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MODERN-DAY TREASURE HUNTERS

BY: CHLOE BARKER POST DATE: MON, 29/11/2010 - 5:36PM



John Counter explored an ethanol refinery plant in Chatham, Ont.
(Photo: from counterphoto.com)

John Counter is just your average, regular guy. The 28-year-old Ottawa native runs his own Internet service provider, enjoys photography and occasionally, in his spare time, he crawls through broken windows in order to explore old abandoned buildings. In other words, he's an urban explorer.

Urban exploration is the art of examining places that would normally go unseen in a city.

This usually means going into abandoned houses, factories, industrial facilities, hotels, drains and sewers, climbing cranes, and occasionally even going into active buildings that are still in use.

For Counter, the fun lies more in the buildings that are no longer inhabited, he says.

"I tend to like the abandoned stuff because it's much more interesting," Counter explains. "There's a mystery there, like 'How did this building work? Why is it here? Why are the rooms laid out like this?'"

"There's also that fear that it's going to get destroyed," he says. "I want to try and capture it before it's gone."

Counter attributes his curiosity of old buildings and their inner workings back to his father's love of trains during his childhood; the pair of

them would explore old train stations together.

This sparked his love for discovering abandoned places, which he says was unexpectedly encouraged by his work as an IT consultant.

"Because of my job, I get to see the guts, the plumbing of how an infrastructure works, and that has always fascinated me. I walk into a [client's building] and I have to figure out how [it] works," he says.

"It's only natural that I would walk into an abandoned building and try to figure out how it works, too."

Counter isn't the only one who thinks like this.

Uer.ca is an online community full of urban explorers from around the globe who post pictures of the places they've visited, plan meets so groups of them can explore certain areas, talk about why certain buildings are the way they are and generally discuss various aspects of urban exploration.

These range from threads dedicated to what to do when you encounter angry dogs to what gear works best against fighting asbestos and more. Besides the occasional angry dog, urban exploration has other dangers as well.

Technically, most urban exploring involves trespassing of some sort, which makes it an unfavourable activity from a police perspective, Counter says.

It isn't uncommon for police to charge urban explorers with trespassing and, in some cases, breaking and entering, if the explorer in question has forcibly made their way inside.

Counter boasts that despite having a few run-ins with the police, he's neither been charged nor detained during his urban archaeological adventures.

Another danger that comes with urban exploring is the constant fear of the building itself.

Usually, the places urban exploring takes you are more often than not isolated and decrepit old buildings on the verge of crumbling down, making accidents like falling more life-threatening, Counter says.

"Three weeks ago, I got to get into the building I've always wanted to get into. The day before I was going to make my first attempt to get in, a guy died in there," Counter recalls, explaining the closest he's come to death while exploring.

"[The guy] fell down a coal chute and it took the fire department six hours to get him out. You hear stuff like that and . . . you sort of sit there thinking, 'There is a risk here.' "

But hopeful Ottawa urban explorers need not worry too much about falling down coal chutes.

The Ottawa urban explorer scene is fairly small, seeing as how it is a town with few industrial zone, meaning that old, uninhabited factories are hard to come by.

That's not to say Ottawa doesn't have its share of abandoned places, no matter how small that selection may be.

Counter says he managed to come across some old abandoned greenhouses, complete with broken glass and graffiti, which is a sign of the spot's popularity.

Other close spots to explore are a microwave transmitter tower and an abandoned hotel outside of town.

Local urban explorers looking for some serious exploits will have to travel to either Montreal or Toronto to really get a feel for the big time, though, where old buildings and factories are more than abundant.

With the constant threat of asbestos, police, injury and sometimes death, it seems like you'd have to be slightly mad to want to start crawling into these buildings anytime soon.

Yet despite all of its downsides, people still continue to explore cities all around the world.

Why? Well there's the obvious thrill of defying someone or something, of being in some place you're not supposed to be, which can cater to the rebel in all of us, Counter says.

Yet there's also a softer side of the culture too, an artistic side which separates the adrenaline junkies from the artists and photographers.

"I think it really comes down to the fact that I think a lot of urban explorers are storytellers. For me, the photography lets you tell the story."

“There’s something so romantic about learning about these things that totally captivates me.”

As a five-year veteran of urban exploring, Counter also has some advice for first-timers looking to break into this enticing counterculture, a certain old mantra that he uses in his life as well.

“Take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints, kill nothing but time. That’s something that I strongly believe in, I live by that,” he says.

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