



Pedestrians walk past a Christmas tree in central Belgrade on December 23, 2017. —AFP

No holiday cheer for Belgrade's 83,000-euro Christmas tree

An artificial Christmas tree in the center of Belgrade has been getting more jeers than cheers this holiday season—given that its reported price tag of 83,000 euros would make it one of the most expensive in the world. The 18-metre tall (59-feet) tree, decorated with 200 red plastic ornaments and 40 candlewick red-gold ribbons, stands in the main pedestrian zone in Serbia's capital and has sparked a furious public reaction and accusations of corruption.

"In the city budget for this and next year there are a lot of scandalous things, and the Christmas tree is only the tip of the iceberg," Nikola Jovanovic, from the opposition People's Party, told Beta news agency. Jovanovic said the tree was just one example of financial abuse by city authorities after the investigative website Pistaljka revealed the cost of almost 10 million dinars (83,000 euros \$98,000). Belgrade Mayor Sinisa Mali, a close ally of Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic, initially

refused to talk to reporters about the tree, but later said he was going to cancel the contract—which Pistaljka reported had been signed three days after the tree was installed. "I was surprised with the amount. We have been working completely transparently and publicly for three and a half years. We did not hide anything," Mali told reporters. The revelation about the tree's cost has led to the public prosecutor's office launching a probe into the case but that hasn't quelled the outrage, with many mocking the price.

"Believe it or not: the city of Belgrade paid whooping 83,000 EUR for its Christmas tree!!! No, it does not boil eggs, it does not clean the house, and frankly it looks like crap," Marko Knezic complained on Twitter. "Such a tree would be a reason for stormy protests anywhere in a normal world," Uros Stojiljkovic wrote on Facebook. The opposition Democratic Party (DS) also spoke out against the cost and invited

Belgraders to leave "wishes" worth 83,000 euros near the pricey tree. "We want cheaper Christmas trees," read one message. "I want to visit Thailand," someone else wrote, while another requested a "raincoat XL size for my dog". All of the messages had the hashtag #83000wishes. The tree was purchased from a company that has been renting New Year lighting to the city of Belgrade for years for very high prices, according to local media reports.

The city authorities, controlled by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party, have regularly been criticized for installing the festive lighting in early autumn and leaving it on display until February. But in the end the Christmas tree jeers have produced a little bit of cheer. The company has agreed to cancel this year's contract for the tree and said it will donate the proceeds to Belgrade "to contribute to New Year decorations for the capital". —AFP



People take part in an Ugly Christmas Sweater Run in The Vondelpark in Amsterdam.



A dog named Noel in Christmas costume is hugged by his owner during the Christmas charity event "Tokyo Santa Run".



A man dressed as Santa Claus poses with a dolphin on December 22, 2017 at the theme park of Marineland in Antibes, southeastern France. — AFP photos

MODERN-DAY AMBER 'KLONDIKES' THRIVE IN TROUBLED UKRAINE



A photo shows jewelry made with amber in an amber shop in Rivne, northwestern Ukraine. — AFP photos



A man looks at religious icons made with amber in an amber shop in Rivne, northwestern Ukraine.

Volodymyr Korkosh steps on the accelerator and his jeep lurches forward, jumping through deep water-filled ditches. "We often come too late by just two to three minutes," the police officer shouts in disappointment. His unit carries out daily raids on the outskirts of the village of Kryvytsya and nearby settlements in northwestern Ukraine's Rivne region, aimed at catching locals red-handed mining amber illegally. Once a scenic forest area, the site has been turned into a moonscape with wet marshy sand on the surface and man-made, funnel-like pits scattered for hundreds of meters around, evidence of work by hundreds of illicit prospectors.

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This site, which locals call a "Klondike" in reference to a 19th-century gold rush in Canada, is one of a number of amber fields in Ukraine, which has the world's second-largest reserves of amber—some 15,000 tons—after Russia, according to the country's state geology committee. Amber is the translucent resin of trees which fossilized over millions of years and ranges in color from pale yellow to deep brown. It is used as a gemstone in jewelry making. But as prices for amber have quadrupled in recent years, fuelled by demand from China, Ukraine has suffered from an illegal mining crisis.

'Environmental disaster'

Legal mining in Ukraine produced just four tons of the mineral in 2015, according to the most recent available figures, while unlawful methods of amber extraction have reaped 120 to 300 tons annually in recent years, said the geology committee. "The state suffers missed financial opportunities that are huge. In addition, we can already

talk about an environmental disaster," it said in a written comment to AFP. Prospecting for amber involves applying high-pressure water to the ground. That loosens the amber, which then floats to the surface, but also erodes the fertile top soil to the point that trees can no longer grow there.

