WASHINGTON — Three U.S. soldiers received the Medal of Honor on Thursday, including two men who sacrificed their lives to ensure the safety of their fellow service members and a third who fought off suicide bombers at a U.S. base in Afghanistan.

President Joe Biden presented the Medals of Honor, the nation’s highest military award, to Sgt. 1st Class Alwyn Cashe, Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Celiz and Master Sgt. Earl Plumlee. Cashe and Celiz died as a result of the actions that led to their awards. Plumlee received the honor in person at the White House.

Sgt. 1st Class Alwyn Cashe

More than 16 years after his death, Alwyn Cashe on Thursday became the first Black recipient of the Medal of Honor for actions in the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Cashe, a 3rd Infantry Division platoon sergeant, was on a nighttime patrol near Samarra, Iraq, on Oct. 17, 2005, when his Bradley Fighting Vehicle struck a roadside bomb, engulfing it in flames. Cashe, 35, extracted himself from the vehicle, and then went back for the driver. Though his fuel-soaked uniform ignited and caused severe burns to his body, Cashe repeatedly entered the fire-engulfed Bradley to pull his fellow soldiers to safety, not stopping until they all had escaped.

Despite being covered in second- and third-degree burns, Cashe ensured the other soldiers received medical care.
EUROPE GAS PRICES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
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<th>Unleaded $1.0</th>
<th>Super plus $1.0</th>
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PACIFIC GAS PRICES

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EXCHANGE RATES

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<th>Country</th>
<th>Military costs (Dec. 17)</th>
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INTEREST RATES

| Prime rate  | 3.25 |
| Interest Rates Discount rate | 0.75 |
| Federal funds market rate | 0.09 |
| 3-month bill | 0.36 |
| 30-year bond | 1.46 |

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
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<tr>
<td>Kabul</td>
<td>68/60</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait City</td>
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FRIDAY IN EUROPE

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<th>Humidity (%)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Misawa</td>
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<tr>
<td>Guam</td>
<td>84/81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tokyo</td>
<td>39/29</td>
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</table>

SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC

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<tr>
<td>Misawa</td>
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</table>

The weather is provided by the American Forces Network Weather Center, 2nd Weather Squadron at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb.

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Round-the-world news for America’s military.

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Deputy Pentagon chief visits Hawaii facility

By Joseph Ditzler
Stars and Stripes
Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks on Tuesday inspected the underground fuel storage facility in Hawaii where a fuel leak may be contaminating water the Navy supplies to nearby military housing.

Hicks visited Oahu’s Red Hill Bulk Fuel Storage Facility, a massive underground system that stores fuel for the Navy, Marine Corps, Army, Coast Guard and Hawaii National Guard.

“I spent nearly two hours with a team, in the tunnels, to gain a better understanding as to what happened and what can be done,” Hicks said in a statement provided by the DOD. “I also had the opportunity to meet with three military families and hear from them, firsthand, how this has impacted their lives as well as the greater community.”

More than 1,700 families were temporarily relocated as of Dec. 10 due to water contamination, according to the Navy. Tests confirmed the presence of petroleum products after housing residents complained of an odor and oily sheen in their tap water.

The Navy has tracked the contamination to a Nov. 20 jet fuel spill connected with the Red Hill underground storage tanks.

Hicks said she met with Hawaii Gov. David Ige, state public health officials and the state’s congressional delegation, Sens. Brian Schatz and Mazie Hirono and Reps. Ed Case and Kai Kahele.

The Navy has tracked the contamination to a Nov. 20 jet fuel spill connected with the Red Hill underground storage tanks.

Hicks said she met with Hawaii Gov. David Ige, state public health officials and the state’s congressional delegation, Sens. Brian Schatz and Mazie Hirono and Reps. Ed Case and Kai Kahele.

After the leak appeared, Case introduced a provision into the National Defense Authorization Act, the annual military funding bill, to seek alternative sites for the fuel facility.

Hicks’ visit follows one last week of Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro and Adm. Mike Gilday, chief of naval operations, who also met with local officials and housing residents.

“At DOD, we recognize the need to continue to care for all affected personnel and their families and help them return to their homes in a safe and expeditious manner,” Hicks said in the statement. “And even though the Navy is leading our efforts, solving this problem will require all of us in DOD and across the services to be rowing in the same direction.”

The Navy is moving a massive water filtration system from the mainland to Hawaii to filter water in the system’s pipelines.

“We take this very seriously,” Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in a statement last week. “And I am personally monitoring our progress and our mitigation efforts. Indeed, Navy leadership updates me daily on the measures they are taking to care for affected military personnel and families, to restore the safety of the water system in military housing, and to coordinate with local authorities — in particular the Hawaii State Department of Health — about the best way forward.”

By Alex Wilson
Stars and Stripes
YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — For two hours Wednesday, teams of Japanese and American first responders rehearsed what they need to do to contain a leak of radioactive coolant from the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan.

Working near the nuclear-powered warship, the responders isolated the simulated leak, notified local and national authorities, and began sampling the surrounding water.

A spokeswoman for the Naval Forces Japan, Cmdr. Katie Cerezo, described the leak scenario as “rare but credible.” This year marked the 14th annual exercise “Operation Cooperation,” a bilateral exercise that simulates an underwater nuclear explosion.

For the exercise, the Navy and the government of Okinawa provided a major chunk of the funding, with the U.S. Navy contributing about $20 million.

Teams aboard a Japan Coast Guard vessel collect water samples near the USS Ronald Reagan during an annual drill that simulates a radiation leak from the aircraft carrier Wednesday.

US Navy, Japanese responders perform radiation-leak drill

Hundreds of munitions from WWII detonated underwater of Okinawa

By Matthew M. Burke and Mari Higa
Stars and Stripes
CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — The first of more than 600 unexploded munitions underwater this year were detonated underwater this week by the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force.

The service blew up 319 items, including bottom-dwelling ordnance, at 10:15 a.m. Tuesday, about a half-mile offshore from Naha Port’s Shinko Wharf, a Naha city spokesman told Stars and Stripes by phone Thursday.

The ordinance was uncovered during the dredging of Naha Port between March and November. They are believed to be American-made and dropped during the pivotal Battle of Okinawa that lasted from April 1 to June 22, 1945, the city spokesman said.

“The disposal was conducted as planned and without any trouble,” he said. It was the largest amount of recovered munitions detonated at one time since 1995.

The remaining 315 items will be disposed of on Jan. 26, the city spokesman said.

Since 1972, when Okinawa was returned to Japanese control, 2,094 tons of unexploded ordnance have been found and detonated in Okinawa prefecture, a spokesman from the prefecture’s Disaster Prevention and Crisis Management Division said Thursday.

“The number of unexploded ordnance found in Okinawa is decreasing,” he said. Last year, only 14.5 tons were unexploded and disposed of.
**Marine Corps to curtail usage of Amtracs**

**By Chad Garland**

The Marine Corps will no longer send its amphibious assault vehicles on regular deployments or training in water except in crisis response, the service said Wednesday.

The decision comes nearly 1½ years after eight Marines and a sailor died when an AAV sank off the coast of California during a training drill.

The decision could be reversed if necessary, as the service still believes that with measures implemented after the fatal event, the vehicles are safe for amphibious operations, spokesman Maj. Jim Stenger said in an email to USNI News.

Also known as Amtracs, the amphibious fighting vehicles have been in use since the 1970s. They'll continue to be used on land, where they perform about three quarters of their tasks, Stenger said.

The Corps halted waterborne use of the AAVs for months after the deadly July 2020 accident but resumed some use in the water earlier this year.

Stenger said the service is committed to fielding the Amphibious Combat Vehicle, the Corps’ second try at replacing the AAVs. The first, called the Expeditionary Fighting Vehicle, was canceled in 2010.

The service approved the ACV for full-rate production a year ago but paused its waterborne operations in September because of problems with that platform’s towing mechanism.

“We expect that issue to be resolved,” Stenger said. “We want ACVs to return to the water early in the new year,” Stenger said.

The AAV’s indefinite grounding comes amid the Marine Corps’ ongoing focus on returning to its amphibious roots after 20 years of land-based warfare in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Earlier this year, Gen. David Berger, the Marine Corps commandant, told reporters that the service’s pool of shared knowledge about amphibious operations had shrunk and would need to be expanded.

Investigations into last year’s AAV sinking, the deadliest training accident involving an AAV in the Corps’ history, found that the vehicles the platoon had been assigned were in “horrible conditions.”

Eight of the service members who died had not been trained how to get out of a submerged vehicle, which is notoriously hard to escape. And most of the service’s fleet of AAVs failed an inspection after the accident.

The service fired several officers in the wake of the tragedy, including its inspector general at the time, Gen. Robert Castellvi.

He was commander of the 1st Marine Division before the sinking, and investigators found him responsible for some of the failures that led to it.

**Pentagon: Housing allowance to increase about 5% on Jan. 1**

**By Caitlin Doornbos**

WASHINGTON — The military’s basic allowance for housing rates will increase an average of 5.1% on Jan. 1, the Pentagon announced Wednesday.

Service members can expect to see the increase in their 2022 monthly housing allowances, which are given to troops who live off-base in the United States, the Defense Department said.

The total amount given in the allowance depends on where the service member lives, his or her rank or pay grade and whether the individual has dependents.

The 5.1% increase reflects an increase in the market rate for rent and average utility costs, which the Defense Department uses to calculate its housing allowance rates, according to the statement.

“The department collects rental housing cost data annually for approximately 300 military housing areas in the United States, including Alaska and Hawaii,” the DOD said in its release. “Local commands provide input, which is used to determine neighborhoods and locations where data is collected.”

The housing allowance is locked in once it’s raised and will not decrease if the market rate does, so long as the service member remains in the same location and doesn’t otherwise become ineligible for the allowance, the Pentagon said.

“This ensures members who have made long-term commitments in the form of a lease or contract are not penalized if the area’s housing costs decrease,” according to the Defense Department statement.

While the housing allowance is a key element of the military’s benefit package, service members have to pay small “cost-sharing” or out-of-pocket amounts to help pay for their housing. Those amounts range from $74 to $168 per month, depending on their pay grade and dependency status, according to the department.

In October, housing allowance rates were temporarily adjusted for 56 military housing areas across the country. Those amounts will be replaced by the new 2022 rates on Jan. 1, according to the statement.

**UK restores presence in Germany with vehicle hub**

**By John Vander**

STUTTGART, Germany — The United Kingdom is taking a page from the U.S. Army playbook, sending hundreds of tanks and fighting vehicles back to Germany so its forces can maneuver more freely around Europe.

“It provides us a near-permanent presence in Europe in which we won’t have to get across the British channel,” Lt. Col. Julian Smith, a British army spokesman, said Wednesday.

The plan resembles initiatives that have transformed how the U.S. Army operates in Europe, where new weapons depots have been built so soldiers arriving for training or crisis response have combat gear to pull from.

Some of the equipment has already arrived at a British army post in Sennelager, Germany, and the rest of the gear is expected to be in place by the middle of next year, Smith said.

Moving British combat vehicles back into Germany will support NATO efforts to defend its eastern flank, he said.

The British army’s effort, which comes just one year after it completed a withdrawal of a Cold War-era force based in Germany, is part of a broader push toward a more durable overseas defense posture.

The initiative, called Future Soldier, also calls for the prepositioning of British army gear in Kenya and Oman, giving soldiers regional hubs in Africa and the Middle East.

“Troops will fly in from the U.K. to conduct their training and use the vehicles that are already there,” Smith said. “We will have a persistent presence in those countries.”

Set up as an occupation force after World War II, the British Army of the Rhine numbered more than 50,000 troops in the 1970s and 1980s. It started decreasing in numbers after the end of the Cold War, and the last permanent forces departed Germany in the past decade.

A difference from past British missions in Germany is that soldiers and their families won’t take up permanent residence in the country, as was the case during the Cold War, Smith said. Instead, the emphasis is on longer troop rotations.

The American buildup in Europe has been part of a broader push to rearm after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014.

At that time, all Army battle tanks had been withdrawn from the Continent as part of a long-post-Cold War drawdown that sent scores of units back to the U.S. The new Future Soldier regional hubs also are part of an effort to streamline the force for more rapid deployments, officials said.

“Our future army will be leaner but more productive, prioritizing speed and readiness over mass and mobilization,” Defense Minister Ben Wallace said last month in an announcement of the Future Soldier plan.

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Army: 98% of active duty got vaccine by deadline

BY LOLITA C. BALDOR
Associated Press
WASHINGTON — Army officials said Thursday that 98% of their active-duty force had gotten at least one dose of the mandatory coronavirus vaccine as of this week’s deadline for the shots, but more than 3,800 soldiers flatly refused and could start being removed from the military next month.

The U.S. military’s largest service, however, reported the lowest number of service members seeking a religious exemption — a bit more than 1,700 soldiers — compared with the other three smaller services. In comparison, there are more than 4,700 in the Air Force, 3,000 in the Marine Corps and 2,700 in the Navy who are requesting religious exemptions, according to data released by the services in the past week. None have yet been approved.

The Pentagon announced earlier this year that the COVID-19 vaccine was mandatory for all service members, including the National Guard and Reserve. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has said repeatedly that getting the vaccine is critical to maintaining a healthy, ready force that can be prepared to defend the nation. The Pentagon is also weighing making the vaccine booster shots mandatory for service members.

