

In the absence of tourists, locals reclaim their cities

BARCELONA: In Barcelona, Laia and her daughter stroll peacefully in Park Guell. At the same time, Mladen savors the silence of the marble alleys of Dubrovnik while Fabiana soaks up the calm of old Lisbon. These three corners of three cities, known for the hustle and clamor of tourists, are unusually tranquil.

The lockdowns caused by the coronavirus pandemic may not have been universally popular but they have had the effect of alleviating, at least temporarily, some of the ills associated with tourism, notably the overcrowding of city centers and a rapid rise in prices and rents.

Park Guell, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the great legacies of modernist architect Antoni Gaudi, is currently for the exclusive use of the residents of the area. "All my childhood, I played in this park but I never came with my daughter because it was impossible to do anything, there were too many people," says Laia Torra. Today, the 39-year-old sports teacher is visiting the park with a friend and her children.

At their disposal lies one of the most coveted places in the park — a long undulating bench decorated with colorful mosaics, overlooking a wonderful panorama of the city, with the Mediterranean on the horizon. The two women normally never go there as it is always swarmed by visitors looking for the best angles for the seemingly obligatory Barcelona selfie. "It's wonderful, it's like going back 20 years," says Torra as the kids

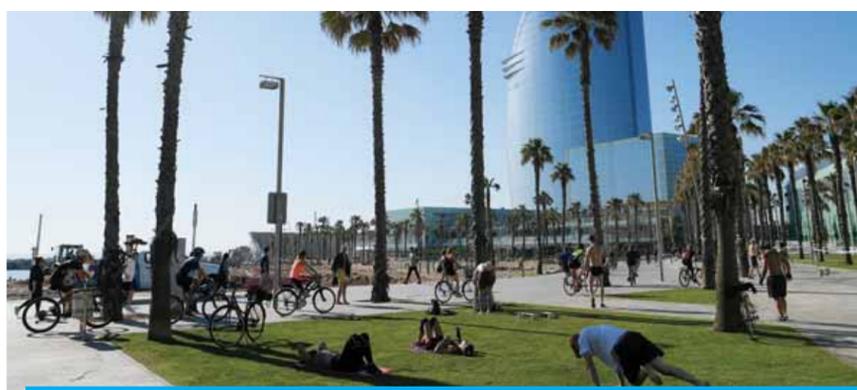
gallivant on a scooter and bike. "We know it's temporary but we have to take advantage of it."

The "Tourist, go home" signs which had flourished in recent years have lost their raison d'être, at least for a while. After protests in recent summers against the partying and incivility of some tourists, the former fishermen's quarter of Barceloneta has been transformed into a gigantic open-air gymnasium, where locals come to run, swim and surf during the authorized hours. "Normally I don't go to these beaches," admits a beaming Emma Prades, a 43-year-old psychologist. "Now it's more tempting. And the water is cleaner."

The 42,000 inhabitants of the Croatian city of Dubrovnik, the "pearl of the Adriatic" where some of the television series "Game of Thrones" was filmed, are also rediscovering beaches which had become overrun by tourists. The gigantic cruise ships, with their thousands of passengers, no longer anchor in the small harbor. It is a two-edged sword, bringing peace and calm as well as anxiety over the future of the economy.

"We have been able to relax a bit during those two, almost three months," says Mladen Kriz, a 43-year-old telecom technician. "This summer, we will be able to swim quietly in town." "At the same time, without tourists it is a bit empty," admits Kriz, a father of two whose wife is a tour guide. "A lot of people live on that here. How will we live without tourists?"

In Lisbon, amid the steep alleyways of the popular



BARCELONA: People exercise at Barceloneta beach on May 20, 2020 during the hours allowed by the government to exercise amid the national lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19. — AFP

Alfama district, Paulo da Silva shares this concern. "It's really sad, there is nothing good in all this," says the 45-year-old. "Foreigners revived this neighborhood and now everything could halt again at any moment."

