

TRAVELING THE BLUE DOT WITH A RED DOT

CHERNOBYL

& LEICA TRAVEL PHOTOGRAPHY

by KEITH R. SBIRAL

"Pick-up" - Leica SL (Typ 601), 35mm f/1.4 Summilux FLE

CHERNOBYL

I think in order to truly capture a sense of place and people one must take a deeper dive into the places they travel than the hop-on-hop-off tour bus is able to provide. Additionally, to create a true connection that tells a story we must move beyond the beautiful landscape shots and images that exist in many online variations and populate Instagram (often in heavily edited forms). It can be more challenging, but as Amy and I have witnessed leading trips to Cuba, anyone who can use a camera can curate great travel experiences with a bit of effort. You don't have to have a photo shoot set up for you with a photography-based tour or workshop. You can actually enjoy the place you are visiting and still have a great selection of images when you return that tell the story of the place and the people.

Because movies as well as the recent HBO drama miniseries have peaked interest in the catastrophe in the former Soviet country of Ukraine and spiked tourism to the exclusion zone, I would like to use a day I spent in 2018 within the exclusion zone of Chernobyl as a case study for the contention that meaningful travel can result in one-of-a-kind experiences and images beyond the standard "tourist shots."



"Abandoned" - Leica SL (Typ 601), 35mm f/1.4 Summilux FLE

Chernobyl is one of those places that require a guide. That can be a blessing as well as a curse. Selecting how you travel to the exclusion zone is therefore critical. I won't get into tour specifics here as there are a myriad of options, but you can check our site for a post about how to travel to Chernobyl. As photographers we often want to see beyond the beaten path. To tell an individual story. And visiting with a guide who gives time to do that is a must.

As you may know, on April 26, 1986, the reactor number 4 at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant had one of what is only two nuclear accidents ever rated with the most severe classification. In the days and weeks after the accident the company town of Pripyat, along with over 1000 square miles of

land, were exposed to higher than normal, and in some cases deadly, levels of radiation. In the months and years since the accident, thousands of people labeled "liquidators" were charged with cleanup of the immediate surroundings and containing the remaining reactor core. These stories are told in modern media. But the silence, visual remainders of vacated structures, and monuments few people ever see are what tell the real story of the Chernobyl disaster. While it is easy to get a photo of a broken doll that has been "left behind" as a photo prop, it is far more challenging to try to understand and capture the level of human tragedy in a 12 hour tour. Unless you are fortunate to take a private tour, you will be with a group of travelers. As we boarded our minibus in Kiev, the other 12 tour participants were quiet with anticipation, and possibly a little trepidation. During the drive to the exclusion zone we were shown a video explaining what happened and the valiant efforts of the liquidators.

It is safe to travel for short periods into the exclusion zone; in fact, hundreds of people work within the zone every day. That being said, 30 years of cleanup makes a big difference. The environmental and human tragedy is evident as you step off the bus at the first check point.

Once you arrive and check in through the exclusion zone, receive your geiger counter, and any protective gear you wish to rent, you head to several stops around Chernobyl and Pripyat. You will visit very close to the reactor including the Red Forest, the wilderness areas around the reactor, the city of Pripyat, and see remains of equipment used to put the fire out and deal with radiation. You will see areas that are still highly radioactive, and you will likely visit an antenna array remaining from the Cold War designed to use waves bounced off the ionosphere to detect incoming planes or missiles.

The challenge is to capture these areas in a way that isn't touristy, cliché, or repetitive. Additionally, I feel it is critical to honor and respect the memory of those who died in the tragedy and in the years since. This type of "catastrophe tourism" or "disaster tourism" can serve to enlighten people and honor historic events, or it can be disrespectful and destructive. In fact there are serious ethical debates over this type of tourism and photography. As photographers we have a responsibility to be respectful and ensure we honor the people affected and tell stories so that more people can learn and understand. It is from that perspective that I believe our concept of Red Dot Blue Dot Photography approaches telling the stories of these types of places. I've done my best to represent images in this article that go beyond the cliché images and try to show the loss as well as the human and environmental devastation that exists. In this case with limited time it was difficult to get all of the shots I wanted and if I have the chance I will certainly return. This small region is



"Disaster" - Leica SL (Typ 601), 21mm f/3.4 Super Elmar



"Keeper" - Leica SL (Typ 601), 35mm f/1.4 Summilux FLE

part of a bigger story about Ukraine and while we spent over a week in Ukraine, you could easily spend much longer.

