

GHOST TOWNS OF THE WORLD

Populated with buildings and all the trappings of a city—but no residents to be found...

Once upon a time they reverberated with life, homes and businesses sprouting up everywhere, but now they lie listless and lifeless. Zman takes you on a visit to a few of the ghost towns scattered around the world to learn how they appeared and what caused them to empty out.

Picture before your eyes a large, empty building, its windows smashed and doors boarded up. Inside, whatever objects have been left behind are covered by a thick layer of dust, testimony to the unbroken isolation the building has witnessed for long years since it was abandoned. The all-pervasive silence is eerie.

If an abandoned building can inspire the creeps, imagine wandering into an entire ghost town! Houses, schools, offices and stores stand ready, yet not a soul is in sight.

Ghost towns take their name from the belief that abandoned structures attract ghosts and evil spirits, and indeed the Talmud (*Berachos* 3a) advises staying away from ruins due to the danger created by possible other-worldly forces that inhabit places devoid of humanity. (Many commentators feel that these harmful forces are not as potent today due to our lower level.) A number of ghost towns exist around the globe, some of which have been

abandoned for natural reasons while others for reasons that border on the bizarre.

Cities often empty out once their main source of income disappears and residents move on to seek jobs elsewhere, such as when the construction of a new highway that bypassed a town left local residents with no income from passing motorists.

This was the case for many communities along Route 66 that ran from Chicago all the way to California. With the completion of the I-40 and I-44, many drivers turned to the newer and faster highways, and numerous local towns fell apart when their gas stations, diners and motels no longer had regular customers.

Similarly, the American West is dotted with ghost towns where gold and silver mines brought droves of people when they boomed and then were left devoid of life when the mines eventually went bust.

In other cases, people abandoned their hometowns due to natural disasters, such as flooding, or manmade disasters, such as wars, massacres and even a nuclear meltdown as in Chernobyl in April 1986. A number of cities in eastern Arkansas were reduced to ghost towns after 7,000 people fell victim to an epidemic in 1918. The entire city of Pattonsburg, Missouri, relocated in 1993 to a new site three miles away from the original after residents decided they had had enough of the constant flooding. (The city had been flooded 30 times since its founding in 1845, including twice in 1993 alone.)

In some instances cities emptied in anticipation of a disaster. Such was the case with Lemieux, Ontario, when testing in 1991 confirmed that the city had been built on unstable ground and residents were forced to evacuate. Two years after the last building in Lemieux was demolished, a shift in the soft earth dumped virtually the entire city into the nearby river.

The city of Centralia, Pennsylvania, is an example of a ghost town that was created by an invisible danger, in this case a fire that had been burning in an

underground coal mine for 20 years and had already caused a number of fatalities when residents evacuated in the early 1980s. Times Beach, Missouri, emptied out in 1983 after Environmental Protection Agency officials found that high levels of chemicals released made the air unsafe.

Other ghost towns were created when governments exercised the right of eminent domain to evict the inhabitants. Tyneham, a town in the southeastern county of Dorset, England, was occupied by military authorities during World War II to be used as a training center for fresh recruits. NASA emptied an area 34 square miles to build the John Stennis Space Center in Mississippi for testing rockets. Residents had to be evacuated both because of the potential danger of testing new rocketry as well as the definite danger presented by the high level of noise. In the case of Lewistown, Tennessee, the city was deluged by water in 1936 after the government built the Norris Dam nearby, and residents had to rebuild their city at a higher elevation.

A number of ghost towns have been turned into tourist attractions, such as the gold-mining boomtown Barkerville, in the Canadian province of British Columbia; Tombstone and Jerome in Arizona; Ashcroft, Colorado, and more. Some of these have been preserved as historic sites and they rely on visitors and movie-makers for their meager inflow of funding. In some cases, the tourism attracted to ghost towns actually served to revive the town. The city of Valhalla in Victoria, Australia, was abandoned after the last bit of gold was extracted from the nearby mine that had created the town. The city's ongoing tourist business, aided by its proximity to other attractions, resulted in some people resettling the deserted area on a permanent basis.

Alexandria, today the second-largest city in Egypt, was reduced during the Middle Ages from its earlier state of glory to a population of just 150, ranking it among the greatest ghost towns of all time. In recent decades it has seen a rebirth and its present population is in the ballpark of 5 million.

Pripyat, Ukraine Nuclear Ghost Town

The town of Pripyat, just a few miles north of Chernobyl and along the border with Belarus, was built to house the workers who operated the Chernobyl nuclear power plant situated less than two miles away. It was occupied by some 50,000 residents who enjoyed amenities that were very rare in the Soviet Union, thanks to their prominent role in advancing the economy and thereby making them the pride of the Soviet Empire. Pripyat was blessed with wide streets, open and spacious dwellings, a large shopping center, restaurants and parks. Virtually every resident was employed in some capacity by the nuclear power plant.

On the morning of April 25, 1986, residents of Pripyat slept peacefully while a horrific accident occurred in the power plant. The Communist leaders in Moscow wanted to keep the embarrassing disaster a secret, so local residents were not informed, much less evacuated. For the next 36 hours residents of Pripyat inhaled the radiation particles that had been released into the atmosphere in heavy doses, and many of them would take sick and die in coming years.

On the afternoon of April 27, the city's public announcement system informed residents that a mild accident had taken place at the nuclear facility, and it would be necessary to evacuate temporarily. They were told to take only the most basic



Ghost town Berlin, Nevada.



A side street in the ghost town of Bodie, California.



Empty park in the former nuclear city.