The Army, which totals more than 478,000 active-duty soldiers, had the last vaccine deadline among the services for their active-duty troops Wednesday. And it scored the second-highest rate for those who have gotten at least one shot at 97.9%. The Navy leads with more than 98%, while the Air Force is at 97.5% and the Marine Corps is at 95%.

The other services had earlier deadlines. The Air Force required vaccines for the active duty by Nov. 2, while members of the Navy and the Marine Corps had until Nov. 28 to get the shots and their Reserve members have until Dec. 28. Air Force Guard and Reserves had until Dec. 2, and the Army Guard and Reserve soldiers have until next June.

According to data released by the Army, more than 2,700 soldiers who refused the vaccine have already been given written reprimands, and six soldiers have been fired from leadership positions. The Army has said that soldiers who refuse the vaccine should not be in leadership jobs.

Procedures to begin discharging those who refuse the vaccine are slated to begin in January, giving soldiers a bit more time to change their minds before being forced out. Students at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point who refuse the vaccine and do not get an approved exemption will not be commissioned as officers.

The Air Force this week said it has already discharged 27 airmen for refusing to obey a lawful order and get the COVID-19 vaccine, making them what officials believe are the first service members to be removed for disobeying the shot mandate.

The airmen were formally discharged for failure to obey an order. It is possible that some had other infractions on their records, but all had the vaccine refusal as one of the elements of their discharge.

Overall, the Army said that more than 6,200 soldiers are seeking some type of temporary or permanent exemption, including 641 medical requests and the 1,746 religious requests. Of those 6,200 requests, nearly 3,900 have received an approved temporary exemption. Four got a permanent medical exemption. Temporary exemptions can be for a variety of reasons ranging from medical, such as pregnancy, to administrative, such as someone who is retiring or in a remote location where there are no readily available vaccines.

Across the military, the vaccine reaction has mirrored that of society as a whole, with thousands of members seeking exemptions or refusing the shots. But the overall percentage of troops — particularly active duty members — who quickly got the shots exceeds the nationwide numbers. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 72% of the U.S. population age 18 or older has gotten at least one shot.

F-35A Lightning II jets arrive in England

BY JENNIFER SVAN
Stars and Stripes
The first U.S. Air Force F-35A Lightning II jets to be based in Europe arrived at their new home in England on Wednesday, six years after plans to base two squadrons in England on Wednesday, six years after plans to base two squadrons in England on Wednesday, six years after plans to base two squadrons...
Cashe suffered second- and third-degree burns over 72% of his body. He died about three weeks later on Nov. 8, 2005 at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, Texas. 

In total, one Iraqi interpreter and 10 American soldiers, including Cashe, were killed in the Bradley. The interpreter, as well as Cashe and three other soldiers — Staff Sgt. George Alexander Jr., 34, Sgt. Michael Robertson, 26, and Spc. Darren Howe, 21 — died from their wounds.

If not for Cashe’s actions, all of the men in that Bradley would likely have been killed. They and their families didn’t have the chance to say goodbye to their families, said Col. Jimmy Hathaway, Cashe’s company commander at the time.

“If you look at the war at that point in time, there’s a lot going on. People who passed away overseas they didn’t get a chance to say goodbye to their families and their families didn’t get to say goodbye to them,” Hathaway said.

“(Cashe) made that happen. He got on them quick and made sure every single one of those kids got to say goodbye the right way.”

Katie Celiz said. “Chris really believed that doing the right thing was the right thing to do...”

Cashe grew up in poverty in the area of their mission, they said. Cashe White announced Cashe would receive the honor this week.

Cashe grew up in poverty in Oviedo, Fla., and joined the Army shortly after graduating high school. Cashe White said he found his niche, his joy, in the U.S. military.

“He is that in this country, you can start here and end here,” Cashe White said, spreading her arms apart as far as they would go.

“I had wanted my story to end differently? Yes — I would give 10 Medals of Honor to get my brother back. But it shows the world there are no limits to what you can achieve.”

Sgt. 1st Class Alwyn Cashe, Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Celiz and Master Sgt. Earl Plumlee received the Medal of Honor on Thursday.

“Don’t come back for me.” White said. “That is a testament to his character... that in the midst of all that gunfire and the threat to our lives, he was cracking a joke to lighten the mood. That way we stayed focused and didn’t get overcome by fear or anxiety. We were just as calm as he was and feeding off his energy.”

When Celiz’s wife, Katie Celiz, first heard about her husband’s final act of waving away the helicopter, she wasn’t surprised, she said.

“Still a little angry at him for deciding to do that, but I understood why he felt he needed to,” Katie Celiz said. “Chris really believed that being there for his men, protecting his men, was everything. Chris believed that doing good was No. 1.”

Katie Celiz first met her husband when they were both in high school and working at a grocery store in Summerville, S.C. Every day for a week, she put her jacket on a hanger at work. When she returned to get it, the jacket would be missing. Its whereabouts was a mystery until she saw Christopher Celiz in the parking lot, wearing her jacket as he brought in shopping carts.

The next day, she found her jacket on its hanger, and its pockets were full of rose petals. She asked him on a date, and they were together from that day forward.

The couple was in high school during the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Celiz decided he wanted to join the military to make a difference, Katie Celiz said. He enlisted in 2006, and he was on his seventh deployment when he died, White said.

“We had a beautiful life together. We have a daughter that’s now 11 years old,” Katie Celiz said. “I just feel blessed that I got to have the years I had with Chris. He was an amazing man. He brought joy to everybody’s life, he touched.”

Master Sgt. Earl Plumlee

Earl Plumlee said he’s accept
Arms: Ex-soldiers accused of trying to sell weapons to drug traffickers

FROM PAGE 1

sell the stolen weapons. The two men had heard from contacts that the customers were taking the haul into Mexico.

In a series of stories, The Associated Press has detailed how the U.S. military has a problem with missing and stolen guns and explosives, and how some weapons have been used in domestic crime. But the inside story of how two men who’d forged a deal amid the violence of the battlefield attempted to sell stolen Army weapons reveals another kind of threat: an organized group of soldiers and veterans taking advantage of flaws in the military’s system to make fast money.

A photograph captures a day in 2009 as Sumlin and Jarvis sat together on a rock in Kunar province, Afghanistan. A rifle rests on the grass of wartime Afghanistan. Sumlin and Jarvis specialized in explosive ordnance disposal, or EOD, the kind of work — with its stifling, huuling bomb suits — given the Hollywood treatment in “The Hurt Locker.”

Their work eliminating improvised explosive devices set by the Taliban was nonstop, and gave them little time to process what they saw, heard and smelled. It was a pressure cooker of a job inside a pressure cooker, intense even in the high stakes world of the battlefield. They stashed traumatic experiences and images deep inside themselves, and their comradery helped blunt the stress.

When they returned stateside, both struggled with adjusting to the slower pace of life. Like many soldiers, they found some balm in the thrills and action of the buying and selling of weapons who’d seen what they’d seen.

Like many military subcultures, the tight-knit EOD community has its own code of conduct, ethics and language. Sumlin joined a private Facebook group where the EOD community commiserated, argued and pranked one another. They also gathered each other to account, debating whether a member’s conduct violated the brotherhood’s code.

Sumlin left the Army in December 2017, but deployed again to do bomb disposal with a private defense contracting company.

Meanwhile, Jarvis remained in the Army. At Fort Bragg, he would form some of the Army’s most elite units, Jarvis worked in an armory. And that gave him access to a wide of ordnance and parts and other equipment such as night vision goggles and explosives.

Inside the Fort Bragg armory, Jarvis took photographs of weapons on display and then he stole it, and set off to sell it.

His buddy, Sumlin, sent the photos and an inventory list of the pilfered weapons and explosives to an accomplice who called himself “Mr. Anderson.” Anderson, a former Army combat engineer who had served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, was one of several other soldiers or veterans connected to the scheme.

In May 2018, Sumlin and Jarvis began mining their contacts to find the buyer. They would find a promising lead with the help of a man identified as “Evan,” who they hadn’t met but who said he had connections with a willing buyer.

“Inventory: NVG-13, Aimpoint-8, ACOG-18, PEQ2A-10, DD Rail-24, DD-Barrel-15, Various Troy toys,” Anderson texted Evan, including Jarvis’ photos. The letters and numbers described a litany of arms and night vision goggles, rifle optics and lasers designed for aiming, and rifle parts.

“Wow, items are good, any idea on price if I took everything?” Evan texted back.

“I’ll let you know as soon as I hear back from him,” Anderson wrote, referring to Sumlin.

Over the next few days, the conversation continued, copied of messages show. Anderson and Evan complained about the weapons’ high prices. They sounded paranoid when they discussed dealing with amateur gun dealers like Sumlin and Jarvis, and feared they’d attract attention from law enforcement.

“As soon as he named his price (for the gun sights) I thought he was joking since they’re definitely USED,” Anderson wrote. “I’m not sure if it’s his first time or not. But it’s the last time I ask around for (Sumlin).”

After a few days, Evan said he’d found a buyer who wanted it. All of it.

What Anderson didn’t know is that Evan was a longtime confidential informant working with Homeland Security Investigations, an arm of the Department of Homeland Security.

In his communication with Sumlin and Anderson, Evan said, he represented a buyer who claimed to be connected to narco-traffickers. (Sumlin has denied that the weapons were meant to be sold to drug runners.)

“I didn’t know (the buyer) was south of Texas,” Anderson wrote.

“Yep he goes between Texas and Mexico all the time,” Evan wrote back.

“I wouldn’t sell anything to anyone down there,” Anderson replied.

“LoL... well he has always been a cash buyer without question and never any issues at all,” Evan responded. “It sounds like they’ve made a deal.”

“I hope so. They still have to meet and conclude,” wrote Anderson.

By mid-November 2018, Jarvis had rented a Chevy Tahoe SUV in North Carolina and drove the stolen cache south. He met Sumlin in Inverness, a small town in central Florida’s lakes region, so they could prepare the weapons for sale, according to a federal criminal complaint.

Sumlin would say that he and Jarvis had initially sought $250,000 for the firearms and explosives. After some back-and-forth, they settled on a much lower price: $75,000.

It seemed a paltry amount, consider the risk, but the weapons sale may have been just one in which they were involved. According to the Army Criminal Investigation Division’s case file, Jarvis and Sumlin would later tell agents about “criminal transactions” in Colorado, North Carolina, Florida, Georgia and Texas. In the document, another soldier confessed to stealing multiple rifle optic systems and a bomb suit, which were given to Sumlin.

In Florida, Jarvis and Sumlin cleaned the firearms to remove their fingerprints. They also had to have some parts modified to fit the rifles. With the cache assembled, cleaned, packed in storage containers and loaded for delivery, the men got into the SUV for the 24-hour drive to Texas.

Arriving in El Paso, they pulled into a truck stop the morning of Nov. 14, 2018. A man they thought was the buyers’ contact, known as Andy, waited with some others. His buddy, Sumlin, sent the containers and loaded for delivery, the men got into the SUV for the 24-hour drive to Texas. The agents confirmed by the defendants’ service records and claims of post-traumatic stress disorder.

As for Sumlin’s insistence that drug traffickers were never disinterested in the sales — and into the trap.

Yet the weapons recovered did not account for all that was missing from Bragg’s armory. According to the report by Army criminal investigators, the items stolen between Sumlin, Jarvis and their accomplices between 2014 and 2018 were valued at close to $180,000. But the U.S. government only recovered roughly $26,000 worth.

The Army referred questions to Homeland Security Investigations, which initially promised to discuss the case with AP, then canceled the interview and, later, did not respond to written questions.

Jarvis and Sumlin were indicted on eight different federal charges, including conspiracy and gunrunning.

“The holy hell they had to be planning this for years,” Anderson texted a Homeland Security agent.

“Boss is extremely happy ... It was worth doing this for,” Anderson texted another.

“Bad guys thought we were narco-traffickers from Mexico ... Using their weapons against troops.”

Sumlin posted bail and returned to his Florida home to pick up the pieces. He faced a possible 70 years in prison, and struggled under the weight of PTSD.

For many in the EOD community, Sumlin’s mea culpa and excuses about needing money were not enough. He had crossed a line by selling weapons that would have killed one of their own.

Sumlin and Jarvis had faced decades in prison, but both reached deals with federal prosecutors. Jarvis faced 10 years in federal prison and was considered guilty to attempting to smuggle goods from the United States.

Each was sentenced to five years’ probation, and Jarvis was ordered to mental health counseling and required to take prescribed medication. Jarvis and Anderson did not return messages seeking comment.

Sumlin declined to be interviewed for this story, but said in a 2019 interview that he planned to finish his probation and complete a psychology degree.

“I want to try and help veterans who have lost their way and try to help them get back to civilian life,” Jarvis said.

He represented a buyer who promised to turn messages seeking comment. Jarvis and Anderson did not return messages seeking comment.

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**By Rose L. Thayer**

Stars and Stripes

Five governors sent a letter Tuesday to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to request he withdraw a directive that National Guard troops be vaccinated against the coronavirus, citing he does not have the authority to mandate vaccines for troops when they are not deployed on federal missions.

