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Religious police break hearts in Saudi Arabia

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RIYADH, Saudi Arabia -- Just days before Valentine's Day, a young Saudi woman desperately searched for a red teddy bear to buy for her boyfriend. But all Nof Faisal could find were blue and white ones, minus the "I love you" she wanted hers to declare.

It's not because the store couldn't keep up with demand. It is because fear of the religious police forced the store's owner to strip the shelves of all red items, including the hottest-selling item: heart-festooned red plastic handcuffs inscribed, "Take me, I'm yours."

As Feb. 14 approaches, the police begin inspecting gift shops for items that are red or are intended as gifts to mark the holiday _ a celebration of St. Valentine, a 3rd century Christian martyr _ which is banned in Saudi Arabia. Such items are legal at other times of the year, but as Valentine's Day nears they become contraband.

At best, shops caught selling Valentine's gifts are ordered to get rid of them. Some salesmen have been detained for days.

The Valentine's Day prohibition is in line with the ascetic Wahhabi school of Islam that the kingdom follows. Marking Christian holidays is banned in Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam and a country where non-Muslims are banned from openly practicing their religion.

Celebrating any holidays but the two most important for Muslims _ Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr_ is taboo because they are considered "religious innovations" that Islam does not sanction. Even birthdays and Mother's Day are frowned on by the religious establishment.

As Feb. 14 approaches, newspapers reprint a fatwa or religious edict issued by scholars a few years ago, declaring "eid al-hob," Arabic for the feast of love, a "Christian, pagan feast" that Muslims should not celebrate. Teachers remind students they must not mark the festival, and girls are warned against wearing anything red.

Nevertheless, Valentine's Day quietly creeps into the capital, Riyadh: While gift stores don't trumpet their Valentine's wares, they acquire a deep red hue as shelves are stocked with artificial flowers, heart-shaped frames and other knickknacks.

Lingerie stores display red lacy underwear and sheer short nighties. Boxes packed with teddy bears, some inscribed with "I love you," appear on supermarket shelves. Newspapers advertise diamond and ruby heart-shaped pendants.

And salesmen urge shoppers to snap up their gifts early because no one knows when the religious police will begin their rounds.

"My colleague spent a night in jail last year because of the color red," said one salesman, who insisted on anonymity, fearing his colleague's fate.

It is a challenge for courting Saudi couples to be together at any time of the year because of strict gender segregation. Unmarried men and women cannot take a drive together, have a meal or even talk on the street unless they are close relatives. Dating consists of long phone conversations and the rare tryst. Infractions are punished by detention.

"I wish things were different," said Faisal, a 20-year-old student, who said she would like to be wined and dined by her boyfriend. She has arranged to have red roses, a red box containing perfume, chocolate and a CD of love songs delivered to him.

Abdul-Aziz al-Shammari bought his girlfriend 10 red roses _ one for each month he's known her _ five days before Valentine's Day and stored the bouquet in his refrigerator to keep it fresh.

"I don't consider it a day venerating (St.) Valentine," said al-Shammari, a 24-year-old student. "I see it as an international day of love."

For at least businessmen, the commercial draw of the holiday was too strong.

Waleed al-Khuleiwi's store was perhaps the only one in Riyadh still brimming with Valentine's goods with just days to go.

His cheeky defense: "I'm not selling the items with the intention of celebrating Valentine's."

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