

Dreamscapes of Decay

SEPULTURAS

Subtle use of HDRi brings out the haunting details in this abandoned crypt in Belgium.

© Jean-Claude Berens

DPP chats with photographer Jean-Claude Berens about his haunting documentaries of abandoned dwellings and industrial sites across Europe, and his use of HDR imaging techniques to convey their mood

SPECIAL FEATURE ► Dreamscapes of Decay

MANEATER

Berens often finds anthropomorphisms in his industrial subjects, such as this machine suggesting a cannibal's open mouth and filed teeth.



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DR. CALIGARI'S HAT

Shot in an abandoned farmhouse in Luxembourg. A fisheye lens gives the distortion reminiscent of the movie Dr. Caligari, and the placement of the hat adds to the eerie abandoned feel of the scene.

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© Jean-Claude Berens

“You see the emptiness, the scattered items that remind you who the owners were and give you glimpses into what they were like”

Urban exploration is a challenge and adventure for Berens, who notes that his most memorable photographs are those where he entered a site and was able to take only one shot. “What we urban explorers do is on the razor’s edge between legal and illegal activity,” Berens says, “though I wouldn’t really describe it as ‘guerilla shooting’ – we never access sites by force, but let ourselves in by doors that have been left open, windows, and holes in fences.” Once in, Berens’ main challenge is dealing with the high contrast levels, with most of the interiors in shadow but with very bright spots and shafts of light coming from windows and other openings. This, he says, was the reason he got a DSLR and went into HDRI in the first place. “Those shafts and pools of light are a very important part of my composition, but to get them and the details of the interiors I had to resort to more than the ordinary post-processing techniques,” he says. The long evenings of Northern Europe help quite a bit, as they provide a good window of time for shooting with the sun quite low over the horizon and giving a soft golden light.

Armed with his 5D Mk II, Canon EF 16-35mm, Canon diagonal fisheye EF 15mm, a 24mm tilt/shift lens and an EF 24-70mm plus panoramic tripod, he scouts for locations with interesting lighting and elements. “Usually I look for interesting symmetries, leading lines, and forms,” he says of his compositions. “But as an artist I’m also always looking for something that can stir you inside when you see it as a photograph,” he adds, thus his inclusion of old furniture, books, and personal mementos in his shots of old residences. With shots of industrial sites, Berens emphasizes the accidental beauty of machinery and industrial architecture, and the emptiness left behind when the place was abandoned. “I try not to have strict guidelines in composition because I catch myself repeating composition styles from my successful images. I think that’s a trap a photographer can easily be caught in, so your style eventually becomes boring. So I might have some preferences in my compositions, but the way I make the image as a whole is always dependent on the situation and my state of mind on that particular day. Because for me, an artist is a person that always creates something totally new.”

Berens considers his HDR workflow quite basic, relying mainly on his experience for getting good exposures and on Photomatix’s tone-mapping options. “The first picture I take has a long enough exposure so that there is no underexposed area in the whole picture. I use the camera’s histogram to check this. Sometimes my exposure times can be as long as 8 minutes. Then I decrease the

► **T**he vast, empty hall has the mournful solemnity of a cathedral, with its rich shadows broken only by the the glowing arched windows. It used to be a coal mine’s generator housing, and stands as a mute reminder of the impermanence of man’s works, despite all the power of the Industrial Age. Fittingly entitled Coal Cathedral, this HDR image is the work of Frenchman Jean-Claude Berens, an IT specialist and in his spare time, an urban explorer documenting the decay of urban and industrial structures across Luxembourg, France and Germany. There is an undercurrent of haunting, solemn nostalgia in Berens’ photographs, with his often formal compositions and almost painterly rendition of light perfectly conveying the mood he finds in his subjects. His work is reminiscent of Simon Marsden’s series on supposedly haunted sites in England, and like Marsden, he uses a special technique of photography that has proven an uncanny match for his theme. Join us as Jean-Claude Berens shares with DPP his unusual vision and the part HDR imaging plays in realizing his visual odes to evanescence.

“I subtitled my book Luxurbex ‘l’amour pour le declin’ – that is, for the love of decay – because I realized there is actually tremendous beauty in decay,” says Berens. “People fear decay because it’s beyond their control. We fear age and death, but my images show that in the evolution over time of all these buildings left to decay there is actually a lot of beauty, a lot of emotion. You see the emptiness, the scattered items that remind you who the owners were and give you glimpses into what they were like, the cobwebs shrouding abandoned furniture, and you appreciate the life that used to be behind those things,” he adds. And indeed, Berens has a lot of beauty in decline to show, with a variety of picturesque subjects. His explorations have taken him into old, disused burial crypts, abandoned farmhouses, medieval castles and a multitude of mothballed industrial sites.

