

## Markiyan Kamysh. **A Stroll to the Zone**

Markiyan Kamysh was born in Kyiv in 1988 in the family of a Chernobyl catastrophe liquidator. He was a history major in Taras Shevchenko National University, and has been an active researcher of Chernobyl Zone since 2010, having walked more than 5,000 km within the Exclusion Zone and having spent more than 200 days behind barbed wire.

Almost 35 years ago, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of April 1986, an accident occurred at Chernobyl nuclear power plant (CNPP). Liquidators and firemen were able to prevent the worst from happening, but Chernobyl region still remains a forbidden land. As all taboos, it attracts adventurers who climb over the barbed wire in the middle of the night to wander waist-high deep through swamps to abandoned places. They spend weeks in Pripyat and are not afraid of wild animals anymore.

*A Stroll to the Zone* is the confession of an illegal Chernobyl tourist and stalker. It's not just a simple instruction on how to get there and not just a shallow attempt to describe the subculture. It's a tale for those who are always interested to see the other side of the story. It's for those who long to feel the wraith of the forest at night and the coldness of gaping holes in the abandoned houses, to touch the swamps and see the red flashes of Prip'yat's sunrises, hear the speechless and dead silence of abandoned towns, and then be so happy about the homelike feeling, when a blanket and hot tea are more important than anything in the world.

Here you will find an inside look at illegal tourism into the Exclusion Zone, a unique territory of Ukrainian Polissya, existing for almost 35 years. The book will take its reader on a journey to the emerald world of Polissya, into a magical country of romantics and criminals, policemen and law violators.

The book is illustrated with photographs, many of which are unique since a lot of the Zone's significant landmarks have been destroyed in the fire of April 2015.

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**A Stroll to the Zone**  
(excerpt)

Inspired by the plenitude of optimism of utopian slogans and the mother-effing inbreeding of unreal Soviet supergraphics, we were in the process of building a Dream. And in pursuit of it, a Horn of Plenty was found – the peaceful use of atomic energy, a panacea for the national economy, and a beacon on the road to the bright red communist future. In awe of its own might, with bright faith in the best, we built nuclear power stations across the entire USSR.

And one of the most powerful ones was called Chernobyl. Its satellite-city expanded and its orderly tower-blocks loomed in exemplary excellence, gigantic slogans stood out proudly on the rooftops and children played boisterously in cosy playgrounds.

A supermarket and restaurant were opened in town, and advertisements, such as “Looking to exchange an apartment in Odessa for one in Prypyat”, didn’t surprise anyone. The atomic city looked like science fiction amid the backwater of Polissya: everything promised rapid growth, imminent well being and incredible potential. Even an embankment was planned to be built: with bridges, lights and musical entertainment. New foundations of electric power stations were being built and the apotheosis of joy and happiness was looming on the horizon.

Until things got fucked up and the fourth reactor went to hell. The land of Chernobyl began to shine like the Star Wormwood, and turned into a poisonous emerald in the precious crown of Polissya. The cruel hangover of reality after long years of sweet dreams. The law of the pit: no matter how hard you climb up, you’ll sink to the bottom in an instant.

But courageous firefighters put out the fire in the reactor, fearless helicopter pilots filled the hellish crater with lead and boron. Dedicated liquidators with pure hearts cleared away the dirtiest heaps in the world, built the sarcophagus and left.

They left, having got their doses, their health problems, their cancer, the Chernobyl certificates of categories A and B, and the list goes on. Their children got the right to attend childrens’ summer camps and got school nicknames like “Chernobylite.” The country got a piece of land of the size of Luxembourg, where people were forbidden to live.

The city of Prypyat and all the surrounding area were evacuated immediately. The Exclusion Zone was fenced in with a barbed wire and patrolled watchfully by soldiers: they predatorily raced their armored personnel carriers (APCs) in search of looters, but the turbulent 1990s were more horrifying than the reactor and the borders of the Zone weakened.

Then, the first illegals appeared: wretched drunkards pilfered canned goods from village cellars in the suburbs of the Zone, escaping from patrols in order to come back again in a week, get caught, and receive their not quite conditional warning. The Chernobyl land became inhabited with bravehearts, the homeless, deserters, looters and escaped convicts. They hid in villages for months, gnawing rotten apples and dreaming of sitting out all the hardships in the world. At that time the zone had really become that dangerous place, about which the tabloid press is writing today.