Govs. Mark Gordon of Wyoming, Mike Dunleavy of Alaska, Kim Reynolds of Iowa, Tate Reeves of Mississippi, and Pete Ricketts of Nebraska signed the letter requesting Austin reconsider his mandate.

“The federal government continues to overreach further into the lives of Americans and especially those serving our country and protecting our very freedoms,” Reynolds said in a statement. “These are the men and women who have selflessly devoted their lives to protecting us and responding to major disasters and times of crisis at the drop of a hat to provide peace and comfort, and now the federal government is giving them an ultimatum to get the vaccine or be separated from serving their country.”

The governors wrote that recognize Austin’s right to establish readiness standards for federal activation, but they took issue with three areas that they believe are within the purview of the state: a directive on training in a state status known as Title 32, punishment requirements for refusing to be vaccinated, and requiring separation from the National Guard for the unvaccinated.

These three issues are “beyond your constitutional statutory authority,” wrote the governors, who are all Republicans. They join Oklahoman Gov. Kevin Stitt, who has previously raised questions about whether the mandate was lawful and went as far as to say he will not enforce it.

“We have received the letter from the five governors and will respond in due course,” Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby said Wednesday in a statement.

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**By Matthew M. Burke**

Stars and Stripes

**WHITE BEACH NAVAL FACILITY, Okinawa —** One carrier pilot relieved another Thursday to take command of the Navy’s activities on Okinawa, a unique responsibility that includes naval aviators and ocean-going sailors.

Capt. Patrick Dziekan, an E-2 Hawkeye pilot, took command of Fleet Activities Okinawa from Capt. Scott Hardy during a low-key outdoor ceremony at White Beach’s Port of Call Club. The naval aviators were surrounded by approximately 150 sailors, dignitaries and special guests, in view of docked vessels and picturesque green-blue seas.

“This is demonstration of the commitment of the United States and Japan to a free and open Indo-Pacific,” Navy Region Japan commander Rear Adm. Carl Lahti said during the ceremony.

No one mentioned China during the event. But Lahti referred to nations that would disregard the “rules-based international order” and impose their will upon the citi- zens of our region.

Dziekan has his “full trust” to continue leading where Hardy had left off, Lahti said.

The roots of the Navy command on Okinawa go back to 1951, according to a fact sheet from the service. With headquarters on Kadena Air Base, the command has a presence on four other Okinawa installations, including White Beach, its staging area for Marines headed to sea.

Fleet Activities Okinawa is responsible for 32 tenant commands and more than 8,000 sailors and civilian employees.

Its primary tenant is Task Force 76, a command that embraces several missions, including expeditionary and amphibious warfare, and humanitarian relief efforts.

Dziekan arrived from Navy Region Mid-Atlantic in Virginia, where he served as executive assistant and acting chief of staff to the commander, his Navy biographical states. A native of Ellision Bay, Wis., he enlisted as a yeoman in 1980 and was commissioned nine years later.

Often referred to by his call sign “Donk,” Dziekan served aboard the aircraft carriers USS Constellation, USS Abraham Lincoln and USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, according to his biography. He recorded over 3,500 flight hours and 500 carrier landings. He also deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan and received the Air Medal and Navy Commendation Medal with Combat V.

“Together with our mission and community partners, we play a vital role in maintaining peace, prosperity and stability throughout this region,” Dziekan said during Thursday’s ceremony. “I am reassured that I am now part of a strong and diverse alliance, with both our Okinawan hosts and partners and our joint leadership team.”

Hardy, a former enlisted Marine turned Navy electronic-warfare pilot, heads to Cornell University where he will teach and serve Officer Training Corps, Navy Region Japan, while Dziekan takes command of Fleet Activities Okinawa, Capt. Patrick Dziekan, the new leader of Fleet Activities Okinawa, speaks during his change-of-command ceremony at White Beach Naval Facility, on Thursday.

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**South Korea puts ban on gatherings of 5 or more**

**By Kim Tong-Yung**

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea will prohibit private social gatherings of five or more people nationwide and force restaurants to close at 9 p.m., rolling out the country’s toughest coronavirus restrictions yet as hospitals grapple with the deadliest month of the pandemic.

Prime Minister Kim Boo-kyum said Thursday that the new measures will be enforced for at least 16 days after taking effect on Saturday, saying there’s an urgent need to bring the country to a “standstill” with the delta-driven surge overwhelming stretched hospitals and exhausted medical workers.

Infections schools in the densely populated capital Seoul and nearby metropolitan areas, where the virus has hit hardest, will also go back to remote learning after fully reopening in November.

The Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency reported 7,622 new cases on Thursday, close to the daily record of 7,850 set a day earlier. That brought the national caseload to 544,117, with nearly 97,000 added in December alone.

Most of the transmissions were in the capital region, where officials say more than 86% of intensive care units designated for COVID-19 treatment are already occupied amid a spike in hospitalizations and deaths.

More than 890 virus patients died this month, bringing the country’s death toll to 4,758. As of Thursday, a record 989 patients were in serious or critical condition.

“During this period of standstill, the government will reinforce the stability of our medical response capabilities,” said Kim, Seoul’s No. 2 behind President Moon Jae-in, during a virus meeting.
A tornado approaches Interstate 80 near Atlantic, Iowa, as a semi truck rolls eastward Wednesday.

At least 1 dead as unusual Midwest storm brings hurricane-force winds

Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — One person has died as a powerful storm system swept across the Great Plains and Midwest amid unseasonably warm temperatures, bringing hurricane-force wind gusts and spawning reported tornadoes in Nebraska, Iowa and Minnesota in a weather outbreak experts described as extremely unusual for December.

A semitrailer struck by high winds rolled onto its side on southbound U.S. Highway 151 in eastern Iowa on Wednesday evening as severe weather moved through the area, killing the driver, the Iowa State Patrol said.

The storm was shifting north of the Great Lakes into Canada on Thursday, with high winds, snow and hazardous conditions continuing in the upper Great Lakes region, the National Weather Service said. More than 400,000 homes and businesses were without electricity Thursday morning in Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa and Kansas, according to poweroutage.us, which tracks utility reports.

A tornado was reported in southern Minnesota on Wednesday and, if confirmed, would be the state’s first ever in December. The small community of Hartland, Minn., might have been the hardest hit, with a reported 35 to 40 homes sustaining minor damage while a few businesses were severely damaged, said county Emergency Management Director Rich Hall. Several barns were down and roofs were blown off some sheds, he added.

The winds knocked down trees, tree limbs and nearly 150 power lines in northern and western Michigan’s Lower Peninsula. In the western Michigan village of Fruitport, high winds peeled back a portion of Edgewood Elementary School’s roof, leading officials to close all district schools Thursday.

There were more than 20 tornado reports Wednesday in the Plains states, scattered through eastern Nebraska and Iowa, based on preliminary reports to the Storm Prediction Center. The day also saw the most reports of hurricane-force wind gusts — 75 mph or higher — of any day since 2004, the center said.

“To have this number of damaging wind storms at one time would be unusual anytime of year,” said Brian Barjenbruch, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Valley, Nebraska. “But to have this happen in December is really abnormal.”

Fla. district to pay $26M to shooting victims

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — The Broward County, Fla., school district will pay more than $26 million to shooting victims whose husband Chris Hixon was killed in the 2018 Valentine’s Day massacre at the school.

The district will also pay $1.25 million to Anthony Borges, who suffered some of the most severe injuries. His lawyer split off from the larger case, saying Borges will have a lifetime of expensive medical needs, according to the South Florida Sun Sentinel.

The Florida Supreme Court ruled in 2020 that state law capped the district’s total liability at $300,000, but the district agreed to go beyond that limit. Since the shooting, two family members of those killed have been elected to the school board: Debbi Hixon, whose husband Chris Hixon was the athletic director, and Lori Alhadeff, the mother of 14-year-old Alyssa Alhadeff. Neither took part in the negotiations or vote.

“We wholeheartedly extend our deepest condolences and continue to pray for those families,” the school board said in a statement. “At this point, the district’s responsibilities have been met.”

All US missionary group hostages freed in Haiti

Associated Press

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti — The remaining members of a U.S. missionary group who were kidnapped two months ago in Haiti have been freed, Haitian police and the group said Thursday.

The spokesman for Haiti’s National Police, Gary Debosses, confirmed to The Associated Press that the hostages had been released, but did not immediately provide additional details.

“We glorify God for answered prayer — the remaining 12 hostages are FREE!” Christian Aid Ministries said in a statement. “Join us in praising God that all 17 of our loved ones are now safe.”

The Ohio-based group said it hopes to provide more information later.

“We’re feeling great,” said Ron Marks, minister at Hart Dunkard Brethren Church in Hart, Mich., whose members included some of the hostages.

The Treasury Department is also banning US financial transactions against several Chinese entities, according to a senior administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the soon-to-be-announced moves.

The official, explaining the Commerce Department actions, noted that U.S. intelligence has established that Beijing has set up a high tech surveillance system across Xinjiang that uses biometric facial recognition and has collected DNA samples from all residents, ages 12 to 65, in Xinjiang part of a systematic effort to suppress Uyghurs.

The White House announced last week that it would stage a diplomatic boycott of the upcoming Winter Olympics in Beijing, citing China’s “egregious human rights abuses and atrocities in Xinjiang.” U.S. athletes will continue to compete, but Biden will not send the usual contingent of dignitaries.

The administration also said this week that it supported bipartisan legislation which bans imports into the United States from Xinjiang unless companies can demonstrate the goods were not produced by forced labor.

China has denied any abuses and said the steps it has taken are necessary to combat terrorism and a separatist movement.

The administration is also expected to announce new sanctions against Beijing over human rights abuses and atrocities in Xinjiang, part of a systematic effort to suppress Uyghurs.

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UN watchdog: Iran will allow cameras set at nuclear site

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — The United Nations’ nuclear watchdog and Iran reached a deal Wednesday to reinstall cameras damaged at an Iranian site that manufactures centrifuge parts, though inspectors remain limited on what footage they can access.

The agreement will see cameras put back at Karaj, which came under what Iran describes as a sabotage attack in June. Iran had since refused the International Atomic Energy Agency access to replace cameras damaged in the incident, part of an ongoing hard-line tactic taken by Tehran at negotiations underway in Vienna over its tattered 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

Iranian media first reported the deal without citing a source. IAEA Director-General Rafael Mariano Grossi later tweeted out a statement detailing the arrangement.

“This is important for verification under the Iran nuclear deal, and work will continue to address other outstanding safeguards issues,” Grossi wrote.

The IAEA said the cameras would be reinstalled at Karaj in the “coming days.”

Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian reportedly said Wednesday that Iran had “reached a good agreement” with the IAEA.

Tehran blamed the Karaj assault on Israel and accused its regional rival of seeking to create a regional shadow war since former President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from Iran’s landmark nuclear accord under world powers.

In an interview Tuesday with The Associated Press, Grossi warned that limited access to Karaj hurt international efforts to monitor Iran’s program.

“If there is a need to inspect through us, through the IAEA, it is seeing clearly how many centrifuges or what is the capacity that they may have … what you have is a very blurred image,” Grossi said. “It will give you the illusion of the real image. But not the real image. This is why this is so important.”

Grossi also dismissed an Iranian allegation that saboteurs used the IAEA’s cameras in the attack on the Karaj centrifuge site as “simply absurd.” Tehran has offered no evidence to support the claim, though it’s another sign of the friction between inspectors and Iran.

As part of Wednesday’s deal, the IAEA said it would “make available a sample camera and related technical information to Iran for analysis by its relevant security and judiciary officials, in the presence of the agency inspectors.”

Iran, however, will still keep all recordings from the cameras — part of another ongoing dispute between the agency and Tehran sparked by the nuclear deal’s collapse.

“The agency and Iran will continue to work on remaining outstanding safeguards issues with the aim of resolving them,” the IAEA said.

In an analysis, the Eurasia Group described Wednesday’s development as Tehran agreeing to “the bare minimum to avoid escalating the monitoring crisis.”

“A number of questions remain unanswered, including how the IAEA will account for advanced centrifuge components produced during the monitoring gap,” the political-risk consultancy group said.

Negotiations continue in Vienna over trying to restore the nuclear deal.

Nations renew talks on ‘killer robots’ as deal hopes narrow

Associated Press

GENEVA — The countries behind a United Nations agreement on weapons have been meeting this week on the thorny issue of lethal autonomous weapons systems, colloquially known as “killer robots,” which advocacy groups want to strictly limit or ban.

The latest such talks of countries behind a Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons is tackling an array of issues from in-c rendery weapons, explosive remnants of war, a specific category of land mines and the autonomous weapons systems.

Opponents of such systems fear a dystopian day when tanks, submarines, robots or fleets of drones with facial-recognition software could roam without human oversight and strike against human targets.

“It’s essentially a really critical opportunity for states to take steps to regulate and prohibit autonomy in weapons systems, which in essence means killer robots or weapons systems that are going to operate without meaningful human control,” said Claire Conboy, spokeswoman for the advocacy group Stop Killer Robots.

The various countries have met repeatedly on the issue since 2013. They face what Human Rights Watch called a pivotal decision this week in Geneva on whether to open specific talks on the use of autonomous weapons systems or leave it up to regular meetings of the countries to work out.

