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# How America reversed the violent crime wave

For years, the headlines told a singular, grim story of American streets: a post-pandemic surge in violence that seemed destined to become a permanent fixture of modern life. But as the 2026 spring air begins to settle, a different reality is emerging from the data—one of historic resilience and a massive, nationwide retreat of violent crime.

New data from the Council on Criminal Justice (CCJ) reveals that 2025 was a watershed year for public safety. In a study of 35 major U.S. cities, homicides plummeted by 21% compared to 2024. This represents not just a minor fluctuation, but what experts believe could be the largest single-year percentage drop in the homicide rate in recorded U.S. history.

From the sun-drenched avenues of Los Angeles to the historic neighborhoods of Baltimore, the "great turning" is visible in more than just spreadsheets. It is felt in the reopening of community centers, the return of "eyes on the street," and a renewed sense of possibility for a generation once defined by lockdown-era instability.

## A Historic Plunge in Numbers

The scale of the decline is staggering across nearly every category of violence. While homicides took the most dramatic dive, other offenses followed suit:

**Carjackings:** Once a terrifying new normal in many metros, reported carjackings fell



**New York City Police Department (NYPD) van is parked near housing projects in the Brownsville section of Brooklyn on June 2, 2015 in New York City.**

by 43% in 2025.

**Robberies:** These incidents decreased by 23%.

**Gun Assaults:** Attacks involving firearms dropped by 22%.

**Aggravated Assaults:** These saw a notable 9% decline.

The FBI's own preliminary data mirrors these findings, showing a 4.5% overall decline in violent crime through late 2024 and 2025, reaching rates not seen in over half a century. In cities like Denver, Omaha, and Washington, D.C., homicide rates didn't just dip—they crashed by 40% or more.

## The "Why" Behind the Change

Criminologists warn that there is no "magic bullet" that fixed the crisis. Instead, they point to a "complex tangle"

of factors—a perfect storm of positive interventions.

**1. The Community Violence Intervention (CVI) Revolution** Perhaps the most significant shift has been the professionalization of "credible messengers." Programs like those in Chicago and Philadelphia have moved from the fringes of public policy to the center. By identifying individuals at the highest risk of being either victims or perpetrators of violence and providing them with job training, cognitive behavioral therapy, and intense mentorship, these programs have achieved what traditional policing often couldn't.

In Philadelphia, group violence intervention (GVI) strategies led to a 38.6% reduction in shootings per

week among contacted groups.

In Baltimore, several "Safe Streets" zones marked an entire year without a single homicide.

**2. Normalization After the Pandemic Shock**

The chaos of 2020 and 2021 was fueled by a breakdown of social guardrails. Institutions like schools, courts, and community centers were shuttered, leaving a vacuum. Experts like Patrick Sharkey note that as these "institutions of collective life" reopened, the informal guardianship of a community returned. More people in public spaces acts as a natural deterrent, providing the "informal guardianship" that prevents conflicts from escalating.

## 3. Precision Policing and Technology

While community programs provided the heart, modern law enforcement provided the scalpels. Many cities transitioned from broad, "dragnet" policing to precision policing, focusing resources on the small number of people and specific street corners driving the majority of shootings.

Improved homicide clearance rates have also played a role. By solving more crimes more quickly, departments are preventing the "retaliation cycles" that often fuel urban violence.

The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department, for instance, reported a 25% reduction in violent crime, credited to "data-driven strategies" and collaborative community teamwork.

## The Human Impact: Lives Saved

The statistics, while impressive, are merely a proxy for human life. The 21% drop in homicides across just 35 cities represents 922 fewer families mourning a loved one in 2025 compared to the year before.

In Pine Bluff, Arkansas, a city that saw a 40% spike in homicides in 2023, the community reached a significant milestone in mid-2025: over 500 days without a juvenile homicide. Such milestones are the true dividends of the massive federal and local investments made over the last three years. □

# Philadelphia students win guaranteed access to hydration and dignity



**By Local Education Correspondent**

**PHILADELPHIA** — In a landmark decision being hailed as a "victory for joy," the School District of Philadelphia has officially approved a comprehensive new wellness

policy that guarantees more than 100,000 public school students the right to water and bathroom breaks.

The policy, passed by the Board of Education late last week and celebrated by families on Monday, marks

a historic shift in how the district manages the basic biological needs of its students. For the first time, access to drinking water and restrooms is codified as a fundamental right that cannot be withheld as a form of disciplinary action.

## "Dignity is Non-Negotiable"

The new rules follow an 18-month grassroots campaign led by Lift Every Voice Philly, an advocacy group of parents who shared harrowing stories of students being denied water or restricted from using the bathroom. "We refused to accept schools where our children

could not drink water freely," said LEV board member Jamila Carter during a celebratory gathering. "This policy makes dignity non-negotiable".

Key highlights of the newly adopted wellness policy include:

**Protected Water Access:** Drinking water must be available and accessible without restriction and at no cost throughout the entire school day. **Mandatory Movement:** Elementary students are now guaranteed movement breaks every 90 minutes of seated instruction. **The End of Collective Punishment:** Practices such as "si-

lent lunches" or withholding recess from an entire class due to the actions of one or two students are now strictly prohibited.

**Guaranteed Recess:** Daily recess is now a requirement for all K-8 students, ensuring time for play and social-emotional development.

## A Foundation for Learning

City officials and medical experts have lauded the move as essential healthcare. City Councilmember Isaiah Thomas, who advocated for the changes, noted that providing structured time for hydration is "not a luxury—it's an act of respect". □

## After 200 Years, shellfishing returns to a reborn Boston harbor

By Environmental Desk

**BOSTON, MA** — For over two centuries, the soft-shell clams and oysters of the Chelsea Creek and Boston's inner harbor were a forbidden fruit. Tainted by the industrial runoff of a growing nation and the raw sewage of a burgeoning city, the harbor was once dubbed the "dirtiest in America." But this week, the salt air carries a new scent: the smell of a promise kept.

In a landmark decision, state environmental officials have officially lifted a generational ban on shellfishing in specific sections of the harbor. For the first time in over 200 years, the iconic bivalves are not just present; they are safe to harvest, eat, and celebrate.

### A Resurrection of the "Harbor of Shame"

To understand the magnitude of this victory, one must look back to the 1980s. At that time, Boston Harbor was a biological desert. Decades of "combined sewer overflows" meant that every heavy rain sent millions of gallons of untreated waste directly into the water. Beaches were permanently closed, and the idea of eating a clam pulled from the flats near Logan Airport was considered a public health hazard.

The turning point came with the construction of the Deer Island Waste Water Treat-



Shellfish for sale is pictured at Caleta La Lonja, in the port of San Antonio, Valparaiso province, on the central coast of Chile on February 5, 2025.

ment Plant, a multi-billion dollar engineering marvel that began the slow process of filtering the city's impact on the sea. But the return of shellfishing required more than just stopping the pollution; it required the ecosystem to heal itself.

### The "Living Filters" Lead the Way

The stars of this environmental comeback are the shellfish themselves. Oysters and clams act as natural vacuum cleaners, with a single adult oyster capable of filtering up to 50 gallons of water per day.

Through the collaborative efforts of the Massachusetts

Water Resources Authority (MWRA) and local non-profits like Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, massive restoration projects were launched to seed the harbor with these "living filters."

"This is the ultimate indicator of success," said a spokesperson for the Massachusetts Division of Marine Fisheries. "We didn't just clean the water; we restored the biological machinery that keeps it clean."

### A Harvest of Hope

On Monday morning, at the first legal harvest in East Boston, the atmosphere was electric. Families who have lived in the shadow of the

city's industrial waterfront for generations gathered to watch as the first baskets of "steamers" were pulled from the mud.

For the local community, this is about more than just food. It is about environmental justice. These shoreline neighborhoods have long borne the brunt of urban pollution. Seeing the water return to a state of bounty is a tangible sign that the cycle of degradation has been broken.

"My grandfather told me stories about how they used to dig here before the war," said Luis Mendez, an East Boston resident. "We never thought we'd see the day when we could take our own

kids out to the flats. It feels like the city has finally given the harbor back to us."

### Economic and Ecological Ripples

The reopening is expected to have a significant impact beyond the dinner table:

**Biodiversity:** The presence of healthy shellfish beds provides a habitat for juvenile fish and crabs, boosting the harbor's overall biodiversity. **Coastal Resilience:** Healthy reefs act as natural storm buffers, absorbing wave energy and protecting the Boston shoreline from the increasing threats of sea-level rise. **Education:** New "Urban Harvester" programs are being launched to teach city youth about marine biology and sustainable foraging.

### The Work Continues

While the harvest is currently limited to specific "conditionally approved" areas, the success has provided a blueprint for other urban centers. Cities from New York to Baltimore are now looking to Boston as the gold standard for urban waterway recovery.

