the construction of the original shelter covering for the reactor, and is, like many of the others, dedicated to those who undertook the clean-up of the site after the explosion. They were called the 'liquidators', which brings to mind more a 1960s ska tune than anything else, I'll be honest. Jane had a chilling thought about them on her trip:

{JANE: Another thing I hadn't appreciated was the role of the liquidators in making the plant and ultimately the planet safe. These 600,000 people risked their lives in the fight to secure the plant. It sounds horrific, sending brave young women and men into such a situation, where they were risking their lives, but that's what happens in a war and that's basically what this is. A war against radiation and it's a war that had to be won.

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-- {section separation jingle} --

Whenever anyone thinks of visiting Chernobyl though, it's not the power plant itself that comes first to mind. Rather, it's the pictures and video they've seen of the town covered in trees, where weeds and vines have pushed through the cement roads and pretty much swallowed up the concrete of the tower blocks. And the fairground. It's always the bloody fairground. Conversely, many people may have recognised or associated it from playing too much Call Of Duty 4. Given that we overnighted in Chernobyl City, you may be forgiven for thinking these pictures are from there, and that everything is called Chernobyl. It is not. I'll talk more about that later.

In fact, the main town serving Chernobyl was called Pripyat. Indeed the town itself was built specifically to serve the power plant - which is only a couple of km away. This was generally the way the Soviets designed places - they saw a need for an industry (in this case, energy), built a factory or other industrial complex to take advantage of that need (in this case, a power plant), then built a town to serve that complex (in this case, Pripyat). The Soviet Union is full of towns and cities like this - especially in Siberia and the Russian Far East - places built specifically to harness mining, shipbuilding, space exploration, nuclear warfare, steel-making, pretty much anything which would give them a boost in their rivalry with the West. Unsurprisingly, most of these places were designated 'closed cities' - places completely closed off to foreigners and where even Soviet citizens needed specific permissions to go, generally not officially listed on maps, and given names in 'public' (insomuch as anything public was revealed about them) like Chelyabinsk-40 to obfuscate them even more. If a railway passed through them, there are tales of the train crew closing and securing the blinds, and not making any announcements on the tannoy. Some of them are still closed, incidentally; including Chelyabinsk-40, which is now called Ozyorsk and is a big nuclear weapons site. Good luck if you want to go there. Maybe Google Streetview will help.

You *can* visit Pripyat. Though probably only because a) it's in Ukraine, and b) it blew up.

Incidentally, there seems to be a small belief Pripyat was built in the days immediately before the explosion, and the town had only just been settled when it was evacuated. This is simply not true. However, what does seem to be true is the iconic fairground, of which more later, hadn't been officially opened by the time of the explosion - this was scheduled for the May Day celebrations the following Thursday.

The town itself was founded in early 1970, and there's a sign on the way in that really leans into this period of typographic style. We're not talking a small white sign on a pole here, no, on the way in to Pripyat there's a huge sculptured rendition of its name in a very 1960s/1970s 'futuristic' font - if you look at many posters of the 1960s, especially from the Soviet Bloc, you'll very much strongly get a sense of this futurism. It looks painfully nostalgic now, as future-setting often does.

It's named after the nearby river, whose etymology isn't known with 100% certainty but Wikipedia tells me the dominant explanation is a word meaning, simply, 'tributary' - it flows into the Dnieper, one of the major rivers of Ukraine (and indeed the fourth longest river in Europe, for a given a definition of Europe).

One of the first things you notice about Pripyat and the exclusion zone is that it's not empty. Animals don't acknowledge human boundaries unless there's impenetrable barriers which have completely blocked an area off and which have been present for more than a couple of generations (it's interesting to look at some creatures like deer who, still to this day, don't cross the former route of the Iron Curtain. The area around the Pripyat sign is popular with horses, who gambol on the railway line. I don't know how many trains still use that railway line but they don't seem to care.

Both Helen and Jess, on their visit, got closer to the animals than I did - mainly stray dogs.

