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## Automatic for the People

From China to California, vending machines dispensing the ordinary and the exotic are supplying a universal demand for fast (and freaky) needs

By NICK HARAMIS



PA Live Bait Vending

Live bait boxes in the U.S.

Insert money, push button and claim your reward: A bottle of Evian. A bag of Doritos. Or maybe, from the quasi-high-tech vending machines that have become ubiquitous in airport terminals, a cellphone charger or video game.

But prosaic products aren't all you can get from vending machines. Around the world, new breeds of automats are feeding demand for practical but surprising local staples as well as out-and-out exotica.

In the Netherlands, vending machines birth rental bicycles. In Abu Dhabi and Dubai, gilded coin-ops dole out gold doubloons and bars. In Los Angeles, you can buy Quiksilver brand bikinis and board shorts from a vending machine in the lobby of the Standard hotel (Don't try this with quarters; the surf trunks are \$75.) In Miami's Catholic-heavy Little Havana, they sell prayer candles from dispensing boxes stamped with an image of the Virgin and Child

Vending machines eliminate the need to staff a store; they are open 24-7. They can also add a frisson of fun to otherwise mundane purchases especially when what emerges is a quirk of local culture, or something that...well, seems like it shouldn't have been left unattended



Last year in Nanjing, China, vending machines appeared in and around subway stations selling live "hairy crabs," or Chinese mitten crabs. A seasonal delicacy prized for their succulent meat, they are kept in little plastic boxes at 42



Sara Clemence discusses some of the very odd things popping out of vending machines around the world these days, including live crabs, hot pizzas and even rental bikes.

dominating the growing market.

When it comes to vending as a whole, Japan appears to rule. According to the Automatic Vending Association, in that country there's one vending machine for every 23 people; in Tokyo alone, the boxes sell everything from live lobsters to lingerie, toilet paper to rhinoceros beetles (a popular child's pet in a land of tight space).



Reuters

China's live hairy crab vendors

degrees, which induces in the palm-sized captives a hibernation-like state that keeps them from escaping.

Twin Lake Crab Co., the China-based vendor that sells the creatures for roughly \$1.50 to \$7 a pop (including condiments), appears to be

As it happens, U.S.-based inventors were ahead of the "it's alive!" game. Angler-targeting live bait-and-tackle machines carrying sleepy crawfish (or crayfish, if in the North) as well as leeches, night-crawlers, minnows and wax worms have been around for nearly a decade, courtesy of companies like Live Bait Vending based in Elverson, Pa.

The company recently expanded its turf to include the Great Lakes region and the Deep South. And last year Live Bait introduced its new "Coastal 24 Hour Bait Shop," for the "saltwater market"; business is reportedly booming for their squiggly things, which are sold (along with cold beverages) from the automats in Tupperware-like containers.

For humans, there are many more appetizing machines around the globe. In Australia they serve up fresh French fries (a potato dicer and a deep fryer do the work). In France, there are wine (with dispensing hoses) and bread loaf machines.

In Rome last year, Italian entrepreneur Claudio Torghele debuted Let's Pizza, a vending machine housing a robot that turns flour, tomato sauce and water into a pizza pie in three minutes (and for \$6, about half the price of an average margherita pizza in Rome).

Buyers can watch the process through a display window: mixing and stretching the dough



GOLD to go

A gold coin-op in Abu Dhabi

(sorry, no tossing), adding the toppings, and baking the pizza in an infrared oven. Despite the wrath of culinary purists, Let's Pizza was such a success in Italy that now the U.K. has a slice of the action.

In Abu Dhabi, German entrepreneur Thomas Geissler unveiled last year "the world's first gold ATM." GOLD to go is aimed at both private investors and tourists, who, Mr. Geissler said "tend to give gold as a present rather than, say a book that will never be read, or a bunch of flowers that will wither in three days.'

Claiming that it would take "military explosives to blow [a box] up," he said that the machines owchich are outfitted with "several locking systems, tamper-proof cash boxes as well as molybdenum steel casing"oare a hit. There are currently 17 units world-wide, including two in German banks, purveying items such as kangaroo-embossed and Maple Leaf-wreathed coins. (Prices world-wide start around \$42.) There are new machines inside the Golder Nugget Hotel in Las Vegas, too.



Artists In Cellophan

A cigarette machine-turned-art dispenser

Nearby, art-o-mat recently set up seven of its vending machines inside The Cosmopolitan of Las Vegas hotel. The company operates 1,000-odd machines world-wide, offering up original artworks, drawings and photography. For the past 13 years, creator Clark Whittington, an entrepreneur from Winston-Salem, N.C., has refurbished 1960s- and '70s-era cigarette machines to pop out the on-spec and commissioned artworks. Submissions come from all over the U.S., and sell for \$5 to \$7.



Wisconsin-based photographer Corey Hengen art-o-mat's best-selling artist, began peddling his images in 2006 when he submitted photos inspired by trips to Europe and Costa Rica "Art-o-mat brings art to people who might never go to a gallery," Mr. Hengen said. "Quite frankly, I wish I had come up with the idea.' Unfortunately for him, you could say the concept's already been coined.

The Standard

Surf shorts for sale at The Standard, Los Angeles

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