“I got into urban exploration while privately researching the history and culture of Luxembourg and of my ancestors,” Berens relates. “Industry being part of my culture, I began to explore the iron ore mines in Luxembourg and France. This led me to study the history of the iron industry and also to visit the old industrial buildings that were left behind.” Though born in Paris, Berens grew up and still resides in the tiny but once heavily industrialized country of Luxembourg. Rich in iron and coal, Luxembourg had a profusion of mines and smelteries from the latter nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth. With the mines giving out and Luxembourg’s population decreasing thanks to a low birth rate and emigration, many of these sites have been closed down and abandoned.

A hobby photographer since the age of 13, when he shot black and white and had his own darkroom, Berens would take his first digital camera with him on his explorations but quickly felt the need for something better. “My first digital camera was an HP point and shoot, but as I realized the advantages of digital photography and processing I decided to get a DSLR,” he says. Berens purchased a Canon EOS 350D in 2004, but soon upgraded to the 5D and now the 5D Mark II. “I now shoot mostly with the 5D Mark II, and the 350D has been relegated to heavy-duty, high-risk work like shooting in abandoned mines,” he grins. Berens considers himself entirely self-taught, easily coming to understand digital photography thanks to his background in analog photography and his professional role as an IT network and security specialist. He considers Ansel Adams and Buddhist philosopher Shantideva his visual and spiritual mentors, and indeed there is a very Buddhist sensitivity to impermanence in his photographs. He became known for his photographs through his blog, Luxurbex – short for Luxembourg Urban Exploration – and after several exhibits on the theme, published a book with the same title just this year.



© Jean-Claude Berens

HEAVY METAL

The monochromatic blue tones of this photo lend it a grim sci-fi atmosphere such as often found in Heavy Metal magazine.

COAL CATHEDRAL

This hall was once the generator housing of a coal mine in France. Berens travels the region looking for abandoned sites like these to document the impermanence of man's works.

GETTING TO KNOW...



Jean-Claude Berens

Kit: Canon EOS 5D Mk II, Canon EOS 350D, Canon EF 16-35mm, Canon EF 15mm, Canon TSE 24mm, Canon EF 24-70mm, tripod