A group of governmental experts that took up the issue failed to reach a consensus last week, and advocacy groups have said nations including the United States, Russia, Israel, India and Britain have impeded progress.

The International Committee of the Red Cross cautioned in a month that the “loss of human control and judgment in the use of force and weapons raises serious concerns from humanitarian, legal and ethical perspectives.”

Some world powers have opposed any binding or nonvoluntary constraints on the development of such systems, in part out of concern that if the countries can’t develop or research such weapons, their enemies or non-state groups might. Some countries have argued there’s a fine line between autonomous weapons systems and computer-aided targeting and weapons systems that exist already.

Rescuers fight strong typhoon lashing southern Philippines

By JIM GOMEZ

MANILA, Philippines — A powerful typhoon slammed into the southeastern Philippines on Thursday, toppling trees, ripping tin roofs and knocking down power as it blew across island provinces where nearly 100,000 people have been evacuated.

Coast guard personnel were rescuing residents stranded by chest-deep waters in a southern province, where pounding rains swamped villages in brownish water. In southern Cagayan de Oro city, footage showed two rescuers struggling to keep a month-old baby inside a laundry basin above the water and shielded from the wind and rain with an umbrella.

Forecasters said Typhoon Rai further strengthened with sustained winds of 122 miles per hour and gusts of up to 168 mph as it blew from the Pacific Ocean into the Siargao Islands. There were no immediate reports of casualties or major damage.

“I’m scared and praying here in my house that this stops now. The wind outside is so strong it’s cutting down trees,” Teresa Lozano, a resident of eastern MacArthur town in coastal Leyte province, told DZMM radio by telephone, adding that roofs of nearby houses were damaged and her farming village had lost power.

Disaster-response officials said about 10,000 villages lie in the projected path of the typhoon, which has a 248-mile-wide rain band and is one of the strongest to hit the country this year.

The coast guard said it has grounded all vessels, stranding nearly 4,000 passengers and ferry and cargo ship workers in dozens of southern and central ports. Several mostly domestic flights have been canceled and schools and work places were shut in the most vulnerable areas.

More than 98,000 people have been evacuated to safety, the government renewed calls for people to avoid crowds and get vaccinated immediately.

Gov. Ben Evardone of Eastern Samar province said he suspended vaccinations in his region of nearly half a million people due to the typhoon. More than 70% of villagers in the province have gotten at least one shot, and Evardone expressed concern because some vaccines stored in Eastern Samar will expire in a few months.

Overcrowding is unavoidable, he said, in the limited number of evacuation centers in his province, where more than 32,000 people have been moved to safety.

“It is impossible to observe social distancing, it will really be tough,” Evardone told The Associated Press. “What we do is we cluster evacuees by families. We don’t mix different people in the same place as a precaution.”

Recuers assist residents over floodwaters caused by Typhoon Rai as they are evacuated to higher ground in Cagayan de Oro City, southern Philippines, on Thursday.
“Chief Chat” is a military-exclusive Facebook live program created to keep Soldiers, Airmen and military communities connected during this challenging time. The “Chief” in “Chief Chat” is the Exchange’s senior enlisted advisor, Chief Master Sgt. Kevin Osby.
THANK YOU FOR
PROTECTING OUR FREEDOM
FROM ALL OF US
THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

- S T A R S A N D S T R I P E S -
Friday, December 17, 2021
A sticky situation

Spider-Man’s world — and ours — plunges into multiverse mayhem with some big blasts from the past in the well-reviewed ‘No Way Home’

Pages 15-16

MJ (Zendaya) and Spider-Man (Tom Holland) take a leap in “Spider-Man: No Way Home.”

Sony Pictures
Keyless entry and ignition make the process of hitching up a some pickups such as the Ford era systems are also available on ing-oriented surround-view cam-
3D model of your vehicle. Tow-
can even generate a 360-degree advanced iterations like those

Essential improvements

Edmunds recommends these must-have features in a new car

One of the perks of buy-
ing a new vehicle is that it offers features that promise a safer and more convenient driving experience. Some technologies have trickled down from luxury to mainstream segments, while others have been introduced quickly across the market. But which features are essential? Experts at Edmunds, an online resource for automotive inventory and information, break down the must-have features to look for on your next car.

Surround-view camera
Parking is a tricky business, with the danger of curbing wheels, grazing poles or bumping into parked vehicles. This is especially true of many modern vehicles that have sleek coupe-like rooflines but poor outward visibility. To reduce anxiety, surround-view camera systems project a bird’s-eye viewing angle on the car’s infotainment system. From this perspective, you can maneuver your vehicle in tight spaces confidently.

More sophisticated versions of these systems offer several camera angles, including a front view and a wheel close-up. The most advanced iterations like those from Mercedes-Benz or Genesis can even generate a 360-degree 3D model of your vehicle. Towing-oriented surround-view camera systems are also available on some pickups such as the Ford F-150 and Toyota Tundra to make the process of hitching up a trailer much easier.

Wireless Apple CarPlay and Android Auto
Smartphone integration in new vehicles has graduated from Bluetooth’s calling and media streaming to Apple CarPlay and Android Auto’s immersive platforms. These solutions integrate a phone seamlessly into a vehicle’s infotainment system. Drivers and passengers can send and receive texts via voice command, listen to music and podcasts, follow turn-by-turn directions, or interact with a host of applications through the onboard display.

The most cutting-edge iterations of Apple CarPlay and Android Auto are wireless, which is handy if your vehicle also features wireless device charging. Wireless integration means reduced cord clutter and instant access to these systems the moment you start the vehicle. Though most automakers bundle both systems, some only offer Apple CarPlay, so do your research if you use an Android device.

User-friendly controls
Contemporary automotive interior design is best characterized as a vendetta against clutter, so much so that we saw a phase of automakers eliminating useful buttons and knobs. Meanwhile, technologies and features are deepening. Fewer physical controls and new menu structures can quickly lead to driver distraction and frustration, so a wellorchestrated user interface is critical. To their credit, a number of automakers listened to customer feedback and restored buttons for critical functions.

BMW’s iDrive system is an excellent example of operational redundancy. Users can touch the infotainment screen, control settings via a rotary dial and hot keys on the console, turn buttons on the steering wheel or opt for voice commands. Audi employs haptic and auditory feedback on its infotainment touchscreens to give operators a cue that their input has been received — without visual confirmation. Most new vehicles offer a combination of some or all of these tools, allowing drivers to use their preferred interface.

Edmunds Says:
The best new vehicle features increase convenience without compromising safety. We recommend picking a model that offers the above essentials — ideally as standard equipment — and bypasses expensive and redundant options like onboard navigation and rear entertainment systems.

GADGETS

Great audio from the comfort of your home

The AKG ARA dual pattern USB desktop microphone shows how easy studio-quality audio can be produced from the comfort of home. It wasn’t long ago that setting up a microphone needed extra software and complicated instructions. Well, that’s long in the past with the ARA. AKG has been engineering top-quality studio microphones since 1947, and now they have taken the technology to home users. It’s built for applications including podcasts, vloggers, gaming, Zooms/Skype conferences, and even musicians. Mac and PC users can connect the plug-and-play ARA USB desktop microphone and start recording in seconds. Some operating systems might ask you to change the microphone output, but that’s it. A 3.5mm headphone jack is built into the bottom of the microphone for adding your headset.

It’s built with a modern camera-ready look and is weighted to sit perfectly on any flat surface. It easily mounts to booms and other microphone stands with the built-in thread. Listening to your own voice is never appealing, but fortunately, I had a perfectly timed video conference call last week to test it on. After the important topics of the meeting were discussed, I asked those on the other end how my voice sounds. It led to a discussion on the microphone, with a unanimous vote on the superb quality the ARA produced.

The ARA’s dual patterns, which are controlled by a button on the front are “Front” and “Front/back.” Switching it changes the omnidirectional pickup pattern. With the “Front” setting, the microphone rejects sound from the back, eliminating background noise. This would be ideal for multiple people sitting around a conference table. Volume is also controlled on the front, the stand on the side, and the buttons on the rear.

The stockung-styled Jabra Elite 7 Pro true wireless Bluetooth 5.2 earbuds produce premium sound and are packed with features.

Jabra always produces great-sounding products, and these follow the same history with a crisp, clear sound and the right amount of bass. A big test for any true wireless earbuds is the comfort and fit, which are perfect with these Jabra earbuds. They work perfectly when using them for listening around the house or pool, or doing yardwork or working out.

Another feature adding to the listening experience is adjustable active noise cancellation. Two built-in microphones have Jabra MultiSensor Voice technology for hands-free calls.

Controlling the Jabra Elite 7 Pros is seamless using the single button on either earbud that can be customized with the Jabra Sound plus app, which includes adjustable sliders, customizable equalizer and presets. Although they sounded great right out of the box, the app is needed for installing future firmware updates from Jabra to add features. Bluetooth multipoint connection is expected in January. This allows the earbuds to be connected to two devices at once.

My personal favorite true wireless feature, auto play/pause, is included so the music stops when an earbud is removed from your ear and starts playing again when it’s back in. Alexa and Google Assistant are accessed with a tap of the earbud.

A portable USB-C/ Qi-wireless charging case, with status LEDs, is included to provide up to 30 hours total of playback. They are rated to play for 8 hours per charge.

Online: Jabra.com; $199.99

AKG ARA dual pattern USB desktop microphones are built with a modern, camera-ready look.

AKG/Al

BY GREGG ELLMAN

The Tribune News Service

Edmunds Says:

The best new vehicle features increase convenience without compromising safety. We recommend picking a model that offers the above essentials — ideally as standard equipment — and bypasses expensive and redundant options like onboard navigation and rear entertainment systems.
**Villainous leak**

‘Spider-Man: No Way Home’ tried to keep its spoilers under wraps, but an actor’s misstep unraveled a Marvel-ous strategy

By Christi Carras

Los Angeles Times

Original general audiences weren’t supposed to know about Alfred Molina’s epic return as Doc Ock until “Spider-Man: No Way Home” hits theaters.

Then people spotted the actor at a hotel in Atlanta — where the latest “Spider-Man” installment was filming — and it was game over.

“We ended up putting his picture on the poster — that wasn’t the plan,” said Sony Pictures Chief Executive Tom Rothman, gesturing to a giant character poster of Molina as the tentacled villain at the film’s world premiere. (Molina’s menacing “Hel-lo, Peter” wasn’t supposed to be in the trailer either. But here we are.)

“We friggin’ tried to tell him to wear a hood out of his hotel. I mean, they were closed sets, but it was impossible. People ... just put two and two together.”

Once the octopus was out of the bag, other major casting reveals followed. Next cast member revealed was Willem Dafoe, who starred opposite Molina in director Sam Raimi’s original “Spider-Man” trilogy as Green Goblin. By then, Jamie Foxx had already been confirmed to reappear as Electro — Spidey’s nemesis from Marc Webb’s “Amazing Spider-Man 2” — and soon Rhys Ifans’ Lizard from “The Amazing Spider-Man” and Thomas Haden Church’s Sandman from “Spider-Man 3” were thrown into the sinister mix.

“Spider-Man: No Way Home” producer Amy Pascal said the studio initially wanted to keep all of the returning foes a secret. But ultimately it decided to openly advertise the nostalgic comebacks — just one of many ways “No Way Home” pays homage to the previous Spider-Man sagas.

Directed by Jon Watts, the third entry in the Tom Holland trilogy sees the lives of Peter, his girlfriend MJ (Zendaya) and company come into play.

“Whatever lengths we went to [contain spoilers], we failed,” Rothman said.

But certainly not for lack of trying: Dafoe recalled the intense “cloak and dagger” routine he was required to follow and “didn’t mind doing” while shooting the Spidey sequel. (The veteran character actor first faced off against Tobey Maguire’s webslinger in 2002’s “Spider-Man.”)

“The second you got out of a car at the studio, they’d throw a black cloak over you,” Dafoe said. “Any time you were wearing the costume, it was covered when we went from soundstage to soundstage. It was pretty serious. ... They were very careful about comings and goings.”

Marvel and affiliates have been forced to employ increasingly drastic spoiler-proof measures to preserve as much suspense as possible in a cinematic universe where leaks are practically impossible to avoid. Especially after the rise of social media, where hordes of rabid fans are constantly circulating convincing theories and fake material in a never-ending effort to suss out — or manifest — the next Big Plot Twist.

For example: Countless Marvel enthusiasts have fiercely speculated that Maguire and Andrew Garfield, who portrayed the titular teen hero in the “Amazing Spider-Man” films, are featured in “No Way Home” along with their adversaries — despite Holland and Garfield repeatedly claiming otherwise.

“It’s tough because everyone wants to know everything really fast, and everyone wants to be the one with the first information,” Batalon said.

“It’s definitely a tough thing to navigate, but we try our hardest to keep it away from people.”

And even with the villains unveiled in its marketing and rampant speculation online about what other actors may appear, “No Way Home” still packs plenty of surprises in its trilogy-capping narrative. Without giving too much away, the talent, screenwriters and executives all agreed that Watts went above and beyond mere stunt cameos to honor earlier iterations of the webslinging franchise while still spinning a fresh adventure for Holland’s Spidey.

