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Interviews with:

AURELIE CURIE

MR. MONSTER

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ROMANYWG

Communist Party Headquarters,
Buzludzha, Bulgaria:

**EXPLORING
CHERNOBYL
WITH URBANX**

Draining Safety Tips:
Majok Crew:
Noctography with John Nocturne:

Interview with

Niki Feijen

Photos by Niki Feijen © 2012
Interview by Andre Govia

UEmag: What is your camera of choice and why?

Niki: Currently, I am using a Nikon D700 together with the 14-24 2.8, a Sigma 15mm Fisheye and a 50mm 1.4. Why? Well a long time ago I started with a Nikon F65 analog camera. For a few years I was snapping pics and all of a sudden there was the digital era. The first two digital cameras available were the Nikon D70 and the Canon 300d Rebel. Well, the Nikon felt more solid as the Canon felt really plastic and reminded me of a Fisherprice camera I once had, so Nikon it was. With the D70 I was quite satisfied until the D90 was released. I made that switch and got myself a Tokina 12-24. Within a half-year I had a great opportunity to get the Tokina 11-16 2.8, which is an amazing lens and I still think is one of the best wide-angle DX lenses you could get. My D90 was serving me very well until I shot with a D700 and a 14-24 2.8 lens. I was sold, what a monster combination that was. About six months later I got me that very same set and I'm still using it. The 14-24 2.8 is the best and sharpest wide-angle you have ever seen. Maybe next up is the Canon 5D Mark III. Time will tell.

UEmag: How did you become interested in urban exploration?

Niki: When I was very little, there was this spooky old villa close to my home. It belonged to an old wood factory that was behind it. For years I could control my curiosity but then one day I decided to enter the place. The excitement ran through my body

as drugs through an addict's vein. From that moment on I was hooked. When the first pictures of abandoned locations appeared online, I soon learned that I wasn't the only one who was into this strange hobby. I decided to bring a camera and start snapping pics.

UEmag: Do you have anyone who has inspired you to take photography to the level where you are?

Niki: There are several persons that are a huge inspiration to me: Nikki Sixx of Mötley Crüe is a very big inspiration. Beside [being] an amazing artist on stage he is also a very talented photographer. Seeing things that most people think of as ugly and turn[ing] those things into something beautiful is a trademark of his. The second person is who got me into the whole world of HDR: Trey Ratcliff. The first time I've seen HDR shots from him my jaw dropped to the floor. I was stunned that you could do that with a normal camera. I knew one thing: That's the kind of shots I want to combine with Urban Exploring. The only thing I didn't like about Trey's pictures is that his colors were just too bright. Then I saw Andre Govia's photographs. I think I mailed everybody I knew with a shot of him and subject "You gotta see this!" By now, Andre is a very good friend and still a huge inspiration too. He taught me a lot of photography and processing techniques that I use as a base from which I continued to build my workflow.

UEmag: Tell the readers about any explores that stick in your

mind and for what reason (i.e. entry , danger, etc.)

Niki: I got a lot of stories to tell, one is at the UEmag site called "Welcome to the Overlook" but I'll share two others.

The first one I call Fifi encounter. After looking for several months for this amazing spiral staircase I finally found the right location. Together with a friend, we parked nearby the monastery and since the gate was wide open, we entered the area. We

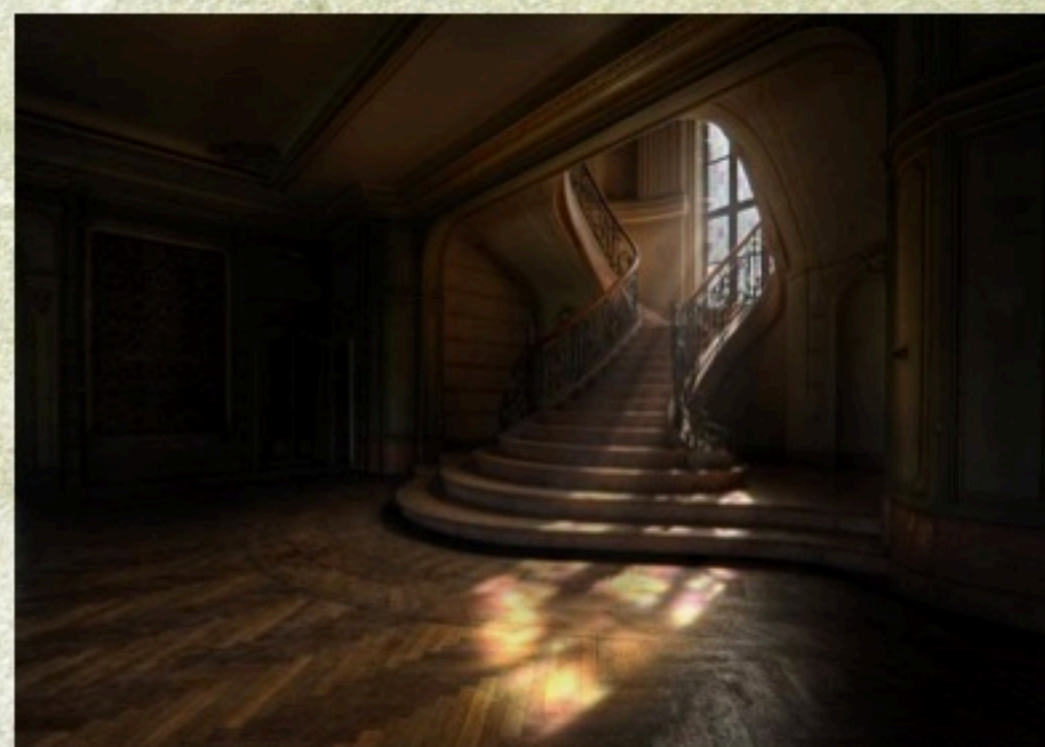


quickly found a busted cellar window and we got in. After finding the amazing spiral staircase we spent just about an hour there and since there wasn't much to see we decided to find another exit. From one room you could get out over a small ledge and a small fence and then you were on ground level again. So we exited Indiana Jones style and got ourselves down. What we didn't see were the bushes with tons of thorns. Crawling on hands and knees, we proceeded and all of a sudden my friend in front of me halted. He just froze and stopped moving completely. "What's the problem," I asked. He whispered, "dooooog." I looked beside him and about 5 meters in front of us there was this huge,