In the center of the Portuguese capital, Fabiana Pavel,

an Italian architect who campaigns against mass tourism, is enjoying the peace of Bairro Alto, known for its nightlife and its fado concerts. "We will miss this era," she says. "I am not against tourism but I am against its excesses. This crisis is proof that it is dangerous to rely completely on one single industry." — AFP

Dubai prison: Virtual visits...

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the coronavirus, but said there were no "active" cases and the overall number recorded could be "counted with fingers".

Those diagnosed with COVID-19 had mild cases, he said, and required only "isolation and simple treatment". Everyone, whether serving time or employed at the jail, was tested "without exception" in coordination with the official health authorities, Shamali added. Inmates and staff must wear masks and gloves at all times, some classes and workshops were suspended and the prison gym closed.

So far, the United Arab Emirates — made of up seven emirates, including Dubai — has recorded more than 26,000 COVID-19 cases, including 233 deaths. "We seek to reduce contact at work, but our main concern is that we continue to provide the same quality of service, even if it is from afar," Badr Sultan, a prison doctor, told AFP from his office, adding that most medical consultations now took place via video conferencing.

Before admission, new inmates are tested for COVID-19 and isolated for 48 hours, said Shamali, standing near a sign that read "Hala (welcome to) Happiness". In a clinic nearby, a dermatologist

asked an inmate to describe his skin condition, prescribing an ointment after seeing the infected area on screen. In another room, a psychiatrist spoke online to an inmate about the "daily pressures" of life during a pandemic.

Since the outbreak began, the authorities have released hundreds of prisoners detained for low-level crimes or because they were unable to post bail. "We received directives to release inmates... and since the outbreak, there are 30 to 35 percent fewer prisoners," Shamali said, without specifying numbers. "We want to reduce the number on a daily basis, especially release those with simple cases, not ones accused of big crimes."

The new safety measures in the prison have been difficult on inmates, some of whom are used to spending their days in workshops and recreational classes. A group of seven inmates had been working on producing the largest-ever cardboard sculpture — the goal was for Guinness World Records to certify it.

Cardboard domes and arches were scattered across a prison recreation room — parts for a scale replica of Abu Dhabi's Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque — but the virus restrictions have slowed work on the project in the past two months. "I came to the UAE in 1999, and I loved the design of the Sheikh Zayed mosque, so I studied it and sought to build the biggest cardboard model by 2021," said the inmate in charge of the project. "We have put the project aside for now. The question now is: What do I do with my time here?" — AFP

high-flow oxygen and 10 percent were on mechanical ventilation. After two weeks, the disease worsened in 18 percent of the plasma patients and 24 percent of the control patients. As of May 1, nearly 13 percent of plasma recipients had died, compared with more than 24 percent of the control patients, with 72 percent and 67 percent, respectively, being discharged alive.

People who survive an infectious disease like COVID-19 are left with blood containing antibodies, or proteins made by the body's immune system to fight off a virus. The blood component that carries the antibodies can be collected and given to newly infected patients — it is known as "convalescent plasma". Hospitals around the world have been using plasma donated by recovered COVID-19 patients, but there has been little information on how effective the treatment is.

The US Food and Drug Administration on May 1 gave emergency approval to Gilead Sciences Inc's antiviral drug remdesivir for COVID-19 based on data showing that it reduced hospitalization time by 31 percent compared to a placebo, but did not have a significant effect on survival.

Remdesivir cuts recovery times in coronavirus patients, according to the full results of a trial published Friday night, three weeks after America's top infectious diseases expert said the study showed the medication has "clear-cut" benefits. Complete results from the research, which was carried out by US government agency the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), were published by leading medical periodical the New England Journal of Medicine.