Visually, for instance, Watts saluted Raimi by occasionally smash-cutting to Dafoe’s face, while a standout scene from the trailer in which Zendaya’s MJ plummets backward in slow motion closely mirrors Gwen Stacey’s (Emma Stone) fatal fall in Webb’s “The Amazing Spider-Man 2.”

“What’s really awesome is that Jon absolutely edited in those villains’ specific type of shots from their movies,” Batalon said. “He’s very meticulous like that. And Jon is the greatest and the smartest, so he knows how to clearly pay respect to all of them.”

“Jon is a true aficionado, in addition to being a terrific director in his own right,” Rothman added. “He had ... tremendous respect for Sam and Marc. ... He approaches it like a fan, and he’s a fan of those earlier movies. ... It’s tough because everyone wants to know everything really fast, and everyone wants to be the one with the first information.”

“They have to service the fans are constantly circulating convincing theories and fake material in a never-ending effort to suss out — or manifest — the next Big Plot Twist.”

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“Jon is a true aficionado, in addition to being a terrific director in his own right,” Rothman added. “He had ... tremendous respect for Sam and Marc. ... He approaches it like a fan, and he’s a fan of those earlier movies. ... It took a director who was a real student of all of that to pull it off.”

While writing the screenplay for “No Way Home,” Chris McKenna and Erik Sommers frequently engaged in conversations with Watts about how to dodge cliches and blend elements from the various “Spider-Man” adventures in an authentic, dynamic way.

“How do we incorporate iconic moments from the movies that don’t just feel like we are doing an empty tipping our hat?” McKenna said. “Because everyone’s gonna get really tired if we’re like, ‘Oh, how do we get the upside-down kiss?’”

“We wanted to give echoes of the other movies, pay homage, but you can’t do those moments for their own sake,” Sommers added. “They have to service the story you’re telling. ... Otherwise, it’ll feel cheap, and the audience will know it.”

Review of “Spider-Man: No Way Home” on Page 16.
Joyous valentine to ‘Spider-Man’ films, fans

Holland, cameo appearances help ‘No Way Home’ tread familiar territory sans fatigue

By Justin Chang

Los Angeles Times

The plot of “Spider-Man: No Way Home” is set in motion by a wacky but essential kernel of amnesia, which is fitting because I could barely remember anything that happened in the most recent of these movies. That’s odd, because I definitely saw it. Fortunately, like most installments of endless cinematic franchises, this latest Spidey adventure seldom stops explaining itself or referencing its predecessors.

Within moments you are helpfully reminded of how 2019’s “Spider-Man: Far From Home” ended, with that belligerent hack journalist J. Jonah Jameson (Spidey mainstay J.K. Simmons) exposing the famous webslinger’s true identity to the mainstay J.K. Simmons) exposing the famous webslinger’s true identity to the entire world.

Due to an accompanying whiff of scandal, being outed as Spider-Man hasn’t boosted the reputations of his girlfriend, (Toni Collette) and her alcoholic husband Pete (David Strathairn). (the excellent Tom Holland). Nor has it boosted the reputations of his girlfriend, MJ (Zendaya), and his best friend, Ned (Jacob Batalon), whose associations with Peter have gotten them rejected from MIT. With bricks flying through the window of the Queens apartment he shares with his Aunt May (Marisa Tomei), winning as ever, Peter calls on his old friend Doctor Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch), asking him to cast a spell that will cause the entire world to forget that he’s Spider-Man. Much digitally concocted spectacle and human error ensue, and rather than erasing the world’s memory, Doctor Strange winds up accidentally jogging our memories instead.

And so a caper becomes a point of convergence, a nearly two- and-a-half-hour reunion special. Amid a jumble of clashing timelines and multiplying meta-paradoxes plotted out by screenwriters Chris McKenna and Erik Sommers (who also wrote “Far From Home”), the familiar faces include a handful of villains from the Tobey Maguire-starring, Sam Raimi-directed trilogy of “Spider-Man” (2002), “Spider-Man 2” (2004) and “Spider-Man 3” (2007), as well as the less fondly remembered Andrew Garfield-starring, Marc Webb-directed duo of “The Amazing Spider-Man” (2012) and “The Amazing Spider-Man 2” (2014). “No Way Home,” directed by Jon Watts (who also steered “Far From Home” and 2017’s “Spider-Man: Homecoming”), strives to pull off something memorable, and largely succeeds. Three parallel Spider-Man universes that once were forced to stand apart now get to balefully salute each other, in a warm, even reconciliatory spirit.

This exercise may be fan service on a maximalist scale. And it doesn’t have quite the delightful invention of “Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse,” the 2018 animated feature that made the most of its multiverse-collapsing conceit. Still, it’s nice to feel a persistent human touch amid the otherwise mechanical sound and fury of “No Way Home,” especially during its wobbly, draggily midsection. Bridges rumble and scaffolding crumbles; the Statue of Liberty really should file for hazard pay. Comic relief arrives on cue (hello, Jon Favreau); tragedy strikes without warning. It’s a Spider-Man movie, in other words, and also a Marvel Cinematic Universe movie.

But while the action ultimately turns as murky as any Avenger’s epic, the snuggly, depersonalized air that often mars those glorified cinematic frat parties is notably absent. And for all “No Way Home’s” vertiginous heights and precipitous drops, few things here shake you more fully than the anguished closeups of Holland, in which Peter’s genetically modified strength—and his all-too-human vulnerability—are on tear-soaked, grimsmudged display.

Like his predecessors, Holland, who was only 19 when he landed this role, is an enormously likable screen presence, which has been crucial to making this third go-round with Spider-Man feel like more than just another retread. That’s no small thing, since every Spidey cycle must essentially trace the same arc, hit the same beats and rites of passage: the loneliness and isolation of superhumanity, the all-too-relatable challenges of teenager-dom, the blissful escape of young love, the pain of sudden, irreversible loss. When someone here intones, “With great power comes great responsibility,” it’s with a wry awareness of how often those words have been spoken before, and how often they’ll likely be spoken again.

The poignantly named “Spider-Man: No Way Home” is that, for the moment at least, it leaves you considering that prospect with more affection than fatigue.

— *Spider-Man: No Way Home* is rated PG-13 for sequences of action/violence, some language and brief suggestive comments. Running time: 169 minutes.

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‘Nightmare Alley’ tells the rise, fall of a con man in luscious, lurid detail

By Michael O’Sullivan

The Washington Post

Based on William Lindsay Gresham’s 1946 novel about the rise and fall of a con man — previously adapted for the screen in 1947 — Guillermo del Toro’s noirish-to-the-point-of-misanthropic, gorgeously atmospheric “Nightmare Alley” may be the filmmaker’s best-looking film yet, as well as the one with the most sour outlook on humanity.

Every other outdoor scene seems staged in driving rain or gently falling snow, or under the kind of spooky sky that Ray Bradbury once described as “orange and ash gray at twilight” in the opening pages of his “Something Wicked This Way Comes.” Like “Nightmare,” Bradbury’s novel was also a story set in the colorful, creepy, menacing world of a traveling carnival, and featuring a cast of outsiders, hustlers and freaks.

“Nightmare” begins in that world, against the backdrop of World War II, with the arrival of Stan Carlisle (Bradley Cooper), a handsome, charismatic drifter who parleys some quick manual labor for carnival boss Clem Hoatley (Willem Dafoe) into a regular job. Stan’s a quick study, and he’s soon picking up the tricks of the trade, particularly the mind-reading act of Zeena (Toni Collette) and her alcoholic husband Pete (David Strathairn).

But Stan’s too good for this world — or, rather, he’s too talented for it: Later, the protagonist makes a point of telling us he’s no good, and you’d do well to believe him. Eventually, Stan leaves for the big time with his new bride Molly (Rooney Mara), a fellow carnies who becomes his assistant in a slick mentalist act they develop for the urbanite audiences of a Chicago nightclub.

When Stan meets a seductive psychiatrist, Lilith Ritter (Cate Blanchett), his small con game gives way to a big one. Together, Stan and Lilith — whose clientele includes a powerful, violent yet credulous mobster named Ezra Grizzard (Richard Jenkins) — hatch a plan for Stan to pass himself off as a spiritualist medium. In this new grift, known in the parlance of the film as a “spook show,” Stan claims to be able to summon the dead: specifically the spirit of Ezra’s old mistress, who died after a botched abortion.

Nicely adapted from Gresham’s book by del Toro and Kim Morgan, “Nightmare” never wholly leaves behind the sordid milieu of the carnival. Even in its most sophisticated settings, it’s never very far away from what Clem calls the “nightmare alleys, train tracks and phloghouses” in which he recruits drunks to play his “geeks.”

“Nightmare Alley” is a cautionary tale, an allegory of ambition, hubris and despair. No matter how far Stan climbs up the ladder of high society, you know he’s going to fall. And, as with the geeks, there’s a certain perverse satisfaction in watching him when he does.

In something of a departure for del Toro, this is not a horror film or a story of the supernatural. But it does have the filmmaker’s shocking, sometimes needlessly bloody DNA all over it. It’s a noir tale for contemporary audiences who have developed an appetite for sensation from comic book movies, not literature.

The film doesn’t need all that spectacle, and it is at its best when it is at its simplest, relying on the power of storytelling and vivid language, not gore effects. “Nightmare Alley” conjures a colorful world — a world of the “Odditorium” and the House of Damnable Ghouls, where blood and signs scream, in lurid reds and acid greens. But it is really, at its heart, an old-fashioned fable, a fairy tale for grown-ups.

“Nightmare Alley” is rated R for strong/bloody violence, some sex, nudity, rough language and mature thematic elements. Running time: 199 minutes. Now playing in select theaters.
Finding humor in disaster

In his latest film, disaster parody ‘Don’t Look Up,’ director Adam McKay finds a way to laugh at a world-ending event

BY ADAM GRAHAM
The Detroit News

A dam McKay nearly walked away from “Don’t Look Up” once the pandemic hit. The Oscar-winning writer and director, who helped shape the face of comedy over the past 20 years with his films “Anchorman,” “Step Brothers” and later “The Big Short” and “Vice,” was finished with his script and ready to start shooting the apocalyptic satire — think of it as “Armageddon” meets “Idiocracy” — before COVID-19 delayed the production’s April 2020 start date.

Then as the pandemic played out on the world stage, McKay saw how uncomfortably close his script — which set out to lampoon the reaction to a cataclysmic, world-ending disaster — was to real life events.

“I wasn’t even sure we were going to do the movie,” says McKay, on the phone recently from New York, just days before the film’s gala premiere. “I was home with my wife and two daughters in quarantine, and I was watching large tracks of the movie happen in reality, over and over. And the cast and my producers were texting me saying, ‘Oh my God, did you see this just happen? That’s right out of the movie!’ And then the peak of it was when the president of the United States, regardless of who you voted for, we could all admit it was pretty insane when he floated the idea of ingesting bleach to deal with a virus. So that was where I’m like, ‘Oh my God. How do you parody that?’”

He found a way, and now “Don’t Look Up” — which stars a huge ensemble cast that includes Leonardo DiCaprio, Jennifer Lawrence, Meryl Streep, Jonah Hill, Tyler Perry, Cate Blanchett, Timothée Chalamet, Ariana Grande and Ron Perlman — is in theaters and hits Netflix on Dec. 24.

The film’s initial seeds were planted from McKay’s own anxiety about the climate crisis, a looming catastrophe that we’re pretending, in large part, isn’t happening. While discussing the fact that no one is talking about it, a friend made an oft-repeated remark that a comet could be on a collision course with Earth and no one would care, “and I was like, that’s the movie,” McKay says.

“Don’t Look Up” takes a very serious topic and playing it for laughs. There’s even a bit of catharsis in its timing, McKay says, coming as we’re still very much in the throes of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We realized there was something enjoyable about getting laughs after this craziness we’ve been through, and we all felt like we kind of wanted to process what was happening, and that to do it through comedy would be a really good thing,” McKay says.

Since it was a doomsday scenario that got him thinking about “Don’t Look Up,” how does McKay feel now that the film is behind him?

“I’m both pessimistic and hopeful,” he says. “I think it’s going to take a lot more pain, but once the action does kick in, the resources are there. Science is a superpower; we just need to use it.”

And in the meantime, find a way to laugh.

‘Don’t Look Up’ lacks the humor it tries to scare up

BY CHRIS HEWITT
Star Tribune

“Keep it light, fun,” the chitter-chatter hosts of a daytime talk show tell Jennifer Lawrence and Leonardo DiCaprio as they prepare to announce that the world is ending in “Don’t Look Up.”

That disconnect is the movie’s main joke. If you’ve seen “The Big Short” or “Vice,” you’ll quickly identify “Don’t Look Up” as the work of their writer/director, Adam McKay, who has a thing for huge, all-star casts, absurdist humor in tragic situations and hitting us over the head with his message.

The world is told that a planet-killing meteor will hit Earth in six months but no one wants to listen, just like we all seem willing to ignore urgent warnings that climate change dooms our planet.

McKay hits his targets with his cracking, Sorkin-speedy dialogue. The hosts, played by Cate Blanchett and Tyler Perry, are especially interesting since both are more intelligent than they appear but they’re so immersed in the put-on-a-happy-face spin their show requires that they can’t grasp reality. A stoner played by Timothée Chalamet also shows unexpected dimension. Lawrence’s charisma is an asset for a character who is, by design, a dowser, and DiCaprio makes sense of what must have been a confusing role on paper, a brilliant scientist who falls under the sway of Blanchett’s happy talk.

