

Venice gold brightens Christmas spirit



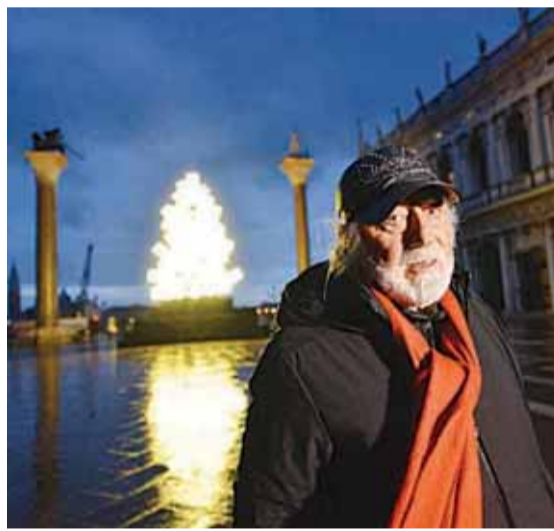
A view shows an installation by Italian artist Fabrizio Plessi set up by the columns of St. Mark's Square in Venice. —AFP photos



A view shows Christmas decorations installed under a deserted shopping arcade by St. Mark's Square.



A view shows a video mapping projection on the Rialto bridge in Venice.



Italian artist Fabrizio Plessi poses by his luminous installation (Rear left) set up by the columns of St. Mark's Square.

Venice lacks the tourists who normally give it a festive air at Christmas, but the Italian city has nonetheless highlighted its landmarks to celebrate the holidays this year. Saint Mark's Square and the Rialto Bridge across the Grand Canal in particular benefit from special lighting and projections that give inhabitants some comfort in this time of coronavirus. Italian artist Fabrizio Plessi created a Christmas tree on the square with huge rectangular screens that project a golden light.

They flood the area with warm light at night, reflecting off wet paving stones. "My purpose is to light up this town, which needs light, which needs culture, which needs new emotions," Plessi told AFP. Owing to the pandemic, "this Christmas is different from the others," said Plessi, who with his white beard could himself pass for Santa Claus.

"We have this problem like other people all around the world, but I strongly believe in positivity," he said. The artist explained his choice of light screens to build a Christmas tree by saying: "I work a lot with digital and all contemporary instruments, because I think that an artist must use all the means which his/her times makes available." Plessi placed a second piece at the end of the square, called "The Golden Age" and which also projects yellow light that resembles molten gold.

Rialto images

Another celebrated symbol of the city, the Rialto Bridge, has been transformed into a screen for light shows once night falls. Angels dance on the span's ancient arches and then make way for the gold lion on a red background that is the symbol of Venice. The images are reflected in the Grand Canal, creating an atmosphere full of fantasy and life. —AFP

St Nicholas tradition triumphs over COVID in Prague



A member of the new circus company Cirk La Putyka entertains people with a fore show during their drive-thru performance in Prague as families with their children drive their car a route visiting heaven, hell, and St. Nicholas, a big traditional event in the Czech Republic before the Christmas holidays. —AFP photos



A member of the new circus company Cirk La Putyka dressed as a Devil entertains people during their drive-thru performance.

Christmas tradition won out over coronavirus in Prague on Saturday with a COVID-compliant, socially distanced St Nicholas giving out presents to excited children. Under normal circumstances, St Nicholas, a bearded man accompanied by the devil and an angel, would call on children in the Czech Republic to give them presents in exchange for a song or a poem.

But with coronavirus measures the world over throwing up obstacles to festive celebrations, Prague-based circus company Cirk La Putyka opted for a drive-through solution. "Over the past nine months we have been looking for different ways to approach the audience," company director Rosta Novak told AFP. "This is just another way to do that at a time when theatres can't play and bands cannot perform," he added. In line with tradition, cars first drove through "hell" with devils performing acrobatic tricks and fire shows. Then they proceeded to "heaven" with angels and finally to St Nicholas himself.

The children received presents at the final stop, many of them sticking their heads out of windows to relish the experience. Driving a van full of children, Ondrej Prachar said they had all been thrilled. "It was absolutely perfect," he said, adding that it had also been a tad less frightening than the traditional version when children are sometimes scared by the idea of the devil carrying a bag in which he puts naughty kids. The St Nicholas tradition dates back to the Middle Ages and St Nicholas Day is celebrated in many countries. Born in Turkey around 280, St Nicholas, the patron saint of sailors, tradesmen, pilgrims and children, handed out a sizeable portion of his wealthy parents' property to the poor after their death. —AFP



A member of the new circus company Cirk La Putyka, dressed as Saint Nicholas entertains people during their drive-thru performance.



A member of the new circus company Cirk La Putyka dressed as a Devil entertains people during their drive-thru performance.

Bethlehem lights up Christmas tree as virus rules keep crowds away

Bethlehem lit up its Christmas tree on Saturday evening but without the usual crowds, as novel coronavirus restrictions put a damper on the start of Christmas festivities in the holy city. Palestinian authorities last week announced measures, including a night-time curfew, across the Israeli-occupied West Bank for 14 days to fight a "worrying spread" of the virus. Locals and pilgrims traditionally gather each year for the lighting of the tree in Manger Square, near the Church of the Nativity, built on the site where Christians believe

Jesus was born. But this year, only a small crowd of journalists was present due to coronavirus restrictions, an AFP photographer said. Carmen Ghattas, director of public relations at the Bethlehem municipality, told AFP that Palestinian prime minister Mohammed Shtayyeh had lit up the tree remotely from his office in Ramallah. The West Bank, with a Palestinian population of more than 2.8 million, has officially recorded 71,703 coronavirus infections, including 678 deaths. Israel has occupied the territory since 1967. —AFP



This picture shows a fireworks display during the lighting of the Christmas tree in the biblical city of Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank, closed to the public due to the COVID-19 pandemic. —AFP photos



This picture shows a view of the scene before the lighting of the Christmas tree in the biblical city of Bethlehem in the occupied West Bank, closed to the public due to the COVID-19 pandemic.