As the tide pulls back to reveal the shimmering flats of a clean, vibrant harbor, Boston stands as a beacon of hope. It is proof that even the most damaged environments can be brought back to life with persistence, science, and a community that refuses to give up on its water. □

## Scientists create 'super honey' from chocolate waste

By Lifestyle & Science Correspondent

**CAMPINAS, Brazil** — In a breakthrough that sounds like a confectioner's dream, researchers have successfully transformed bitter cocoa waste into a "super honey" that tastes like chocolate and packs a powerful nutritional punch.

The innovation, developed at the State University of Campinas (UNICAMP) in Brazil, uses advanced technology to infuse native bee honey with the bioactive compounds found in discarded cocoa bean shells. The result is a sustainable, heart-healthy sweetener that researchers believe

could revolutionize both the gourmet food and cosmetic industries.

### A Green Chemistry Breakthrough

Every year, the chocolate industry generates over 635,000 metric tons of cocoa shells—a papery byproduct typically thrown away.

To rescue these nutrients, the UNICAMP team employed a "green chemistry" method called ultrasound-assisted extraction. By placing an ultrasonic probe into a mixture of honey and finely milled cocoa shells, high-frequency sound waves create microscopic bubbles that burst, physically breaking

down the shell's cell walls. This allows the honey to act as a natural, edible solvent, absorbing beneficial compounds without the need for synthetic chemicals.

### Why It's a "Superfood"

This new blend isn't just about flavor; it significantly boosts the natural health benefits of both ingredients. According to the study published in ACS Sustainable Chemistry & Engineering, the "chocolate honey" is enriched with:  
**Heart-Healthy Stimulants:** The honey absorbs theobromine and caffeine from the shells, which are linked to improved blood flow and cardiovascular health.



**Antioxidant Powerhouse:** The process significantly increases the levels of phenolic compounds and flavonoids, which help reduce oxidative stress and inflammation.  
**Energy Without the Crash:** Combining honey's natural sugars with cocoa's stimulants provides a sustained energy boost, making it an ideal "guilt-free" pick-me-up.

### Leveraging Local Biodiversity

A key to the project's success was the use of honey from native Brazilian stingless bees. Unlike common European honeybees, these native species produce honey that is more fluid and has a higher water content, making it a more effective "magnet" for drawing out the cocoa's nutrients. □

## Periods, old age and communal conflict: Oscar shorts showcase variety

### Beverly Hills, United States

From menstruation mishaps to a meditation on old age, and the challenges faced by Arab-Israelis in the aftermath of the Hamas attacks, one Oscars category is nothing if not varied.

"The live action short category, it's particularly diverse in its genres," Julia Aks, nominated alongside Steve Pinder for their satire "Jane Austen's Period Drama," told AFP.

"That makes me very hopeful that the Academy, the pinnacle and the barometer of the industry, is broadening." Aks and Pinder's 13-minute comedy sees Georgian era heroine Estrogenia Talbot get her period in the middle of a long-awaited marriage proposal.

When her suitor mistakes the blood for an injury, it soon becomes clear that his expensive education was somewhat incomplete.

Aks said she never imagined her work would land at Hollywood's biggest gala.

"It's just been really encouraging that the kind of things that we want to make are also being rewarded," she said.

The short film category is seen as a gateway for new talent seeking to stand out in a competitive industry.

Previous winners include writer-director Martin McDonagh, who went on to helm Oscar-winning feature "Three Billboards Outside



**Writers directors nominees in the Best Live Action Short Film category for "Jane Austen's Period Drama" Julia Aks and Steve Pinder pose during a photo session ahead of the 98th Oscars Nominees Luncheon at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills, California on February 10, 2026.**

Ebbing, Missouri" and nine-time nominee "The Banshees of Inisherin."

### - Connection -

For Sam Davis, who worked with Jack Piatt to create "The Singers," getting an Oscar nomination has been surreal, but has also validated his ambition to use film to explore issues that matter to him.

"The Singers" focuses on a group of lonely men who spontaneously begin a musical competition one night in a bar.

"I wanted to tell a story about connection and the power of vulnerability, especially today," Davis told AFP.

"Everybody's on their phones, and I think we're less and less connected."

The young filmmaker, who counts "One Battle After Another" director Paul Thomas Anderson among his idols, said the isolation and missed opportunities that technology imposes on men in particular was something he wanted to examine.

"You never know who you're standing next to at the grocery store or sitting next to at the bar," he said.

"Maybe you'd be friends if you just talked."

The same theme of isolation guided the work of debut director Lee Knight, whose "A Friend of Dorothy" stars vet-

eran British actress Miriam Margolyes.

The 20-minute film follows a duo who form an unlikely friendship and is a delightful meditation on the importance of connecting with another human being.

"They come to each other in a time where they need each other, and they're lonely in their own way," Knight told AFP.

"He's lonely; he hasn't found his people, and she's lonely too. It's a simple story, but we need these stories now more than ever."

### - Stars -

For up-and-coming filmmakers, an Oscar nomina-

tion -- and the attendant glitz and glamour of luncheons rubbing shoulders with megastars like Timothee Chalamet and Steven Spielberg -- is confirmation that persistence pays off.

"For me, it's about sending a message to other people, to other filmmakers, to other actors, other storytellers, to say: 'You really cannot give up,'" said Knight, who worked as an actor for years before heading behind the camera.

Meyer Levinson-Blount, nominated alongside Oron Caspi for "Butcher's Stain," agrees. "You just never know where it's going to happen or when it's going to happen," he said.

"Butcher's Stain" tells the story of an Arab-Israeli working in a Tel Aviv supermarket who is accused of tearing down hostage posters after the October 7, 2023 attack by Hamas on Israel.

Caspi said the current moment in filmmaking felt like one of enormous optimism. "Storytelling is one of the most ancient arts, and I think a lot of the changes about technology and a lot of changes about the situation we're in -- that's how we get our stories," he said.

"I feel like we're getting into a very interesting era of storytelling."

The 98th Academy Awards will be held on March 15 in Hollywood. □

## 'Train Dreams' director says goal was to take audience 'on a journey'



**U.S. director Clint Bentley nominated for Best Adapted Screenplay for "Train Dreams" also nominated for Best Picture, poses during a photo session ahead of the 98th Oscars Nominees Luncheon at the Beverly Hilton hotel in Beverly Hills, California on February 10, 2026.**

### Los Angeles, United States

When director and screenwriter Clint Bentley decided to adapt "Train Dreams" for

the big screen, he hoped he could captivate audiences with the tale of an ordinary man living in extraordinary

times -- the early 20th century.

Now, that vision -- starring Joel Edgerton and Felicity Jones -- is up for four Oscars, including the coveted best picture prize.

Bentley's gamble on the 2011 novella by Denis Johnson appears to have paid off.

"It's been overwhelming," the 41-year-old filmmaker told AFP.

"I wanted to give something to the audience with the film and take them on a journey. But you never know how it's going to be received."

"Train Dreams" tells the story of Robert Grainier (Edgerton), a reserved logger and railroad worker in Idaho, and

his wife Gladys (Jones), over the course of his entire life.

The Netflix film stands as both the story of the American northwest's transition to the modern era and a beautiful meditation on love, friendship, grief, loss and hope.

"It's lovely that people are connected and seeing themselves in it," said Bentley. "The story is really beautiful."

"Train Dreams" was filmed in Washington state and has so far won several prizes during Hollywood's awards season, especially for cinematographer Adolpho Veloso.

"A lot of movies really helped me in my life. So it's amazing to be a small part of a movie

that is doing that to other people," Veloso told AFP.

"I feel like that's the reason I wanted to do films in the first place, because movies were important for me, because I love movies," said the 36-year-old Brazilian.

"Train Dreams" won the top best feature prize at the Spirit Awards honoring independent films, as well as awards for Bentley and Veloso.

At the ceremony earlier this month in Santa Monica, Bentley reflected on the challenges and rewards of taking on such an ambitious project with a limited budget, including the construction of a period locomotive... from plywood. □

## A Nation Reclaimed:

# Croatia celebrates its first days of a landmine-free future

By International Affairs Desk

**ZAGREB, Croatia** — For thirty-one years, the beauty of the Croatian wilderness carried a silent, jagged asterisk. Beneath the lush canopy of the Lika-Senj forests and the fertile soils of the Slavonian plains, a deadly legacy of the 1991–1995 War of Independence lay dormant. But this week, that chapter has officially closed.

In a historic announcement on February 27, 2026—coinciding with International Civil Protection Day—Interior Minister Davor Božinović declared that Croatia is now officially free of landmines. The declaration marks the completion of one of the most ambitious and successful humanitarian demining efforts in modern history. After three decades of meticulous, dangerous work, Croatia has fulfilled its final obligations under the Ottawa Convention, restoring safety to every square meter of its territory.