As I approached my day in the exclusion zone, my mind first focused on the story of the liquidators. These are people, military and civilian, who were charged with responding to the emergency. With little or no information, and in some cases incorrect information, these people went into the radioactive zone in an effort to deal with the situation. As the world watched the limited reporting coming from the Soviet Union, liquidator pilots called back from Afghanistan would fly sand over the melting reactor in an effort to dissipate the fire in hopes of stopping the nuclear fuel from further explosions. These pilots flew right through the worst radiation.

Monuments built in the exclusion zone celebrating the fire fighters, liquidators, and entire villages lost to the accident mark empty town squares and intersections. So my challenge was to grasp the human component of a place with essentially no visible humans. The vast emptiness of many of the spaces told that story. Many places are marked as highly radioactive. For example, a graveyard of equipment used at the accident site is visited by many, but people must stay a clear distance from the equipment as it remains highly radioactive.

The city of Pripyat has been extensively photographed. A city once home to over 49,000 residents with 147 mass transit busses, over 50 stores and cafes, and over 150 apartment blocks has been vacant since 1986. It is easy to create photography that is saturated with color prompting thoughts of radioactivity or dismal with high contrast black and white images that create the image of a land of monsters depicted in movies. My goal was to capture images that told the story of a once vibrant city home to thousands of people full of hope for the future and devastated in an instant by human made disaster.

In my images I have attempted to capture both the tragedy of the environment and the people.

It is easy to fail at this type of travel photography. Often thousands of images come down to 10 images that tell the story you wish to tell. Three travel tips have helped me and may help you improve your odds of telling an interesting story from your travel images.

TRAVEL TIPS

The International Leica Society LHSA, has grown rapidly over the last few years. While it may have been safe to assume that those reading Viewfinder in the past were seasoned veterans of Leica photography, there are now many people brand new to this wonderfully creative and interesting group. Further, not everyone considers themselves a “travel photographer.” With that in mind, I want to offer three tips for travel photography. These tips are designed to help you achieve that “Red Dot Blue Dot” image that tells a story of place and people without words. They may seem basic and simplistic, but they can be beneficial to beginner, intermediate, and professional photographers alike.





(LEFT) "Deep End" - Leica SL (Typ 601), 21mm f/3.4 Super Elmar (RIGHT) "We Hear You" - Leica SL (Typ 601), 21mm f/3.4 Super Elmar



(LEFT) "Cliche" - Leica SL (Typ 601), 21mm f/3.4 Super Elmar (RIGHT) "Stands" - Leica SL (Typ 601), 21mm f/3.4 Super Elmar



Be sure to study your subject prior to your travels. Movies, books, and research can be critical to give you advance knowledge of what you will see. Additionally, and in the case of Chernobyl, I visited a small museum that is often overlooked in Kiev prior to my actual visit. That gave me a solid foundation of knowledge on the subject. Then it is time to travel.

TIP #1 Be a travel minimalist.

We are all Leica enthusiasts, many of us are historic camera enthusiasts, or even more widely, equipment enthusiasts. For many there are never enough lenses, cameras, and gear for the occasion. While I truly believe there is always room for one more camera, lens, or camera bag, travel and travel photography is better served by limiting the load. Every year I carry less and less gear, making my bag lighter and lighter. As technology has improved a MacBook Pro became an iPad Pro, and soon the upcoming iPadOS will provide an even more robust travel system. Some have moved from a DSLR to a mirrorless camera. And the changes in the industry are ongoing. When it comes to gear, in the last year I have been carrying only one or two bodies and one or two lenses on a trip. But when I go out for the day, I typically decide on one camera and one lens and don't even take a bag.

