

by ALEXANDER WELSCHER

***Chernobyl not only sparked global attention in 1986 nuclear reactor disaster. The hugely popular TV series has also led to a surge in tourists to the filming locations in Lithuania. The Baltic country has become a new destination for nuclear tourism.***



Visitors pose for a photo on top of a dismantled nuclear reactor during a guided tour to the decommissioned Ignalina nuclear power station in Visaginas

## Atomic attraction

What was it like on 26 April 1986 when everything went wrong at the Soviet nuclear power plant in Chernobyl? More than 30 years after the reactor meltdown and explosion, the HBO mini-series *Chernobyl* took up the nuclear disaster in a dark and realistic manner. In five episodes, it authentically depicts the explosion's aftermath, the vast clean-up operation and the subsequent inquiry. The series has been a major success that scooped multiple film awards and became a must-watch historical drama. Its fame has also brought unforeseen attention to Lithuania. *Chernobyl* has turned its filming locations in the Baltic nation into off-beat tourist attractions – nuclear tourism is booming since the series exploded onto TV screens in the spring of 2019.

“We have seen great interest here. Since the series was aired, we have many times more tourists than usual,” says Ignalina Nuclear Power

Plant director Audrius Kamienas. The decommissioned Soviet-built atomic station in Lithuania, which underwent its final shutdown in 2009 due to a commitment that the Baltic state gave when it joined the European Union, was one of the main film sets for *Chernobyl*. Not much had to be changed for this: Ignalina dates from the same time period as the ill-fated Chernobyl plant and had an almost identical reactor design. The Lithuanian facility went online in 1983 and was supposed to become the largest nuclear power plant in the Soviet Union at that time. To accommodate plant workers, even an entire city was built from scratch – Visaginas. The nearby town now also benefits from the tourists visiting the plant nestled in the north-eastern tip of Lithuania, close to the borders to Belarus and Latvia.

Tickets to tour Ignalina, priced at around €60 each, are booked months in advance. In 2019 alone, 4,485 people visited the plant – up

from 2,240 the year before. The facility has extended its visitor capacity to cope with the demand from Lithuania, Europe and beyond. Tours for groups not exceeding 15 people are now offered up to two times on four days per week, instead of three weekly tours of the past. “We even had to recruit additional guides,” Kamienas said during an interview in his office in the plant that seems to have fallen out of time. Guided tours are also held in Vilnius, enabling visitors in private excursions to explore the dreary Soviet-era residential district of Fabijoniškės where the original sites were recreated and adapted to look like the infamous Ukrainian town of Pripyat. Located next to the Chernobyl plant, Pripyat was once home to 50,000 people who mainly worked at the plant before it was evacuated forever on day two of the disaster and left to the devices of nature. Today, it is a desolate city at the epicentre of the exclusion zone around the plant, but for *Chernobyl* the town was reborn in fiction in

Fabijoniškės. Other film locations in Vilnius include the former cultural and sports centre of the Ministry of the Interior and the KGB museum.

Lithuania's second-largest city Kaunas, on the other hand, served as a backdrop for scenes set in Soviet Moscow. The scene where Pripyat residents gather on a bridge to watch the eerie blue glow of radiation on the night of the explosion was also shot there. In total, over 40 different locations in Lithuania can be seen in the series. There were around 1,000 hours of footage – *Chernobyl* is by far Lithuania's biggest production to date. Filmed in 16 weeks in 2018, the series was made with a direct outlay of around €15 million into the Lithuanian economy and created hundreds of jobs.

### Inside the Chernobyl lookalike

The main filming location for the series, however, was Ignalina. Day-trippers board trains or buses in

Vilnius or join organized tours by operators such as *Travel Addicts* to the plant located in the midst of a scenic forest. “Wow, it looks like the real thing in Chernobyl,” the French tourist Morgane Kaluzinski said upon arrival when spotting the Lithuanian nuclear site for the first time. Together with her travel companion Gabriel Peron, she already visited the Chernobyl exclusion zone a few years ago. Now, the couple came from London to see Ignalina and get to know what happened when a similar reactor exploded in 1986. “We saw the series but the topic interested us before, as the Chernobyl incident is really fundamental to the history of the 21st century,” said Peron of his motivation to visit Ignalina. Other visitors also come for their own reasons, which range from pure sensationalism to genuine historical interest.