### A Moral Triumph Over a Dark Legacy

The scale of the task was monumental. At the peak of the contamination, approximately 13,000 square kilometers—nearly a quarter of the country—were suspected of being littered with explosive remnants. These unmapped minefields cut through the heart of rural communities,



Djuka Dretvic, 14, plays with anti-tank landmines found recently in front of his family house in the village of Ceric, close to the eastern Croatian town of Vukovar, 11 September 2006.

paralyzing local economies and keeping families from their ancestral lands.

"This is not just a technical success," Minister Božinović told a crowd in Zagreb. "It is the fulfillment of a moral obligation to the victims of mines and their families".

The human cost of this journey was heavy, and the national mood this week is one of both relief and profound gratitude. Since 1995, mine-related incidents claimed the lives of 208 people, including 41 deminers who died while clearing the path for others. The official declaration serves as a tribute to

these heroes, whose sacrifice ensured that today's Croatian children can run through any field without fear.

### The Logistics of a Miracle

The road to this milestone was paved with a €1.2 billion (approx. \$1.3 billion) investment and the tireless work of specialists who combined high-tech robotics with painstaking manual labor. Key milestones of the demining campaign include: 107,000 landmines discovered and destroyed. 470,000 pieces of unexploded ordnance safely

removed.

121 major sites cleared in the final push alone, supported by EU-funded initiatives like Safe Steps CROSS II.

The final piece of the puzzle was solved earlier this year in Lika-Senj County, a rugged mountainous region where the last known mines were removed from the dense Otočac woods.

### Unlocking the "Lungs of Croatia"

Beyond the immediate safety, the removal of the final mine warning signs—the iconic red triangles that once haunted the country-

side—is an economic and environmental boon.

**Agriculture and Forestry:** Thousands of hectares of fertile farmland and sustainable forests have been reclaimed for local farmers and workers.

**Tourism:** Croatia's world-renowned outdoor tourism industry can now expand into previously unreachable hiking and biking trails in its protected wetlands and mountains.

**Environmental Restoration:** Protected areas like Kopački Rit and Mura-Drava, known for their rich biodiversity, can now be managed according to sustainable principles for the first time in three decades.

### From Victim to Global Leader

Croatia is not merely celebrating the end of its own struggle; it is stepping into a role as a global mentor. The country has transformed its painful experience into world-leading expertise.

The Croatian Mine Action Centre and private Croatian firms are already sharing their knowledge and specialized robotic demining equipment with other conflict-affected nations, most notably Ukraine. By turning its scars into solutions, Croatia is helping ensure that other nations do not have to wait thirty years for their own day of liberation. □

## Altitude and adaptation on new Swiss banknotes

### Zurich, Switzerland

The Swiss National Bank on Wednesday unveiled the new-look Swiss franc banknote designs, featuring native plants, landscapes and how human life adapts at different altitudes throughout the Alpine nation.

Switzerland's SNB central bank launched a competition to find the new designs, with the winner coming in the top three in a public vote and with a panel of experts. On the front, the series features delicate drawings of native plants found at different altitudes, while landscapes and buildings from around the country fill the reverse. Trains, boating, watchmak-



Swiss National Bank (SNB) vice chairman Antoine Martin gestures during a press conference announcing the selected project in the design competition for the new Swiss banknote series in Zurich, on March 4, 2026.

ing, Alpine cheese dairies, hiking trails, cable cars, the Glacier Express train, mountain climbing, and the Jungfrau observatory all fea-

ture on the new notes, which are expected to enter circulation in the early 2030s.

"We really focused on the topography that shapes life in

Switzerland," Sebastien Fasel, from the winning graphic design duo Emphase, told AFP at the unveiling in Zurich.

"We wanted to show how life adapts to the terrain."

The Swiss currency is considered a safe haven investment and is one of the world's most traded currencies.

Unusually, Swiss banknotes have a vertical orientation. They are printed in the four national languages: German, French, Italian and Romansh. The new designs are being exhibited in Zurich until March 15. Switzerland is due to vote on Sunday on a popular initiative which would amend the constitution to guarantee

the option of cash payments. The use of cash in Switzerland has declined sharply since the Covid-19 pandemic.

While 70 percent of everyday transactions were conducted in cash in 2017, the figure had fallen to around 30 percent by 2024, according to an SNB study last year.

"The use of cash is declining, but the Swiss are very attached to it," SNB vice chairman Antoine Martin told AFP, highlighting the importance of maintaining cash for unforeseen circumstances, such as power outages or mobile phones running out of charge.

The current banknote series was launched in 2016. □

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## Michelangelo's works hidden in 'secret room', researcher says

### Rome, Italy

Renaissance artist Michelangelo ordered many of his artworks to be hidden by his pupils in a secret room to protect them for posterity, an Italian researcher claimed Wednesday.

According to renowned art historian Giorgio Vasari, the Italian genius burned a large number of his own drawings and sketches before his death in Rome in 1564.

But researcher Valentina Salerno says she has unearthed unpublished archival documents that reveal a plot to squirrel away his works.

"One of these three unpublished documents I found in the archives speaks of a room" kept by students of the Michelangelo school, the origins of which "can be traced back" to the artist, Salerno told AFP on the sidelines of a press conference in Rome.

"Assets are hidden inside this room. These assets are locked away so tightly that they require a system of multiple keys, so that no one can access them without the permission of others," she said.



Italian researcher Valentina Salerno poses in front of a marble bust displayed inside the Basilica of Santa Agnese Outside the Walls after being identified as a work by Michelangelo Buonarroti after centuries without attribution, following a decade of archival research in Rome on March 4, 2026.

Salerno was researching a book on Michelangelo when she came across a document that showed the artist had in 1550 joined the Brotherhood of the Most Holy Crucifix. Those close to him in his final years were members too.

Over a decade of research, she followed the document trail between a series of archives in the Vatican, Italy

and European cities including Paris.

As part of what she called a "maniacal plan" cooked up by Michelangelo, his works were to be hidden "because otherwise it would all end up with a nephew he detested".

"The goal was to pass on to his poor, vulnerable, non-noble descendants the material to be able to continue

studying, to transmit his art to future generations," she said. Those involved in the plan went on to form the famous art Academy of San Luca in the 16th century, she added. It still exists today. Salerno believes the secret room designed to safeguard the artist's creations was likely somewhere inside the Saint Peter in Chains church in central Rome.

### - Michelangelo bust -

During her research, she also stumbled across a reference to a bust at the Basilica of Sant'Agnese, also in Rome, currently attributed to an anonymous artist.

She found documents attributing the white bust of Christ the Saviour to Michelangelo down the centuries.

In the 1930s it appears to disappear from documentation, only to reappear in the 1980s, attributed to a minor artist.

Italy's cultural authorities later declared it to be a work by an unknown sculptor instead.

But Salerno insists the bust is a genuine Michelangelo, not just due to the paper trail, but also because it shares a striking resemblance to Tommaso dei Cavalieri.

Cavalieri was a young nobleman with whom Michelangelo became infatuated in his 50s.

Salerno's work has not yet been peer reviewed, but she is a member of the Vatican committee for the celebrations marking the 500th anniversary of Michelangelo's birth. □

## Gabon fashion designer brings traditional raffia to Paris runways



Gabonese fashion designer Chouchou Lazare poses for a portrait inside his tailoring workshop in Libreville on February 9, 2026.

### Libreville, Gabon

Strands of raffia dry outside in the sun at the studio of Gabonese fashion designer Chouchou Lazare, who has made a name for himself using the natural fibres to craft his award-

winning garments.

The natural material derived from palm leaves -- and traditionally reserved for Gabon's nobles and village chiefs -- gained international attention on the runways of the world's fashion capital last week.

"This is raffia from Gabon, it's special, it's woven very finely, it's a textile that deserves to be shown," the self-taught designer told AFP at his workshop in the capital Libreville. Whether braided, sewn or glued to bustiers or skirts, nearly all of Lazare's dresses incorporate raffia.

Lazare was only nine years old when he began helping out his mother with her sewing to make ends meet. He went on to organise his first fash-

ion show in high school and has never received formal training in fashion.

Now in his 50s -- he chooses to keep his exact age under wraps -- Lazare says he learnt his craft by designing dresses for the two most important women in his life: his mother and grandmother.

"She was very tall; to me, she was like a queen," he said of his mother. And in readying his latest collection for the show in Paris on February 28, she remained his inspiration.

"When I prepare my shows, I want to see queens, women who fully own who they are," he said.

Although the signature material is used throughout his collection, the

natural fibres are never dyed.

In the central African country, raffia has special significance.

"It's a traditional fabric that is part of the spirituality of our country, that speaks to the ancestors," the designer said.

### - Like 'diamonds' -

Nowadays no longer just for nobility, raffia features at Gabonese traditional weddings and Indigenous bwiti spiritual ceremonies.