{HELEN: We saw lots of feral dogs. They congregate around the power station canteen, where workers, and some visitors, smuggle them food, despite the warning notices to the contrary. We were advised not to pet them, not because they might bite, but just in case they'd been rolling in a radioactive hotspot. We also encountered a semi-tame fox. He;d injured his leg and had been cared for by the checkpoint guards. Our guide held out the geiger counter to make sure he was not radioactive before we were allowed to meet him.

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{JESS: We were told not to pet any of the stray dogs that were around; there were a lot of stray dogs, which I think were quite well fed by the local workers, but we were told don't let them jump up at you, don't pet them,

because the main place where the radiation could be highest is in like the dirt in the ground, and obviously the dogs pick up the dirt on their paws and stuff. But like, some of the dogs were so cute and when would arrive at places they're obviously used to some tourists giving them food, because when we arrived at one of the sites, a dog just jumped right up on me and I was like 'oh for god's sake I can't pet you, like, get away', so that was a strange thing to have to do. I know you shouldn't pet stray dogs anyway, but gosh it's so difficult sometimes isn't it? So that was a strange thing. And you do go through these like radiation detectors as you leave, just in case you're particularly radioactive. Obviously nothing was picked up for me or my friends but.

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The town itself looks exactly as you expect and imagine, having seen the pictures and video. They've not been doctored or photoshopped, I mean maybe they have but they don't really need to have been, and indeed it probably looks even more Pripyatty now than even they show. It's a great control cell in a way to demonstrate what would happen if humans suddenly disappeared from the world, as per that TV series (Life After People).

Even as soon as entering the town in our minivan it was clear this was a truly abandoned place - a long cement road lined with huge trees either side, and which was littered with weeds and trees literally growing through the road surface. And even though it'd only been 30 years since the accident when I went, they well towered above me. At some point they might turn into an air traffic control hazard.

A tour of Pripyat will take you to a number of the buildings. My tour could go *in* a few of them; I don't know how that would be now (other things being equal and Russia not being militaristic), since no-one's doing maintenance of them so they are literally falling down; at some point it will literally no longer be safe to enter them. I mean, when you're in a nuclear fallout zone, safety is the number one priority, right? As a side note, the group had a couple of geiger counters, more for 'oh that's a big number' selfies than anything else.

Although not the first place we went to, I ought to talk about the fairground first, since that's the one spot everyone seems to recognise and associate with Pripyat. Especially the Big Wheel thing. It is just as eerie as you imagine, and I'm kind of surprised the rusted joints haven't snapped yet. The cabins at the top of the wheel are (were!) above the tree-line though even if you could kick-start it, it wouldn't be the best view in Pripyat. The wheel itself definitely looks iconic, stationary yet still clearly identifiable in the trees and the broken cement. The payment kiosk was still present on my visit, though obviously no longer serving any purpose.

Nearby was what remained of the dodgem car stall. While the roof itself had long gone, it was clear to see where it had been as the metal framework that supported it was still in place - no longer protecting the cars from the elements but patiently waiting for a hood to return. What remains of the ceiling is now in broken debris on the weed-covered ground, The dodgem cars themselves are still present, still coloured in vibrant greens and yellows tho this is fading and chipping off. They're all stopped in position, a couple going to the grave in a permanent nose-boop position like all good dodgem cars should be. The steering wheels are present but long-since broken off and lying in the passenger seat like a bad date.

Other fairground rides were equally as derelict, including what remained of a whirligig-type ride, only the bare metal frame once again remaining but clearly identifiable as a place where lunch returns to irk its consumer. On the ground nearby was the remains of a leather boot cast aside on the floor - maybe it had fallen off its owner on one of the more vibrant rides. This is no longer a place to be shoeless though; the debris and broken fixtures & fittings will put paid to that idea. There was also a swing, again just the ghostly outline in steel bone, nothing attached to it any more - what had been there had fallen to the floor and broken apart long ago.