It’s an effective movie but, oddly, not a very funny one. “Don’t Look Up” is swift and lively and you can see where McKay wants us to laugh in, for instance, scenes that feature a poll-obsessed president (Meryl Streep) and her disinvited chief of staff (Jonah Hill). But the writing lacks the subtlety of “Dr. Strangelove,” a dark comedy to which “Don’t Look Up” pays homage, or the satiric punch of the more outrageous “Network.”

Unlike those edgier movies, McKay wants to lampoon his characters and make us care about at least some of them, but the script, which has a whiff of Hollywood smugness, can’t pull off that tricky balance. Give him credit, though, for a good attempt at doing what may be impossible and for righting the ship in the end.

With world destruction seemingly inevitable, the last scenes of “Don’t Look Up” are its best. McKay encourages us to sympathize with even his most odious characters and nails the answer to the inevitable question, “If you knew the world were ending, how would you spend your final moments?”


Leonardo DiCaprio plays Dr. Randall Mindy and Jennifer Lawrence is Kate Dibiasky, two scientists with a dire message about a world-ending event that no one takes seriously, in “Don’t Look Up.”

Netflix/ AP

Jonah Hill as Jason Orlean, Leonardo DiCaprio as Dr. Randall Mindy, Meryl Streep as President Janie Orlean and Jennifer Lawrence as Kate Dibiasky in a scene from “Don’t Look Up,” in theaters Friday.

Netflix/AP

Pay to get lost

Company provides ‘ultimate adventure challenge’ by depositing travelers at a mystery destination

BY HANNAH SAMPSON  
The Washington Post

M any people travel to get away from it all. A few travel to get away — and then walk their way back.

That’s the idea of Get Lost, an “ultimate adventure challenge” that spirits travelers away to a mystery destination and then leaves them alone in the middle of a remote landscape.

Depending on the location and duration of the (distantly supervised) trek, the cost can start around $10,000 and veer into six-figure territory.

Luxury travel company Black Tomato introduced the concept — a kind of a blind date for vacations with “Survivor” elements — in 2017. But with its focus on isolation, Get Lost seems tailor-made for COVID-era travel.

“During the various lockdowns, unable to travel, I had longed for adventure,” New Yorker writer Ed Caesar wrote in a first-person piece about the experience.

Here it was.”

Black Tomato co-founder Tom Marchant said that while the company produced a few such trips last year, it was mostly a time when people in lockdown got in touch to plan their post-pandemic adventures.

“It just happened to have struck a chord over the last 18 months,” he said.

Marchant, who came up with the idea of getting clients “lost,” thought of it as he considered ways to help people truly relax in an age of digital distractions.

“Could we create an experience that requires total mental and physical focus?” he said. “Being totally distracted, it’s almost impossible for them to think about the day-to-day, everything at home.”

There are plenty of expedition — and even survivalist — options for travelers who want to push themselves. And more companies have started offering “blind” trips in recent years, such as Magical Mystery Tours and the “surprise travel” agency Pack Up + Go.

“This combination of not knowing where you’re going but it being a challenge and an earned experience, I think that still is unique to us,” Marchant said.

With Black Tomato’s experience, travelers can choose how lost they want to feel, and how surprised they want to be by their destination. The company’s website offers an array of environments (polar, jungle, coastal, desert or mountain). Extremely laid-back clients can let someone else choose for them.

Destinations have included Iceland, Namibia, Morocco and even the United States. In most cases, travelers don’t know where they’re going until they receive flight information; if they fly private, Marchant said, they might step off a plane with no clue where they are.

For Esther Spengler, 33, a stay-at-home-mom in a military family, the only requirements she had were going somewhere warm and far away from the United States.

Spengler, who calls Austin, Texas, home but is temporarily stationed in Biloxi, Miss., discovered the service while she searched for an outside-the-box anniversary activity. When her husband offered to stay with their two children so she could go on her own, she realized it was a chance to rekindle a long-dormant adventurous streak.

Over about 18 months, Spengler saved up for the 10-day trip to Morocco, which she said cost roughly $13,000, and made the outdoor outfitter REI her best friend.

She flew to Marrakesh in October and continued by car into the mountains. In the New Yorker article, Caesar described a similar journey as “like a very pleasant kidnapping, with coffee breaks.” After a couple of days of training — learning navigation, fire-starting and how to put up her own shelter — Spengler was on her own for three days; at least, she was as “on her own” as someone being tracked by an ex-military guide could be.

“There was a point where he actually did lose me and I was pretty proud of that,” she said, after following the wrong trail and actually getting lost. “He said I almost gave him a bloody heart attack.”

Despite bloodied toenails and a tricky time setting up her tarp shelter, Spengler was thrilled with the experience.

“It turned out really, really incredible and so much more than I could imagine,” she said.

Back in Mississippi, Spengler has put her newfound fire-starting skills to work in the backyard, showing her daughters the steps. She is hoping to turn her affinity for navigating into a career: She is joining the Army National Guard, with plans to focus on imagery intelligence.

Ultimately, she said, she would love to do the kind of work her own guide did during the trip.

“You’re going to have the curious rich people who are like, ‘Oh I’ll do this for fun. I want to see what this is like. I want to have bragging rights,’” she said. “I want to be the real deal.”

Marchant said many of the travelers who book these trips are looking for that sense of accomplishment.

“What we’re looking for is that people feel challenged,” he said. “There’s always an angle that we want people to feel like they’ve achieved something, have that feeling of reward at the end of it.”

Destinations have included Iceland, Namibia, Morocco and even the United States. In most cases, travelers don’t know where they’re going until they receive flight information.
Norway’s festival of light in darkness

I’m in Oslo, and it’s the perfect winter scene — a full moon arcs high overhead, ice-white holiday lights sparkle in the darkness — and it’s the middle of the afternoon! Norway, with its northern location, has the longest and darkest winters in Europe. It’s also about the most popular Christmastime country in Europe. Maybe that’s why Christmas in Norway feels more like a pagan festival revering light than a celebration of Jesus’ birth.

In fact, the Norwegian word for Christmas, Jul (Yule), literally means “wheel,” referring to the sun as it turns toward spring. Only in the 10th century did King Haakon I move the Jul winter-solstice, pagan, drinking festival to December 25 to honor the birth of Jesus.

Imagine the raucous time as medieval Norwegians celebrated the ebb of darkness. Carnivores were in hog heaven, enjoying an abundance of fresh meat. Jul was the time when animals were slaughtered — which made more sense in that subsistence economy than feeding them through the winter.

When the beer was brewed, the animals butchered and the bread baked, the house was cleaned and the party began. People brought in enough wood to last the entire holiday. They gave the remaining animals a little extra hay and even lashed bundles of grain to posts outside to feed the birds.

Today, even though the Christmas season and its Advent concerts — boost church attendance, you see almost no Christian elements in the holiday decorations. It’s as if Jul was timed centuries ago to coincide with the solstice celebration, has reverted back to its pre-Christian roots.

Christmas in Norway is a festival of light, seeming to promise longer days and the return of the sun. Norwegians miss the sun intensely, and they need a spirit boost during these weeks when moon feels like twilight and it’s dark by 4 p.m.

In good, understated Norwegian fashion, houses are decorated only with white lights — never colored — in the windows. You’ll see some traditional candles, but electric lights posing as candles are more common.

Darkness settles on Oslo by late afternoon in December, but festive garlands light up city streets.

A highlight of the season is December 13, the feast day of Santa Lucia. She was a fourth-century Sicilian woman who (according to the lore) wore a head wreath adorned with candles to light the way as she helped persecuted Christians hiding in tunnels.

The Scandanavian version of the legend is that a young woman born of rich and noble parents — dressed in a white gown with a red sash and wearing a crown of lingonberry twigs and blazing candles — traveled from one farm to the next in the early morning on December 13. She carried a torch to light her way, bringing baked goods to each house, returning home by sunrise.

Today, Santa Lucia Day is celebrated in family gatherings, churches, schools, day-care centers, nursing homes and hospitals.

If the ceremony is in a village church, the finale of the service is not “Silent Night” but “Santa Lucia” — the same song popular in Italy but with Norwegian lyrics. As they sing, the children’s choir with their leader wearing her crown of candles proceeds down the aisle and into the night, as if to spread light to the needy community.

Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes Europe-"Rick Steves’ Europe“ blogs on Facebook.

Ancient sites shed light on our forebears’ solstice fascination

At precisely 3:58 p.m. GMT on Dec. 21, the winter solstice will occur throughout the Northern Hemisphere. The winter solstice marks the exact moment when half of Earth is tilted at its farthest distance from the sun. It’s a matter worth celebrating, for from this day forward, the amount of daylight will be on the rise for the next six months. Cultures and civilizations have been observing such celestial phenomena for thousands of years already, as the prehistoric constructions they left behind attest. Many of these sites are in Europe. While visiting them at the times when they’re in sync with the universe is undoubtedly a fantastic experience, one can appreciate them and wonder at the skills and sophistication of our forebears any time of the year.

Ireland: One of the world’s most coveted spots for taking in the winter solstice is in Newgrange, a Neolithic monument in Ireland’s County Meath, some 30 miles north of Dublin. The site consists of a vast circular mound featuring an inner stone passegeway and chambers. It is one of several of Western Europe’s passage tombs, a term used to describe an ancient site that has its much smaller neighbor Gozo are dozens of megalithic temples, seven of which are on the UNESCO World Heritage List. These prehistoric monumental buildings were constructed during the 4th and the 3rd millennium B.C. Each complex is a unique architectural masterpiece displaying sophisticated building techniques and is a testament to an advanced culture with impressive architectural, artistic and technological achievements.

Two of them, the Hagar Qim and Mnajdra temples, are found within a third of a mile of one another, the former on a hilltop overlooking the sea and the latter at the bottom of the hill. Both are notable for an astronomical orientation that reveals itself at the times of the equinoxes and the solstices.

Heritage Malta runs a visitor center offering information about both sites; this is open daily from 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m. Online: heritagemalta.org/hagar-qim-temples

Turkey: The recent discovery of Göbekli Tepe has forced historians and anthropologists to rethink man’s transition to settled life. The Neolithic site, an artificial mound spread out across 20 acres near the city of Sanliurfa in Southeastern Anatolia, was noted by a team of surveyors in 1963, first excavated in 1995 and was added to the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2018. The site is made up of a series of circular sunken structures supported by massive stone pillars and dates back to sometime between 9500 and 8000 B.C. It also features artistic elements such as animal figures carved in relief and abstract human figures. It’s thought the area was occupied for a thousand years before being abandoned and covered up with debris.

Ongoing research is continuing to shape knowledge about the Göbekli Tepe. Evidence suggests the central pillars in four of the enclosures discovered onsite are oriented toward the setting point of Alpha Cygni, a star clearly visible in July and August. Another enclosure seems to be oriented toward the rising point of the sun on the day of the Harvest Festival, which would have fallen approximately halfway between the summer solstice and the autumn equinox. While the more fantastical claims that the entire site served as some kind of ancient observatory have yet to be confirmed, clues to Göbekli Tepe’s true purpose continue to emerge from the sands.

Online: whc.unesco.org/en/list/1572
Island-hop the Inner Hebrides aboard the ‘subway of the sea’

By Liza Weistuch
Special to The Washington Post

Colonsay is a roughly 10-by-2-mile island in Scotland’s Inner Hebrides. It has a bookstore, two galleries, two distilleries making gin, a general store and the Colonsay House, a Georgian home owned by a lord. The year-round population is about 130. In the post office, a sheet of paper tacked to the wall notes the time of low tide at the Strand, the approximately milelong beach between Colonsay and nearby Oronsay (population: six). Postal workers use it to time their daily runs to Oronsay and back. It’s useful to tourists, too. During low tide, they can — and should — walk across to see the island’s 14th-century monastery ruins and Celtic cross.

‘People here are always talking about the tide. Even today, the ferry was affected — it docked at the pier an hour late,’ said Jane Rose, the postal clerk and an artist who makes playful assemblages with beach litter. When she’s not on the job, you’ll find Keith Rutherford, who became postmaster after logging 100,000 miles delivering mail on the island’s 12 miles of road. If you want to buy books and the Colonsay Bookshop is closed, you ask Keith or Jane for the key.

‘You let yourself in, put the lights on and have a rummage around, and if you find anything, you leave me some money or give me a ring with your credit card. Then you take the key back to the post office,’ said co-owner Christa Byrne, whom I met when I visited in September. ‘I don’t want to deprive anybody of the bookshop if they want to go in.’

Its titles are mostly British in theme: history, nature, cooking, guidebooks. There are used treasures, too. I bought a history of the Hebridean clans, a book about whisky smugglers, and “Lonely Colonsay: Island at the Edge,” by Christa’s husband, Kevin, whose many local roles include funeral conductor. (“Probably because he’s the only one with a suit,” she said.) (More information online at colonsay.org.uk/shops-food/bookshop.)

