

10,000 TOURISTS VISIT NUCLEAR EXPLOSION-HIT CHERNOBYL ANNUALLY



With dark tourism being on the rise, the interest in Chernobyl for holiday tours is also rising with more than 10,000 visitors annually.

April 26, 2016 will mark the 30th anniversary of the Chernobyl power plant explosion that involved Reactor 4 in 1986. **During the explosion, the Pripyat area that was formerly part of the former Soviet Union, had its atmosphere filled with radioactive particles. The area is now part of Ukraine.**

Due to the high contamination, an area of almost 50 kilometer radius around the power plant is an Exclusion Zone. However, the level of contamination has been reduced and the region is safe for short, regulated, and privately organized visits to the site.

When tourists arrive at the site through tour bus, there are numerous check points at which their documentations must be checked. While at the site, they are neither allowed to touch anything nor to eat anything not from outside the area. Even sitting on the ground is prohibited. Visitors are supposed to leave everything as is. While exiting, the radiation levels are checked using body scanners.

Despite the many restrictions, visits lasting more than one day are allowed. This is due to the significant reduction in the levels of radiation over the years even though the levels are about 10 times more than normal. Although Pripyat city, 3 km away from the nuclear reactor has remained empty, there are people living in Chernobyl - a town 15 km away from the zone. There is even a hotel - Interform Agency Hotel - within the site that offers catering to visitors.

Also in Orane, SoloEast Travel offers accommodation for overnight tours at Countryside Cottage Chernobyl Hotel. According to Sergei Ivanchuk, SoloEast director, the Exclusion Zone has no new hotels with few old ones being refurbished. This, he says, is due to the Ukrainian law forbidding businesses in the zone. Only those vital for the zone functioning are allowed.

Wildlife in the area is thriving. According to scientists, this is due to the almost 100% human absence. Some studies however claim that the radiations reduced biodiversity and had long-term health implications on the animals.

The ghost town of Pripyat was affluent before the explosion. It had an amusement park, apartment complexes, and a movie theatre. Of the three, the most photographed is the amusement park.

There are about 200 "self-settlers" living within the zone, against government orders to leave. According to previous visitors to the region, tourists usually bring them donations and gifts.

For tourists to get legal entry to the site, a pass must be granted to them. **This is only possible via booking a private tour that costs between \$100 and \$400.** The cost varies based on the duration of stay and the number of people in the group.

Ivanchuk said that in 2014, the visitors to the zone totaled 5,900 with SoloEast Travel serving 1,980 of them in 290 tours. He also said that the numbers usually exceed 10,000. Despite one day tours being popular due to the affordability, interest in more than one day tours is growing with many visitors who come once returning for an extended tour.

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