



A man walks as pigeons are seen in the courtyard of Hazrat-e-Ali shrine or Blue Mosque, in Mazar-i-Sharif on June 9, 2020. — AFP photos



A man feeds pigeons in the courtyard of Hazrat-e-Ali shrine or Blue Mosque, in Mazar-i-Sharif.



Pigeons are seen in the courtyard of Hazrat-e-Ali shrine or Blue Mosque, in Mazar-i-Sharif.

Doves starve at famed Afghan mosque shuttered due to virus

More than 1,000 doves have died of starvation at Afghanistan's famed blue-tiled mosque in Mazar-i-Sharif after it closed to curb the spread of the coronavirus, caretakers said Tuesday. Before the mosque complex shut amid a nationwide lockdown, flocks of the snow-white birds would gather at the popular tourist attraction, where visitors would feed them. But without any visitors to the 12th century wonder in Balkh province in northern Afghanistan,

the doves have had little to eat, caretakers said. "Every day, about 30 doves die. We bury them outside the shrine," said Qayum Ansari, head of cultural affairs at the mosque, adding that more than 1,000 birds have starved to death in recent weeks.

The doves have been a fixture for decades, with some visitors even considering them sacred. "The birds were fed by visitors but since the lockdown, nobody has come," said Ahmed Naweed, a caretaker at the mosque.

Local officials said authorities were ready to feed the birds if mosque managers allow it. "We will buy them bird food," said Munir Farhad, spokesman to the governor of Balkh province. The mosque, which is adorned with intricate hand-painted tiles, was destroyed by Genghis Khan and his army in the 13th century, but was rebuilt and has emerged as a major pilgrimage centre for Muslims.

Afghanistan's coronavirus crisis is worsening by the

day, with authorities reporting 21,459 confirmed cases so far, though the real number is thought to be much higher. Experts say the country has one of the highest rates of tests coming back positive—about 40 percent, indicating high levels of undetected infections. Officials have warned the country faces a "disaster," with hospitals running short of beds as suspected cases surge.—AFP



In this file photo taken on November 15, 2019 pastry chef of the Ritz Paris hotel, Francois Perret, poses during a photo session at the Ritz hotel in Paris.—AFP

Gimme s'more: How a French chef cracked America's sweet tooth

It sounds like a kind of cruel joke. Taking the world's best pastry chef, who usually cooks for the creme de la creme at the Ritz in Paris, and seeing if could satisfy the sweet tooth of hardscrabble Americans who eat from fast food trucks. But despite his almost non-existent English, and his equally rudimentary understanding of the down home American palate, Francois Perret was game for the experiment, which was shot for the new Netflix series, "Chef in a Truck". So much so, that the man who was pronounced the best restaurant pastry chef on the planet last year by the august World's Great Tables even created two US-inspired desserts for the Ritz.

For two weeks, Perret travelled around California trying out local treats and traybakes and then tried to come up with ways to refine them and still please the average American. The 39-year-old Frenchman told AFP that he loves watching people eat his creations because their expressions "do not lie"—a chance he rarely gets at the Ritz. "It was great to take part in an adventure like this, to be in direct contact with the people who are eating your food," he said.

Culture shock

Even so, the culture shock between the sophisticated palates of the jetset, the pressed linen tableclothes and scurrying waiters of the Ritz and the lunchtime truck stops of workaday Los Angeles could not be more stark. Technically too it was also a challenge for a chef used to the best equipped kitchens in the world, with his brigade of 30 highly-trained cooks, to be reduced to cooking in a truck with only two helpers. But the pay-off for being forced out of his "comfort zone" was worth it for Perret, whose new creations normally have to be tasted and signed off by the Ritz's strict kitchen hierarchy. "There was no service, you had to do everything yourself," he said. "You are there in front of your customers and you see their reactions. When someone eats (in front of you), they cannot lie. You see straight away from their face whether it works and they like it or not," he said.

While Perret occasionally goes out into the dining room to present his desserts at the Ritz, usually he has to peep out through the kitchen door or ask waiters for feedback. However, his big challenge in the land of sugar and syrup-drenched cookies and cakes was to make goodies that were nowhere near as sweet but just as morish. To do that, Perret latched onto the American habit of eating savoury dishes with sweet ketchups and sauces, coming up with pear and honey tacos.

Perret also took that American picnic and camping institution, the s'more—fire-roasted marshmallows sandwiched between biscuits with chocolate—and gave them a haute cuisine twist. "The base of my s'mores is puff pastry, and there is nothing more French than that. Stuffed with chocolate ice cream, we then dipped them in molten marshmallow. It is a pastry which looks very American but the conception is very French," he added. Perret scorched every one with a blowtorch as a little nod to the camp fire and the treat's scouting heritage.—AFP

Street art star unveils Paris mural to George Floyd, Adama Traore

A huge mural by French street art star JR was unveiled in Paris on Tuesday paying tribute to George Floyd and Adama Traore, a young black man who died in police custody in France. Traore's death four years ago has become the focus of renewed protests across France over claims of police racism and brutality following the anger unleashed in the US after Floyd was killed in similar circumstances in Minneapolis last month. Some 20,000 people rallied in front of a courthouse in Paris last Tuesday to demand justice for Traore and Floyd, defying a coronavirus ban on public gatherings.

