

**Doug Murray** finds Chernobyl has become a hallowed ground where people come to witness history and to remember

IT LOOKS like a baby monitor, but the beeping device that tour guide Dennis Zaburin clutches in his hand monitors radiation. The digits on the dosimeter's display change rapidly, indicating rising and falling danger. Other than the beeps, our footsteps are the only sounds we hear, multiplied as they echo off the abandoned buildings that surround us.

Dennis knows where it's "safe" and the spots to avoid. But I have my doubts. I am, after all, at the site of the world's worst nuclear accident: Chernobyl, Ukraine.

More than 20 years after the atomic genie was released from the bottle, the invisible danger in this modern ghost town remains. Dennis tells me not to worry, but I can see the readout on his dosimeter. It reads 1,800. Only a few hours earlier he told me that 50 is normal.

What am I doing here?

On April 26, 1986, Reactor Number Four at Chernobyl, in what was then the Soviet Union, blew up. For some reason, I've always been fascinated by the tragic event. I've read the books, seen the movies and played the game (yes, there is actually a video game set in Chernobyl). I think this fascination comes from how man's quest to control nature backfired and how nature is slowly reclaiming a city where thousands once worked, raised families and made a community.

At the time of the accident, four reactors were in operation and two more were under construction. It was during a systems test in the early morning hours of that spring day that things went terribly wrong.

Technicians tried to stop the test and rein in the reactor, but it was out of control. It overheated, resulting in a massive blast. While it wasn't a nuclear explosion, the reactor blew apart, shooting radioactive debris more than a mile into the sky.

In the days after the explosion, winds carried radioactive fallout across most of Europe. Eventually more than 300,000 people were forced to relocate.

It may seem a macabre place to visit, but is Chernobyl any different than the sites of tragedies like Auschwitz or New York's Ground Zero? It too has become hallowed ground where people come to witness history and to remember.



**ABANDONED CITY:** Clockwise from main image, toys and a gas mask at an abandoned preschool in the deserted city of Pripjat; highly-radiated vehicles used during the 1986 catastrophe; the sarcophagus over the destroyed 4th reactor and tour guide Dennis Zaburin with his dosimeter.

Chernobyl lies about 130 kilometres northwest of Kyiv (Kiev), Ukraine's capital. It is an atomic bull's-eye in the middle of the menacingly named Zone of Alienation, a 30-kilometre exclusion area that surrounds the power plant.

Just after 9am on a sunny Wednesday I board a tour bus in central Kyiv, along with five Swedes and a Norwegian.

We pass through military checkpoints before arriving at the town of Chernobyl. While the power station is referred to as Chernobyl, it is actually located in Pripjat, a model Soviet town founded in 1970 to support the nuclear complex.

We stop at a bland government building and head inside. This is where I first meet Dennis Zaburin, our young but serious government tour guide. The 27-year-old is dressed in blue jeans, camo jacket and a Formula 1 ball cap. He doesn't smile. Perhaps he doesn't like his job?

Inside a large room lined with maps and photographs of the disaster, Dennis gives us a short lecture about what happened and what to expect.

The tour begins at what Dennis calls the vehicle museum. It's really nothing more than a few military vehicles scattered about a grass field in desperate need of a mow. Dennis waves his dosimeter a few inches from a tank — the numbers skyrocket.

Even though I know how dangerous radiation is, it's easy to forget about the risk because it's invisible. But the signs and the beeping of the dosimeter keep reminding me.

Most of the time our group is quite boisterous — making comments, asking questions, taking pictures. But at the Monument to the Firemen we become subdued. Until this point we've only seen objects that were affected by the disaster. The large blue sculpture before us reminds us of the human toll.

A few miles down a deserted road, partially completed cooling towers and idle construction cranes welcome us to the reactor complex. We drive past stagnant cooling ponds and a decaying network of electrical transmission infrastructure before reaching the heart of the disaster: Reactor Number Four, an enormous and enormously frightening building.

Nearby is another poignant tribute: the Monument to the Liquidators. In the weeks, months and years that followed the explosion, 100,000 troops and 400,000 experts and civilians worked to stabilise the complex and clean up the radioactive mess. They became known as the liquidators and their work may have saved countless millions. But they paid a high price: many became very sick and many died.

The sarcophagus, a hastily constructed containment structure, covers the wreckage of Reactor Number Four. Built as a temporary measure, it is the only thing standing between tons of loose radioactive material and the outside world. As I stand before the giant tomb, Dennis explains that it is in dire need of replacement. If it were to collapse, clouds of radioactive dust would be released into the air, creating another nuclear disaster.

