

01 A child-size gas mask sits on top of a torn map of Russia in a composition that's symbolic of what happened at Chernobyl

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MISSION FACTFILE

Who: Darren Nisbett

What: To profile Chernobyl. This landscape remains an enigma, even a quarter of a century after the terrifying nuclear accident that still affects people in the area to this day. "I'm not interested in taking photos on safari," says Darren. "I'm intrigued by history and decay."

Where: Chernobyl, Ukraine.

Kit list: Canon EOS 450D SLR with 695nm infrared conversion and Canon EOS 5D Mk II SLR, with Canon EF-S 10-22mm f/3.5-4.5 USM, Canon EF 17-40mm f/4L USM, and Canon EF 24-105mm f/4L IS USM lenses.

More info at: See Darren's photo project on the aptly named Zone of Alienation by going to www.darkoptics.net

All images: Darren Nisbett

Going nuclear

UK-based photographer **Darren Nisbett** explains how he braved radiation, collapsing buildings and wild boars to get his haunting shots of Chernobyl

Set the scene for us. Is Chernobyl as bleak as we're led to believe? My first time out there I didn't know what to expect. I was really humbled, yet also inspired by the place. It was fascinating. I've never been somewhere with such a complete sense of silence. Even if you venture out somewhere in the UK where there aren't many people around, you can still hear birds singing, or there are other forms of background noise. But in Chernobyl there are few birds and hardly any wildlife. Everything is very still. Walking through completely abandoned streets and buildings, trampling through broken glass and debris, you get a striking sense of this.

My first trip was in August at the end of the summer when everything was still in full bloom. The second trip I took was to focus on building more images for my infrared portfolio and exhibition. This second time I went just before the spring bloom to see how it looked in a different season. I found it even more still and desolate. The atmosphere was darker, and there was more space in my photos. Because the winters there are so harsh, there was also water dripping in a lot of the old buildings, which was eerie.

Can anyone go to Chernobyl?

You need to organise permits in advance. There are a few companies in the UK that are authorised to sort them out for you. I went with a company called Lupine Travel, which organises outback and beyond tours. You can also get permits if you go to Kiev and book early enough in advance. There are tour operators there in Ukraine who will get you on a one-day Chernobyl tour and take you to a number of places around the contamination zone. The tours are more geared towards education than tourism, however. They're using the money from these tours to create a museum and sculpture garden of monuments from the lost villages.

Didn't you worry about radiation?

You go with a guide who is always with you. The guide carries a Geiger counter, which is a pocket radiation meter that beeps along in the background as you shoot. Generally, the radiation is safe in limited doses. The levels are about twice as much as you'd find in Kiev. On a two-day trip to Chernobyl it's probably the same amount you'd get by going through a couple of airport scanners. The people who work there do six days on,

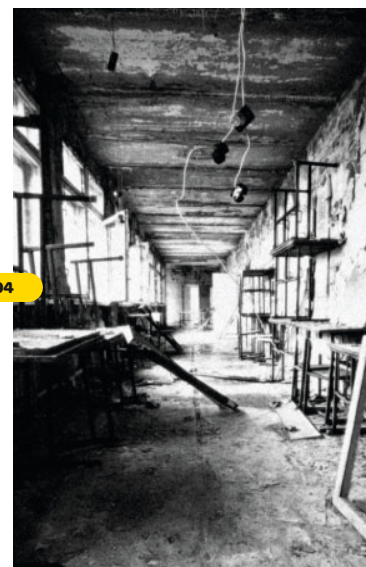
02 People were evacuated quickly, so many everyday items remain in homes, hospitals, businesses, and so on

03 Morning light shining through the small bunk beds in a nursery

04 Dilapidated buildings posed many safety hazards for Darren when trying to photograph on unstable foundations

05 The iconic ferris wheel – this amusement park was supposed to open just days after the accident at Chernobyl

06 Military vehicles abandoned around Pripjat. These metal objects retain high levels of radiation, and had to be approached with caution



“Sometimes, though, you’ll go to photograph a subject and the radiation meter goes crazy. When this happens you step back and wonder why you’re doing this”

six days off to minimise their exposure. Sometimes, though, you’ll go to photograph a subject and the radiation meter goes crazy. When this happens you step back and wonder why you’re doing this. Usually, these are metal objects, because metal absorbs radiation more than concrete or trees, for instance. Abandoned machines that used to take radioactive material from the power station were really interesting subjects, but you couldn’t get too close to them because they are still so highly radioactive.