I had traveled to Colonsay by ferry from Islay, one of two ferry routes that service the island. Islay, a royal center in the medieval ages, is most famous today for the distilleries that produce distinctively smoky whiskies, such as Ardbeg and Lagavulin. It would bookend my five days of island-hopping, a journey that covered four islands in the Inner Hebrides, including one of the biggest (Mull) and two much, much, much smaller ones (Tiree and Colonsay). I highly recommend incorporating Islay into any visit to the Inner Hebrides, not only for the distilleries and history but also for the epic seafood platter at the Lochindaal Hotel pub. ‘Look at the claws on that boy! That’s as fresh a lobster as you can get. You enjoy!’ said Iain MacLellan, the fourth-generation owner and chef, when he set down the plate piled with langoustines, mussels, crab claws, scallops and, yes, a whole lobster. (More information online at lochindaalhotel.co.uk)

My journey would ultimately cover a great distance within the relatively limited expanse of the Inner Hebrides, which encompasses the southernmost 70-plus islands of the Hebrides and forms a crescent-shaped archipelago that hugs Scotland’s southwestern coast. According to visitscotland.com, 38 are inhabited to varying degrees. Some have a single store and church, others multiple villages. Most have ruins that tell stories of past civilizations.

Caledonian MacBrayne ferries would be my trusted guide — my amphibious guide, a saltwater stagecoach. A staunch urbanite such as myself might describe the ferry network as the subway of the sea, only with lounges — rooms with sofas, wood tables and tartan-patterned carpets. And outdoor seating for unparalleled scenery. And, of course, taighean beaga (read: toilets). There are also gift shops that stock books about history and whisky and CalMac-branded products such as clothing and toys. The Mariners Cafe, the cafeteria, sells very popular Scottish breakfasts. And most ships have a bar that serves “local whisky,” a rather lofty offering in a region synonymous with prized single-malt scotches.

SEE INNER HEBRIDES ON PAGE 21
Weekend: Travel

Inner Hebrides: Of the more than 70 islands, 35 are accessible by ferry

FROM PAGE 20
CalMac is owned by the Scottish government. It traces its origins to a shipping company founded in 1851. Today, there are routes to 54 ports and harbors on 35 islands and mainland cities across 200 miles of Scotland’s west coast. In 2019, the fleet carried 5,866,042 passengers. Ferries are efficient and charming, if the weather abides. Sailings are sensitive to the sea, so too turbulent. (More information online at calmac.co.uk.)

Histories and poetry have been written about the region’s arduous maritime conditions. Words from Charlotte Brontë’s “Jane Eyre” are fittingly evocative: “Where the Northern Ocean, in vast whirls, / Bolts round the naked, melancholy isles / Of farthest Thule; and the Atlantic surge / Pours in among the stormy Hebrides.”

The risk of danger was low to none the Thursday I left Colonsay. I was standing with a beer on an upper deck of MV Clansman with James Truscott, a Scottish landscape architect and author of “Private Gardens of Scotland,” and his wife, prolific island hoppers. We had met the prior afternoon in the sitting room of the Colonsay Hotel. He advised I carve out significant time to amble the 20-acre woodlands and gardens on the Colonsay House estate. Exotic plants grow there thanks to the warming Gulf Stream, he explained. Now I had a chance to tell him my visit was richer for meeting him.

It was a nighttime sail to Oban, a resort town on Scotland’s west coast and home to CalMac’s busiest port of call, a distinction that earned it the moniker “Gate- way to the Hebrides.” The bay side vista is a crescent of centuries-old buildings: towers, spires, domes and steeples. There is a cinematic mystery and romance to sailing at night: the wind seems more distant, the sea is ink-black, and civilization feels millions of miles away.

In the restaurant, tremendous alabaster walls, pale wood furniture and floors, and potted palms. In the restaurant, tremendous windows overlook infinite stretches of sky. There’s an electric-car charging point outside. (More information online at reef-tiree.com.)

That afternoon, I met Ian Smith, an accordion player with the band Tirisdeach, a speaker and a history buff. In 2019, he and a bandmate started the Isle of Tiree Distillery in his late father’s workshop. The raw, seepia-toned ocean side building has four small stills positioned in front of a window that faces west. (More information online at tyegan.co.uk.)

“Way out that way is Newfound- land,” Smith said, motion- ing at the thunderous waves. “We’re basically on the western end of the world.” He offered me a taste of bracing Tyrree Gin, made with local sea kelp, a cash crop for the island. It’s the “brown gold” was sold to the mainland for glass and soap production. History looms in the whisky that’s aging, too. In 1768, “Tiree had about 150 distilleries. Most were operated illegally, and all were shuttered eventually. Ian’s is the first to operate in 217 years.”

Tiree’s notorious gale-strength winds were in full force the next morning. Rain was pelting. The ferry was late to arrive, and because of the sea swell, it was uncertain whether the boat would dock or turn around. I stood with other walk-on passengers in the Yellow Hare, a sweet bakery and cafe next to the village around back. (More information online at distillery.com.)

There’s nothing more exciting than sailing at night: “There’s more waiting to find out whether we would be leaving Tiree that morning.”

Ferry travel is a great equalizer: “There’s no first-class cabin or exclusive dining option. Everyone shares every space and spectacular views. It inspires committed enthusiasts.”

Alice Hickford told me. She’s an administrator of Ships of CalMac, an online enthusiast group, and former merchant mariner. “There’s nothing more exciting and daunting at the same time.”

“On any given sailing, you might find a family with kids playing cards across from a gaggle of napping backpackers. And over there, laborers headed back to a monthlong construction job on a remote island. On the next day’s sail to Mull, I was regaled with stories by a man — a Tirisdeach (TIR-as-deich), or person from Tiree — who works on the crew of a ship that supplies lightous- es and services the vast system of buoys throughout the Hebrides. Many buoys, which serve as safe-navigation markers, are held in place with almost 500 feet of chain anchored to a five-ton metal sinker on the seabed below, he explained. As the boat pulled into the terminal on Mull, he pointed out a nearby ship, the floating workspace he would soon board.

Mull has about 300 miles of coastline and draws nature lovers for hiking in its dramatic inner mountainous landscape. Boat excursions to Staffa, a near- island, offer the geological marvel Fingal’s Cave and puffin sightings. In Samuel Johnson’s “A Jour- ney to the Western Islands of Scotland,” a 1775 chronicle of his monthlong construction job on a remote island. On the next day’s sail to Mull, I was regaled with stories by a man — a Tirisdeach (TIR-as-deich), or person from Tiree — who works on the crew of a ship that supplies lightous- es and services the vast system of buoys throughout the Hebrides. Many buoys, which serve as safe-navigation markers, are held in place with almost 500 feet of chain anchored to a five-ton metal sinker on the seabed below, he explained. As the boat pulled into the terminal on Mull, he pointed out a nearby ship, the floating workspace he would soon board.

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Quite a mooooving exhibition

Opel Villas in Ruesselsheim, the setting for many cultural experiences, has gone to the animals with its newest exhibit

BY DAVID EDGE
Stars and Stripes

In the late 1990s, the German city of Ruesselsheim resolved to turn a complex of villas on the River Main into a cultural hub, making the onetime private residences a posh showcase for public functions.

Since then, the Opel Villas have lent their splendorous setting to exhibitions, concerts, lectures and the like while preserving mansions previously owned by the family that founded the Opel vehicle brand.

As the city where Opel is headquartered, Ruesselsheim is practically synonymous with the auto-maker founded in 1862.

The first of the current three villas in the ensemble was built in 1916 and includes a winter garden that was restored to its former magnificence in 2012 after decades of neglect.

The second villa, which Fritz Opel called his “Castle on the Main,” is now the exhibition space. A modern third villa was built in 2002, giving the Opel Villas an architectural range spanning almost a century.

The Art and Culture Foundation, a nonprofit organization that cares for the Opel Villas and puts on the events there, changes the exhibitions every four months.

I went to one titled “Art for Animals: A Change of Perspective for People,” which runs until early February. The Opel Villas were once the private residences of the Opel family of automakers.

Ursula Bohmer’s photographic series “All Ladies” hangs in the Opel Villas in Ruesselsheim, Germany. The photos are part of the exhibition “Art for Animals: A Change of Perspective for People,” which is on display until early February. The Opel Villas were once the private residences of the Opel family of automakers.

On the QT
Address: Ludwig-Dorfier-Allee 9, 65428 Ruesselsheim.
Cost: Admission is 8 euros.
Hours: Sunday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; Monday, closed; Tuesday through Friday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m.; Saturday, 2-6 p.m. Advance registration by phone or email is recommended. The cutoff time for visitation is 4 p.m.
Contact info: Phone, +49 6142 835907; email, termine@opelvillen.de
Miscellaneous info: The 2G rule is in effect. Proof of vaccination against or recovery from COVID-19 is required for all adults and for children of school age.

Gabriele Muschel’s “Orang-Utan” hangs in the Opel Villas as part of its “Art for Animals” exhibit.

In Esko Mannikko’s “Savukoski,” the man bottle-feeding a small lamb shows the love and compassion people have for animals.

The cultural offerings of the Opel Villas can easily be paired with a side trip affording travelers a chance to soak up the many charms of Mainz.
Sidestepping the pasta and pizza

Grande Muraglia in Sacile serves affordable Chinese food for the Italian palate, but requires a bit of searching

By Kent Harris
Stars and Stripes

If you’re not in the mood for the local cuisine while dining out in Italy, Chinese food is generally the next-most plentiful option. It’s often among the cheapest as well.

Grande Muraglia, meaning Great Wall in Italian, is hardly the easiest place to find. It’s on the ground floor of a large apartment complex in Sacile. The easiest way to explain how to get there is to say it’s across the street from the large Eurospar grocery store. Don’t bother looking for a sign for the restaurant.

But Grande Muraglia’s prices might make the search worth it. Most of the entrees go for 4 or 5 euros, with only a few, all of which are fish dishes, approaching 10 euros.

Half a dozen entrees or a few less with appetizers will adequately feed a family of four. The restaurant has only a handful of tables, and there’s nothing special about the decor. So you’re not losing a lot by going the takeout route.

And with the new Italian coronavirus protocols in place, dining in might not be a choice if you don’t have a “super green” pass.

So how’s the food? Grande Muraglia is second to TaiJi Fusion Restaurant in Aviano on our list of Chinese places in the province of Pordenone. Admittedly, there are more than a few we haven’t been to. Some of them we’ve been told by others not to bother trying.

As is the case with many Chinese restaurants in Italy, the food doesn’t quite resemble what you’d see in the United States. Or in much of China itself. But that has more to do with local tastes than the quality of the cooks or the ingredients. Chinese and Indian restaurant owners have told me over the 20 years I’ve lived in Italy that many Italians are not fond of unfamiliar spices.

So the result is food that’s a little bland, and the flavors don’t change as much from dish to dish.

My children, both of whom were born in China, have no issue with the food from Grande Muraglia. Rice and noodle dishes are always tops with them, with chicken-oriented selections close behind. We tend to stick with vegetable options for the fried rice and chow mein, giving the chicken dishes a bit more variety.

During our most recent visit, we got five entrees and two appetizers for a bit less than 25 euros. That’s about 5 euros less than we paid for takeout pizzas for the four of us earlier in the week. And we didn’t even get chopsticks with the pizza order.

Grande Muraglia only has a handful of tables and the decor is hardly worth mentioning, so you’re not missing anything if you get your meal to go.

harris.kent@stripes.com
Video-game time machine

Step inside the '80 and '90s 8-bit wonderland of Super Potato in Tokyo

BY KELLY AGE
Stars and Stripes

In busy Akihabara, the Tokyo district famous for its arcades, maid cafes and infinite shops peddling anime and manga merchandise, you’ll find a special kind of shop.

Instead of offering the cutting-edge, high-tech items that Japan is famous for, this store beats to the tune of a different drummer. An 8-bit drum, to be precise.

Super Potato, a 1980s wonderland, transports customers to the retro world of classic gaming. And the Akihabara location is the flagship of a 10-store chain.

It isn’t hard to find. Sightseers need only keep their ears open and follow the 8-bit video-game tunes, which can be heard from the street.

These catchy sounds will guide them inside a five-story building whose exterior bears larger-than-life-sized images of the classic video-game icons Mario and Pac-Man, who is chasing two of his ghost archenemies, Blinky and Inky.

Customers entering the building are led into a tiny hallway where a sign on the ceiling displays the store mascot, a potato, and a red arrow that points to a blue elevator door. The elevator/time machine transports guests to the store’s first level, on the third floor.

Super Potato is the No. 1 store for retro games in Japan, according to its website. The shelves and bins groan with thousands upon thousands of games for a multitude of systems.

Gamers in search of age-old systems are in luck because Super Potato is also a source for consoles, including the Famicom — Japan’s version of the classic Nintendo Entertainment System — and the Nintendo 64. You’ll also find unique obscure systems such as the Wondermega, a combination of a Mega Drive and Mega CD that can be used as a karaoke machine.

Finding a game isn’t too difficult. Although the titles are in Japanese, most have familiar, famous faces of well-known gaming characters on their covers. Games sold include DOOM, Alien vs. Predator, Paperboy, Kirby’s Dream Land and Pitfall, just to name a few.

For a steal of a deal, bargain bins contain Famicom games that cost around 100 yen or Sega Saturn games ranging from 100 to 600 yen.