Now, I said about the potential views from the top of the big wheel. *The* best views of Pripyat are from the top of the large tower blocks where everyone lived. I'm almost certain this isn't a view that you can get any more, and to be honest I'm not sure we should have been up there even when we went, but what's health & safety in a nuclear fallout zone in an ex-Soviet republic? [Disclaimer: this is a joke. But, it must be said, one made with the easy-to-fall-into attitude that pervaded much of the Soviet Union].

Helen had the same thoughts about health & safety when she visited:

{HELEN: Nikolai warned us not to step on any moss, as it soaks up radioactivity, demonstrating with a geiger counter which beeped obligingly. Nikolai's job as a guide in the exclusion zone was to keep us safe from radiation, ensuring that we avoided any hotspots in the otherwise safe areas. His attitude to other health & safety issues was, by UK standards, refreshingly relaxed. We picked our way through the abandoned town of

Pripyat through broken glass and up crumbling stairways. So what if the floor had a hole with a tree growing through it? The other side was fine! "I had a couple of visitors fall through a hole in the stage, so we don't go in there any more" Nikolai observed, casually, as we looked into what had once been the auditorium of the theatre.

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The tower blocks themselves are standard-issue for the time and place, and all generally look the same from outside, The only difference is the height - some only rise to five storeys, while others climb above the trees and reach up to the mid-teens. Inside they're all much of a muchness; if you listened to my last episode on The Cathcart Circle, you'll've heard me talk about the tenement blocks in Glasgow. These in Pripyat are a different style, in the sense they tend to be standalone rather than cover an entire street, and considerably less aesthetic being made out of grey concrete rather than red sandstone, but they're fundamentally the same kind of principle - a little basic but pretty comfortable, and all built to the same standard (so everyone lives in the same type of flat, very socialist and utilitarian principles), with two bedrooms, a bathroom, a kitchen, and all mod cons, including bookshelves, cooking facilities, and a TV. There's enough space to not feel cramped, and bear in mind the 'target market' (if such a concept would exist in a planned economy) for these flats would be, generally, a married couple with a kid, a worker and a housewife, and yes probably specifically a house *wife* because this was the 1970s and 1980s and gender expectations were much stronger, yes. Anyway, they'd've had a nice life here, especially as they'd've been transferred here and the idea would have been to make as much nice environment as possible, hence the fairground. Liverpool didn't have a fairground in my youth, and Liverpool's much bigger than Pripyat; the ups and downs of being an Everton supporter don't count.

Anyway. We went into one of the 15 storey blocks, and had a wander through it. It was all looted and quite derelict, with nothing much left of any provenance, In one flat someone had left a shoe - not that there's a pattern here. In another the TV remained, and in a third was a broken and dusty piano, which seemed a bit highbrow for a Soviet worker flat., to be honest; I'd've thought they'd've been more prevalent in the communal areas, There was broken glass everywhere and certainly nothing would have worked even if there'd been power. Not even the lifts - it was better to stay far away from the lift shaft. The remains of a creature, probably a dog, were present in one room - evidently it had wandered up and not been able to get back out. This was presumably some years after the evacuation.

We didn't just wander inside the tower block though; as you heard, we were able to get onto the roof and stand on it, looking out over the city. Now this *was* a view; well above the treeline, the town below looked almost elvish, in the sense there were buildings almost hidden amongst the newly-grown forest. I think the phrase 'nestled quaintly' was created for this very situation, to be honest. And the extent of the forest was clear to see - apart from the power plant itself, and, in the far distance, a weird metallic-frame structure visible on the horizon, all that was visible was green treetops. It must be said there were no guard-rails or anything like that on the rooftop, so standing near the edge was ... not advisable. You may be pleased to know I did not do anything like that. Others may well have done, I have no memory of that.

As befits a town of its size and importance, Pripyat had a number of other buildings that served the community and now lie in ruins. The first one we went to was a large restaurant (and now I'm trying to picture the Cumbernauld Wetherspoons as a tourist attraction in the post-apocalyptic world. Cumbernauld is a very odd place and that might be the subject of a future pod). Anyway. As you will no doubt now be expecting me to say, the place was quite ruinous and debris-stricken. The tables were upturned and broken, having been smashed into the concrete tiling. Much of the infrastructure was still in place and identifiable, even down to the remnants of the overhead signage, though what it had once said is not something I'd be able to tell you.