Apart from the radiation, what were the major hassles?

Often it was structural, physical hazards. In the old abandoned building you were walking

across floorboards that were about to give way. I had to be very careful where I put my feet and hands. A number of times I had to climb out of windows onto balconies, not knowing whether the concrete would hold my weight.

Also, of course, there are none of the conveniences such as lifts that we take for granted. On my first trip we went to the top of a 16-story apartment block, and I had to climb 40 flights of stairs. When carrying a pack with my tripod, two cameras, flashlights and lenses, it was back-breaking.

We were also expecting to meet wild boars. Apparently, these have flourished in Chernobyl in the last 25 years because there’s no-one there to hunt them.



Fortunately, we didn't see any during my visit, but I was constantly looking over my shoulder for them.

Why did you shoot infrared?

High-speed infrared film produces noise and halo effects. I wanted to replicate these characteristics in my images so I used a converted digital camera. I do a lot of infrared anyway, and when I went over there I was intrigued to see whether contaminated foliage would look any different than non-contaminated foliage, given that plants soak up the radiation more than concrete or wood. It turned out there was no real difference between plants over here and over there, but I found that infrared lent itself really well to the grey landscape and faded concrete of the Soviet-era buildings. There were huge apartment blocks, and within them trees growing through the floorboards, and plants creeping through windows. The infrared picks all of this foliage out and creates contrast in the scenes.

What camera settings did you use?

With my converted camera I don't get much benefit from changing apertures because there generally isn't any real quality gain past f/8. In some cases you get worse internal reflections past that point, which cause hotspots in the images. So the majority of my images are shot at around f/8, but I used



a wider aperture if I needed a faster shutter speed — although I probably never went wider than f/4.

When I used my (non-infrared) Canon EOS 5D Mk II with a neutral density filter, I shot with an aperture of f/5.6 using ISO800 for about three seconds. The long exposure sometimes produced movement in the trees and sky, which really helped to add drama to the picture.

What post-processing techniques did you use to get the intense, grainy effect?

Digital infrared is almost unusable out of the camera, because the sky comes out too dark red or orange and the foliage too green or blue, but this gives me a good base to work



Plants grow on the roof of the city hotel, the rusting letters looking out over the city. Over the years nature has reclaimed much of the old Soviet-era architecture

An old television set strangled by plants. Infrared photography produces interesting effects in vegetation, and Darren was curious to see if plants that had soaked up radiation for 25 years produced different effects than vegetation elsewhere



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09 The empty pool that was used as a location in the Call of Duty videogame

10 Once grand trains and carriages that criss-crossed the Soviet Union are now left rusting in the station. You have to use a Geiger counter when approaching these trains to limit your exposure to the radiation they've absorbed

11 The white glow in between the concrete is the radioactive moss surrounding a small shop



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with. My post-processing starts with the application of a custom camera profile in Adobe Camera Raw. This profile enables me to set a lower default white balance temperature, which provides more control over the limited colour palette of IR photos. I then change the raw file to greyscale and use the colour sliders under the HSL/Greyscale tab to bring out the shades from the image. The movement of these sliders affects the original colours of the image, lightening or darkening the tones depending on the direction you move the sliders.

Next, I use the Exposure, Blacks and Clarity sliders to darken the concrete and brighten the foliage. I then add a layer of monochrome noise to emphasise the noise

in the sky, and use Alien Skin's Exposure to add the halation effects. It all sounds quite a technical and complex way to get the images to look like they were produced in an analogue way, but the end result does look like they were taken with infrared film.

How do your compositions differ from more traditional landscapes?

I shot a lot of wide angles, but also plenty of close-ups. I was really drawn to the architecture, and there were some buildings where I wanted to emphasise the vertical lines and weight of Soviet-era architecture.

What's the biggest misconception we have about Chernobyl?

Chernobyl is full of workers from scientific fields and security services. The thing that touched me when I went was that these people are very enthusiastic about what they're doing, despite the fact that the power station is still leaking. They're currently having to build a sarcophagus to cover the sarcophagus they built ten years ago, but people are still optimistic. Another thing is that Chernobyl may have been out of sight, out of mind until Japan's accident, but it's still in the news every day in Ukraine. 📍