"Raffia represents a natural resource to be preserved, contributing to the influence of Gabonese and African cultural heritage," the ministry of sustainable tourism and crafts said on social media earlier in the year. □

## A quick snack for the road Learn how to make the Aruban Pastechi!



(Oranjestad)—If you ever been to Aruba before, you probably heard of (and even tried) the Aruban Pastechi. Beloved by young and old, this tasty treat is a staple for party snacks, a quick lunch or even breakfast!

Here's how to make the Pastechi dough.

### Ingredients:

- 4 cups of wheat flour
- 1 tbsp baking powder (if using self-rising flour, omit baking powder)
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tbsp sugar
- 0.5 cup of melted butter
- 1 cup water
- 1 egg

### Directions:

Sift your flour into a bowl and add all the dry ingredients before giving it a quick mix. Next add the butter, water and egg and mix until thoroughly combined. At this point, your dough will start to get sticky; time for an arm workout. Knead your dough into the bowl you are using or on a clean surface with some flour lightly dusted until its surface is smooth. You'll know your dough is ready when it doesn't stick to your hands or the surface on which you're kneading it. Let your dough rest covered for 15-20 minutes.

After resting, divide your dough into approximately 100 gram balls and roll it flat with a rolling pin. The thickness of the pastechi depends on your taste, but the average thinness would be around ¼ inch or so.

Filling for the pastechis varies according to your taste. The easiest and most common filling you'll find in Aruba is a simple cheese filling. For this, we usually use shredded Gouda, but feel free to use any cheese that melts well when frying the pastry.

Place the filling on your rolled out piece of dough, fold it in half and pinch the sides shut with a fork. If you have a folding tool, feel free to use it for this process. Your pastechi is ready for the fryer!

If you want to store some pastechis for later use, you can freeze them. A good tip is to place a piece of wax paper in between each pastechi if you are to store them on top of one another. This way the pastechis don't stick to each other when defrosting.

Here in Aruba we enjoy pastechi at any time of the day, but it has become almost tradition to eat pastechis for breakfast on the way to work. Many roadside snack trucks sell pastechi from early morning to noon, and offer a variety of fillings like cheese; ham and cheese; ground beef and pulled chicken to name a few. □

## Lessons from our elders: Plants and fruits for medicinal use

ORANJESTAD—Though western medicine is now widely used for common illnesses and to keep our bodies healthy and happy, it is still very common in every household in Aruba (and around the world) to have staple home remedies that is passed on through generations. Here are some tips that our elders have passed on to us over the years.

### Pineapple

Pineapple has more uses than topping it on your Christmas ham. According to elders, the skin of a pineapple is great to use to refresh your body. Clean the skin thoroughly and make tea or warapa\* with it. It is said that this tea can also be drunk after an operation on the ovaries or uterus. This gets rid of irritation and inflammation.

### Arrowroot

Arrowroot is native to tropical America and can be sold as a powder or whole. It is said that you can take arrowroot powder and make a "shalup" (porridge) for stomach pain or when you're feeling weak. You can

make it with milk too, but it is advised to best use just water. You can also add prunes for a bit of sweetness. Arrowroot shalup is also good to treat an unhealthy gut or for diarrhea.

To make arrowroot shalup, boil a bit of water and add one tablespoon of arrowroot powder and stir continuously until you reach porridge consistency. If you make a shalup with milk, add a pinch of salt. Raw arrowroot powder can be used to powder babies.

### Eggplant/Aubergine

Eggplants, or aubergines, are easy to find in supermarkets around the world and can be grown all year round on the island. Related to potato and tomato, eggplants are good to calm nerves. It can also be used to lower blood pressure, by steeping its leaves in boiled water and drinking it. You can also make eggplant juice to help purify your blood. However, do make sure to drink slowly; let it mix with your spit and then swallow. □

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## Visit the island's popular cave sites!

(Oranjestad)—Among the endless sea of dark brown sand and cacti, there are two caves hidden in the outskirts of San Nicolas, in the north-eastern area of the island. These caves, The Quadirikiri cave and The Fontein Cave are open to visitors of the Arikok National Park, so if you ever decide to take an “off-road” tour in the park, be sure to visit these prehistoric caves.

### Quadirikiri Cave

Known for its two chambers accompanied by a skylight, the Quadirikiri Cave is the most popular cave among locals and tourists, as it is easy to walk through and provides great lighting for pictures.

### Woman in Quadirikiri Cave, Arikok National Park, Aruba

As with all prehistoric or ancient sites, there is always a folk legend that adds to the lore and mystery of the site. The Quadirikiri cave is no different. The most well-known legend behind the cave could be considered as Aruba's first love story, as it tells the tale of the undying love between the chief's daughter and her beloved. As legend would have it, the chief disapproved of his daughter's choice of lover, as he thought him unworthy. Stubborn and filled with anger, the daughter refused to turn away her beloved.

So, the chief decided to lock her up in the Quadirikiri Cave, in hopes that she would soon calm down and turn away her lover. Her beloved, in turn, was locked away in the Tunnel of Love (Now known as the Huliba Cave).

Through the pathways underneath the Tunnel of Love running up to the Quadirikiri cave, the two love birds found each other, and refused to let each other go. Because of their stubbornness, they both died in the Quadirikiri Cave, their ascending spirits burning two holes in the ceiling of the cave. This is why the cave has two holes through which sunlight passes through to illuminate the chamber.

Though there have been discoveries of Amerindian drawing on the wall, these have mostly been ruined by vandalism. However, the Fontein Cave further up north, provides a better glimpse in prehistoric Amerindian paintings.

### Fontein Cave

Longer than the Quadirikiri Cave, the Fontein Cave contains pathways that stretch to the limestone walls further down. Here is also where prehistoric drawings can be seen. Though this cave does not have its own legend, this was speculated to have been occupied—or at least used by prehistoric Arawak settlers on the island for rituals and other spiritual ceremonies.

### The Huliba Cave/ Tunnel of Love

The Huliba Cave, formerly known as the Tunnel of Love, was once open to the public, and was the biggest and most accessible of all three caves. This cave had five chambers, including one that is heart-shaped. This cave had narrow stairs that led to long pathways deep into the cave, with a staircase leading to the exit on the other side. In one of the chambers, there used to be the carving of the Virgin Mary, put there for the protection of the cave.

However, the Huliba Cave has been permanently closed for a few years now, as a way to preserve the bat population that lives in the cave. These Long Tongue Fruit Bats and Insect Eater Bats are very important to the ecosystem of the island. Though this cave is no longer accessible to the public, it surely is interesting to learn more about the history of these caves and the Arawak tribes that resided or utilized them.

Do note that these caves are very dark, humid, hot, and are inhabited by bats. Do wear comfortable clothing and shoes, as the pathways in these caves may be rough and bumpy. Take care to not disturb the bats' habitat. □



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**Aruba's Bocas: home to the rarest fossil reefs on the planet!**

(Oranjestad)—If you've been to the northern coast of Aruba already, you've probably noticed how the ground differs entirely from the sandy beaches on the southern part of the island. These hard surfaces, with sharp bumps and holes are actually fossilized coral reefs, of which its growth and changes can be traced back to the last glacial period.



On May 30 2023, geoscientists, Dr. Patrick Boyden from the Marum research faculty at the University of Bremen, Prof. dr. Alessio Rovere from the Ca' Foscari University of Venice and Prof. dr. Gianfranco Scicchitano, from the University of Bari Aldo Moro, presented their research on these fossilized coral reefs at the University of Aruba. Their focus for their research included studying the health and formation patterns of these coral reefs, and to

investigate how these reefs have responded and can respond to fluctuating sea levels or extreme weather, like hurricanes and tsunamis.

Through underwater and land surveillance, and 3D models of the reefs, they were able to narrow down when these formations started to take place. They were also able to track the

fluctuation of sea levels during the past hundred or even thousands of years, and the effects that this fluctuation has had on the coral reefs of the windward side of Aruba.

These findings can certainly put things into perspective. The ground on which we have walked many times on the northern part of the island hold such rich history,

history that dates back to a time that most of us cannot even imagine. As the scientists themselves have pointed out, these fossilized reefs on the windward side are truly an incredible and rare remnant of geological history, as they provide a clear view of how these reefs have formed.

This research is also important for the future of coral reefs on the island.

By studying rising sea levels and climate impact on these coral reefs, we are able to take concrete action in protecting and preserve our coral reefs. So, if you are ever visiting one of the bocas or driving along the northern part of the island, please be conscious to help protect our natural historical remnant. Oh, and wear (coral-friendly) sunscreen! ☐



**Aruba to me are "High Fives"**

**ORANJESTAD — You are back and we would like to portrait you! By inviting you to send us your favorite vacation picture while enjoying our Happy Island.**

Complete the sentence: Aruba to me is ..... Send your picture with that text (including your name and where you are from) to: [news@arubatoday.com](mailto:news@arubatoday.com) and we will publish your vacation memory. Isn't that a special way to keep your best moments alive? Please do note: By submitting photos, text or any other materials, you give permission to The Aruba Today Newspaper, Caribbean Speed Printers and any of its affiliated companies to use said materials, as well as names, likeness, etc. for promotional purposes without compensation.