Other facilities were in similar levels of disrepair; the university had a lecture room that was still identifiable, with terraced pews heading down a slope towards a central stage, although it very much looked as though the roof had literally caved in with how much of it was present on the seating. For some reason there was also a piano present, though whether it worked or not we don't know - this didn't seem the time nor the place to break out into Prokofiev's Second Piano Concerto.

The hospital and doctor surgery still had health posters and opening times on the wall, and doctor's ledgers with information written on them, not too faded even after thirty years. The waiting room still had chairs along the walls, empty, waiting in vain for new patients to sit and be checked up for, I don't know, signs of leukaemia or something. For some reason there was also a rusting bike frame on the floor - maybe one of the last patients had cycled to see a doctor. This was also the place where some medical clothing had remained - nothing more

than a discarded piece of cloth or fabric, but the geiger counters recorded figures that suggested wearing it for more than approximately five minutes would kill you. Evidently radioactivity stays longer in clothing than the natural environment.

Other buildings had scattered paintings of Soviet leaders, copies of Pravda dated to the days around the explosion, broken and empty vending machines whose wares had long since been pilfered - though whether that had been before or after their use-by dates is anyone's guess; I'd suggest their 'best before' dates would have been realistically specifically 'the time of the disaster'. Outside in the streets were the occasional shopping trolleys, long since warped and no longer usable, not even as makeshift dodgems.

We also went into the school - a precarious journey even at the time of my visit and I'd suggest it's probably no longer accessible due to trees and the sheer fragility of the structure. There were many rooms across several floors, but all felt generally the same - murals on the walls, textbooks and exercise books left where they'd fallen, desks littered with the schoolwork children had been working on at the time of the evacuation, still open at the pages they'd been using. Some of the rooms had the remains of educational posters, lesson plans, and even orange chalkboards with whatever the teachers had been talking about still written on them. One room had children's paintings and other art, another pictures of the natural world (mainly animals), a third a 3-dimensional map of the Soviet Union. In amongst the debris too were vinyl records; I'm going to guess they were playtime songs rather than the latest release by Nautilus Pompilius. There was also a large collection of gas masks on the floor of a couple of the rooms; apparently this was a later addition to the mess rather than being relevant to the immediate matters at hand.

Elsewhere in the town were the sports facilities. The stadium was kind of the opposite to that at Cathkin Park, in that here, the terracing was largely clear, if a bit weedy, and you could easily still walk up and down it to find a place to sit, while the pitch was lost in overgrowth. Above part of the terracing, there was still a stone roof in place, providing some shelter for the dignitaries. Outside, the turnstiles were firmly shut but as the fences either side had long since gone, they weren't holding back any crowds desperate to watch a match. What of, I don't know; is tree-climbing a sport?

Nearby was the sports hall, containing a basketball court with hoops still present, but no balls, and the swimming pool - last used by the clean-up brigade I believe (though it may have been used by subsequent staff passing through around the turn of the century). It looked really weird to see an empty pool - specifically to see clearly how the floor slopes down from the shallow to the deep end. It's not a gradual thing here; the shallow end had a flat bottom then it suddenly drops sharply. I avoid swimming pools in general so I don't know if that's common. Still present poolside were the diving board, the timing clock, and the changing rooms, though I doubt any of them would be usable again.

Jane's feelings on seeing Pripjat were more centred on the communist vibe:

{JANE: My first impression on entering the exclusion zone was of time standing still. The accident took place on 26 April, just a few days before the first of May, International Workers Day, which was a big event in the Soviet calendar. You can still see the decorations hanging on the streetlights and around the iconic funfair which was due to open for the first time on May Day.

