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COVID Cupid shoots down Thailand Valentine's Day marriages

Lovers across Bangkok will be heart-broken come Valentine's Day, with city officials declaring yesterday that all of the Thai capital's 50 districts will be banned from issuing marriage licenses. The holiday, immensely popular across the kingdom, is also typically considered an auspicious day for couples to tie the knot resulting in large queues at marriage registration offices across the city. The most popular district is Bang Rak which translates as "district of love" in Thai. But the hopes of eager-to-wed couples have been dashed.

"Bangkok's 50 district offices will refrain from providing marriage license registration service on this Valentine's

Day," Thailand's Public Relations Department said on Twitter. "The cancellation aims to prevent the spread of #COVID19." The announcement also said Chinese New Year festival, which usually involves a raucous parade in Bangkok's Chinatown, will not go on. Last year, Bang Rak district had scores of couples dressed in matching outfits or formal wear lining up before dawn to register for licenses, helped by pink-shirted civil servants wearing "love" headbands. Little fanfare has been made among the city's malls and businesses compared to previous years, though that hasn't stopped some restaurants for punting out Valentine's Day-themed

meal offerings. Burger King Thailand has debuted "Black and Pink burgers" for Valentine's Day, featuring a pink salmon patty with rose-color buns. Last year Thailand was faring well in handling the pandemic but infections have climbed to more than 23,000 cases after a new wave hit in December. This has led to a partial lockdown in Bangkok, with authorities banning bars and alcohol sales in restaurants. — AFP



In this file photo a couple shows their newly-issued marriage license on Valentine's Day in Bang Rak, the Thai capital's "district of love," in Bangkok. — AFP

VIRUS THREATENS 'GAME OVER' FOR JAPAN'S ARCADES

Evenings are normally the busiest time at Mikado, a retro gaming arcade in Tokyo, but these days the shutters come down early, leaving "Street Fighter" fans out in the cold. Bright, noisy arcades are still a neighborhood fixture in Japan, but they have been disappearing as business is hit by virus-curtailed opening hours. "This is when the place usually starts to fill up," laments Yasushi Fukamachi, a manager at Mikado, whose 250 vintage machines attract nocturnal students and office workers who have just clocked off.

It is approaching 8pm and a few dozen gamers wearing face masks are fighting it out on joystick classics, eking out their final minutes of fun before being shooed out. Since early January, Tokyo and other parts of Japan have been under a state of emergency to bring down surging virus cases. Businesses are told to close early, with possible fines for those that refuse. But unlike bars and restaurants, arcades like Mikado do not receive government cash as compensation for lost income. Several arcades went bust following Japan's first state of emergency last year, which saw most of them close completely for two months, and those that survived are now struggling. "Customers were slow to return," after the first virus emergency, Fukamachi told AFP, but by November the arcade's takings were back at 90 percent of normal levels. By late December, as Covid-19 cases soared in the capital and elsewhere, this dipped to around 50 percent. Customers stayed away despite anti-infection measures, from plastic barriers between machines to the daily disinfection of 100 yen coins for the slots, he added.



This picture shows Yasushi Fukamachi, a manager at the Mikado game center, posing in front of arcade game machines following an interview with AFP in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo.

"Space Invaders" Even before the pandemic, "smaller, independent gaming centers were already closing down at a rapid rate", Morihiro Shigihara, a journalist and author who once managed an arcade, told AFP. The number of Japan's arcades has plunged from 22,000 in 1989 — around a decade after the release of "Space Invaders"-to just 4,000 in 2019, according to police, who license the establishments. And since late last year, a number of well-known arcades in Tokyo have shut up shop for good, including in the entertainment districts of Akihabara and Shinjuku.

"The fact that even big arcades are

going out of business one after the other shows the situation's severity," said Shigihara. Gaming giant Sega in November sold off 85 percent of its arcade business, although its logo still adorns game centers nationwide that are now run by another company.

With consumers likely to own a console, and facing competition from mobile games, arcades have had to adapt to survive. More than half of a typical arcade's takings are now from profitable claw-crane toy machines, according to the Japan Amusement Industry Association. Video games only accounted for 13 percent of arcade sales in 2017, down from a third in 1993, it says.



A man playing a game at the Mikado game center in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo.



Staff member working at the Mikado game center as the center closes early due to the state of emergency from the COVID-19 coronavirus. — AFP photos



Yasushi Fukamachi, a manager at the Mikado game center, cleaning the machines.



A man standing in front of arcade game machines at the Mikado game center in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo.



