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# Cows walk on fire in India's harvest festival

Indian devotees led decked-up cows over burning hay to celebrate the Hindu harvest festival in a ritual seeking good fortune and protection from harm. The Makar Sankranti festival marks the advent of spring and is celebrated by kite-flying and other regional festivities in the month of January.

In the southern city of Bangalore famous as the tech-hub of India, men decorated the cows with garlands and bells and walked them over hay set ablaze. The age-old ritual is believed to bring good fortune and keep cows, which are sacred to Hindus, and other livestock and crops from harm's way. — AFP



Indian men lead a cow over burning hay as part of a ritual to seek good fortune and protection from harm during the Hindu Makar Sankranti festival in Bangalore. — AFP photos

## YouTube clarifies rules on pranks as risky memes rage

YouTube on Tuesday clarified rules against posting videos of dangerous pranks, as risky "challenges" prompt people to video themselves doing things like biting into laundry soap or driving blindfolded. The company already forbid content inciting dangerous activities likely to result in serious harm. But the clarifications "make it clear that challenges like the Tide pod challenge or the Fire challenge, that can cause death and/or have caused death in some instances, have no place on YouTube," the company said in a blog post.

"We've made it clear that our policies prohibiting harmful and dangerous content also extend to pranks with a perceived danger of serious physical injury," said YouTube, which like other social networks is trying to show that it is better tackling problematic content. It made clear the updated policies ban pranks that trick people into thinking they are in danger, such as fake home invasions or drive-by shootings. "YouTube is home to many beloved viral challenges and pranks, like

Jimmy Kimmel's 'Terrible Christmas Presents' prank or the water bottle flip challenge," said YouTube, owned by Google's parent Alphabet.

"That said, we've always had policies to make sure what's funny doesn't cross the line into also being harmful or dangerous." While playful or goofy challenges or pranks have become raging trends online, with video shared at YouTube or Facebook, some "memes" have put people in jeopardy. A "Fire Challenge" dared people to put flammable liquid on their bodies then ignite it, while a "Tide Pod Challenge" involved people, typically teens, biting or chewing the encapsulated candy-colored laundry detergent. A "Bird Box" thriller released on Netflix a month ago inspired a challenge for people to do things blindfolded, mimicking characters in the original streaming film.

A US teenager over the weekend crashed while driving with her eyes covered, taking part in a challenge inspired by the hit Netflix show, according to media reports. YouTube policy also bans pranks that cause children trauma, for example the fake death of a parent or severe abandonment, according to the firm. Accounts that post videos violating policies on pranks will get a "strike" that will limit some features such as live streaming. A second strike within three months will result in even more limited use of YouTube, while accounts getting three strikes in that time period will be terminated. — AFP

# 'Naive, reckless' tourists Couchsurfing in war-torn Afghanistan

Seeking an "authentic" experience as he backpacked through war-torn Afghanistan, Dutch tourist Ciaran Barr searched the Couchsurfing website for locals to stay with. He found an astonishing number of potential hosts. Despite the country's decaying security nearly 2,000 Afghans—the vast majority of them men—have signed up to host guests on the social networking platform, which connects travellers around the world with locals who are willing to put them up for free. "You feel like you get a more authentic feel for the city so you don't get trapped in tourist hotspots," Barr, 24, tells AFP in heavily-militarized Kabul, where he spent several nights sleeping on a thin mattress on the floor of his Afghan host's bedroom. "Not that there are any in Afghanistan," he adds wryly.

Once a popular stop on the well-worn hippy trail between Europe and South Asia in the 1970s, Afghanistan has seen the number of foreign travellers crossing its borders dwindle in the past four decades of almost non-stop conflict. But dozens still make the dangerous journey every year, ignoring clear warnings from their own governments to stay away from a country infested with suicide attackers, kidnapers and armed robbers, and which by some estimates is now the world's deadliest conflict zone.