mean-looking pit bull. After crawling 1 meter we could get up and [we] just stood there. Now what, he asked me. The dog was in the neighbor's backyard. Unfortunately the back of the yard had no fencing. Just some ankle-high flowers were between him and us. The exit was just 30 meters away but it seemed like 600 meters. "Don't look at him and keep moving," I said. We slowly walked past the dog and in the corner of my eyes I see its big head turning and following us. Just 10 meters left, don't look back! Every one of those last steps I was expecting the dog to snap my heel and bite off my foot. It never happened. The dog never moved a muscle.

The second one I call Hunting Season.

I was urbexing for several years now but still hadn't visited Noisy Castle. Now it was time, together with Daanoe, Andre Govia and Rusty, we visited this impressive piece of architecture. We made our way from the back into the castle and finally we needed some shots from the front. The problem of Noisy is the caretaker, who is not a very friendly guy and isn't afraid of shooting his gun above your head if he catches you. He drives a quad around the terrain with his hunting rifle strapped to the hood. He even has a good reason for that as the castle's in the middle of hunting grounds. As we were setting the tripods and focusing for the shots we hear this noise. Oh shit could it really be ... listening again. Then in the corner of my eye I spot this vehicle coming. I run to the right and the other guys run towards the left. I'm still in knee high grass but I'll never make it to the woods. I dive behind a tree with my extended tripod next to me in the high grass. I hear the car pulling up about 6 meters from me just behind the tree in front of me. I push my face down in the grass and wait for the guy to yell at me. Five minutes pass but nothing happens. Then I hear people talking. Damn! There are two of them. Slowly I lift my head and take a peek if I can see someone. There is this guy close to the castle looking around - just as he turns his head towards me I duck down again. It's almost impossible if he doesn't spot me. I stay as still as I can but now I even think he can hear my heart beat. Again five minutes pass and nothing happens. I peek again and now I see the other guy close towards the castle and he [has] a camera in his hands. Oh no - he brought a friend to take some pics, this can take a while. I look to the left and the other guy is standing with his back behind me wielding a big rifle underneath his right arm. I press myself firmly to



the ground again and a million thoughts go through my mind. I look back. The forest is about 8 meters away, there is no way I can reach it before he spots me - or worse. Behind me, a crazy loud noise. A turkey! Oh no! I'm wearing a backpack; if he spots it in the grass he might as well think it's a turkey. Could it be hunting season already? I reach a 160 bpm heart rate now. Ten minutes pass and I decide to look once more and if they are both near the castle I'll make a run for the woods. I lift my head again. The guy with the camera is snapping pics in front of the castle. The other guy is ... taking photographs? He has a big tripod set up and is pointing at the castle. Wait a minute ... Rifle ... tripod ... rifle ... tri... Oh shit, that was no rifle underneath his arm, he was setting up his friggin' tripod! Completely flabbergasted, I rise a bit higher. That's no quad buggy, it's a blue van! All the pieces fall together now and I stand up. I walk towards them and they still didn't spot me. I say hi, and he turns around a bit scared. I soon learned that the guys were from National Geographic and shooting a documentary there! What a relief. Still I head down in a hurry and meet the guys at the cars. Completely soaked I tell my story. Don't have to tell you they laughed their asses off.

UEmag: Where do you see yourself taking your skills in the future?

Niki: Well, processing changes for every picture you process so it just goes with the flow. I want to get better in mastering shadows and light. As far as urbexing goes, there are still tons of places that I want to visit. Battersea Power Station is very high on my to-do list as well as an Italian tour.

UEmag: If you could give any advice to new explorers thinking of getting into urban exploration what would it be?

Niki: Don't do it. Besides that it's just dangerous: asbestos, fungus, entrapment, cracking floors, drug needles and even radiation. You will end up spending loads of money on equipment and gas. Enjoy the pics of others and don't get into it. If I cannot stop you with that - never go alone, go with an experienced explorer and don't be a hero. If you are afraid to do something, don't.

UEmag: What's in your kit bag (things you always take on an explore)?

Niki: Besides my camera, lenses and tripod I'll always bring water, food, Leatherman, flashlight, extra light, spare batteries, gloves, door handle, dust mask, remote control, dust cloth and urbex buddies.

UEmag: Do you explore with a crew or alone?

Niki: I always explore with a small crew and once a year I organize a big international trip (Urbex Kings / Big Shots).

UEmag: What countries have you explored in and what country for you is the best and for what reason?

Niki: So far I'm mostly in Western Europe. Best country was Ukraine. In 2010 I visited Chernobyl with my girlfriend, which was an experience which lasts a lifetime; to walk around Prip'yat is amazing.

UEmag: We talked about the best place you have explored, but what about the worst place and why?

Niki: I'm not quite fond [of] industrial places. I don't get a real kick out of those. I think the worst place I've visited was an east German sanatorium. It was just so trashed - besides concrete there was just nothing more left.

UEmag: Your final word for the readers?

Niki: Are you still reading this? Well thank you very much for making this small journey into my life. You can follow me on my website www.ArtofUrbex.com