Despite being decommissioned, significant safety requirements apply for accessing the nuclear power plant. Under the gaze of armed military staff, each visitor has to undergo a strict inspection in the entrance area that is similar to an airport security check. Mobile phones, cameras and other technical devices as well as food and drinks are strictly forbidden inside the plant. These rules have to be observed by all visitors taking part in the Ignalina excursion. No concessions were made for the *Chernobyl* film crew either.

Once you have entered the power plant through the chip-based security turnstiles, everyone has to take off their street clothes and slip into a whiter-than-white overall that smells of disinfectant and shoes. Wearing the new plant-issued outfit and a helmet on your head, the guided tour passes through a seemingly endless labyrinth of long, poorly lit

corridors. The walls are covered with different-coloured samples of Soviet plastic production and still have safety and warning instructions in Russian on them. Always on hand throughout the tour is a radiation dosimeter, and everyone is checked for contamination on exit.

The three-hour tour first leads into the cold heart of the decommissioned plant – the reactor hall. Several metres below the tourists' feet, and shielded by several protective layers, was the reactor core which was loaded by control rods located within a floor with a checkerboard pattern of small grey metal plates. Standing and walking on top of the dismantled nuclear reactor gives some tourists an uncomfortable feeling – the core is still highly radioactive. The tour then continues into the turbine hall, which is several hundred metres long and where dismantled and disassembled machine parts give an idea of the dimensions of the plant that was a model of centrally planned enormity.

The highlight of the tour for most tourists, however, is the control room that looks familiar to anyone who has watched *Chernobyl*. For many visitors, being in the small windowless room feels like stepping back into one of the scenes. Surrounded by outdated screens and tables with dozens of buttons and switches, they willingly agree to a souvenir photo offered by the guide. Most of the tourists pose next to the button for the reactor's emergency shutdown. It was also pressed in the series. Too late and without success – as in reality. A fatal design flaw led to a chain reaction. The reactor experienced an explosion and core meltdown – and the most devastating nuclear accident in history got under way. Within days, the fallout had spread across most of Europe and its consequences are still felt today.



Film shooting for the Chernobyl in the Fabijoniškės district in Vilnius

Lithuania was also affected back then by the catastrophe. Thousands of liquidators were sent to Chernobyl in the months and years after the disaster by the Soviet authorities to help clean up the contamination. Many of them suffered from illnesses and health problems or died as a result of their exposure to the high levels of radiation. For some of the former conscripts, the series has brought back memories and reopened old wounds. In general, however, *Chernobyl* is considered to be historically relatively accurate and was received positively in Lithuania, while there has been a row about the series in Russia and other former Soviet Republics.

### Nuclear town with(out) an atomic future

The success of *Chernobyl* and the resulting interest in the film locations came as a surprise to many in Lithuania. While tour operators and the nuclear power plant in Ignalina were quick to exploit the new situation as an additional source of income, for Visaginas the unexpectedly great

attention and interest feels like a missed opportunity. “The city was not prepared for such a large increase in visitors,” says the Visaginas Mayor Erlandas Galaguz.

In 2019, the number of overnight stays in the purpose-built town, which is shaped like one half of a butterfly from a bird’s eye view, grew by 50% compared to the year before. Apart from 14 broad, straight avenues with lined-up multi-storey apartment blocks, however, there is not much to see for *Chernobyl* fans in the monotonous red and grey city of prefabricated buildings. The tourist information is hard to find, and there are no souvenir shops or places that sell memorabilia with the nuclear power plant or the like on it. Only the local brewery seized the opportunity and merchandizes the local beer: Atomic blonde.

