

## What does a billion dollars look like?

One hears large sums of money bandied about in reports and discussions of Albania's current pyramid crisis. Several hundred million dollars are lost here, a billion has been taken in there, a holding company claims "investments of 500 - 600 million dollars," and creditors hope to recover their half-a-billion dollar losses through filling dental cavities and selling off a gas station or two.

All this prompts one to wonder: What does a billion dollars look like, anyway? Let's just say, it is a lot of money. Try these comparisons on for size to get some idea of the scope of the sum:

-- Let's say you went to the bank and took out a billion one-dollar bills. Just for fun, you stretched them end-to-end. You would find that they stretched nearly 95,000 miles (about 150,000 kms), or nearly four times around the Earth at the Equator. If you decided to go up instead of out, you would find that your trail of dollars would stretch nearly 40 percent of the way to the Moon. If you decided you didn't have time to lay out so many bills and withdrew \$100 notes instead, your paper trail would still stretch 950 miles (1,500 kms), or about the distance from Tirana to Brussels. Just think of the lunch you could have in the Capital of Europe!

-- This time, you go to the bank and just ask the teller to stack your billion dollars outside. Of course, you'll take them in \$100 notes, since you don't have much room in your trunk. Well, get ready for a surprise -- your billion-dollar stack will stand nearly a mile high, or roughly about 1,686 meters. That's 73 meters higher than Mount Dajti stands above the level of the sea. (Speaking of the sea, does that dimension make you wonder a little bit about that \$130 million that was reported to have left Vlora bound for Italy on a speedboat back in January?) Better not even think of taking your stash in singles, though -- a stack of one billion one-dollar bills will tower nearly 99 miles (160-some kms) into space, or about half as high as the Space Shuttle typically orbits the Earth.

-- Okay, dimensions don't impress you. You're the saving type, instead. Let's say you're a typical Albanian who is earning (and receiving from remittances from overseas relatives) a fairly typical income of \$1,000 per year. You want to be up there with the big guys, though, so you decide to save up all your income until you have put away one billion dollars. Well, you had better be one patient Albanian, because -- at \$1,000 per year -- you will have to save all your income for no less than 1 million years . . . that's right, 1,000,000 years. After all, a billion dollars is one thousand million dollars.

-- Forget saving. That's for pikers. You're the spending type, as is your spouse. After all, the two of you are each earning the national average of \$650 per year, for a combined annual total of \$1,300. Why not spend it? In fact, you're not going to spend only \$1,300 per year, but \$1,300 per day, until you hit a billion dollars in expenditures. Since you are really ancient Albanians, you're going to start spending \$1,300 per day, every day, beginning on the day Christ was born. Keep at it every day of every week of every year, and by the eve of the beginning of the third millennium on December 31, 2000 years later, and you still would not have hit your goal of spending one billion dollars. While you would be starting to see the light at the end of the tunnel, that light still will be several years off in the distance. Keep spending!

And that's what a billion dollars look like. If you can think of some other comparisons, please let us know. FJY