The United States authorized the emergency use of remdesivir in hospitals on May 1, followed by Japan, while Europe is considering following suit. The study found that remdesivir, injected intravenously daily for 10 days, accelerated the recovery of hospitalized COVID-19 patients compared to a placebo in clinical tests on just over a thousand patients across 10 countries.

On April 29, NIAID director Anthony Fauci, who has become the US government's trusted face on the coronavirus pandemic, said preliminary evidence indicated remdesivir had a "clear-cut, significant and positive effect in diminishing the time to recovery". The National Institutes of Health, of which the NIAID is a part, said Friday in a statement online that investigators found "remdesivir was most beneficial for hospitalized patients with severe disease who required supplemental oxygen."

But the authors of the trial wrote that the drug did not prevent all deaths. "Given high mortality despite the use of remdesivir, it is clear that treatment with an anti-viral drug alone is not likely to be sufficient," they said. About 7.1 percent of patients given remdesivir in the trial group died within 14 days — compared with 11.9 percent in the placebo group. However, the result is just below the statistical reliability threshold, meaning it could be down to chance rather than the capability of the drug. — Agencies

Pak goes wild for blockbuster...

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The five-season series tells the story of Ertugrul, the father of Osman I who founded the Ottoman Empire, which ruled parts of Europe, Western Asia and North Africa for more than 600 years. "The response has been incredible, it's really great to see how the show is resonating with Urdu speakers around the world," said Riyaad Minty, digital director of TRT, which produced the series. PTV said viewership has been unprecedented, with the drama fetching ratings five times higher than average.

Featuring heartthrob heroes, westernized heroines and picturesque scenery, dozens of Turkish soap operas have made it onto Pakistani television channels since 2012. But a dependence on imported content is a source of frustration for some Pakistani artists, producers and directors who bemoan prime-time slots being given to a foreign show.

PTV once used to produce the subcontinent's best soap operas but has suffered in the face of rising competition from private channels. "It is a good opportuni-

ty for PTV management to look at themselves, shake their conscience and wonder how they are unable to produce a prime-time drama," Aehsun Talish, a Pakistani drama producer, told AFP.

The channel has profited from advertising breaks during the broadcasts but experts warn it is on shaky ground. "It's a cheap re-run, a temporary filling. If we truly want PTV's revival we will have to bank on local talent," Samina Ahmad, a veteran television actress, told AFP.

Turkish television has become a major vehicle of soft power, with viewers in the Muslim world becoming voracious consumers of the country's soaps. Resurrection: Ertugrul is another strategic asset for Turkey, said South Asia analyst Michael Kugelmann from the Wilson Center think tank. "There's strong backing among many in Pakistan for pan-Muslim solidarity, which translates in many cases to support for strong Muslim leaders from Malaysia to Turkey and many places in between," he said.

Turkey has backed Pakistan on the international stage, particularly in the dispute with New Delhi over Kashmir, and the two nations have enjoyed strong relations. Egypt, however, fearing Turkey holds a desire to revive the Ottoman Empire and rule the Arab Muslim world, quickly issued an Islamic legal ruling against the hit show. Saudi Arabia stopped its state broadcaster from airing all Turkish soap operas in 2018. — AFP

Iran slams 'tumor' Israel, lauds arms...

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"Some Arab governments in the region, which play the role of US puppets, have provided the necessary preconditions for this, such as economic ties and the like; these efforts are completely fruitless and sterile."

The 80-year-old leader also appeared to confirm for the first time that Iran has helped to provide Palestinians with arms. "Everyone must fill the hand of the Palestinian fighter and strengthen his back. We will proudly do our best in this way. One day we realized that the only problem of the Palestinian fighter... was the lack of weapons. We planned to resolve this issue, and the result is that the balance of power in Palestine has changed: Today Gaza can stand up to the Zionist enemy's military aggression and win."