Last but not least: check out our website, Instagram and Facebook page! Thank you for supporting our free newspaper, we strive to make you a happy reader every day again.

For today we received a lovely message from Don Alhart.

He wrote to us saying: "Aruba to me are "High Fives" along the walking path. I see some of the same people every March. I suspect they live here, or perhaps their vacations parallel ours. It brings a smile to my face and warms my heart for the rest of the day. One "Happy Walk!"

Thank you for sending us this wonderful message sharing what Aruba means to you with us and our readers! ☐

## PSA from the Aruba Conservation Foundation: How to behave when you see a “lora”

(Oranjestad)— The conservation of the Yellow-Shouldered Amazon, also known as the ‘Lora,’ relies on how we act as humans. We’ve seen many hikers who’ve encountered the ‘Lora’ in our protected nature areas and we can certainly imagine the pride and joy it brings to any Aruban. However, not everyone may know how to behave when encountering these clever and social birds. This guide is here to explain the behaviors that will most effectively help us in our efforts to conserve the ‘Lora.’ Please, don’t just read but also follow these guidelines so we can ensure the survival of these birds for future generations.

### No interfering, please

Please refrain from interfering with the “Lora”. The Lora is a highly intelligent and social animal, perhaps slightly too friendly because they

have gotten used to the rangers as they prepared for their reintroduction. However, it is our collective responsibility to help them adapt to the wild once again. Please play your part by not interfering (calling, provoking etc.) with the Lora. Simply enjoy their beauty from a safe distance.

### Be respectful and keep cats and dogs away

Pets and strays such as cats and dogs are prone to attacking other animals, especially birds, as part of their natural instincts. Please make sure your pets are kept inside of your yard or are kept on a leash when going out for a walk.

### Do not feed them food or water

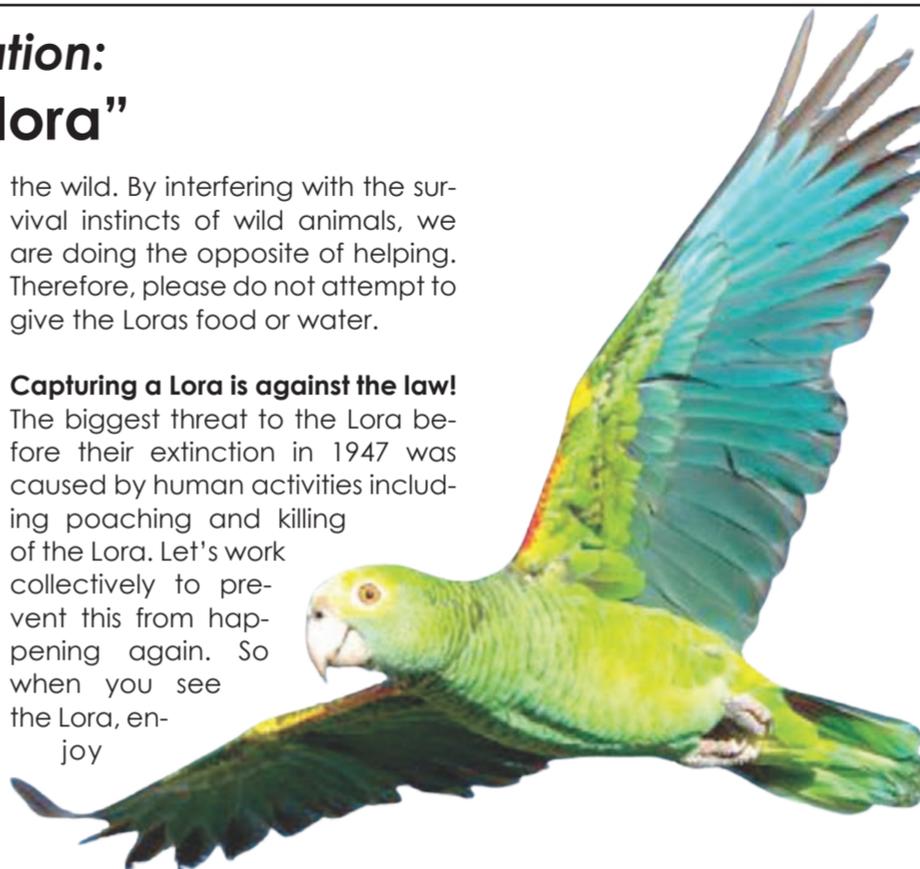
You may think that giving the any food or water is doing a good deed, but it actually does not contribute to them developing survival skills in

the wild. By interfering with the survival instincts of wild animals, we are doing the opposite of helping. Therefore, please do not attempt to give the Loras food or water.

### Capturing a Lora is against the law!

The biggest threat to the Lora before their extinction in 1947 was caused by human activities including poaching and killing of the Lora. Let’s work collectively to prevent this from happening again. So when you see the Lora, enjoy

their beauty from a distance and admire them as they flourish in the wild. □



## The Bushiribana Gold Mill Ruins and its history

(Oranjestad)—The Bushiribana Gold Mill Ruins is one of the most visited places by tourists on the island, as it lies along the northern coast line near the mini pool and on the way to the Natural Bridge. Despite its seemingly plain appearance, this ruin represents one of the most important histories of the island: The Aruban Gold Rush.

Built in 1872 by English company Aruba Island Gold Mining Company Ltd, the gold mill at Bushiribana was constructed in the area where most gold was found by locals. The story of gold on Aruba actually dates back to 1725, when a first exploration for gold on the island was commissioned by the Dutch West India Company. Under the leadership of Mr. Paulus Printz, a three-year search was conducted on Aruba, to no avail. Though they found some gold, it was enough to motivate a further search, and the assignment was discontinued by Printz himself.

It wasn’t until 100 years later, in 1824, when a young boy found a lump of gold while out herding his father’s sheep. His father took



it to a local merchant who then sold the lump for \$70. Unbeknownst to the boy and his father, they quite literally struck gold, and as word got out, a gold fever spread among the locals who started searching for more gold. About 25 pounds worth was found.

At the same time, the Aruban government took immediate actions, and informed Curacao that gold was found. At first, everyone could look for gold, as long as they sold it to the government. However, after some time, the



Administration Buildings at Gold-plant

government decided to implement stricter rules and banned local search parties.

Over the years, concession-holding had seen different companies from around the world, all of which used primitive meth-

ods to dig and carve out gold from the rocks. Aruba Island Gold Mining Company Ltd. was no different, but used a unique method that involved grinding the rocks and letting the dust be blown away by the strong northeast wind, leaving clumps of gold behind. The next step was melting the gold and letting it attach to quicksilver in order to obtain pure gold. All these processes were done at the Bushiribana Gold Mill.

The gold mill itself had a short life-span: only 10 years in service, but its structure remained relatively solid till this day, and is now a historical remnant. □



Sources: Etnia Nativa

# Aruba's cultural and literary development: Then and now

(Oranjestad)—The Aruban culture has seen many substantial developments over the course of a century. With the introduction of the Lago Refinery at the turn of the 20th century, followed by the breakout of the Second World War and the general incentive for political independence during the mid-century, a cultural identity on the island began to take form and have since developed through international and local influences.

In the pre-industrial era of the 19th century, much could not be said about a cultural identity on the island. Still being a part of a Dutch colonial territory at the same, as well as not having political or economic autonomy (Curacao was the center of commerce, cultural life, and political management of the Netherland Antilles at the time), the small population of Aruba consisted mostly of farmers and fishermen, tending to their crops and their cattle, or going out to fish to provide for their family. As Quito Nicolaas states in his article *Historia di Literatura Arubiano: E Bida Cultural* (Literary History of Aruba: Cultural Life), "during the pre-industrial period, there were no significant economic activity that could have created a cultural ambience, with only one way to generate profit at the time for the sub existence of Aruban families."

It wasn't until the introduction of the Lago Refinery in San Nicolas in 1928, that the island saw a small boom in cultural manifestations and entertainment, as farmers left the 'cunucu' (country) life to work in the refinery, which resulted in Aruba acquiring a different economic pillar. Before this, entertainment and cultural manifestations were mostly experiences by local parishes and the island's elite, who often partook in cultural and entertaining activities around the island, like going to the movie theater or coming together to share poetry



on Sundays after church.