My second impression was of an era standing still. A Lenin statue takes pride of place in the main street in Chernobyl, and there are plenty of red stars and other remnants of communism, long since disposed of in most of Eastern Europe.

I went to University behind the Iron Curtain in the 1980s, it was a bit like walking into a time warp. I feel a bit like Marty in Back To The Future, except for one major factor: here, nature has regained control. There are trees growing out the middle of buildings, and reclaiming the concrete jungle. In fact, wildlife is in abundance here, in this people-free zone, with lynx, bear, and bison all now living in the zone.

}

Jess' thoughts were affected by the time of year she went.

{JESS:

And then we also visited the nearby town of Pripjat, and that was very eerie and strange to walk around,

especially as it was Winter and we had a little bit of snow, and I think snow affects how sound moves through the air so it was just deadly quiet, which really made it very atmospheric.

}

While Helen had the same feeling as me on how long it'll all last; the best time to visit Pripjat was about eight years ago:

{HELEN: Exploring the town of Pripjat was rather like stepping into episode one of a post-apocalyptic sci-fi serial. Established in 1970 as a home for the workers of the nuclear power complex, with modern amenities and leisure facilities, 30 years after it was completely abandoned, nature is well on its way to reclaiming Pripjat. Shops, apartment buildings, and leisure facilities are slowly decaying. Every year there is less to see.

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It is important, very important in fact, to note that although the town is pretty much a decrepit, derelict, demolished hulk, none of the actual damage was done at the time. Indeed as stated, most of the residents didn't even know anything had happened – this wasn't a Hiroshima-type event causing regional-wide destruction; rather the vast majority of the danger was through invisible radiation, the fires at the plant never reaching much beyond the reactor itself. Rather, the look and feel of the town is caused mostly by the effects of nature reclaiming a town having been abandoned, and a little bit by ongoing looting in the years afterwards. Remember that most of the townspeople left their possessions behind as their evacuation was meant to be temporary, so a good chunk of people's stuff was effectively left in unguarded, empty, properties. So the reason there's very few items of value or use in the town and every building is empty is because in the years after the explosion, people nicked it all.

Each tour apparently takes a slightly different route depending on conditions, and sadly we didn't get to visit the railway station, which I've been informed contains numerous abandoned carriages and wagons, as well as, you know, being a dead railway station, which is something I always approve of. Comparisons with IBM Halt are therefore not possible, though I'd imagine Pripjat's station would be considerably bigger. Instead, however, we got to go to a very different place which probably excited me even more.

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One of the places on our tour was the Chernobyl-2 array, This is a huge piece of metal hidden deep in the forest, and labelled on the maps and the signposts along the way as a Childrens' Home. It's 11km outside Pripjat in a straight line, and down a 7km-ish road through the trees off the main road between Pripjat and Chernobyl City. It really is quite deep in the forest, almost as if they wanted to hide the fact that it wasn't really a Children's Home.

As a side note, you can actually see it, on the horizon, from the top of the tower blocks in Pripjat, so as secret sites go, it's not exactly perfect, especially as back in the day I'd imagine there was less forest cover.

- "Oh, what's that metal frame in the distance that looks like a radiator?"

- "Comrade, that's a children's home"

- "It ... clearly isn't"

- "Are you saying the Party lies? Off to Siberia with you"

It's about 700 metres long and 150 metres high. It's not something you can just sweep under the arboreal carpet.

Anyway. It was never officially revealed at the time what this huge hunk of metal in the forest actually was, although it's clearly not populated by small people. However most people in the West at the time believed it was an over-the-horizon radar array, and this has since been confirmed by the release of Soviet-era documentation.

My knowledge of physics isn't great, it was never a subject I found interesting, but that's what happens when you have the same teacher for four years who dislikes you. As such, I'd suggest doing your own research on what over-the-horizon radar is, and how it works. As far as I can gather though, radar involves firing radio waves into the sky, and if they bounce back, well, you've found yourself an object. Normal radio waves though travel in

straight lines, which means since the Earth is curved, you can only detect something in your line-of-sight, otherwise the wave carries in a straight line into the atmosphere and away. An Over-the-Horizon radar is one that uses simple physics to 'bounce' the radio waves off the sky, thus allowing them to travel much further around the Earth (there's another method using very longwave radio waves along the ground, but this works better at sea so is used for detecting submarines rather than aircraft). Doing this effectively requires large computing power and even larger transmitters and receivers, located close to but still some distance from each other.