Zeyad Al-Nakhala, chief of Palestinian Islamic Jihad, which has publicly admitted getting Iranian arms and funds, praised Khamenei's comments. "We are ready for a long jihad and victory is granted," he said in remarks distributed by the group. Every year since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has marked Quds Day on the last Friday of Ramadan, the Muslim month of fasting, in solidarity with the Palestinians. Khamenei was speaking at the event for the first time in more than 30 years as supreme leader, although he has repeatedly referred to the Palestinian cause as "the main problem of the Muslim world".

Iran has cancelled its Quds Day rallies this year to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus, which first

emerged in the country in February. This year's commemoration comes after the assassination in January of Qasem Soleimani, the powerful commander of the Quds Force, the foreign operations arm of Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

Netanyahu on Wednesday blasted Khamenei on Twitter after the Iranian leader's own account posted quotes from a speech he made in November. In the tweet on Khamenei's account, the Iranian leader was quoted as saying that "eliminating the Zionist regime doesn't mean eliminating Jews". Netanyahu responded by saying: "He should know that any regime that threatens Israel with extermination will find itself in similar danger".

The Iranian leader's tweets were also condemned by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and the European Union. The next day Israelis woke to a series of cyber attacks targeting websites of businesses, municipalities and non-governmental organizations with a message in Hebrew and English: "The countdown to the destruction of Israel began long ago".

Earlier in the week, The Washington Post reported Israel had launched a cyber attack against the Iranian port of Shahid Rajaei, located on the Strait of Hormuz, a vital route for international oil traffic. This attack was thought to be in retaliation for a cyber attack against civil hydraulic installations in Israel.

In his speech, Khamenei also criticized the UN for failing to do its job in Middle East trouble spots. "The main policy of arrogance and Zionism is to downplay the Palestinian issue in the minds of Muslim communities and to drive it into oblivion," he said. Khamenei said the Syrian conflict, the Saudi-led war on Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels and the destruction of Iraq "are all tricks to entertain the resistance front and give the Zionist regime the chance". — Agencies

"heard a big bang and woke up to people calling for the fire brigade". An AFP reporter saw charred bodies being loaded into ambulances.

Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan said he was "shocked and saddened" by the crash, tweeting that he was in touch with the state-owned airline's chief executive. "Prayers & condolences go to families of the deceased," he wrote on Twitter. The Pakistan military said security forces were deployed to the area and helicopters were used to survey the damage.

Pakistan has a chequered military and civilian aviation safety record, with frequent plane and helicopter crashes over the years. In 2016, a PIA plane burst into flames after one of its two turboprop engines failed while flying from the remote north to Islamabad, killing more than 40 people.

The deadliest air disaster on Pakistani soil was in 2010 when an Airbus A321 operated by private airline Airblue and flying from Karachi crashed into the hills outside Islamabad as it came in to land, killing all 152 people on board. An official report blamed the accident on a confused captain and a hostile cockpit atmosphere.

PIA, a leading airline until the 1970s, has seen its reputation sink due to frequent cancellations, delays and financial troubles. It has been involved in numerous controversies over the years, including the jailing of a drunk pilot in Britain in 2013. — AFP

Survivor recalls horror of crash...

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Aviation Minister Ghulam Sarwar Khan said the captain, Sajjad Gull, had been described by the airline as a senior A320 pilot with extensive flight experience. The plane had first entered service in 2004 and was acquired by PIA a decade later and had logged around 47,100 flight hours, Airbus said in a statement.

Residents were the first to sift through the charred and twisted wreckage strewn in search of survivors, with witnesses reporting the cries of a man hanging from the plane's emergency exit door. Sarfraz Ahmed, a firefighter at the crash site, told AFP that rescuers had pulled bodies from the aircraft still wearing seatbelts. Residents near the scene recounted how the walls of their homes shook before a big explosion erupted as the aircraft slammed into the neighborhood.

"I was coming from the mosque when I saw the plane tilting on one side. It was so low that the walls of my house were trembling," said 14-year-old Hassan. Another resident, Mudassar Ali, said he