### Literary life

Throughout the 19th century and up until the 1940s, there were also not much trace of a cultural climate for the cultural-literary sector on the island. Primary education was introduced on the island mid-19th century, followed by secondary and higher education around the late 30's and 40's. It wasn't until the 1950s, with the introduction of the E.R.N.A agreement in 1951 and the signing of the Statute in 1954, which allowed more space for and control over the economic and cultural development of Aruba, that the literary life on the island began to grow substantially compared to decades before. This was in response to local institutions established in the 1940s for cultural and literary growth on the island, but that did not yet capture the attention of the general public. The 1950 brought with it a boom of literary production on the island, like those of V.S. Piternella, as well as migrant authors José Ramón Vicioso y Rings Wil-



liam Rufus, who have also contributed to the literary development on the island. The literary movement was further promoted by local broadcasters Voz di Aruba and Radio Kelkboom, with their regular broadcast of literary works.

The 50s and 60s also saw the influence of international cultures, especially

that of the United States. During this time, because of international influences as well as the continued prosperity of the oil refinery, cultural traditions in Aruba began to really take form and become widespread, as different worldly and local concepts were introduced in the Aruban society. With the establishment of local television broadcast sta-

tion Tele-Aruba in 1963, and with time and possibilities, local programs such as "Nos Tera" ("Our Land") started to pay more attention to the Aruban culture and worked to form a cultural consciousness in the community. The 1960s also saw the rise of local authors and artists, who were more comfortable in producing works in our native tongue, Papiamentu, but who also produced works in Spanish, English and Dutch. This new phenomenon was in response to the interaction between economic growth, individual prosperity, cultural life and literary expression.

### The 21st century

Nowadays, international influence on our culture is still prevalent, especially those from Latin America, the United States and The Netherlands. Nevertheless, there also exists a strong cultural identity and traditions that are exclusive to the Aruban culture, often manifesting during traditional celebrations, like Dia di San Juan/ Dera Gay (St. John's Day), Dia di Himno y Bandera (National Hymn and Flag Day), Camping during Easter and much more. With the surge of social media in the last decade, artistic voices, especially those of the younger generation, has become even more prevalent and easily accessible to the community of Aruba through online platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.

Source: *Historia di Literatura Arubiano: E Bida Cultural* by J.R. "Quito" Nicolaas

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**CROSSWORD**

By THOMAS JOSEPH

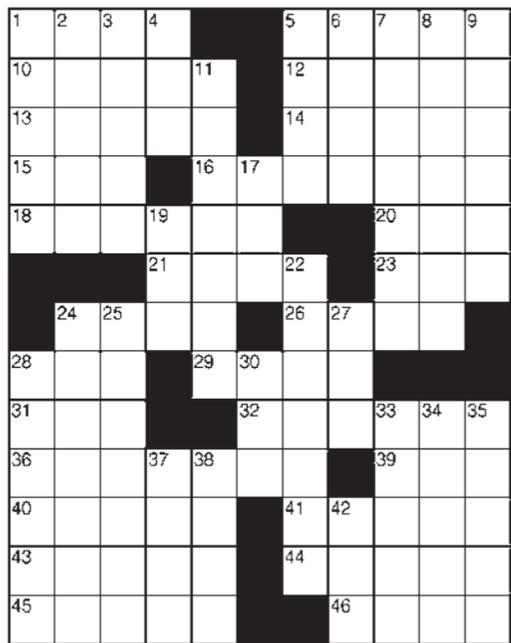


**ACROSS**

- 41 Writer Jong
- 1 Storage site
- 43 Can't live without
- 5 Duel count
- 44 Reef visitor
- 10 "The Taming of the Shrew" city
- 12 Before, in Bordeaux
- 13 Star in Orion
- 14 Half of deca-
- 15 Mamie's mate
- 16 Flattery, Irish-style
- 18 Wheeled stretcher
- 20 Mine yield
- 21 Son of Hera
- 23 Went ahead
- 24 Captivated
- 26 Bill stamp
- 28 Crazy —
- 29 Indian gown
- 31 Qty.
- 32 Bamm-Bamm's dad
- 36 Competition, for short
- 39 Log chopper
- 40 "Tomorrow" singer

**DOWN**

- 1 Parsley unit
- 2 Short poem
- 3 Yard tool
- 4 Bill stamp
- 5 One of a bear trio
- 6 Declare
- 7 Cheese-filled pastry
- 8 Came in
- 9 Didn't budge
- 11 Einstein and Sabin
- 17 Caustic stuff
- 19 Catch some z's
- 22 Used an aerosol
- 24 Punk pioneers
- 25 Harmonizes
- 27 Melody
- 28 Samurai sword
- 30 Justice Fortas
- 33 Too trusting
- 34 Shine
- 35 Age units
- 37 Carousel, e.g.
- 38 Comfy home
- 42 Equip



3-16

AXYDLBAAXR  
is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

3-16

**CRYPTOQUOTE**

GLQ ASBX KWGL Y GDFQ

XSI WR YR NYRGWBI YR GLQ

GWQR SZ GLWR QYDGL KWNN

QTQD AQ. — CSBDYX NSDQBJ

**Cryptoquote:** ONE DAY I WILL FIND THE RIGHT WORDS, AND THEY WILL BE SIMPLE. — JACK KEROUAC

**Cruise ship Schedule: March 03-06 2026**

			ARR	DEPT	BERTH	
TUE	03	CARNIVAL HORIZON	08.00	22.00	B	1
		SEVEN SEAS GRANDEUR	10.30	22.00	C	1
		NORWEGIAN SKY	13.30	22.30	I	1
WED	04	BRILLIANCE OF THE SEAS	08.00	****	B	1
		AMBASSADOR SHIP 3	09.00	18.00	C	1
		BRILLIANT LADY	10.00	22.00	I	1
THU	05	BRILLIANCE OF THE SEAS - Dept.	****	18.00	B	-
		MAJESTIC PRINCESS	07.00	16.00	C	1
		SERENADE OF THE SEAS	08.00	18.00	I	1
FRI	06	CARNIVAL GLORY	09.00	22.00	B	1
		NORWEGIAN STAR	11.00	20.00	C	1

**Helpful tips for your stay on Aruba**

(Oranjestad)—When traveling to another country, especially for the first time, it is always better to be over-prepared than under-prepared. That is why we have a list of basic but important information that we think may come in handy to Aruba's visitors.



**Electrical power**

Aruba generally operates on 110V to 127V supply voltage and 60Hz. There are also three types of outlets used on the island: type A with two flat prongs; type B with two flat and one grounding prong, and on occasion, type F with two round prong and two earth clips on the side. However, Type A is most commonly found in homes and establishments.



**Drinking water**

The water that flows through the sinks of every house, hotels and other establishments is distilled and perfectly safe to drink. Aruba's drinking water exceeds WHO's international standards for water quality, so there is no need to buy bottled water from the store.



**Safety**

Since February 2024, Aruba has been categorized as the safest country in the Caribbean by The Telegraph, and many tourist that visit have often told us how they feel safe to explore the island or walk around at night. However, rare incidents do occur, so keep yourself and your belongings safe.

**SUDOKU**

To play sudoku, use logic to fill the empty squares so that each row, each column and each 3x3 box contains the numbers 1-9 only once. Puzzle difficulty increases from Monday to Sunday.

**King Classic Sudoku**

	9		5	4				
5		1	6			9	2	
		7		3	2			
			3		9	6	7	1
								9
7				6		5		
3	7						6	
9					6			3
8		6			3	2		

Difficulty: ★★★

3/5

**Answer to previous puzzle**

9	2	8	5	7	4	6	1	3
1	5	4	6	2	3	7	9	8
3	7	6	9	8	1	5	4	2
2	4	3	7	5	9	1	8	6
7	6	5	8	1	2	4	3	9
8	1	9	4	3	6	2	7	5
4	9	1	2	6	8	3	5	7
6	3	7	1	9	5	8	2	4
5	8	2	3	4	7	9	6	1

Difficulty: ★★★

3/4

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# The Microscopic Assassin: Scientists engineer bacteria to 'eat' cancer from within



Waterloo researchers (from left) Dr. Brian Ingalls, Dr. Sara Sadr and Dr. Marc Aucoin have engineered bacteria to treat cancer by eating tumours from the inside out.

Image credit: University of Waterloo

**By Science Correspondent WATERLOO, Ontario** — In what researchers are calling a "eureka moment" for oncology, a new generation of genetically modified bacteria is being trained to do what the most advanced chemotherapies often cannot: infiltrate the impenetrable core of solid tumors and devour them from the inside out. The breakthrough, led by researchers at the University of Waterloo, centers on *Clostridium sporogenes*, a common soil bacterium with a unique biological quirk: it can only survive in environments completely devoid of oxygen. This makes the oxygen-starved, necrotic centers of solid

tumors—often resistant to traditional radiation and drugs—the perfect "home turf" for these microscopic hunters.