In this case, the array at Chernobyl is part of the Duga-1 array ('Duga' meaning 'Arc'), and is the receiver of the two - the transmitter was 57km NE, just north of Slavutych, as it happens.

One of the side-effects of using radio waves in radar is they can be picked up as transmissions on radio sets. The best frequencies for over-the-horizon radar seem to be in the low MHz range, in what's commonly known as 'shortwave radio', similar to those used by amateur and CB radio, and air traffic control. The Duga array's power output was estimated at around 10 MW. This led to an unfortunate side-effect, which affected the Soviets in the same way as the West; it was dubbed 'The Russian Woodpecker'. What was picked up by radio operators was a constant and repetitive 'buzz', at regular intervals (several times a second), similar to how a woodpecker would sound, hence the name. The problem was the signal was strong enough to 'leak' over several frequencies and affect other broadcasts, making that wavelength range virtually unusable, to the extent people manufactured 'woodpecker-proof' radio systems.

In radio culture, the Russian Woodpecker became synonymous with other shortwave broadcasts like Numbers Stations (spies), and other weird radio broadcasts like UZB-76 (The Buzzer), and 'Letter Beacons' of repeating morse code that translate into a letter (eg 'R'). These may nor may not be a way to, essentially, keep that frequency clear (for someone like the Russian military) and ensure no-one else could broadcast on it. I've talked about Numbers Stations and similar before on my pod, in one of those 'it's the pandemic, I don't have anything else to talk about so let's hyperfocus' episodes, but I do find all that kind of thing fascinating; mysterious radio noise and the like. So it was incredibly interesting to visit a site at the centre of that kind of mysterious operation. And, I must say, a pleasant surprise; I didn't know we were going there until we did.

As an aside, it was built where it was, not just because it was in a relatively remote area of the Western Soviet Union, close to The West, surrounded by trees, but also because it was close to the Chernobyl Power Plant. The two came as an item, in a sense, because it's believed about a third of the entire output of the power plant was used by the array.

The site itself was quite well protected. The road to it ends at two sets of huge gates, each embossed with a metallic 5-pointed star of the kind of so beloved of communist aesthetic. One set of gates was very much suffering in the years since abandonment, the other were still quite solid.

At the array are a couple of buildings that wouldn't look out of place in a 1970s ex-Polytechnic. One was large and white, the other quite low-rise and built of orange brick. Both were very cuboid in shape, whose only decoration was a large number of windows. Because obviously anything stylistic is the work of decadence and doesn't meet strict utilitarian standards. To be honest, mind you, sometimes I can see their argument. Outside the buildings are the now-standard series of abandoned vehicles, many quite heavy-duty, all in various states of disrepair and almost certainly undriveable.

Inside the buildings are long, wide, corridors, some of which have had floor collapses so you have to walk along the supports/foundations. The walls are, like everywhere else, pretty damaged with bits falling off everywhere. There's not much light in these buildings as the windows are quite small and often quite distant. The roof seems to be falling down, or at least the insulation is falling through the metallic beams holding it all up. I obviously can't help but wonder about the presence of Asbestos, but one assumes if it were present in dangerous levels, they wouldn't let us in here in the first place, right. Right?

In some of the rooms are pipes and other various metallic objects of unclear provenance, sadly none of which are humming eerily or glowing green, while scattered on the floor are the wrecked remains of electronic equipment, like keyboards, with the circuit boards clearly visible. Worn-out signs in Russian, some slightly faded, may once have told you what everything did, but more likely they were some kind of motivational poster. And by motivational I mean 'Glory to the Motherland', rather than *живи, смейся, люби* (zhivi, smeysya (smee-ay-sa), lyubi). Maybe they're telling you not to touch anything unless authorised. But if there's something you learn from playing video games, it's to go nowhere near any pipes, wires, or unlabelled metal objects.