Creating the ability to be closer to people, without making them nervous about the huge camera, is a key to street photography and is a huge benefit of using a Leica. That said, taking that to the next level and shooting with one camera and one lens alone makes it even easier to become part of the environment you are shooting and connect directly with the people who are your subjects.

TIP #2 It really is all about the people.

Although I really encourage you to, you may not photograph people at all. I never photographed people until I met my friend and fellow Leica photographer Bob from New York who told me, "Oh, you just have to include people, they make the image interesting!" But even if you shoot landscapes, abandoned places, or wildlife, the key is almost always the people.

Talking to people while traveling can be intimidating. But the payoff can be a gold mine in photo opportunities. There is nothing like a local person to know that "locals only" off the beaten path place. Creating these relationships can not only open up your photography opportunities but it can open a door to truly understanding the place you are visiting. Creating a deeper understanding will pay dividends in how you see your subject through the viewfinder. In turn you will have photos that tell a more detailed, accurate story of place. So don't be shy and engage with locals, even if only through pantomimes or smiles.

TIP #3 Say yes.

Even if you aren't naturally introverted, traveling to a new place can often make you uncomfortable and at a minimum more guarded. This, of course, is the exact opposite of what we try to achieve by traveling. So how can you combat the naturally protective nature of your brain in order to have the very experiences you set out to have?

I find that the answer is to say yes. Say yes more often. Travelers are inundated with decisions on a daily basis. Often we only have two weeks of vacation from our job where we make decisions every day. The phenomenon of decision fatigue can



be addressed (at least from a travel photography perspective) by making your default yes.

When someone you meet asks if you want to taste a new food...

Yes.

When your cab driver tells you there is a really interesting neighborhood you should visit...

Yes, take me there.

When you are exhausted and just want to go to bed but your travel companion wants to go see a night street food market...


Get out of bed and go! Yes.

The key here is to get out of your comfort zone. Embrace things you wouldn't normally do. Be open to experiences you would never have at home. Now, disclaimer, I'm not advising you to embrace risk or put yourself in dangerous situations, just to be open to new experiences that you may not be naturally comfortable with.

I would never have seen mud volcanos in Azerbaijan, snorkeled in the Straights of Hormuz, salsa danced at a Bosnian rave, or had homemade liquor from a Georgian market vendor lady's private stash if I had not said yes. And, perhaps more relevant from a Viewfinder standpoint, I wouldn't have images of those experiences if I had not said yes.

So be a travel minimalist, embrace local people, and say yes.

CONCLUSION Whether traveling to environmentally devastated places like Chernobyl or in the heart of a vibrant city, my goal is to connect with both the place and the people.

Keep traveling and keep making incredible travel images. I hope you are able to visit www.reddotbluedot.com and support the project. We are launching new features regularly to build a travel and travel photography community that embraces the type of travel I've outlined above. We have fantastic shirts that we collaborated with Tog Tees in Philadelphia on, a great soft release that shows your Red Dot Blue Dot travel photography spirit, Photographer in Focus features, and aim to be a great source for information and content to help travelers and photographers alike. 

Keith R. Sbiral serves as Vice President of the International Leica Society, LHSA, is a career transitions coach for his firm Apochromatik and co-owns both Red Dot Blue Dot and Complete Cuba. He currently has a gallery show of Red Dot Blue Dot images at The Rangefinder Gallery in Chicago, Illinois. He can be contacted at: krs@reddotbluedot.com or www.keithsbiral.com

(LEFT) "1970" - Leica SL (Typ 601), 21mm f/3.4 Super Elmar

(CENTER) "Why" - Leica SL (Typ 601), 35mm f/1.4 Summilux FLE

(RIGHT) "Grocery" - Leica SL (Typ 601), 35mm f/1.4 Summilux FLE