

Bedding down with reindeer at a Berlin museum

By MARY LANE

AP Associated Press

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BERLIN — It's rather stinky and kind of loud, but an exhibit that allows visitors to bed down with 24 golden canaries and a dozen reindeer is one of the most popular ever at a Berlin museum. While the goal of the unusual installation is to acquaint the public with spiritual Hinduism, the gallery says the combination of reindeer and the approaching holidays has many visitors thinking just one thing: Christmas.

Even though the connection to the holidays may have been unintended, the impulse to use one's own culture to interpret the customs of others is part of what artist Carsten Hoeller wants to expose, curator Dorothee Brill said.

"That irony has to do with our need for fixed points of reference," she said.

The exhibition, called "Soma" — which also includes a patch of giant mushroom sculptures — is named for the legend of a hallucinogenic drink purportedly used 5,000 years ago in Hindi religious ceremonies and believed to be the magical elixir of the gods.

Beginning in the 1960s, anthropologists began drawing comparisons between the Soma ritual and similar religious practices of ancient Siberian nomads. One amateur Soma enthusiast even hypothesized that both the Siberians and ancient Soma drinkers used the hallucinogenic fly agaric mushroom.

"Carsten plays out this fantasy using reindeer who eat wild mushrooms," Brill said, adding: "It's a piece of poetry, not academic documentation."

As part of the "reflective component" of the exhibition, guests can rent a single revolving bed in the middle of the reindeer herd for 1,000 euros (\$1,363) per night.

Businesswoman Maru Winnacker and her husband rented the bed a few weeks ago and considered the hefty price tag money well spent.



Gero Breloer / AP

A new museum exhibit in Berlin allows visitors to sleep overnight amid a dozen reindeer.

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"The bed was comfortable, but we were too excited to sleep," she told The Associated Press. "The reindeer were playing and fighting; it was quite loud. We sat on the bed and watched it all."

The bed is at the end of a long room on a raised circular platform that overlooks the reindeer enclosure. The pathway that leads to the stairs up to the bed bisects the sawdust-covered pen, and tall white railings keep the reindeer and guests separated at all times. Six reindeer are on one side, another six on the other.

"It wasn't a night like any other night," said Belgian-born Hoeller after staying over himself. He also found it a little difficult to sleep: "The reindeer made distinctive roars that sounded to me like lions — you are surrounded by different noises here."

The reindeer have a busy schedule ahead of them — all available dates through the end of the exhibit in February, six nights a week, are booked up. Christmas Eve remains open, but the museum is still deciding if visitors can stay over on the 24th, and for how much.

Winnacker said she researched Soma to gain a better understanding of the exhibit, but also saw it as a chance to look at the other art without others around.

"It was wonderful to wander about the artworks with flashlights and walkie-talkies. You can observe so much more at night than during the day," she said.

For Hoeller, early morning was the best time for reflection.

"It is a moment when one is not quite awake, but in a state in-between," he said. "I love to look at art in such a moment — art then appears more clear to me."

Brill said the exhibit has been one of the museum's most popular ever, with a steady stream of more 20,000 visitors since it opened in early November.

There is even some room for holiday interpretation.

"The red and white colors of Santa's suit are similar to those of the red and white mushroom," Brill said. "So the fact that Santa comes flying through the night with reindeer could be sort of a Soma vision. You really can mesh it all together."

After the exhibition closes in February, the reindeer will be returned to their owner in Sweden.

Kerstin Sopke contributed to this report.

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