The main control room still exists and looks like something straight out of a 1970s sci-fi movie, *after* the heroes have blown it up. There's large block cabinets housing control panels, in futuristic grey, covered with switches, buttons, and long-broken LEDs. Instructions still line the walls, urging long-gone operators to initiate the correct sequence lest the missiles be launched. That's probably not true, but who knows what secrets lurk underneath a children's home. The floor is covered in wires, pulled out from their casings and plopped on the floor, while everywhere there's broken pieces of metal, shards, screws, nails, and broken glass, amongst other detritus. Somewhere in here there might still be a live microphone I can use to recreate a numbers station and confuse the heck out of listening radio hams, but I can't find it. What I do find is a weird ... what can be best described as a 1970s space-age diorama, the sort of thing that two parents would make out of cardboard the night before a primary school assembly. It's of the top third of the Earth, a flat-rendered arc, with a progressively darker night sky above it, dotted with stars.

It was fascinating to see somewhere this notable up close, especially given the nature of the site meant for decades it didn't even officially exist, never mind wasn't accessible, and therefore has a very strong sense of mystery and, yes, adventure. In fairness, much of the ex-Soviet Union is a bit like that to me, somewhere just that but out-of-reach that we knew we'd never be able to get to (and the people there would never be able to get to us), which is why places like this hold a special interest for me. It's that feeling of 'this is off-limits', like most abandoned places, but doubly so, because it's an abandoned place that was already impossible to reach, and which had that aura of 'but what's really going on, what's it all about'.

There's almost certainly a whole host of secrets still unrevealed. And maybe that adds to the feelings of adventure.

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While much of the impression of the Chernobyl Disaster concentrates on the town of Pripjat, and with good reason because it was the town specifically built to serve the power plant, there are many other towns and villages around that were affected. One of the most notable was Chernobyl City itself.

Despite its name, it lies a bit further from the power plant, around 15km away. It is, however, much more of a functioning city rather than an accidental nature reserve, and was the site of the hotel we all stayed in for the one night.

Granted there's not much to the town any more, but it serves as the admin centre of the region, the place where tour groups base themselves, and, outside of those tour groups and the workers at the plant itself, the place where you're most likely to see other people.

These days much of the town is dedicated to the remembrance of the disaster. There's several sculptures and other memorials to those who died, including a stone set in the grass with three flat tablets around it. These tablets list everyone who's reported to have died in the accident, and from above the whole thing is built to look like the symbol of radioactivity. There's also a, and the best way to describe it is 'very Soviet', memorial specifically to the clean-up crew, with meticulously-carved humans depicted as fighting the fire. I believe the style is called 'socialist realist art' and it's very common in communist countries - centring the 'working man' in his struggle against the natural world. Conversely, elsewhere in the town centre is a weird sculpture made of thin poles of metal that look like an angel blowing a trumpet. This *is* apparently a reference to the Wormwood of the Bible which turned a third of the world's water green and bitter, and feels ... to me, slightly awkward, I must say.

One quite poignant part of the memorials is a path with signposts either side, the sort of signposts you find when you enter and leave a town/village. Except these signposts depict all the places that were abandoned after the disaster, or at least within the exclusion zones - everyone knows of Pripjat but there were hundreds of other places affected, mostly small villages, true, but they all count, they all had people living in them that were forced to move on elsewhere. The signs have the white 'welcome' boards on one side and the black 'you are now leaving' boards with the town names struck through on the other - they would have been the signs you saw had you been passing through before it all happened.