### Solving the 'Oxygen Wall'

While the idea of using bacteria to fight cancer dates back decades, early efforts were stymied because the microbes would die the moment they reached the oxygenated outer edges of a tumor. The Waterloo team solved this by using "genetic wizardry" to insert a gene from a related, oxygen-tolerant bacterium (*C. aminovalericum*). This modification allows the engineered microbes to survive longer in the tumor's periphery, en-

suring more comprehensive destruction of the cancerous mass.

### The Genetic 'Safety Switch'

Safety has been a primary concern for "bugs as drugs" therapies. To prevent these bacteria from growing in the oxygen-rich bloodstream, scientists equipped them with a sophisticated genetic "circuit".

**Quorum Sensing:** The bacteria use chemical signals to "talk" to one another.

**Activation:** The oxygen-resistant gene only "switches on" once a high enough density of bacteria—a quorum—is reached deep inside the tumor.

**Self-Destruction:** Once the bacteria move beyond the tumor's edge, they are designed to self-destruct, minimizing the risk of systemic infection.

### A Multi-Pronged Attack

Other global research teams are uncovering even more ways microbes interact with cancer:

**Melting Tumors:** At King's College London, researchers discovered that *Fusobacterium* can "melt" head and neck cancer cells, potentially acting as a powerful treatment.

**Deep-Sea Solutions:** Scientists have found sugar compounds from deep-sea bacteria that cause cancer cells to undergo a "fiery" form of cell death.

**Immune Boosting:** Certain gut bacteria, like the YB328 strain, have been found to activate the immune system's "killer T cells" to attack distant tumors.

"We are essentially ridding the body of the tumor using its own natural predators," said Dr. Marc Aucoin, a professor of chemical engineering at Waterloo.

While researchers caution that the fight against cancer is far from won, the transition to preclinical trials marks a major shift toward "microbe-aware" therapies that could make even the toughest cancers treatable. □

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# China's overstretched healthcare looks to AI boom

## Shanghai, China

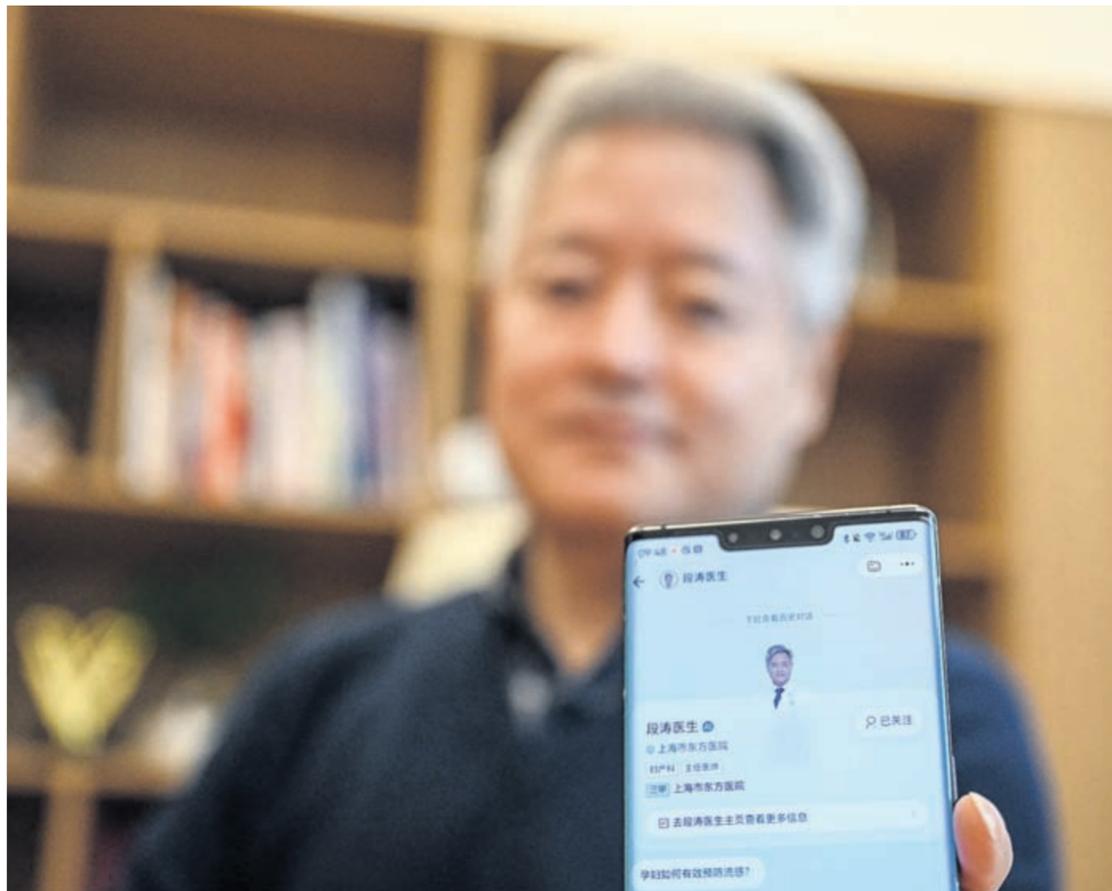
Throughout her first pregnancy, Wang Yifan had lots of questions, which she usually put to renowned obstetrician Duan Tao -- or rather, an AI clone of the top Shanghai-based doctor.

Duan has created a digital double for healthcare app AQ, which now boasts more than 100 million users in a display of how high-tech parts of China's medical sector have become. A state-driven digitisation, aiming to inject efficiency into the overstretched healthcare system, has been underway for over a decade.

But with rapid developments in AI and robotics, the government, companies and practitioners see an opportunity to turbocharge that transition.

"Three to five years at most, and our entire medical model will be radically transformed," the soft-spoken Duan told AFP.

To train his avatar, Duan



The photo taken on February 11, 2026 shows doctor Duan Tao showing his AI avatar on the healthcare app AQ at his office at a hospital in Shanghai.

selected material, including textbooks, clinical case studies and content from his social platforms -- followed by more than 10 million -- to capture his tone. The chatbot cannot prescribe medication, and AQ's maker, tech giant Ant Group, says it is not a substitute for treatment.

"At the beginning, I did have concerns," Duan said. "I value my personal reputation."

But he believes in "actively embracing" technology to help improve it.

**- 'Democratising access' -** Beijing is soon expected to release its 15th Five-Year Plan, a blueprint for the world's second-largest economy until 2030 with technological transformation at its heart.

An October framework called for scientific breakthroughs to "enter practical application quickly", and referenced intelligent healthcare solutions.

AQ, or Afu in Chinese, now has more than 1,000 expert digital doubles.

The app "gives any ordinary user -- no matter where they are -- the opportunity to get good answers to their questions," Duan said. "What we're doing is de-

mocratizing access to medical knowledge."

That's especially appealing in China, where "waiting all morning for a three-minute appointment" is common, he said.

Within half a year, Duan's AI bot had 160,000 patients.

During Wang's pregnancy, digital Duan was a trusted mediator when she and her husband disagreed, for example on using cooking wine in food.

Since giving birth, she has used AQ even more, asking paediatrician avatars about rashes or for general care advice.

While the app can't replace doctors, "it can reduce the number of questions we need to ask doctors directly", Wang told AFP as her baby dozed in her Shanghai apartment.

"If I take my baby to hospital, I worry about cross-infection."

### - 'Urgency drives change' -

China's vast population and territory have always posed challenges to consistent, evenly distributed healthcare -- and as its citizens age, stress on the system is increasing.

The challenges are similar to other countries', but are happening "at a greater scale and a greater pace",

said Ruby Wang, a writer and director of LINTRIS Health consultancy.

"China's health technology landscape is maturing so quickly, partly because... urgency drives change," she said.

And "state-industry alignment allows many pilots to occur quickly", Wang added.

Chatbot DeepSeek is already used in hundreds of Chinese hospitals, according to one study, and Beijing's prestigious Tsinghua University runs a hospital it says is designed to use AI in almost all its processes.

Nationwide, there are more than 100 AI medical projects, an official said recently.

In a top Shanghai hospital, a specialised AI model called CardioMind supports cardiology diagnoses, while a tool called PANDA is being deployed, including in remote towns, to flag early stage pancreatic cancer.

Robotics companies tout their healthcare potential, with firms like Fourier already supplying rural rehab centres with devices like mechanical arms for physiotherapy.

Enthusiasm for AI in healthcare is signalled culturally too.

This year's televised Spring Festival Gala, a state broadcaster-run New Year ritual, featured a sketch that referenced AQ, and one starring humanoid robots caring for a neglected grandmother.

### - Human decisions -

At a busy health centre in Shanghai, Yan Sulian, an energetic 65-year-old volunteer, helped older patients with electronic registration.

"Many elderly people just can't keep up with the smartphone era, so we volunteer to teach them how to adapt," she told AFP.

Yan said she and her friends all used AQ, after initially crosschecking its answers with doctors.

Life is already highly digitised in China, which explains the broad uptake of high-tech healthcare, said LINTRIS' Wang, with data and privacy not often cited as a concern.

