

December 22, 2005

Catalan town blessed with massive wins in lottery

By MANU FERNANDEZ

Christmas lottery, showering \$612 million US in winnings on a town with the bite-size name of Vic.

The sweepstakes known as El Gordo - the Fat One - spread a total of 2.02 billion euros (\$2.4 billion) in Christmas cheer around Spain on Thursday, much of it on this Barcelona-area town of 30,000 that is more routinely associated with churches and convents. All 1,700 first-prize tickets, each worth \$360,000, were sold by one lottery office in Vic.

"I won't believe it until I see the money," Alexandra Montaner, 18, said, and giggled with glee as revellers chugged sparkling wine from bottles and sprayed it at one another on the streets of Vic.

"I have never seen so many people on the streets," said Montaner, who works at her parents' catering company and planned to buy a new car for herself and a fancy vacation for her folks.

Police had to cut off the street that is home to the lottery office that sold the first-prize tickets.

"This is new for us," the manager of that lottery office, Miquel Colina, said in an understatement. "This has absolutely overwhelmed us."

There are lots of ways to win at least something in the nearly 200-year-old lottery, which

features a system of shared numbers designed to spread wealth rather than concentrate it in a jackpot. The idea is for the big money to trickle through Spanish society.

Each five-digit number ranging from 00001 to 85000 appeared on 1,700 tickets costing \$24 apiece. The luckiest gamblers this year held the first-prize number 20085.

It was not the first time all the first-prize tickets were sold in one town. It happened last year, also in the Catalonia region, in a town named Sort, Catalan for "luck." And it happened in 2000 in the town of Segovia.

The lottery is a hallowed Spanish tradition that marks the official start of the holiday season.

The annual prize ceremony takes more than three hours because nearly 1,800 numbers bring some kind of prize and all of them are sung out by school children after wooden balls bearing the numbers roll out of a large golden tumbler.

This year, it was about 2 1/2 hours before the luckiest numbers emerged.

Prizes range from the face value of the ticket to the first prize.

Vic's lottery office sold tickets to individuals and to bars and restaurants, which as per Spanish custom then turned around and sold them to customers, either as they were or divvying them up into smaller shares.

Vic restaurant owner Carme Criviller did that, selling 10-euro shares that ended up fetching 180 million euros (\$216 million) in winnings for employees and customers.

Criviller and her husband Efe won \$1.4 million. But two of her 10 employees, a cook and a waitress named Diana and Ana, decided not to gamble "because they are anti-lottery."

"I think we are going to have to do something for them, give them a gift," Criviller told Efe.