Chernobyl City also has a church. It's a very pretty building built in the traditional style of Russian Orthodoxy, with the golden domes, and quite colourful (especially pastel blue). It's the Church of St. Elijah, and it dates from 1877, having been built on the site of two previous churches which both burned down earlier in the

1800s. It's not open very often, but it still serves as the 'mother church' for everyone who used to live nearby but who have since been relocated, so when it does open, it's very popular. Many people make specific journeys here to pay their regards to dead relatives in their old hometowns, who are still buried in the churchyard nearby, but because the site is in the exclusion zone, most of the time they don't have access.

Around Chernobyl City are any number of abandoned buildings. One we went to; indeed it was the first building we entered on the tour; is an old school nursery, or children's home (a genuine children's home, I mean, not a front for a huge metal antenna). It's a very eerie place, and served as quite the introduction to the rest of the region. Obviously it's in ruins - it's very much falling down, there's dust everywhere, there's posters ripped and peeling off the walls, and there's metal-framed bunk beds, well, cots I guess maybe, all bedding and soft furnishing long since gone, but what makes it all the more hitting are the small things. Toys scattered around, plastic 1980s dolls lying on the bed-frames, perhaps decades since they were last held (we'll pass over the thought that they've been placed there on purpose for a photo-opportunity; they're still *here*, they're still unloved). One shoe discarded on the floor. And, on one of the window-ledges, a teddy-bear in the form of a rabbit. Abandoned, never to be loved again.

What may surprise you is the exclusion zone isn't completely abandoned, or at least it wasn't on my visit. A couple of people who used to live in the area before the accident moved back a couple of years afterwards. This was much to the annoyance of the local authorities, but while they expressed their strong dissatisfaction, didn't manage to actually re-evict any of them. Maybe because they felt it was too much hassle, maybe because they felt 'eh, well, if they want to move back, that's their funeral'.

On their visits, Jess and Helen both met people who had moved back - I wonder if it was the same person?

{JESS: Oh, one other thing we did while we were in the exclusion zone is our guide knew an elderly man who lived in a nearby town I guess you could call it, I don't even think you could call it a town, but he lived within the exclusion zone and had never left, even when the government ordered people to, he did not leave. SO that was really fascinating to go and visit him for an hour or so in the afternoon, and that was great cos it was obviously something you wouldn't do by yourself, not without a Ukrainian guide to translate, so we had a little chat with him, and he was adamant he did not want to move out of his home, which I suppose is fair enough. But yes, he'd lived into his 80s and hadn't died of radiation-related diseases, so I suppose it didn't affect every single person who stayed in the area, but obviously it would have been hugely dangerous for him to stay, but he did, so that was fascinating.

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{HELEN: Our first stop in the exclusion zone was an abandoned village called Zalissia, the largest of the abandoned villages in the zone. It was completely overgrown. Nikolai, our guide, told us until the previous winter, a retired schoolteacher had been living there. She lived to the grand old age of 87. Most of the settlers who returned to the zone lived into their 80s. Later, we met Ivan, and he told us he'd moved back in 1988, as the town to which he had been evacuated had more radioactivity and poorer housing. His village was in the clean area of the zone, and the house, which he had built himself, was free from draughts. He grew all his own vegetables and chopped his own wood, and certainly he looked very well on it.

}

We also met up with one of these people; an elderly husband and wife whose names I sadly don't remember, because I never made a note of them at the time. They'd been evacuated, along with everyone else, just after the accident, but the husband had come back as part of the clean-up operation. And, well, stayed. His wife joined him later.

They had built up a little cottage in the woods, and turned it into quite a small-scale self-sufficient farm with animals and crops. They also had pet cats and a dog, They didn't seem to have any ill-effects from living there, and remember my visit was some 28 years after the explosion and they'd been there for most of them. {pause} I mean they're all probably dead now, given it was 9 years ago, but who knows.

In their yard they had several of the vehicles used in the clean-up; not necessarily in use any more but certainly in a decent enough condition to climb on and poke around in. Which we did, because when next would I get to sit on an adapted tank covered in radioactive dust.

I am not a role model.

-- {end pod jingle} --

Well, that's about all for this pod. Join me next time for another adventure beyond the brochure. Until then, don't get arrested for trespassing or espionage, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}