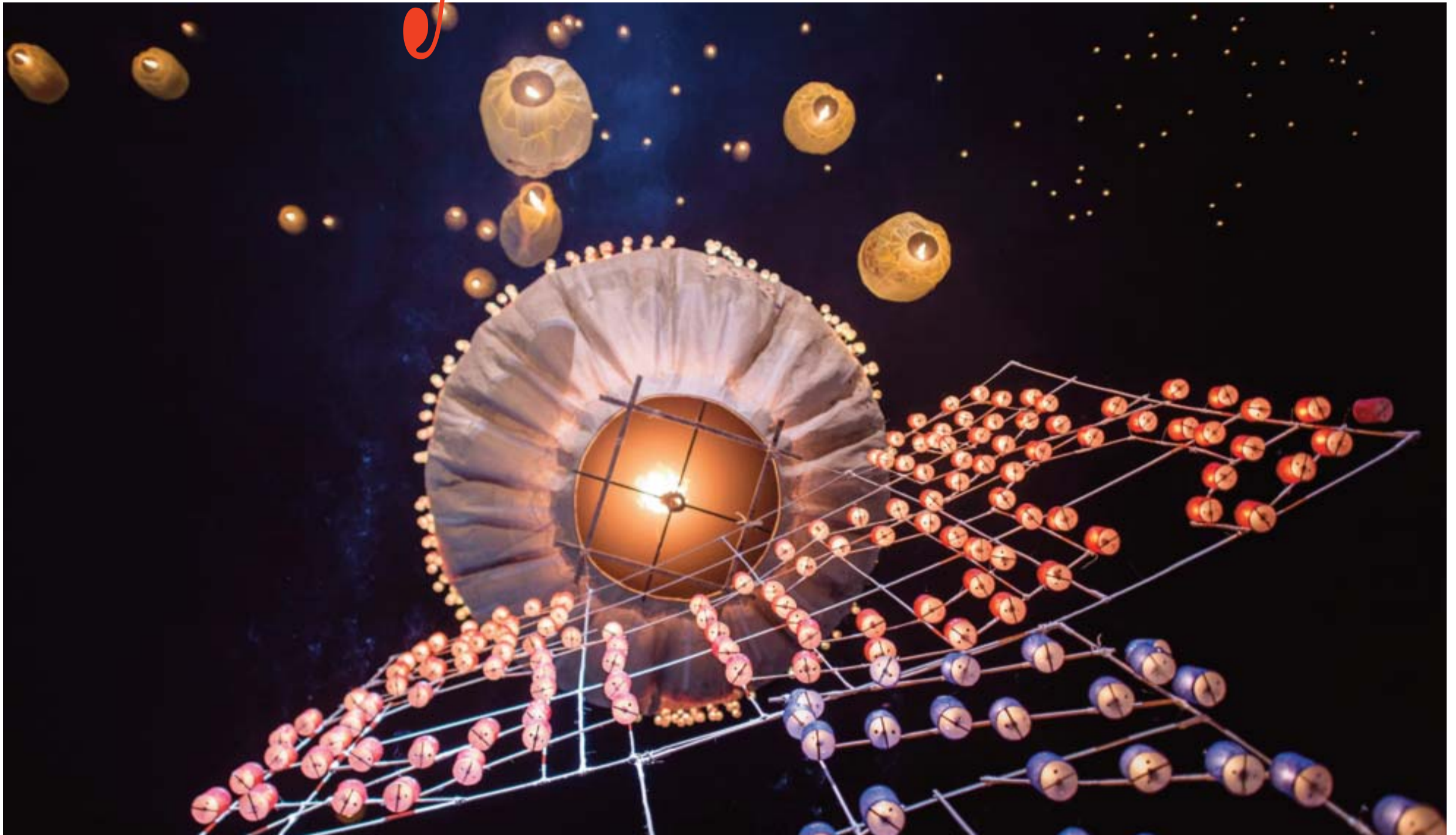


# Lifestyle

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 17, 2016

A touch of 'Game of Thrones' magic on small Spanish town

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Participants release hot-air balloons carrying small lanterns during the closing ceremony of the Tazaungdaing Festival at Taunggyi, in Myanmar's northeastern Shan State, on Tuesday. The skies of central Myanmar were set ablaze this week with the beginning of the Taunggyi fire balloon festival, one of the most beautiful and dangerous celebrations in Asia. Brightly coloured balloons with hundreds of homemade fireworks woven into their frames are sent soaring into the night sky, showing down cascades of sparks onto adoring crowds. — AFP

## Door-to-door book salesman takes his knocks in Saudi Arabia



A picture shows Indian salesman John displays explaining material about a children's learning program he offers for sale, during a demonstration of his sales pitch in the Saudi capital Riyadh. — AFP photos



Indian salesman John Gunti leaving after visiting a customer in a business district in the Saudi capital Riyadh.

In Saudi Arabia where many people spend a big chunk of their lives online, like elsewhere in today's world, John Gunti seems like a relic from a bygone era. The Indian national knocks on doors in the business district of the Saudi capital Riyadh, hoping to sell a 22-volume World Book Encyclopedia that weighs about 25 kilograms (55 pounds). Even though times are tough in an oil-dependent economy where everyone is cutting back, Gunti says: "Cold calling is my passion." But what would anybody want with such a tome these days, when every question can be answered on a smartphone? As a direct marketer, rather than just a static display in a bookshop, he is always ready to explain.

"You'll ask me 100 questions. I'll answer your 100 questions," says Gunti, 47, who carries fold-out promotional material in a smart black satchel to help his pitch. After 11 years in the business, and prior experience in medical diagnostic sales back home, Gunti says it doesn't matter what product is being sold. "If you want to sell a stone, you can sell it. If you want to sell sand, you can sell it. What matters is attitude: I have to sell this product," he says. Still, Gunti believes books have their place, even though sales have slumped to almost nothing.