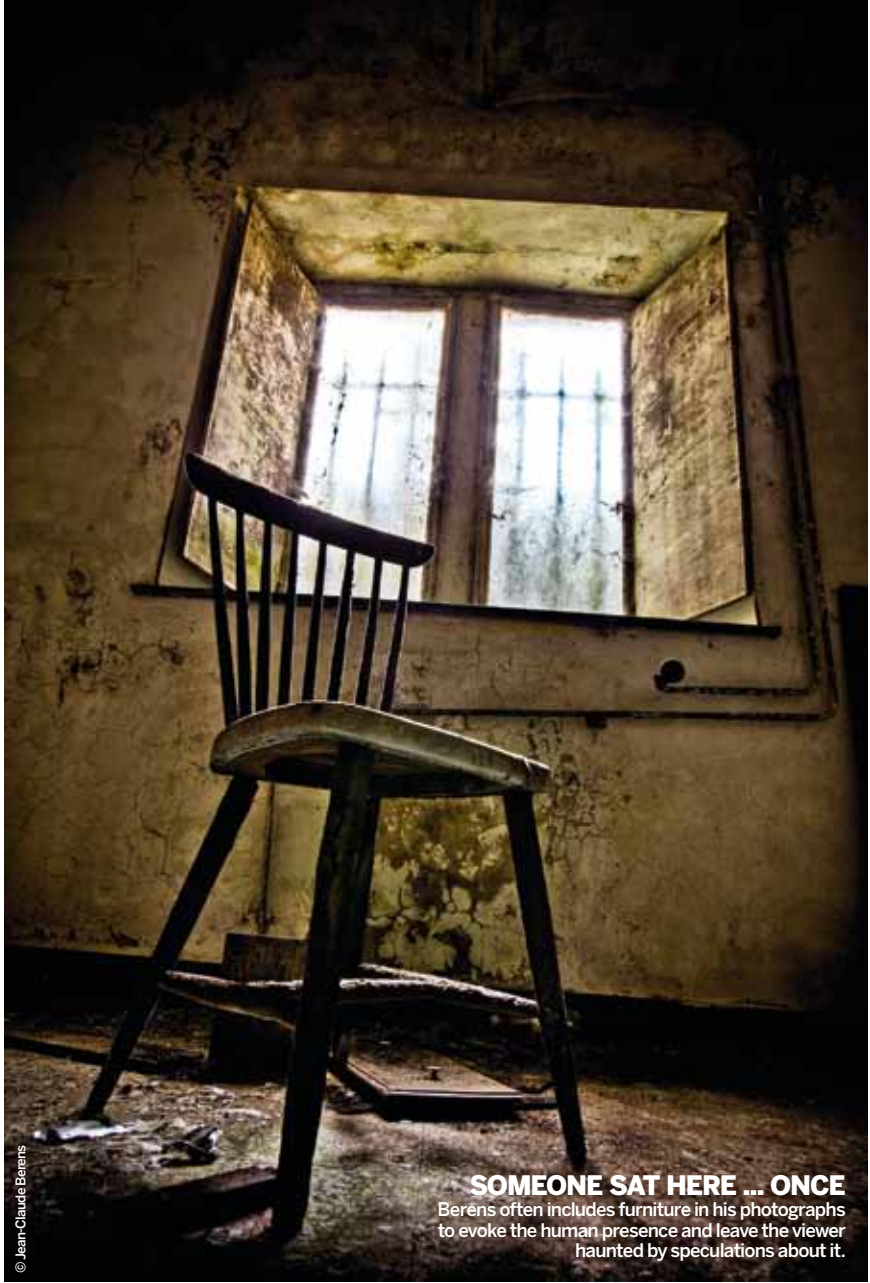
Preferred genre: HDR

Jean-Claude Berens is an IT expert in networking and security. Born in 1970 Paris, he moved to Luxembourg as a child and grew up in that small but highly industrialized country. He's been a hobby photographer since the age of 13, developing his own black and white pictures. He has since spent much of his free time touring Luxembourg, France and Germany photographing abandoned mines, mothballed factories and abandoned residences, using HDR techniques to document the details of these decaying places.

Berens' photos can be found in his book Luxurbex, on the covers of a crime thriller series by Norwegian novelist Jo Nesbo, and on his websites, www.urbanvisions.lu, and his urban exploration and spelaology blog, www.luxurbex.com.



© Jean-Claude Berens



SOMEONE SAT HERE ... ONCE

Berens often includes furniture in his photographs to evoke the human presence and leave the viewer haunted by speculations about it.

© Jean-Claude Berens

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» exposure by 2 stops – that is, I divide the previous exposure time by 4 – until I have a shot with no overexposed pixels. I can use up to 12 exposures to create an HDR image, depending on the contrast range of the scene. All my pictures are taken at ISO 100 to avoid noise. I combine the images in Photomatix, then tone-map it, usually using the Details Enhancer option. My output is a 16-bit LDR image in TIFF format, which I can then tweak as needed,” he says.

Berens has come to prefer a subtle, realistic style of HDR imaging, just enough to bring out the richness of detail in the scene. “Usually beginners in HDR photography ‘overcook’ their images,” he observes. “Some like the effect because of its surrealistic touch. If you’re not used to it you might say ‘Wow’ the first time – but the second time you’re not really sure you like it anymore, with those halos around hard contrast edges, and the third time you see an overcooked HDR picture you definitely don’t like the effect anymore.” His solution? “As with so many things, and one of the first things you should learn when you take up Photoshop or any image-editing program, less is more. My own standard is to use a high Strength with lower Light Smoothing in Photomatix only when the scene is very high-contrast. In outdoor scenes with a blue sky and sharp contrast edges like a roof of a house I set the Strength down to 30 or 40 and use a higher Light Smoothing to avoid halos. The rest is done in Photoshop, and then it’s a case-to-case thing, I can’t have a recipe because the images can be so different.”

Berens’ photography has attracted a strong following over the Internet, and a series of them have been used as covers for crime thrillers by Norwegian novelist Jo Nesbo. The images have an extraordinary quality to them, eerie yet not morbid, depicting very static subjects yet inviting dynamic exploration of the frame, demonstrating how a photographer can adopt a technique and find his ‘voice’ in it. Most of all, they are very evidently the products of a deep passion. “I think now that my two hobbies, urban exploration and photography, are deeply interdependent,” says Berens. “I could continue one without the other, but this burning passion, this deep love for those places, abandoned by the crowds, so full of serenity, would not be the same if I could not bring back some glimpses of decay and impermanence in a life where we all grasp for a permanence we could never reach.”

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