Many take their chances by staying with Afghan strangers they find through the Couchsurfing network, rather than paying for a room in a hotel protected by armed guards and bullet-proof doors. "Staying with people and dressing to blend in a bit makes it possible to travel in Afghanistan with not too big of a risk," says Barr, who—with his dark hair and beard, and dressed in the baggy pajama-style shalwar kameez favored by most Afghan men—stands out less than most foreigners.

### 'You have to be smart'

Couchsurfing's concept is like a modern-day version of Afghanistan's tradition of hospitality, which obliges Afghans to provide food and shelter to strangers. But it is risky. Couchsurfers only have their host's online profile and references to judge their character. In a country where kidnappings remain common and foreigners are highly-prized targets, they have no way of knowing if their host is connected to criminals, who may see a chance to get rich by abducting them or giving them up to militants. "You can end up with the Taliban," says a diplomat in Kabul, who has been involved in negotiations to rescue kidnap victims. "It's naive and reckless."

That is what happened to North American couple Caitlan Coleman and Joshua Boyle, who were kidnapped while backpacking in Afghanistan in 2012. They were freed from the Taliban in 2017, along with their three children who were born in captivity. But Norwegian tourist Jørn Bjørn Augestad, who has couchsurfing in Iraq and the Central African Republic, tells AFP in Kabul that government warnings exaggerate the dangers.

"They are too careful. You have to be smart about a lot of things, having contact with a local is the best way to stay safe," says Augestad, who is on a mission to visit every country in the world, including Syria, before his

30th birthday this year. He adds: "This is part of the cultural experience, seeing how people live and hearing people's life story and getting an understanding of the country that you are in."

### Vicarious travel

Barr and Augestad began their week-long Afghan odyssey in the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, famous for its ancient Blue Mosque and buzkashi, a savage version of polo played with a goat carcass. The pair met through a local travel agent, who found them a taxi driver to take them more than 400 kilometers (250 miles) to the Afghan capital. After reaching Kabul, the deadliest place in Afghanistan for civilians, Barr and Augestad stayed with Couchsurfing host Naser Majidi, 27, who works as a technical adviser for a water utility company.

For Afghans consumed by wanderlust, hosting a foreigner is a chance to travel vicariously through their experiences, as more and more countries make it all but impossible for Afghan passport holders to obtain a visa. "I can make it easier for them to see the beauty of this country," says Majidi, who has hosted six guests since signing up to Couchsurfing in 2016. "It's a good experience for me—I get more friends and I know the world better." But his family worry that he is putting himself in danger.

"They have advised me many times that this is very risky for you and for them (guests)," Majidi says. Elyas Yari, who became a host in 2017 despite the objections of loved ones, says he enjoys listening to his guests' travel "experiences and their ideas". "It's fun for me," says Yari, 19, who has received visitors from Canada, Russia, Mexico and Taiwan. Afghanistan is "not as dangerous as it looks," he says.

But Barr and Augestad are not oblivious to the potential pitfalls of travelling independently in Afghanistan where the Taliban and the Islamic State group terrorize much of the country. "Things can go well nine out of 10 times," says Barr, adding: "It just takes that one time when things go wrong and so far nothing has gone wrong. He concedes: "We also have been lucky." — AFP



In this photo Afghan Couchsurfing host Naser Majidi (center), 27, eats breakfast with his guests Norwegian tourist Jørn Bjørn Augestad (right), 29, and Dutch tourist Ciaran Barr, 24, at a house in Kabul. — AFP photos



Norwegian tourist Jørn Bjørn Augestad looks on as he talks with Afghan Couchsurfing host Naser Majidi (unseen), 27, at a house in Kabul.



Afghan Couchsurfing host Naser Majidi (right) talks with his guests Norwegian tourist Jørn Bjørn Augestad (left) and Dutch tourist Ciaran Barr at a house in Kabul.