Globally, its accuracy has come under scrutiny though.

Studies suggest while AI chatbots can match human doctors in exam conditions, they are less effective in messier, real-life conversations.

"We must always remember (AI) can hallucinate," obstetrician Duan said.

"Humans must retain the ultimate decision-making and choice."

But infectious disease expert Zhang Wenhong, a top doctor in China's Covid-19 fight, has voiced concerns that if AI becomes default, "without systematic training, doctors will lose the ability to judge whether AI's conclusions are correct".

Others emphasised that the adoption of AI in healthcare will be cautious.

"Doctors as a group are very conservative," Duan said.

"We insist on safety... because the nature of the profession puts us in that mindset." □



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## Donald to captain Europe again at 2027 Ryder Cup

### London, United Kingdom

Luke Donald will captain Europe again at the 2027 Ryder Cup at Adare Manor in Ireland as he bids to become the first man to lead a side to three consecutive wins in the competition, officials announced Wednesday.

The 48-year-old Englishman, a former world number one, previously led Europe to victory in the biennial tournament in Rome in 2023 and then at Bethpage Black in New York last year with a dramatic 15-13 win.

"The last two Ryder Cups have meant a lot to me and my family," said Donald in a European Tour statement.

"I didn't imagine this third time would come," he added ahead of what will be the centenary Ryder Cup. "Celebrating on that Sunday night in New York after a pressure packed week in a tough environment, I thought maybe my job was



Luke Donald is announced as Team Europe Captain for the 2027 Ryder Cup on March 03, 2026 in West Palm Beach, Florida

done — but maybe there is a little more story to tell... "It's a real privilege and I am certainly looking forward to another home Ryder Cup." Donald was a playing member of the victorious European team at the 2006 Ryder Cup, held at the K Club in County Kildare.

"The Irish golf fans are some of the best in the world," he said, with the 2027 event set to run from September 17-19. "They are so passionate about the game, so hospitable and so down to earth." Tiger Woods, whose tally of

15 major championships is second only to the 18 won by compatriot Jack Nicklaus, is reportedly in line to captain the United States team at Adare Manor.

### - 'Meticulous' -

Ryder Cup Europe chief executive Guy Kinnings said the "meticulous" Donald, renowned for the care with which he selects pairings, was the right choice to lead Europe once more.

"He has faced a lot of challenges as captain throughout his two terms, and he has handled all of them with his usual calm, poise and authority and above all with respect," Kinnings said.

"He is meticulous in everything he does when it comes to planning and preparation, but Luke would be the first to acknowledge that as good a job as he has done, this is a new challenge for him and the team.

"He will be as motivated and as committed as ever

to help them achieve more success."

The Ryder Cup, named in honour of its founder Samuel Ryder, an English businessman and golf enthusiast, was first staged in 1927. Since golfers from continental Europe were added to the previous British and Irish team in 1979, Europe have won 13 matches, while retaining the Ryder Cup once with a tie, and the United States nine editions.

Last year, Donald's men had to stave off a final-day surge by the United States in singles after dominating the opening two days' foursomes and four-ball matches to lead by 11.5 points to 4.5.

It was the first time either team had won away from home since Europe's 'Miracle at Medinah' triumph in 2012.

The Americans have not lifted the trophy on European soil since 1993 at The Belfry. □

## Sabalenka backs 'best-of-five' Slam proposal, Swiatek against

### Indian Wells, United States

World number one Aryna Sabalenka on Tuesday voiced her support for a proposal to make women's matches best-of-five sets during the later stages of Grand Slam tournaments.

Speaking ahead of this week's ATP-WTA tournament in Indian Wells, the hard-hitting Sabalenka said she believed switching to five sets would benefit her game.

"Yeah, let's do that," the four-time Grand Slam singles champion said when asked about the idea, which was floated by incoming US Tennis Association chief Craig Tiley at the Australian Open earlier this year.

"I feel like I would have probably more Grand Slams," Sabalenka added. "Physically I'm really strong, and I'm pretty confident that my body can handle that. So let's do it."

Tiley, the former head of

the Australian Open who last week was named as the new USTA chief, told the New York Times in an interview last month that switching to five sets from the quarter-finals onwards at Grand Slams should be discussed.

"All the research shows interest grows as the match goes on," Tiley said. "As a sport, we need to evolve." But while Sabalenka backed the move, other women players were more circumspect.

"I mean, it probably would favor me, because I'm physically up there with the best, but I mean, I probably wouldn't want to see that happen," reigning French Open champion Coco Gauff told reporters.

"And if it were to happen, I would prefer it to be the whole tournament, not just the quarters. I think changing the format in the middle of the tournament defeats the purpose of the playing field."

Six-time Grand Slam champion and former world number one Iga Swiatek was firmly against the idea, and questioned the suggestion it would boost audiences.

"I think honestly it's a weird approach in the world where everything is becoming faster, you know," Swiatek said. "So I don't know if the audience honestly would like that.

"Also, I don't know if we would be able to keep the quality for five sets. Well, that's a fact, like, men are more physically strong and they can handle it for sure better."

Swiatek said the physical demands would also force players to adjust their schedules, potentially leading to them playing fewer tournaments.

"We have never practiced in a way to prepare for that, so we would need to change, I think, our whole calendar, because the



Aryna Sabalenka fields questions on media day during the BNP Paribas Open at the Indian Wells Tennis Garden on March 03, 2026 in Indian Wells, California.

Grand Slams would be so tough that I don't think we would have honestly time to prepare for any other tournaments," she said.

"I think it would change a lot. I don't think it would change anything for good." World number five Jessica Pegula echoed Swiatek's remarks, stating while five sets were well within the physical capabilities of women, a switch could be counter-productive.

"I think we have amazing female athletes that honestly I think we could do that," the American said. "I don't think it's the fact that we can't; I just don't necessarily think that we should.

"On that aspect, I don't even know how you would schedule tournaments. We'd have to add weeks. We can't even get through the schedule now. So I'm not really sure for like a fan experience how that would really work." □

# Cavs upset Pistons, Spurs thrash Sixers

**Los Angeles, United States**  
The Cleveland Cavaliers shrugged off to the injury absence of star point guard Donovan Mitchell to score a 113-109 upset of the Eastern Conference-leading Detroit Pistons on Tuesday.

Jaylon Tyson scored 22 points while James Harden and Evan Mobley finished with 18 points apiece to give the Cavs an impressive victory before their home fans.

A hard-fought encounter saw Cleveland take the lead early in the second quarter, and dogged defense combined with consistent defense kept them in front for the remainder of the game.

"It's a good win, not perfect by any means, but we'll



**Cade Cunningham #2 of the Detroit Pistons guards James Harden #1 of the Cleveland Cavaliers during the fourth quarter at Rocket Arena on March 03, 2026 in Cleveland, Ohio.**

take it," Cavaliers coach Kenny Atkinson said afterwards.

Jalen Duren led Detroit's scorers with 24 points but it was a frustrating night for Pistons star Cade Cunning-

ham, who was restricted to just 10 points by Cleveland's relentless defense.

"Just throw bodies at him, try to wear him down, contest everything and try

to keep him off the free throw line," Atkinson said of Cleveland's approach to Cunningham.

Despite the defeat, Detroit remained comfortably on top of the Eastern Confer-

ence on 45-15, four and a half wins clear of second-placed Boston. Cleveland improved to 39-24 and are fourth in the East.

Elsewhere Tuesday, the San Antonio Spurs produced another dazzling all-round performance on the road to demolish the Philadelphia 76ers 131-91.

Sixers fans began heading for the exits well before the end as San Antonio surged into a 49-point lead towards the end of the third quarter.

Eight San Antonio players finished in double figures, with Devin Vassell and Dylan Harper leading the scoring with 22 points each.

"It wasn't any amazing individual performance, it was just team play," said San Antonio's Victor Wembanyama, who contributed 10 points.

"When we're locked in, when we feel like this as a team, I think we're the best team in the world," Wembanyama added.

Oklahoma City Thunder maintained their grip on the Western Conference with a 116-108 defeat of the Chicago Bulls on the road.

The Thunder are three games clear of San Antonio at the top of the table. The Los Angeles Lakers meanwhile were pushed all the way by the struggling New Orleans Pelicans before edging clear to claim a 110-101 victory.

A back-and-forth contest in Los Angeles saw the lead change hands 18 times before the Lakers finally closed out the win with a 24-7 run late in the fourth quarter.

Luka Doncic led the scoring with 27 points, with LeBron James adding 21 as the Lakers improved to 37-24 to remain in sixth place in the Western Conference.

In Minneapolis, Anthony Edwards' 41 points helped the Minnesota Timberwolves take down the Memphis Grizzlies 117-110, while in Toronto, the New York Knicks were too strong for the Raptors in a 111-95 win. □

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