This picture shows posters asking people to wear facemasks at the Mikado game center in the Shinjuku district of Tokyo.

ARCTIC TOWN'S OLYMPIC BID HIGHLIGHTS RACE TO SAVE PLANET

A snow-covered Arctic village in Finland has struck a viral hit with a fake bid for the Summer Olympics to highlight the impact of climate change in the far north. Authorities in Salla, a remote municipality of 3,500 people in northern Finland, in January released a pitch to become a candidate city for the 2032 Games, despite average temperatures barely climbing above freezing for six months of the year. "I've never felt

warmth before, but I'm sure it's coming," one resident says in the video bid, which warns that a snow-covered tundra will become a beach volleyball pitch and a frozen river the site for surfing if climate change is not addressed.

The video describes the town as "in the middle of nowhere" and says it is the coldest place in Finland. In winter, temperatures regularly sink to minus 10 to minus 20 degrees Celsius (14 degrees to

minus four degrees Fahrenheit). A #Salla2032 website introduces the campaign's mascot, a reindeer called "Kesa" ("Summer") which is plagued by mosquitoes—a reference to insects migrating further north in the Arctic region. Scientists say the Arctic is warming twice as fast as the global average, endangering local wildlife as well as releasing carbon stored in the melting permafrost. The video has become a hit on social media, garnering around 400,000 views, mayor Erkki Parkkinen told AFP.

It has prompted "messages and calls from around the world saying 'We can't let the summer games happen in Salla,'" he said. "It's helped people understand that here on the Arctic circle, we have livelihoods which need winters, and if we lose our winters it makes many big prob-

lems for us and for the whole planet." The stunt, produced in conjunction with the Fridays for Future movement, urges people to take action to help the climate, from recycling to volunteering to lobbying MPs. "We hope our small campaign to 'Save Salla, save the planet' gets more people thinking and doing climate-friendly acts," Parkkinen said. In Lapland, where tourism has been a major source of income, Salla's municipal leaders are pushing the government to reinstate an old railway allowing visitors to reach the remote region by more eco-friendly means. "We don't want to be the best place to host the summer games in 2032," Parkkinen said. "We want to keep Salla and the planet as it is now." — AFP

Mads Mikkelsen comedy among international Oscars shortlist

A boozy Mads Mikkelsen comedy from Denmark, a Netflix musical drama from Mexico and an elderly lesbian romance from France are among the Oscars hopefuls on the best foreign film shortlist announced Tuesday. Fifteen contenders for the international feature film Academy Award were selected from 93 eligible submissions, and will be whittled down to five nominees next month, before April's Oscars ceremony.



Danish tragicomedy "Another Round" stars former James Bond villain Mikkelsen as a middle-aged alcoholic who vows to get drunk every day, as part of a pseudoscientific experiment featuring three fellow school teachers. The movie, which bagged a Golden Globe nomination last week, debuted at last year's Toronto festival, and was dubbed an "engaging tribute to friendship, family and bacchanalian hedonism in moderation" by The Hollywood Reporter.

It will compete with Mexican teen drama "I'm No Longer Here," set within the colorful Latin American musical tradition of cumbia, and France's "Two of Us," about a pair of retired women who have kept their passionate affair secret for decades. Last year's international Oscar went to South Korea's "Parasite," which became the first winner to also scoop overall best picture. The country failed to make this edition's shortlist, with East Asia represented by Taiwan's acclaimed family drama "A Sun" and Hong Kong's high-school bullying saga "Better Days."

But "Parasite" distributor Neon will hope for repeat glory with Ivory Coast's "Night of the Kings," a mystical fable told within the walls of the African country's notorious Maca prison. "La Llorona," a modern political retelling of the folklore horror tale, set among ruthless military leaders and indigenous tribes, hopes to become Guatemala's first nominated film. Romania and Tunisia also never nominated-made the cut with their submissions too.

Submissions from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Chile, Czech Republic, Iran, Norway and Russia round off the international feature film list. Italy's submission "Notturmo" did not feature on the international shortlist, even though no country has won more Oscars in the category than the land of Federico Fellini. But "Notturmo," about everyday people fleeing devastating Middle East conflicts, made the best documentary Oscar shortlist-also unveiled Tuesday- instead.

It will compete with disability documentary "Crip Camp" from the Obamas' production house, as well as Wuhan pandemic hospital film "76 Days," Texas teen politics portrait "Boys State" and prison system feature "Time." This year's Oscars, delayed by the pandemic, take place April 25. — AFP