The final portion of our tour is Pripjat,

### gettingthere

- BMI (01-283 0700; flybmi.com) and Air Baltic (+154 099 9956; air-baltic.com) offer connecting flights to Kiev from Dublin. Current return flights average €300.
- I stayed at the Slavutich Hotel in Kiev (+380 (44) 561 1112; hotel-slavutich.com, from €37 per night), a comfortable Soviet-era hotel overlooking the Dnipro River.
- I booked my Chernobyl tour through SoloEast Travel (+380 44 406 3500; www.tourkiev.com). The full day tour includes lunch and transport from Kiev. Price per person varies depending on the size of group. A solo tour will set you back €424, but only €146 in a group of 5-14 people. SoloEast's website provides information on joining other tours to lower your costs.
- Kiev is Ukraine's bustling and booming capital. If you're keeping to the Chernobyl theme, check out the Chernobyl Museum (+380 (44) 4175427; 1 Khorevyi Lane, Kiev).

the power plant's support city that once had a population of about 50,000. Today it's zero.

Back in 1986, officials told residents that the evacuation was temporary and they need only bring a few days worth of clothes. As a result, most people left everything behind, unaware that they would never return.

Pripjat was a modern city before the disaster. Today, it is a crumbling shell, a surreal place where empty roads are lined with streetlamps that never light. The only traffic is the occasional bright yellow dump truck emblazoned with radioactive symbols. Dennis warns us not to breathe when they pass by. The dust could be hazardous to our health.

It's at the main square where I really feel Pripjat's emptiness. Dennis tells us we're free to explore the city's skeletons: A grocery store filled with overturned carts and mouldy signs. A hotel waiting for guests that will never come. Disconnected phone booths, empty swimming pools and overgrown paths that snake past faded signs highlighting the achievements of a country that has ceased to exist.

Books, chairs and even radiators are scattered about, the flotsam and jetsam of 1980s Soviet life. A child's ballet shoe here, a trumpet case there. The children of Pripjat must have been bursting with excitement in the days before the disaster. A new amusement park was scheduled to open on May 1, 1986 in honour of May Day. It never did.

Instead of children's laughter, this amusement park is silent, a sad reminder of shattered dreams and the lives ripped apart. The large decaying Ferris wheel has become a tragic symbol of the disaster. A few steps away, I spot a rotting stuffed toy hanging in the smashed window of a ticket booth, as if caught in mid-escape.

It feels like the set of a zombie movie, but Pripjat is not dead. It's renewing itself. Just as nature is slowly returning, evident in the grass that now grows between the cracks in the plaza or the shrubs and trees that have found root in the contaminated soil, so too are people slowly returning to the area, albeit in the form of visitors like me.

It may be thousands of years before this area is safe enough for human habitation. Until then, the site of mankind's worst nuclear disaster may become one of the world's most chilling tourist attractions.



**briefcase**  
Barry Coughlan

## Ooh la la at Lagrange

THE French Holiday Centre has announced the addition of a new range of luxury villas in the South of France.

The properties are from the exclusive Lagrange range and include high standard complexes with villas in the Languedoc, Aquitaine and Côte d'Azur. The six new residences will enhance the already extensive range of 170 high-end residences across France in the prestige Lagrange range. Accommodation benefits from extended facilities, including private pools, and in some properties features such as saunas, steam room and gym.

Clients can choose from a variety of villas; a three-bedroom property that sleeps five is, for instance, available from about €1,800 a week in May to early June.

For a copy of the new summer 2009 brochure or for reservations, call 021 4272527 or visit [www.frenchholidaycentre.ie](http://www.frenchholidaycentre.ie)

■ THOSE looking to combine a visit to Lourdes with the fun of a family holiday should consider current offers from Keycamp. The Cork-based travel company has just launched a selection of brand new three bedroom lodges at the beautiful Camping Pyrenees at Luz St Sauveur, within easy reach of Lourdes.

For departures up to the June 19, prices for six nights at a lodge and a further six nights in a mobile home at Le Ruisseau start at a tad over €600 (accommodation only). Fly drive packages or ferry crossings and overnight stops are available at a supplement. For further information, or to book a break, visit [www.keycamp.ie](http://www.keycamp.ie) or call 021 425 2300.

■ ETIHAD Airways has announced details of a new code share agreement with Qantas. The deal, which comes into effect tomorrow, offers Irish customers greater access to destinations in Australia and New Zealand. It is likely to be extended to other routes.

■ KENYA'S Minister for Tourism has decided to slash the cost of entry visas by 50% and offer children under 16 complimentary visas from the start of next month until the end of 2010.

The move has been made in a bid to attract increasing numbers of tourists to a market that has been badly hit by isolated examples of internal unrest. A family of four (two adults, two children) will save more than €100 as a result.

For more information on Kenya, visit [www.magicalkenya.com](http://www.magicalkenya.com) or call 0207 367 0931

**travelwise**  
**HANDY PACK:** Always pack twist-ties, safety pins, and string. Closing a sugar bag, repairing ripped pants or a broken zipper on your bag. They don't take up much space and could avert a holiday disaster.