And a further 23,000 attended demonstrations across the country on Saturday calling for an end to police violence. More French protests were called Tuesday as Floyd was laid to rest in Houston, Texas. Oscar-nominated black French film director Ladj Ly—whose movie "Les Misérables" also tackles the fraught relations between ethnic minorities and the French police—told reporters that "the mural is there to pay homage both to Adama and George Floyd." Students at Ly's Kourtrajme film school in a deprived

Paris suburb worked with JR—Oscar-nominated himself along with Agnes Varda for the 2017 documentary "Faces Places"—on the huge photo montage in central Paris.

Faced with rising anger over the behaviour of French police, Interior Minister Christophe Castaner said Monday that a controversial choke hold used to subdue suspects was being banned. Racist insults and comments made by officers on private police Facebook pages have added to public unease. Traore, 24, died in 2016 after he was pinned to the ground after a routine identity check with the combined body weight of three arresting officers, according to the testimony of one of them.—AFP



A man walks by a giant mural by French street artist JR paying tribute to Adama Traore, a black man who died in police custody in 2016, on June 9, 2020 in Paris.—AFP



This file photo taken on March 28, 2020 shows the Eiffel Tower and the deserted Esplanade du Trocadero in Paris, on the twelfth day of a lockdown aimed at curbing the spread of the COVID-19 (novel coronavirus) in France.—AFP

Eiffel Tower to reopen to public on June 25

The Eiffel Tower, one of the most visited sites in Paris, will reopen to the public on June 25 more than three months after shuttering in France's coronavirus lockdown, its operators said Tuesday. The 10-tonne metal landmark will emerge from its longest closure since World War II with limited visitor numbers at first, and face masks mandatory for all over the age of 11, said the Eiffel Tower website. "At first, only visits by the stairs will be available," and not by elevator, it said, as a means of ensuring a safe distance between people to limit infection risk. "To ensure that ascending and descending visitors do not meet in the stairs, ascent will take place from the East pillar and descent by the West pillar," added the website, with a limited number of visitors per floor at a time.

The top level will remain closed for now, "since the lifts taking visitors from second to top floor are small. It might re-open during the summer." The statement said ground markings will be put in

place to ensure people keep their distance from one another, with "daily cleaning and disinfection of public spaces at the tower." The monument, completed in 1889, receives about seven million visitors every year, about three-quarters of them from abroad, according to the tower website. The tourism industry of France, one of the world's most visited countries, has taken a hard hit under a lockdown to halt the COVID-19 pandemic, with hotels, restaurants, museums, and theatres closed.

These included some of the French capital's most famous landmarks such as the Louvre museum, due to reopen on July 6, and the Palace of Versailles which opened Saturday. "The re-opening date of our online ticket office will be soon communicated," said the Eiffel website. "We strongly encourage our visitors to opt for online ticket purchase, in order to avoid the wait at the Tower's ticket offices."—AFP

'Harry Potter' star says sorry to fans offended by author's post

The star of the "Harry Potter" movies Daniel Radcliffe has apologised to fans of the book franchise offended by comments from author JK Rowling which have been criticised as insensitive to the transgender community. The British writer sparked controversy and accusations of transphobia last weekend in a Twitter post about an article on menstrual health during the coronavirus pandemic.

Quoting a reference in the article to "people who menstruate", she wrote: "I'm sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?" Following criticism, Radcliffe on Monday wrote a post on the website of The Trevor Project, a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) suicide prevention organisation. "Transgender women are women," Radcliffe wrote. "Any statement to the contrary erases the identity and dignity of transgender people and goes against all advice given by professional health care associations who have far more expertise on this subject matter than either Jo or I," he added, referring to Rowling's first name Joanne.

The 30-year-old actor then went on to apologise to any Harry Potter fans

offended by Rowling's comments. "To all the people who now feel that their experience of the books has been tarnished or diminished, I am deeply sorry for the pain these comments have caused you." He stressed his intervention was not about "in-fighting between JK Rowling and myself", noting the writer was "unquestionably responsible for the course my life has taken". But Radcliffe added that "as someone who has been honored to work with and continues to contribute to The Trevor Project for the last decade, and just as a human being, I feel compelled to say something at this moment".

Rowling has vigorously defended herself amid the furore over her post. "I respect every trans person's right to live any way that feels authentic and comfortable to them," she stated on Twitter. "I'd march with you if you were discriminated against on the basis of being trans. At the same time, my life has been shaped by being female. I do not believe it's hateful to say so." Rowling also faced accusations of being transphobic in December when she voiced support for a researcher who was sacked after tweeting that transgender people cannot change their biological sex.—AFP



Daniel Radcliffe and Jk Rowling