### Lonely business

Gone are the days when his company, Pioneer House, had about 20 salesmen, all of them from South Asia, who even came to blows over customers. Not the fast-talking Gunti, though. He says he never relied on fists but only on his power of persuasion. Gunti once had three or four salesmen under him and got a share of their income as well as his own. "I worked on commission all these years."

The more prosperous era ended about two years ago, coinciding with the collapse in Saudi Arabia's oil revenues and ensuing cutbacks throughout the economy.

"It was good some time ago but now... the demand has gone down," leaving only Gunti and one other Pioneer House salesman hunting for customers. According to him, theirs is the last surviving Riyadh firm in this business. Gunti depends on the roughly 25-percent share he earns on each 2,000 riyal (\$533) World Book Encyclopedia set he sells. He also offers the more costly Encyclopedia Britannica, children's encyclopedias and multimedia educational programs from which he also gets a cut. "There were times where I sold five encyclopedias or six encyclopedias a month," says the well-spoken Gunti, glasses perched atop his head.

"The ideal ratio is that if you make five presentations, you need to close one deal." Now it takes 100 meetings to make a sale, so "you need to make more effort to meet more people," he says. "Ninety-nine percent are 'nos.'" Some of his business comes from referrals but most of his time is spent on cold calls.

### Tough times

He rides elevators up and down the towers of Olaya Street and King Fahad Road in Riyadh's business district, ringing doorbells. Experience tells him who to target. "If I go to an office I don't just approach every person there." Gunti, who speaks some Arabic but makes his pitch in English, says he has the best luck with Jordanians, Syrians, Egyptians and Palestinians from among the millions of expatriate workers in the kingdom. Saudis and other Arabs are less likely buyers. "I'll approach and I'll

introduce myself in a friendly way so that he gets friendly with me," Gunti says.

"Then I start my pep talk and get his background about his children and their ages and everything. "Then in my mind I decide what (product) to present to him, so accordingly I'll make a presentation. "Then I'll close the deal." That is the tricky part-getting a stranger to part with 2,000 riyals. "It all depends on how you make your presentation," says Gunti. "He buys because of John, not because of the product, not because of the company. Because of trust in John."

Every customer asks why he should buy the printed encyclopedia, to which Gunti answers: "A book is more comfortable" than online and "has its place." The salesman says he enjoys a job where he can help children learn, and he still believes "there is a big market". But the kingdom's economic slowdown has left him barely getting by. "It's (a) tough time for me," Gunti admits, his business shirt showing signs of wear. "I'm unable to send any money back home" to his wife and two grown daughters in Hyderabad. "This month I may earn only 2,000 riyals. Or even there were times I earned only 1,500 riyals." He doesn't know how much longer he can keep going. "I'm really planning to quit," he says. "I have plenty of talents-people skills and presentation ability-that could be useful elsewhere." But Gunti firmly believes that, far from dying out, door-to-door sales is something that will survive economic downturns. "Door-to-door is a system," he says. "Direct marketing will never die." — AFP

## TYCOON HOSTS BIG, FAT INDIAN WEDDING AMID CASH CRUNCH

A controversial Indian mining tycoon has taken over a royal palace and flown in Brazilian dancers at a reported cost of \$75 million to celebrate his daughter's wedding, as the country reels from a cash crisis. Up to 50,000 people are expected at the sprawling Bangalore Palace, a mock Tudor castle in southern India, to celebrate the wedding of Gali Janardhan Reddy's daughter, who was married in a Hindu ceremony earlier in the day. Local media criticized the extravagance at a time when many Indians are struggling to find the cash to eat after the government's shock move to pull high-value notes out of circulation in a bid to tackle tax evasion.

But one associate defended the lavish expenditure, saying Reddy wanted people to remember the wedding of his only daughter. "It is unfortunate that a daughter's wedding has been made an issue out of envy and rivalry," Manju Swamy told AFP ahead of the party. "It's an important moment for her parents and they wanted to celebrate the event in a way that befits the family's status in society." India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced last week that 500 and 1,000 rupee (\$7.50, \$15) bills — 85 percent of the cash in circulation — would cease to be legal tender. Indians can change a limited number of old notes for new ones at banks and post offices, but there have been huge queues

since they reopened last Thursday after closing for a day following the announcement.

Indians rely heavily on cash for their daily transactions and those living in rural areas or who do not have bank accounts have been particularly hard hit. The 49-year-old Reddy, a former minister with the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the southern state of Karnataka, spent three years in jail for his alleged involvement in a mining scam before he was released on bail last year. Speaking to journalists in his home town last week, he refused to reveal how much he was spending on the celebrations, but said everything would be declared to the tax authorities.

Guests received their invitations on LCD devices and the party venue reportedly includes a mock-up of the helium balloons featuring images of the Reddy family are reported to be floating above the palace. Indian activist T. Narasimha Murthy put the cost of the wedding at five billion rupees (about \$75 million), a figure that tallied with local media reports. "Reddy has hired about 3,000 bouncers and security guards to prevent media and activists like me from barging into the venue," said Murthy, adding he had petitioned local tax authorities to investigate. — AFP



The moon rises over an illuminated wooden boat making the way along the Tonle Sap river for a boat race in front of the Royal Palace in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, Monday, during the annual water festival. The three-day festival that dedicates to the kingdom's ancestral naval warriors coincides with the phenomenon known as the supermoon, the brightest moon in almost 69 years, on Monday. — AP