

HENK VAN RENSBERGEN

ABANDONED  
PLACES

 | LANNOO



# PREFACE

HENK VAN RENSBERGEN

We had been sneaking around the villa in the dunes for days. Was anyone still living there? Some of the windows had been broken and the front door was wide open, but when we peered into the villa we saw furniture, 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. 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 played 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 made a habit of taking my camera with me on visits to new abandoned buildings I discovered. In those early years, I had a fascination for all things industrial. Once I got my driving license, I could travel further afield to seek out places such as Charleroi, Anderlues, Tertre, Ghent or Zeebrugge, and of course, the Buda

Marly factory by the canal in Brussels.

In the early 1990s, I built a website, which was fairly unique at the time. I called it Industrial Art, a rather silly name that I soon replaced with [www.abandoned-places.com](http://www.abandoned-places.com). Later I developed another website - [www.henkvanrensbergen.com](http://www.henkvanrensbergen.com). Press interest started growing, and sometimes, when a building was to be demolished, I was asked to be interviewed. Eventually, the number of visitors to my website peaked, and slowly, a network of urban explorers began to develop. We 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. For me, the challenge in photography was not simply to record what was there to see, but to reproduce the atmosphere: the tension, the complexity, the philosophical questions, the emotions and the surprises these places would have in store.

I regularly revisited the same places, 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, travelled to Japan, Sri Lanka, Mexico, Brazil, Africa and the United States, to name a few. I met some fantastic people with whom I teamed up to explore. I also like to venture out on my own when it is safe to do so.

Should you ever want to start exploring yourself, think about the following: Take nothing but photos, leave nothing but footsteps. It's never the intention to force open windows or doors and to break in. It is equally important not to invade the privacy of the former residents; call it urban exploration ethics.

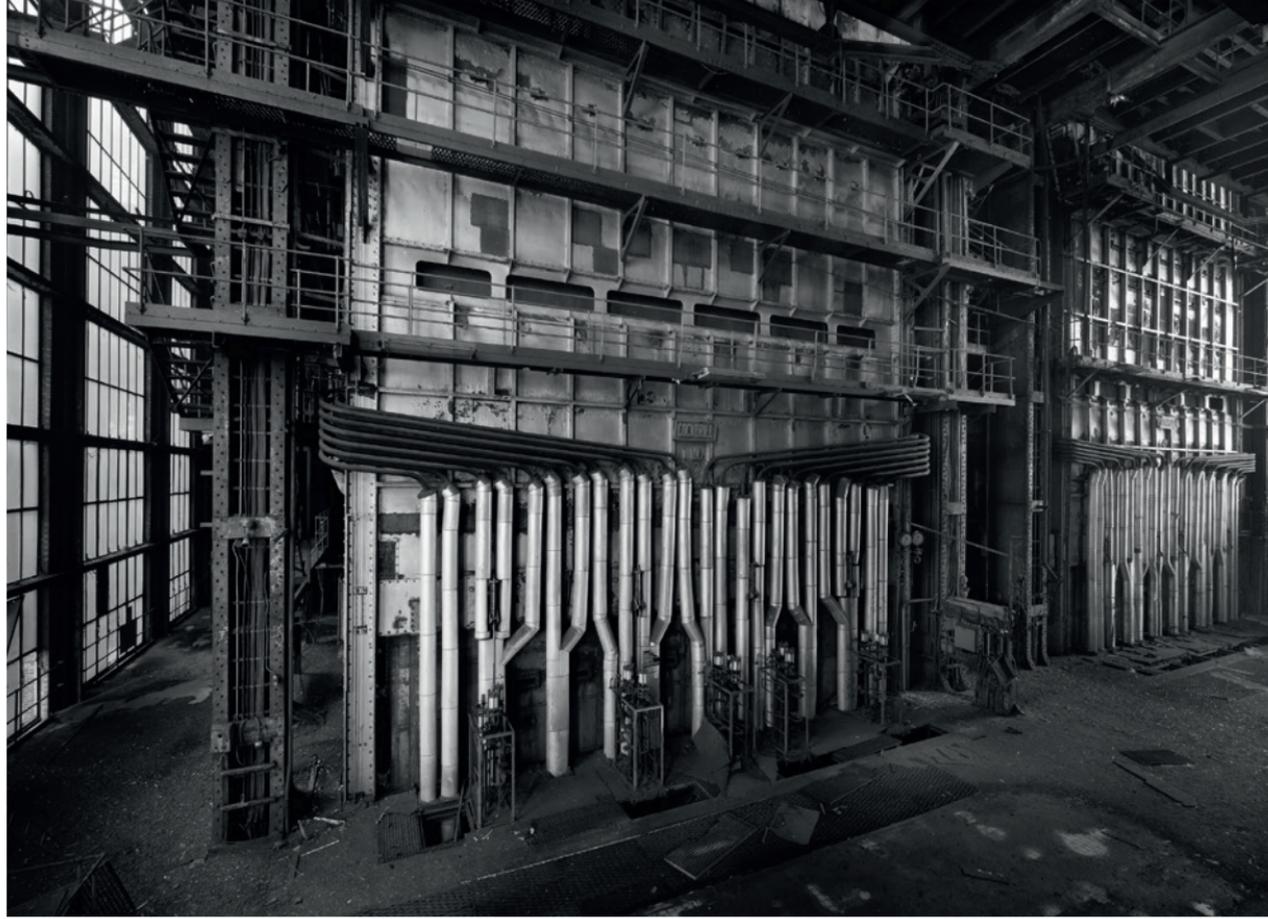
The book you're now holding is an update of 'Abandoned Places', the 2016 edition, which included a collection of the best photos. This 2019 book includes new photos and stories from my recent trips to Abkhazia, Croatia, Italy and Portugal. Enjoy! ♦