Once hailed as a model Soviet city and worker’s paradise, Visaginas has faced an identity crisis since Ignalina was decommissioned. Galaguz now deems nuclear tourism as an opportunity for the city that

Visitors pose at the button for the reactor emergency shutdown in the central control room of the decommissioned Ignalina nuclear power plant.



is left with just over half of its previous 35,000 inhabitants when the plant was in operation. The mayor, who also worked at the plant for years, wants to further develop in that direction and plans to set up a multi-purpose information and education centre on nuclear power and the atomic legacy of the city. Others in the city have similar ideas for establishing a museum about Ignalina.

No matter what plans are implemented in the end, they will probably come too late for the vast majority of tourists. The surge in visitors has already peaked and is now slowing down again, according to Lithuanian tourism experts. Ignalina director general Kamienas also expects the boom to end sooner or later, but still expects visitors to come and see the plant until it is razed to the ground in 2038. “Nuclear tourism is a special kind of tourism and these tourists are definitely coming here,” he believes. “There are not many nuclear sites that can be visited. In fact, there are only a few in the world – and we are one of them.”

Photo: Alexander Welscher, Sky UK Ltd/HBO



Photo: Alexander Welscher

*Chernobyl* became one of the most outstanding and acclaimed mini-series after exploding onto TV screens in spring 2019. The HBO historical drama about the 20th century’s worst nuclear disaster won several Emmy and Golden Globe Awards. One of the many people behind the success is Gary Tuck, the managing director of the Vilnius-based *Baltic Film Services* that provides production and co-production services in the Baltic States. *Baltic Business Quarterly* talked with Tuck about the five-part series that was partly shot in Lithuania and made its filming locations an off-beat tourist attraction.

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“I did not expect it to be such a phenomenon”

### Were you surprised by the huge success of *Chernobyl*?

I think everybody was surprised by the huge success of the series. Even though I was convinced that the series would be good because the scripts that I read before the film was shot were among the best scripts I have ever read in my whole career. We also had access to the research materials used for it – and it contained the most comprehensive information about the whole Chernobyl disaster from every perspective. Of course, a lot can go wrong between the script and the final project, but in this case it did not. There was a great team behind it with a very good director. So I thought that it would be a great series but I did not expect it to be the kind of phenomenon that it certainly became.

### Not everyone is as enthusiastic as you. There is controversy in Russia and Ukraine about the series.

Of course, there are always going to be different opinions about the facts as presented. But I think overall that it is a fairly reasonable depiction of what happened back then. The primary focus of the writer and executive producer *Craig Mazin* was to tell the story of the actual people involved in terms of the

human dimension. Ok, it shows the Soviet system and the cover-ups and all the rest of it. And I can understand the criticism but I think he draws the line very well. For me, the overriding thing about the series is the human impact of the disaster on ordinary people. Ultimately, it is about the ones who were directly affected and their heroic efforts to contain it: the fire-fighters, the miners, the hospital workers, the soldiers and so on. For me, that is that is the real key here.

### The success of the series also had an effect on tourism in Lithuania. There are now organized tours to the filming locations of Chernobyl. Is this kind of film tourism a new trend in the Baltics?

I don’t think it is a new trend but rather a more public phase of it. Historically, tourism has always benefitted from film, and most tourist organizations have acknowledged that film can have an impact on tourist numbers. People have always come to see the very spot where a popular movie was filmed. Now it is just taken to the next level by organizing actual tours and the tourist people are much more active about it in

terms of really promoting this. So that is kind of a new thing. Before *Chernobyl* they did it already with the BBC series *War and Peace* which was shot in Lithuania, Latvia and Russia, and organized special tours to the film locations. And in my understanding, they are quite successful.

### Do you think the success of Chernobyl can be repeated or was it more of a one-off?

Never say never. In general, the film business is very unpredictable. Ultimately, the art of attracting films anywhere in any country is almost always location-driven. The only reason why the *Chernobyl* executive producers came to Lithuania was that we had an existing nuclear plant that was a dead ringer for Chernobyl and also the Soviet-style buildings that could double for the city. So this was kind of a unique situation and it is hard to image this repeating itself. But let me rephrase your question: Could we get some more productions of that scale in the Baltics? Yes, I think we can. But for this we need to improve and expand the infrastructure. We certainly need some stages and larger studio spaces. That would help to attract some of these bigger productions.