What attracts the danger tourist?

Some people like to visit New Zealand and jump off bridges with only an elastic band attached to their ankles, other people like to swim in the sparkling waters of Mexico patting the backs of sharks. However, there is an even more intrepid breed of tourist out there looking for that unique holiday. A vacation so deadly that, instead of sporting suntans and souvenirs, they could be bringing back radiation poisoning. The things the danger tourist is attracted to will not include the beach, sunscreen or paperbacks. These gutsy tourists would rather don radiation suits, clutch Geiger counters and sign liability waivers. If it's post-apocalyptic sights of the Soviet persuasion you're interested in, then Chernobyl is the perfect, though heavily contaminated, holiday for you!

The Chernobyl Disaster

For those of you who are too young to recall what happened in Chernobyl, let me recap. In 1986 Reactor 4 of the power plant exploded into the air and the resulting radioactive fallout forced 350,000 people to leave their homes forever and contaminated large parts of Europe for centuries to come. The fire burned uncontrollably for 9 days and released 100 times the radiation of the Hiroshima bomb. The then modern city of Pripyat, which was only 4 kilometres away, was evacuated a day later. Most of the 50,000 inhabitants of the city were plant workers and their families. The people were told to pack lightly, as the evacuation would only be short-term. They never returned and now the town has an abandoned ghostly atmosphere that is frozen in time.

What's it like today?

Some parts of the dead zone are simply too dangerous to visit, but Ukraine's Emergency Situations Ministry have opened up 30 kms of the Exclusion Zone to tour guides. Straying from the path is not advised and tourists are equipped with Geiger counters which screech alarmingly due to the elevated levels of radiation. Some of the safety rules include no touching vegetation, no leaving bags or other belongings on the ground, no eating, drinking or smoking and no bare skin.

Tour groups are taken to the public library and the elementary school. Broken glass and dusty books litter the floor. Discarded gas masks lie on the ground side-by-side with childish drawings of normal life. Creepy looking dolls and raggedy teddy bears are positioned on chairs and beds by the tourists. The water in the swimming pool evaporated over the years and a climbing rope in the gym dangles eerily from the roof. Outside, tourists head towards the fairground and jump into the Dodgems for a quick photo opportunity. Beyond the stationary Ferris wheel you can see that Pripyat is slowly

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being consumed by weeds and plants. Wild boar, deer and wolves casually roam the streets. It seems that Mother Nature is reclaiming the broken city for itself.

There's no place like home

Despite the disturbing atmosphere, there is still a little scratch of human activity. Around 2500 workers are still there to make the site safe. The concrete sarcophagus, which was placed there after the explosion to prevent further contamination, is now cracked and has been leaking radiation. This, however, has not deterred some 300 odd villagers from returning to the area. These inhabitants, known as Samosely, either refused to evacuate the area or sneaked past the cordons in the Exclusion Zone and returned home. Most of these settlers are old women.

True or False

1. Visitors to Chernobyl will come back with radiation sickness.
2. The Hiroshima bomb was more radioactive.
3. The city of Pripyat was newly built.
4. The inhabitants of Pripyat were told they could go home soon after the explosion.
5. You can wander round the dead zone as you please.
6. Tourists pose objects that they find on the furniture.
7. The sarcophagus needs to be repaired.
8. 300 hundred villagers were deterred from entering the Exclusion Zone.

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