



COVID pall over Vietnam's pink incense village as the Lunar New Year nears



A man transports bamboo sticks past dried incense sticks along a road in Quang Phu Cau village on the outskirts of Hanoi.

Vietnam's "incense village" is dazzling pink as workers prepare the fragrant sticks for the Lunar New Year holiday, but strict rules to stop the spread of COVID-19 are dulling its lustre. January is usually the busiest time of year for workers in Quang Phu Cau village on the outskirts of Hanoi, where the tradition of making incense goes back more than a century.

As Vietnam's Tet new-year holiday approaches - this year it begins on February 1 - sales tick up with throngs of people crowding into temples to light incense during worship, or burn the sticks on the ancestral altar at home. But while villagers are busy dyeing, drying and whit-

ening bamboo bark to make the sticks, they complain that business is slow. "I think our sales must have dropped by 30 percent compared with the same period last year," says Nguyen Thi Luyen, 59.

Communist Vietnam reported economic growth for 2021 of just 2.58 percent - its lowest in three decades - as the country endured draconian restrictions to fight the pandemic. Production, supply chains and businesses were seriously hit as almost the entire country went into lockdown for at least three months. Things have started to improve, but the consequences remain. "Normally, there would be trucks carrying our products from central provinces and border provinces. This year, due to pan-

demical preventive policy, trucks cannot carry goods there," Luyen told AFP.

Quang Phu Cau is among several places dotted across Vietnam making the sticks, the scent of each batch carefully tailored to suit the tastes of the regions where they will be sold. Most households in the village are involved in the ancient trade, from cutting bamboo planks and dipping thin strips into pink dye to coating the dried sticks in an aromatic paste. "We really hope things will come back to normal soon," Luyen said. — AFP



A worker collects dried incense sticks for sale in Quang Phu Cau village on the outskirts of Hanoi ahead of Lunar New Year celebrations, known in Vietnam as Tet. — AFP photos



Residents cut bamboo sticks to make incense sticks in Quang Phu Cau village on the outskirts of Hanoi, ahead of Lunar New Year celebrations.



A worker cuts bamboo sticks to make incense sticks in Quang Phu Cau village ahead of Lunar New Year celebrations, known in Vietnam as Tet.

Music-loving pope visits record store

Pope Francis, a lover of classical music, made a surprise visit to a Rome record store to bless the premises - and picked up some vinyl while he was there. The 85-year-old pontiff slipped into Stereosound, located near the Pantheon, on Tuesday evening to bless the shop after its recent renovation, a Vatican source told AFP. The owners of the store are longtime friends of the Argentine pontiff, who has previously spoken of the power of music and is said to enjoy classical composers but also tango.

He left with a 33 RPM record of classical music, a gift presented by the owner's daughter, according to Vatican News. A small crowd gathered outside the shop while he was inside, for around 10 minutes, but he made no public comments as

he got into a white Fiat 500L and was driven away. Vatican News reported the owner, Letizia, saying that the pope was an "old customer" who had been going to the shop since he was made a cardinal, in 2001.

The pope is known for being unpredictable and living more simply than his predecessors, carrying his own briefcase and making his own phone calls. In 2015, two years after being elected head of the world's 1.3 billion Catholics, he went to an optician in central Rome to change his glasses. The following year, he went to a shop to buy some new orthopaedic shoes. Francis lives in modest rooms measuring 50 square meters in the Casa Santa Marta guesthouse. — AFP

Free yoga for Delhi as Omicron shuts offices, eateries

New Delhi ordered Tuesday the closure of non-essential offices and restaurants and bars but offered free online yoga classes to those in home isolation, as COVID cases soared in the Indian capital and nationwide. With case numbers rising six-fold over the past week, the Indian government is terrified of a repeat of last year when thousands died of the virus every day and the health system teetered on the brink of collapse.

While stopping short of a full lockdown, authorities have steadily increased restrictions nationwide and capacity at private offices and eateries in the capital was already restricted to 50 percent. But those

in home isolation can take free online yoga classes, with Delhi's chief minister Arvind Kejriwal saying that it would help patients "boost their immunity and attain mental and spiritual peace".

India's capital registered 17 deaths each on Saturday and Sunday, the biggest single-day toll in more than 200 days, according to local media reports. Every fourth person tested is coming back positive. Nationally, India recorded almost 170,000 new cases on Monday, almost half the daily number recorded during the surge of last April and May. Deaths remain a fraction of what they were but are rising.

Meanwhile, the Indian Council of Medical Research, the government's apex scientific body, on Monday tweaked its mandatory testing guidelines to ease the strain on the testing infrastructure. Healthy, asymptomatic contacts of confirmed coronavirus patients no longer require mandatory testing. Experts say that India is better prepared to deal with the latest coronavirus wave, driven by the Omicron variant, than last year.

The country has now administered more than 1.5 billion vaccine shots and recently opened the program to teenagers. It has also begun giving boosters to vulnerable groups. The surge last year, which killed more than 200,000 people - and possibly several times more - was blamed in part on huge political rallies and religious events. The latest spike comes ahead of elections in five Indian states including Uttar Pradesh, home to 220 million people, beginning next month.

Political parties have been holding massive rallies with tens of thousands of people in attendance over the last few weeks. West Bengal state is also holding a massive Hindu religious fair this week on an island in the Ganges, while Tamil Nadu has allowed bull-racing festivals to take place next week. The India Open badminton championship meanwhile began in Delhi on Tuesday after a two-year gap with 219 players from 19 countries taking part - but without spectators. — AFP