Hippies ended up there. In newspapers there were mentions of isolated cases of children: laughing and swimming in rivers, getting caught by the police and chased far away with strict orders never ever to go there again. Young people from the capital also managed to get in, looting wall clocks in Prypyat and haggling a price for them on Andriyvsky Uzviz. There they also shot up drugs and carried guns. Then they left – reduced to ashes in the whirlwind of a bygone drive and became completely normal family men: small business owners and loving parents of those, who today litter your online friends’ status with breakfast pictures.

There were also singles: they didn’t leave any footprints and drank good cognac. They went fishing in rivers for the sake of the Sun in a clear sky: they didn’t give a damn that no one lived there and they might be captured. How they’ve grown, the generation of

contemporaries of the Accident. For them the Zone became a land of stillness and frozen time.

I am one of them.

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What is the Chernobyl Zone today? For someone, it's a horrible memory of half-forgotten childhood, of happy Soviet youth days, when in a few days your life is shattered into small pieces, and yourself, and all your neighbors, flee into the world to find new homes on evacuation buses. For some, the Chernobyl Zone is radioactive shit that was cleared out in May of eighty-six. For some, it's Terra Incognita, filled with myths about zombies and soldiers riding in dark green APCs. For some, it's official excursions, when greedy businessmen with loud speeches make money on preoccupied tourists. For some, it's the locations of a famous computer game about macho men with Kalashnikovs, who hide away meat rations and bandage the holes made by firing among the fog of morning marshes. And for some, everything is totally bad, and the Zone for him is the place for the action for the film *Chernobyl Diaries*.

For me, it's worse. For me, the Zone is the place of relaxation. Instead of the sea, the Carpathian Mountains, mine waste hills, instead of Turkey peppered with tanned whores and drowned in chilled mojitos. Some twenty times a year, I, an illegal tourist to the Chernobyl Zone, a stalker, a pedestrian, a self-propelled vehicle, an idiot, call me as you want. I am not visible, but I am. I exist. Almost like ionized radiation. What does it look like? I get my backpack ready, arrive at the barbed wire and dissolve in the darkness of the Polissya forests, woodlands and pine aromas, disappear among the dizziness of thickets, and no one, anywhere in the world, will notice me.

This is about stalkers. Not those who collect children's gas masks across the bomb shelters of district cities, and not those who photograph unfinished pissed-on buildings in residential areas. It's about others. About boys and girls, who are not ashamed of putting backpacks on their backs and treading through cold rain to abandoned towns and villages, where you can drink cheap vodka, break windows with empty bottles, swear way too loud, and do other things, which differentiate living towns from dead ones. It's about those, who are not afraid of radiation and don't care about drinking from poisonous streams and lakes. About those, who take cool photos from the roofs of Prypyat, which find their way to *National Geographic* and *Forbes*.

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Sometimes I think we don't exist. There are none of those forty men who regularly ramble through Chernobyl marshes. We existed, but we dissolved a long time ago among the swamps, we spread out in the duckweed, reeds and sunlight. We are swamp ghosts, we shake hands with blonde-haired Nazis, who haven't yet been discovered by archaeologists. They share their Rheni cigarettes with us, fill our pockets with bullets, and quietly whisper their words of wisdom.

Not even flies notice us: they circle around, buzz in their affairs, and fly to the side of us. We are a dim reflection of television lies in the minds of our countrymen, simply a pile of tales about radiation, zombies and calves with three heads. In dull nightly dusk we look for hours for fording places through impenetrable swamps, and in the daytime we drag on up to our waist in leeches.

I just returned. My last week has been a road through darkness, the anxious anticipation of light coming from headlights and cigarettes. Then I hoped for a bed without a mattress and icy water from the frozen river, there was coldness and quenching of thirst. There was patrol that I noticed at the last moment. There was grass: limp, dry and yellow. And then, only a dead dream, so in the morning to run further to the North, to dive into fantasies, into a captivating land of abandoned homes, canals, and agricultural infrastructures.

*Translated by Svitlana Bednazh*