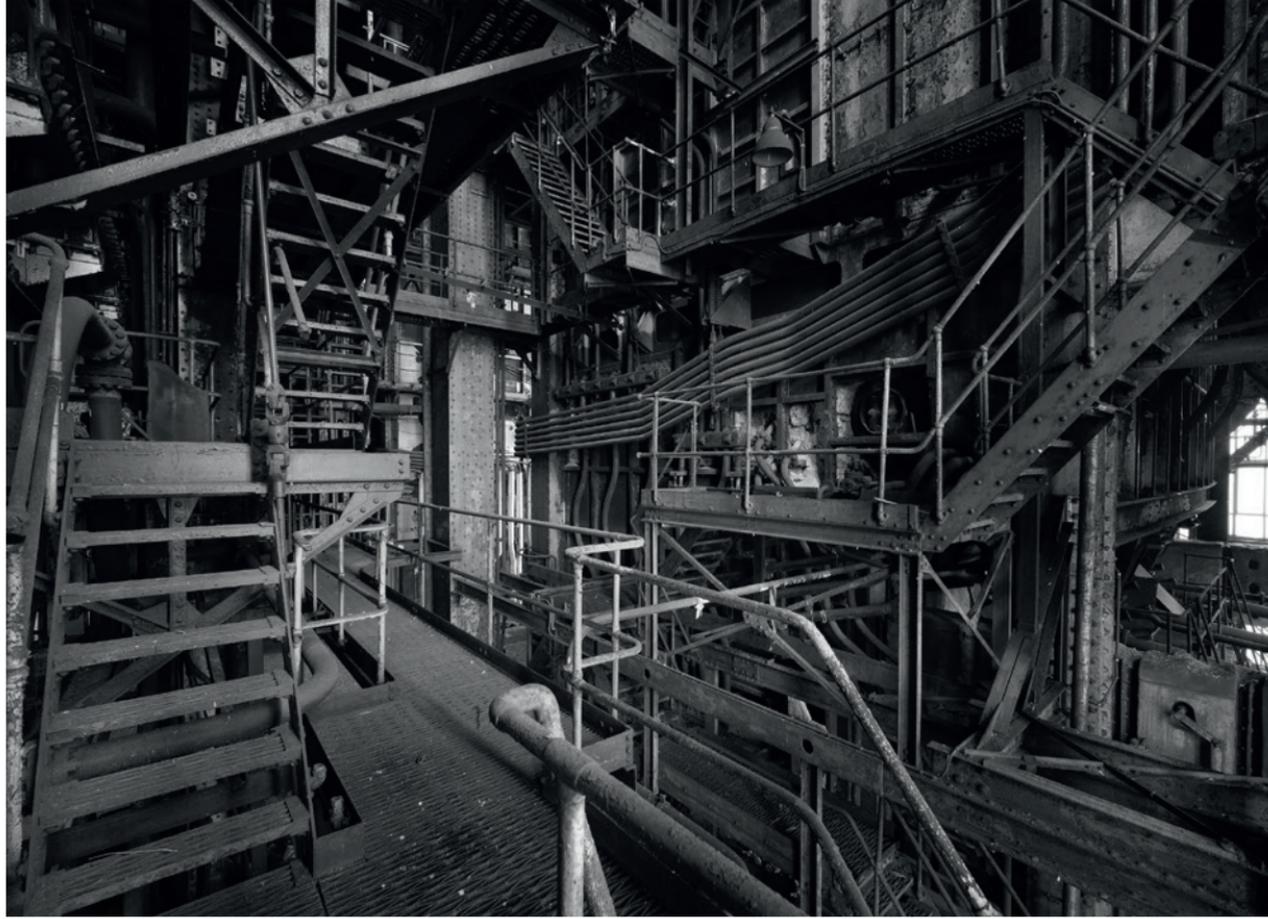




9 Anderlues, Belgium, 2002



10 Centrales Electriques des Flandres, Belgium, 2009







## ◀ POWERPLANT IM

BELGIUM, 2014

Pays Noir, Black Country, is the region around Charleroi, named so for the presence of coal-mines and heavy steel industry. Even though most of the factories have been closed since the 1950s, the landscape remains dotted with spoil tips and old industrial buildings.

This gigantic cooling tower is just one of many abandoned buildings that dot the gloomy skyline of Charleroi.

Built in 1921 and shut down in 2007, this coal-burning electric power station was responsible for 10% of the CO<sub>2</sub> produced throughout the entire country.

The interior never was and never is completely silent. Even when the building is properly sealed off, East European copper thieves always find ways to get in. ♦

## WARSHIP CEMETERY ▸

FRANCE, 2012

This was a risky expedition. In a wide river that flows into the Atlantic Ocean, there are some ten warships waiting to be dismantled. Chains and gangplanks hold them together. Strong currents follow the rhythms of the tides, and military speedboats carry out regular patrols.

When we began to pump up our rubber boats, we found a hole, bigger than the one that sank the Titanic. Plan C was for me to take all the baggage and for my friend to swim over on an airbed. With four bags, my boat was overloaded, and the lack of space made it hard to row. After pausing at the buoys halfway, we set off on the second stage of our journey. The current was much stronger in the middle of the river. The bags in my boat began to slide and I temporarily lost one of the oars.

I started drifting off course and saw the boats disappearing in the darkness. There was one last chance of success, and that was the buoy that held the boats in position. I rowed like a madman and was just able to catch hold of the cable...

Once on board, with knocking knees, we exchanged our trademark grin and cracked open a well-earned can of beer!

That night on the boat was magical. It was raining, and the boats were slippery with oil. The deck was full of young gulls that had never seen human beings before. At daybreak, the entire colony of gulls took off and flew over the boats, calling loudly, their droppings raining down on us. ♦







< **URICANI**  
ROMANIA, 2015

A thousand metres under the ground, everything hangs by a thread. Pumps operate night and day to keep the water level low, and fans blow fresh air through the mine to remove methane and supply the miners with oxygen. If there is a power outage, the place becomes pitch black, quiet as a mouse and very quickly unliveable. Wearing miner's garb, I walk through the endless passageways of Uricani. There is only one place here where they still excavate; the rest, for the most part, looks like a world that has perished. Besides cockroaches and rats, there is no sign of life. The cockroaches arrive in the mines together with the lumber. The rats are always there, and in passageways where few people venture, they get hungry and aggressive. If you stand still for a minute, they start climbing up your clothes. ♦





## **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. ♦





