



Nastja Verdnik, a 26-year-old journalism graduate, poses in Maribor, in front of the country's first bakery for dogs she opened.—AFP photos

## Jobless journalist opens Slovenia's first dog bakery

Who would have thought the answer to unemployment in the city worst hit by Slovenia's economic crisis could be meat, mint and peanut butter-flavored snacks for pooches. But that's just what happened for Nastja Verdnik, a 26-year-old journalism graduate who has opened the Balkan country's first bakery for dogs. "I used to make biscuits for my dog, but never dreamt of making a career out of it," Verdnik told AFP in her tiny shop in the northern city of Maribor, where she sells home-made biscuits, muffins and cakes, including for dogs with allergies.

After graduating from Ljubljana University last year, her hunt for a job in journalism led nowhere. She had already made biscuits for friends' dogs and even sold small quantities to a local pet shop. "I saw at the employment office a program for promoting entrepreneurship among young people," she said, so put forth the idea for a dog bakery and got immediately backing. "Hov Hov"—Slovenian for "woof woof"—was born. "There are more dogs registered in Slovenia than children under nine. And owners, before getting a dog, know they will have the financial resources to keep it," said Verdnik. Her confidence was boosted by research showing during a dog's lifetime, owners can spend the equivalent of the price of a car on their pet.

### Dog biscuits are crisis-resistant

Since she opened in June, her business—strategically located at the entrance to Maribor's main park, a favorite playground for dogs—has not stopped growing. "In September I will open a new shop in the capital, Ljubljana, and later might do it also abroad," she said, with eyes on neighboring Croatia or Austria. Once a major industrial centre, Maribor has struggled more than the rest of Slovenia with the economic crisis. Unemployment in June was 18.1 percent, compared with 12.6 percent in Ljubljana. Anger over rampant corruption in city hall also prompted violent demonstrations last winter.

But dog biscuits have proven remarkably crisis-resistant, with people in and around Maribor willing to go the extra mile to indulge their pets. "We are not from this neighborhood, we live on the outskirts of Maribor, but we care about the quality of our dogs' food and we also like buying them home-made biscuits," Vera, the owner of two greyhounds, told AFP. Hov Hov's selection ranges from the classic beef, lamb, venison, turkey and tuna to banana, peanut butter and even mint-flavored biscuits to fight bad breath.

The snacks cost three to four euros (\$4-5.50) for a 150-gram (5.3-ounce) package and are available in gluten-free and no-egg

versions. She makes all shapes and sizes—bones being a favorite—and will even make special birthday cakes. "I only use healthy ingredients as I would for my own pets," said Verdnik, who gets advice from a veterinarian friend and adds no artificial ingredients. And it's not just the canines who are eating Hov Hov's biscuits, as some of their owners confess to nibbling the vegetarian treats, said Verdnik.

"This is our second visit: now we have returned with a list of orders for our neighbors and friends," said Marija, the owner of a German shepherd. Keeping up supplies means baking at home an average of five kilograms (11 pounds) of biscuits each day. To cope with increasing demand, Verdnik plans to rent a kitchen and probably hire one or two helpers in September. "Two hands aren't enough any longer," she said. She has not totally ruled out journalism. But if she did ever find a job, she would only use her skills "to write about pets, pet-food and related issues", she said. — AFP

## Thai village under siege from marauding monkeys

In one Thai village homes are raided, property is pinched and locals are attacked by dastardly gangs operating beyond the law—but the perpetrators are monkeys, not men. "They creep into my house when they see me sleeping, they go into the kitchen and take cooking oil, sugar and even the medicines that I hide in a cabinet," said Chaluay Khamkajit, after years battling with pesky primates who are thought to have been drawn into Khlong Charoen Wai village by habitat loss. "They took my snacks, I can buy new ones, but the medicines are important to me," the 72-year-old said, as she and her husband demonstrated a variety of anti-monkey devices including a homemade lock for the fridge and the more direct deterrent of a sling-shot.

Around 150 households in the shrimp farming community in Chachoengsao province on the east coast, 80 kilometers (50 miles) from Bangkok, have suffered raids by so-called "sea monkeys"—long-tailed macaques—for about a decade. An increasing number of shrimp farms, coupled with the associated deforestation, is thought to be behind a surge in monkeys venturing into built-up areas. "They could find food easily in the past but when there is less forest, they have to find food in people's houses," said village headman Chatree Kaencharoen, expressing frustration at some villagers who give food to the incorrigible creatures.

"Sometimes, a few hundred monkeys come at once—especially at dawn and dusk when it is cooler. They know it is time to be fed," he said. Conservation group WWF said people have encroached on the monkeys' habitat not the other way around. "People have moved closer to nature, that is why there is an increased chance of interaction between human and animals," WWF Thailand director Petch Manopawitr told AFP. "Macaques can adjust their behavior quite well—they learn in similar ways as humans—and when they know that they can find food in a village, they come."

### 'We cannot stop them'

The spread of villages into formerly dense jungle has caused other clashes between people and beasts in Thailand. And WWF says the problem is accelerating. In a recent report, the conservation group said demand for farmland could strip the Greater Mekong region—Thailand, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam—of a third of its remaining forest cover over the next two decades without swift government action. Between 1973—the first point of available data—and 2009, Thailand lost some 43 percent of its natural woodland, the WWF said, although it praised the country for its network of national parks.

Khlong Charoen Wai's monkeys spend their days hanging out on the narrow bamboo bridges that meander across the coastal swampland at the edge of the village. Mothers lounge with babies slung across their chests, while others leap between nearby mangrove trees. They tend to flee when approached. But when nobody seems to be looking, they climb onto roofs, leaving trails of muddy footprints as they stalk into homes through any openings they can find.

Residents have been forced to seal their houses with nets, lock their windows despite the tropical heat, and secure their property the best they can. "They pushed over a 21-inch television, which fell and smashed. They even stole a rice cooker, managed to open it and scooped out the rice to eat," said Chatree. Local authorities tried to curb the monkey raids—even attempting to sterilize the intruders. But that effort was on too small a scale according to deputy village head Tawin Songcharoen. "We cannot stop them," he told AFP. — AFP

