

ABANDONED
PLACES



HENK VAN RENSBERGEN

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PREFACE

For days we had been sneaking around the villa in the dunes. Was anyone still living there? Some of the windows had been broken and the front door was wide open, but when we peered inside we could see that there was still furniture there, crockery in the cupboards and the remains of food on the table. Taking that step through the front door seemed like the most challenging feat, but our excitement only increased as we ventured further in. We walked past the coats on the coat stand and into the living room.

The stairs creaked as we climbed them. Suddenly we heard stumbling; there were other people on the stairs. In the half-darkness there was total panic, as everyone tried to run for the front door at the same time, and there,

in the daylight, we recognized the boys we had been playing with the previous day on the beach.

It felt as though the summer holidays would never end. We got to know every nook and cranny of the ghost villa. There was an ancient black and white TV, which exploded with a loud bang, sending a cloud of dust into the room. We played hide and seek in the upstairs bedrooms and came upon an old clock that still worked. A year later, the villa had disappeared and the year after that, new apartments had risen up in its place.

I bought my first camera in 1984, when I was 16. I experimented endlessly with things like lighting, night photography and double exposures, and I would increasingly take my

camera with me when I had discovered a new abandoned building. In those early years, I mainly had a fascination with all things industrial. Once I got my driving license, I was able to travel further afield towards Charleroi, Anderlues, Tertre, Ghent or Zeebrugge, and of course, to the Buda Marly factory by the canal in Brussels.

In the early 1990s, I built a website (which at that time was still fairly unique) and called it 'Industrial Art'. It was a rather silly name and I replaced it when I had my own domain name with 'abandoned-places.com'. For the first time, I made contact with a number of other photographers who shared my enthusiasm. The press heard about me and the number of 'hits' grew.

Slowly, a network of urban explorers began to develop. We came into contact via our websites, exchanged information and occasionally met up. These early friendships are still alive today, and they have left me with many fond

and often exciting memories. Photography became more and more important to me. The challenge was not to strictly record what was there to see, but to reproduce the atmosphere: the tension, the complexity, the emotion, the surprise and the feeling. I went back to the same places regularly, 'befriended' the local iron thieves, and saw how factories were slowly looted and finally razed to the ground.

My flying career enabled me to explore abandoned places abroad. I visited most European countries, went three times to Japan, to Sri Lanka, Mexico, Brazil, Africa, the United States and many more places. I met some fantastic people whom I teamed up with to explore. I was lucky enough to discover New Jersey with John and Nick, Detroit with Brett, Florida and Alabama with Ryan.

When safe to do so, I like to venture out on my own.

In 2007, Lannoo published my first book. The book was reprinted twice, and it has now

acquired cult status. In the years that followed, I staged a number of exhibitions and my photos were shown at art fairs in Belgium and the Netherlands. Various magazines, newspapers, websites, TV shows and musicians used my work. In 2010, *Abandoned Places 2* came out, in 2012 *Abandoned Places 3* and in 2014 *The Photographer's Selection*.

With the explosive interest in urban exploration, many new locations were discovered. Explorers jointly hit the road and traveled in groups from factory to castle looking for the ultimate photo, only to find out that their creation appeared in nearly the same way on Facebook or Flickr. For most of them this won't spoil the fun, but for me it was a sign that I had to look for a new idea, a new story that I could perhaps tell in my next book. The book that you are now reading is a collection of my best work, the peaks of my many journeys, from my very first industrial photos, often in black & white, to inaccessible places on the other side of the world.

Enjoy this adventure, and should you ever want to start one yourself, think about the following: 'Take nothing but photos, leave nothing but footsteps.' In any case, it's never the intention to force open windows or doors and thus to literally break in. It is equally important not to invade the privacy of the former residents. Call it urban exploration ethics. ♦

SAFEA ▸

AMMONIA FACTORY, BELGIUM
2003-2006

When I 'discovered' this abandoned factory, it was still completely intact, yet it was virtually impossible to gain entry. Behind the gate lived Georges, the dog and his wife (in ascending order of danger). Nature had completely taken over and all kinds of wild creatures inhabited the place, obviously unaffected by the large-scale pollution. Walking around was like discovering a deserted Maya city, with incomprehensible switchboards and monstrous machines, pipes, meters, taps and knobs, dark corridors, staircases and ladders. In musty offices I found punch cards, lists of names, fossilized plants and a 1970s calendar.

When Georges' wife died, he stopped taking care of himself and moved into a home.

Demolition started right after that. ♦





BUZLUDZHA ▸
BULGARIA, 2013

In 1981, the Bulgarian communist regime built a monument on 'Mount Buzludzha', a historic but virtually inaccessible place.

Since 1989, Bulgaria's largest ideological building has stood empty. After the villagers stole the copper roofing, the building decayed even faster.

In the winter, access is restricted to 4 wheel drive vehicles or snow scooters, and for the final kilometer, you need snow shoes.

'Buzludzha' literally means 'icy', and for good reason: it is incredibly cold up there; the icy wind blows right through you. At night, temperatures plummet to way below freezing.

The monument stands inviolable on the barren mountaintop like an alien spaceship. I slipped inside through a crack in the concrete.

This was where real challenge greeted me: due to a cycle of thawing and freezing, the floors were like a vast ice rink. Even the stairways were covered with a thick layer of slippery ice, making it literally impossible to climb even a few steps. The worse thing is that there are holes in the concrete everywhere, and if you start to slip, it may be impossible to stop...

The reward for all these risks is the beautiful arena with its mosaics and UFO-like roof.

The missing face on the mosaics-covered wall is that of Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria's last communist leader who reigned from 1954 until 1989. It's unclear whether unhappy people removed his face, or if he ordered its removal so as to distance himself from the collapsing Soviet regime. ♦



НА КРАК
О ДАРИ ПРЕЗЕНИ
НА ДИРАК О РОБИ НА ТРУЛА
ПОДСЛАТИ И УНИЖЕНИ
СВАМИТЕ СВОИ БРАТА
НЕКА БЕЗ МИЛ
НЕ МОЖЕ
РАБОНИИ
ДЕОНИИ
ОГЕСИ СВАМИ КИЛОТЕЛЕ СЕ
НАВРЕДИ ПРОВАТИ СЕ
НА СВАМИ НАШЕ ВЕРИ СЕ
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НА СВАМИ НАШЕ ВЕРИ СЕ





Buzludzha, Bulgaria, 2013





NARA DREAMLAND ▸
JAPAN, 2012

A nocturnal exploration is always special. Darkness sharpens the senses, the animal in man surfaces: seeing without light, walking without noise, climbing like a Ninja, blending invisibly into the environment (and yet you get scared stiff by a life-size dummy of a cowboy in the bushes).

At the highest point of the roller coaster, balancing between vertigo and ecstasy, I saw the guard's car. He stood in front of the gate with the four blinking lights, but had no

chance of catching us, even though this could earn him 100,000 yen.

The park was pitch-dark. A quarter-moon was visible and the sky was slightly lit by the city lights in the background. I placed my camera on the tripod and set a minute's-long exposure. At first sight it gave an ordinary daylight picture, but with incredible light. We remained in the park for six hours in all; a surreal visit that ended with enjoying a can of beer, the view and the silence. Unreal. ♦



Screw Coaster





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