Amber poachers have also cleared huge plots of forest in order to ease access to amber-rich sites. Illegal prospectors admit they cause damage but say the work is the only way to make ends meet in a deprived region. "Some people there live below the poverty line," Oleg, a 28-year-old miner, who wanted to give only his first name, told AFP. "I was constantly scared, but the adrenaline and the taste of the first big money blocked that fear," he said, having recently spent four months mining amber in his native northwestern Zhytomyr region, which neighbors Rivne. Agreeing to be filmed only with his back to the camera and the hood of his grey sweatshirt over his head, the former assistant manager in a Kiev-based trade company said his monthly salary was about 6,000 hryvnia (\$220, 187 euros), but at the Klondike he managed to earn \$300 in the first five days.

Working in groups of five to 10 people, the miners use powerful homemade pumps and thick hoses to funnel water to a depth of 10 meters (33 feet) in the ground, wash out a dirty mixture of clay, sand and stones and then finally sift from it the coveted gems. As soon as prospectors get information about an approaching police car, it takes just a few minutes for them to turn off the equipment and vanish.

Racing the miners

Korkosh leads a team of some 200 police officers brought in to reinforce the Rivne regional police since March but they don't often manage to detain the amber hunters, who work in remote areas. "We raid the sites of illegal mining and document the crimes. When we arrive, the mining at least stops," Korkosh told AFP, as he stood near a freshly dug abandoned pit, minutes after once again arriving too late to make an arrest. Amber can fetch as much as \$20-\$30 per gram, depending on quality, said Sergiy Martyniuk, a deputy director of Burshtyn Ukraine (Ukrainian Amber), the only state-owned amber production company. — AFP

Paris truffle find hailed as boon for urban gardeners

French gourmets were celebrating Friday after a wild truffle was discovered for what experts said was the first time ever in Paris. The discovery in a hotel roof garden in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower comes as prices for the aromatic fungus have doubled to more than 5,000 euros (\$6,000) a kilo. Coming just before Christmas, when truffles are used to flavor such seasonal dishes as foie gras and chestnut soup, it raises the hope of an undreamt-of windfall for the new wave of urban gardeners colonizing city roofs.

"The discovery of this wild truffle is a wonderful example of how roof gardens and green roofs have a huge potential for urban biodiversity," said the Museum of Natural History in the French capital, which revealed the find. It also raised the question of whether the micro-climates roof gardens foster might be particularly favorable for truffles, the museum added.

The black "tuber brumale", which tends to grow in the same regions as its more highly-prized cousin, the Perigord black truffle, was found at the base of a hornbeam tree on the roof of the Mercure Paris Centre Tour Eiffel hotel by Frederic Madre, a researcher from the museum's centre of ecology and conservation.

He told AFP that he felt a "great surge of joy" when he found the truffle but immediately began to wonder how it could have grown so far north. He said he had to resist the temptation to taste the fungus, which weighed 21 grams, before handing it over for analysis. The museum's mushroom expert Professor Marc-Andre Selosse said the truffle usually only grows in a Mediterranean climate, but that the soil and exposure of roof of the hotel had managed to replicate that. "What is remarkable is that it takes two spores coming together for a truffle to grow. This shows that it could happen

again and that it might be possible to cultivate truffles on Paris roofs," he added. Madre is a co-founder of the Topager startup which was responsible for putting organic gardens on the top of several major buildings in Paris.

City of roof gardens

It plans to add another to the roof of the Opera Bastille. A 600-square-metre (6,450-square-foot) roof garden above the Pullman Paris Tour Eiffel hotel, around the corner from where the truffle was discovered, already supplies that hotel with honey, herbs, salad leaves and some of its vegetables and eggs, with chickens fed on its kitchen leftovers. Deeply-flavored truffles are usually hunted down and dug out of the ground using dogs or specially trained pigs. The variety found in Paris is said by experts to be stronger and muskier than the classic black Perigord truffle



A handout picture released by the press service of the French National Museum of Natural History shows a wild truffle, Tuber brumale, found on the green roof of an hotel in Paris. — AFP

found in the warmer climes of southern France, Italy, Spain and Croatia.

It has a light garlicky aroma and a much more pronounced peppery flavor than the sweeter Perigord and Italian white truffles. Although cheaper to buy than its grander cousins, the tuber brumale is preferred by many chefs to flavor sauces, rustic sausage and potato dishes and carpaccios of scallops. Experts from the museum and mushroom specialists from the French Institute of Evolution and Biodiversity are now trying to work out how the truffle got onto the roof, "and if this is a good sign of the health of the Paris ecosystem." The French capital is making a major push towards urban gardening, aiming to have 100 hectares of roof gardens in the next two years, a third of which will be used to grow herbs, vegetables and hops to flavor beer. — AFP