# Thiranottam 2019 event to celebrate Mohanlal's 40 years in Indian film history

Thiranottam 2019 is a special event to celebrate the completion of 40 years by south Indian superstar Padmasree Lt Colonel Mohanlal in Indian film history. The program is jointly organized by Texas Kuwait and Uyarangalil enterprises. The event conceived by the great RB initiative will be held at Hawally park auditorium on January 18, 2019 from 6 pm onwards. Many other prominent and popular members of Malayalam film industry will also be present at the event.

Legendary star known as the Marlon Brando of Indian movie industry and hailed many times as the best actor of India by legends like Amitabh Bachchan, Srikant Murali will also be present at the event. Srikant Murali

started his career with film director KG George at the age of 16 who then proved his caliber in many areas such as acting, direction, film making and ad development. He is the creative head of Mindscape Productions, also a well-trained "Kadhakali dancer" reservoir of knowledge on Kerala folk art, music and tradition, who had contributed his valuable ideas for TV and film production companies in south India. He is well known for his latest film "Aby". Mindscape Productions has created some of the best advertising campaigns under the creative leadership of Srikanth Murali as he continues to redefine the direction of the advertising business.

Rakesh Brahmanandan, a distinguished voice among

young singers of Malayalam music industry, began his career by singing for an album by his friends at the age of 24, while working in a corporate. He later recorded his voice for great music maestros like Dakshinamoorthy Swami, Illayaraja, Ravindran, Jerry Amal Dev and new age composers like Bijibal and Alex Paul and eventually became a reverberant stage performer.

Rakesh has anchored and performed in prominent TV shows aired in almost all the prominent channels in Malayalam. Apart from film songs, Rakesh has sung almost 500 songs in numerous musical productions. "RB live" - his band from Cochin embracing Indian music culture in an international outfit has performed in vintage music show, Mehfls and semi - carnatic concerts for music lovers of varied interests, and occasions.

Pooja Vija alias Swasika Vijay is one of the popular face and a leading female artist in the Malayalam television industry. She has done three television series in which she was the lead character which fetched her to fame. The current airing series Seetha have crossed 500 episodes and still successfully running is one of the greatest contribution of this star. She has acted in more than 25 movies which includes Kattapanayilae Hrithik Roshan, Ayalaam Njanum Thamill and still continues to act in an ongoing movie. She has also hosted couple of TV reality shows like Katturumbu which gained huge success and is a very well-known dancer, who learned Barathanatyam (Indian classical dancing) at the age of 7.

Arjun Lal is a digital marketer by profession and an artist by passion. Being a trained dancer with expertise in classical and western dance forms, Arjun was a regular participant in the cultural events during his school days. He holds a degree in Psychology and he is the co-founder of a marketing firm named Digiteyes in Bangalore. Arjun Lal, was a teenager when he debuted through the renowned Director Blessy's National Award winning Mohanlal starred Thamathra. He also played the lead in "Asha Black". He is the proud winner of Kerala State Award and Asianet New Face of the year Award. We are honored to welcome these esteemed figures for this huge event in Kuwait.



## Kim Kardashian and Kanye West expecting fourth child

The latest Kardashian to keep up with is on the way, Kim Kardashian said, confirming rumors that she and rapper Kanye West are expecting a fourth child via surrogate. The lifestyle mogul and reality TV superstar told the US program "Watch What Happens Live With Andy Cohen" late Monday that her family's newest addition was a boy, and was due "sometime soon." "It's out there," she said, sitting alongside sisters Kourtney and Khloe. "I got drunk at our Christmas Eve party, and I told some people, but I can't remember who I told."

The new baby joins daughter Chicago, who was born last January via surrogate, daughter North, five, and their first son, three-year-old Saint. Kardashian has been open about her struggles with pregnancy and decision to use a surrogate, as she had previously suffered from placenta accreta—a serious condition where the placenta becomes too deeply attached to the wall of the uterus. — AFP



In this file photo Kanye West and Kim Kardashian West attend the Versace fall 2019 fashion show at the American Stock Exchange Building in lower Manhattan in New York City. — AFP