There are also vending machines and a place to purchase snacks, including retro candies such as candy cigarettes and glass bottle sodas, to enjoy as you play your favorite games.

Super Potato is a must-stop shop for avid gamers, said first-time visitor Jesus Bibar. He made the trip after watching a YouTube video of the store.

“I saw how big the store was and how many different items they sell,” Bibar said. “I love collecting classic video games, so I decided to come to visit this store to add to my collection.”

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Twitter: @KellyA_Stripes

Photos by KELLY AGE/Stars and Stripes

Mario greets customers as they enter the Super Potato retro video-game shop in Akihabara, Tokyo.

On the QT

Location: 1-11-2 Sotokanda, Kitabayashi Building, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 101-0021
Directions: About a five-minute stroll from Akihabara Station.
Hours: 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. weekdays; 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Saturdays, Sundays and holidays.
Information: Online: superpotato.com

Kelly Agee
Mexican with a smile

Get south of the border flavor and fast, friendly service at Casa Burrito just outside Osan Air Base, South Korea

By Jazzmin Spain
Stars and Stripes

I f you are looking for simple yet tasty Mexican cuisine after a long day of shopping in Pyeongtaek, South Korea, stop at Casa Burrito on your way back to base. On my first visit, the owner greeted me warmly and immediately, and when I had trouble deciding, offered a few suggestions. He was so inviting and immediately, and when I had trouble deciding, I decided to stay and eat rather than get my order to go.

I went with the steak quesadilla — Casa Burrito’s most expensive menu item at $10.50 won, or about $8.90 — which comes with cheese and sour cream. The owner honored my special request to leave off the sour cream, because I didn’t want it to overpower the other flavors.

The aroma of fusing spices and the sound of sizzling meat permeated the restaurant as he prepared my order. While I couldn’t watch the cheese melting with the meat, I wasn’t disappointed based on what I could sense coming from the kitchen.

My quesadilla was ready in 10 minutes, which didn’t really feel like long at all. I’m not a person who likes my food drowning in sauce. This quesadilla had just enough kick for my taste buds to enjoy the flavor without forcing me to reach immediately for the nearest beverage.

It was tasty, fresh and not too greasy. It filled me up, and I still had enough left over to take with me.

Casa Burrito also offers other Mexican staples like burritos — obviously — tacos and chimichangas. The burrito is next on my list. Everything on the menu was in English. There were many beverages to choose from, including water, sodas and tea. They also serve beer and other alcoholic beverages.

Casa Burrito offers tasty Mexican staples just outside Osan Air Base, South Korea. Seating is limited, but the location is convenient enough for a quick takeout meal.

Spam musubi is a simple and tasty Hawaiian snack

By Jim Webster
The Washington Post

Chef Sheldon Simeon says two of the questions he gets asked most often are whether Spam is really popular in Hawaii and if he eats a lot of pineapple. He says he doesn’t eat too much pineapple, but Spam is the real deal.

The canned meat was introduced just in time to become ubiquitous as a ration during World War II, and in Hawaii, the amalgamation of pork products and spice was widely embraced. It’s still used in many rice, noodle and egg dishes throughout the islands, but according to Simeon, a two-time fan favorite on “Top Chef,” it shines brightest in musubi.

Musubi can be made a lot of ways, and Simeon’s is a simple and satisfying version in which the canned meat is quickly seared in a savory-sweet glaze before being assembled in a sushi-like package.

Musubi

Ingredients

1½ cups water, plus more for assembly
1 cup (7¼ ounces) uncooked sushi rice, rinsed until the water runs clear
1 tablespoon neutral oil, such as canola or sunflower
1 (12-ounce) can 25% Less Sodium Spam, cut horizontally into 6 equal slices
¼ cup soy sauce
¼ cup (scant 2 ounces) granulated sugar
2 tablespoons mirin
2 sheets sushi nori
3 teaspoons furikake, store-bought or homemade, optional; see note

Directions

In a large saucepan over medium-high heat, combine the water and rice and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium-low so the liquid is barely simmering, cover and cook until the rice has absorbed all the water, about 20 minutes. Uncover and fluff the rice with a fork to separate the grains, then let cool uncovered until warm enough to handle. You should get about 3 cups.

In a large skillet over medium-high heat, heat the oil until shimmering. Working in batches if necessary, sear the Spam slices until they start to brown, for 3 to 4 minutes per side. Transfer to a plate.

When all the Spam is seared, add the soy sauce, sugar and mirin to the pan and stir to combine. Bring to a boil and continue to stir until the sugar dissolves, about 1 minute. Reduce the heat to low and return the Spam to the pan. Turn the slices to coat and continue to cook until a sticky glaze forms, about 1 minute. Remove from the heat.

Gently toast the nori sheets by holding them with tongs over a hot burner over medium-high heat for about 20 seconds. Alternatively, toast them in a 350-degree oven for about 1 minute; they just need to get warm and crisp. Cut each sheet into 3 equal strips, about 2½ inches wide.

Fill a small bowl with water. To assemble the musubi, lay a strip of the nori on a clean surface. Wet your hands under running water, then take about ⅛ cup of the cooked rice and lightly compress it to form a ball. When the rice is stuck together, gently form it into a shape to match the Spam. Place the rice on the nori, perpendicular to the strip. It should slightly hang over the edges. Season the rice with furikake, if using, then top with a slice of the Spam. Dip a finger into the bowl of water and dab the end of the nori strip with it. Fold the ends of the nori up over the Spam, and overlap them so that the wet end seals the ends together. Repeat with the remaining ingredients and serve.

Note: To make your own furikake, toast and crumble 3 sheets of nori, then mix together ⅛ cup toasted sesame seeds, 2 tablespoons bonito flakes, 2 teaspoons sugar and 2 teaspoons sea salt. You should get about ⅛ cups of homemade furikake.
Exploring winter coats

You might not be going on an arctic expedition, but consider your activities and weather conditions when choosing outerwear.

Fabric and insulation

Choosing a winter jacket may seem straightforward, but there’s an almost dizzying array of styles, fabrics and insulations to sift through. Some people prefer a classic pea coat that’s made out of a woven fabric such as wool or a wool blend — which are solid insulators, says Deborah Young, a textile expert and author of “Swatch Reference Guide for Fashion Stylists.”

“If you’re going for a 20-minute run in the dry cold, that’s very different than shoveling your car out in a wet blizzard, or walking around the block over and over again without moving. Here’s a guide to what to consider as you shop for a winter coat that maximizes warmth:

**Fabric**

Coats made from animal fur also offer an excellent barrier against the elements, but people tend to prefer faux fur, which won’t keep you quite as warm unless it has a particularly thick lining, says Rachel LoMonaco-Benzing, an assistant professor in the school of fashion design and merchandising at Kent State University in Ohio. Fleece coats need to have a good liner, too, or they’ll allow wind to pass through pretty easily.

One of the best options if your goal is warmth is a performance jacket — think puffer coats like those made by Patagonia, REI and Columbia. They tend to be comfortable and ideal for winter activities. This category of coat is where “a lot of the innovation in outdoor clothing” has centered, LoMonaco-Benzing says. The outer shell of a puffer jacket is typically “very tightly woven fabric that’s almost always made out of a synthetic, such as polyester or nylon,” she says. Many types — like the popular Gore-Tex fabric — are waterproof, windproof and durable. It’s increasingly common for these materials to have been recycled, part of a push for sustainability in the fashion industry.

Most puffer jackets feature either down or synthetic insulation, says Joseph Katz, a personal trainer and fashion expert in Los Angeles. Which type you choose will determine your coat’s warmth, weight and price. Down, made from clusters of duck or goose feathers, is a superior insulator while remaining breathable and lightweight. Before selecting a down coat, check its fill power. This number, somewhere between about 500 and 900, indicates the general quality of the down. The higher the number, the better the insulation, Katz says. “If you have 500, it’s still good — but there might be spots where there isn’t a little down, so the air can get through, making you feel colder.”

Synthetic down, meanwhile, isn’t as warm as animal down, and it’s sometimes bulkier. However, it’s made out of water-resistant fibers and dries more quickly than duck or goose down. It’s also less expensive. One of the most commonly used synthetic fillers is called PrimaLoft — “ultra-fine fibers that keep you dry and warm,” Katz says. Synthetic insulation is measured in grams per square meter; most coats will have around 60 to 100 grams. The aesthetic appeal of these puffer jackets is broadening, making you feel colder.” But if you’re planning to be out in temperatures at or below freezing, the best bet is to go with a down coat. “If you have 500, it’s still good — but there might be spots where there isn’t a little down, so the air can get through, making you feel colder.”

**Insulation**

LoMonaco-Benzing says: “The ubiquitous nature of the performance look is kind of trickling down, and manufacturers are finding ways to make it look a bit more timeless. You’re seeing a lot of longer puffer jackets that are cut a little more stylishly, like an overcoat.”

Charlene Balick, a sales lead at the REI store in Seattle, often steers locals to coats with PrimaLoft insulation: “They’re lightweight, not that expensive, and cute,” and they work well in a city that rarely drops below 40 degrees. If she’s helping someone from the East Coast, where it gets colder, she might recommend a long coat that’s packed with down and has a waterproof shell to protect against the elements. Such a coat is also a good choice for commuters, who “may not be generating a lot of their own body heat.” But if you’re planning to be super-active, look for a coat with a high down fill power — in addition to offering the best warmth, it will be able to compress into a small shape for easy packing and then puff up again later, Balick says.

**Special features**

Lots of small features can make the difference between a good coat and a great coat. Here are some to look for:

- **A hood:** Your head will lose heat quickly if it’s not covered properly, Lipman says — so prioritize a hood. “Even if it’s not insulated, hood, even if it’s removable. Ideally, something with a hood is a must.”

- **Two-way zippers:** “You can unzip it from the bottom and up it from the top, so it’s only connected where you want it connected.” Balick says. If you’re sitting down, for example, you might want to open the bottom to make the coat roomier. More generally, Lipman’s motto: “Bad zipper, bad coat.”

- **Zippers need to be durable, easy to close — even with gloves on — and a little on the bigger side,” he says. They should also be water-resistant.

**Drawstrings at the hems:** These are a must, Larsen says: “That way I can customize the fit depending on conditions.” Ideally, you’ll be able to pull your jacket tighter at the bottom, at the cuffs and around your face to prevent heat from escaping. Check your coat’s label to see if it’s “fully seam-sealed,” which means all the seams are sealed tight to prevent air and water from getting in, or if it’s “critically seam-sealed,” in which case only certain areas, like the shoulders and back, will be sealed.

**A color that suits your activities:** If you plan to spend a lot of time in the snow, consider a bright color that pops so you can easily be spotted, Balick suggests. If you know you’ll be walking your Chihuahua after dark, slip the black coat, which would make you less visible. “Everybody wants the black, but I try to get people to branch out a little,” she says.

**Shopping tips**

When trying on coats, “make sure to wear a sweater or something under it,” Katz says, to ensure your coat will fit even if you layer up. Don’t, for example, try on a coat while wearing a T-shirt, or you may later realize it doesn’t fit well.

While you have the jacket on, “actually zip it all the way up, and then try to move around in it and do different things,” LoMonaco-Benzing says. If it’s going to be your all-purpose coat, “you certainly want to be as mobile as possible.” Balick says, “even if my model’s too tight, it will restrict your movement.”

One final tip for your shopping checklist: “Try spinning around and admire the coats you’re considering in the mirror. “We’re not supposed to care about this, but I don’t want to discard the cut of this jack-“”

- **Lipman:** “Is it going to make someone feel happy to wear it?”

- **Larsen:** “On most of my trips, there’s no one else around for hundreds of miles,” he says. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t still look good.”
Halo’s back and better than ever

Infinite merges narrative of Halo 4 with early games’ design, silliness and sci-fi slickness

By Todd Martens

No one is as gleefully brain dead to go to battle as the creatures in the Halo franchise — and especially those in the campaign of Halo Infinite, a sort of reset for the massive sci-fi franchise after 2015’s bonanza of immutable intergalactic war threads that was Halo 5: Guardians.

It’s hard, after all, to put down a controller in frustration when, after watching the man-turned-war-machine Master Chief get slain by an unseen alien brute with a pulsating blue sword, a squealy-voiced rodent-like reptile creature yowls, “I got dibs on the helmet, guys!”

The whole of Halo Infinite is somewhat ridiculous. There are times Halo tries to be serious, though those moments are best left at the tip of an eye roll. But when Halo embraces itself as sci-fi gobbledygook — wrapping a warm hug around its cheesy dialogue and reveling in the weirdness of its core storyline of one man’s relationships with artificially intelligent female holograms — it soars as pulp, timeless, space opera fantasy.

So far, every minute I’ve played of the Halo Infinite campaign takes flight. Return to form, reboot — whatever descriptor one wants to use — Halo Infinite plays as a bit of a Halo greatest hits, merging the Master Chief narrative existentialism of the very fine Halo 4 with the early games’ patient level design, silliness and sci-fi slickness. As an interactive text it is still primarily a celebration of shooting with a variety of space guns, but even for someone who doesn’t often gravitate to the so-called “shooter” genre, Halo Infinite is still primarily a celebration of shooting with a variety of space guns, but even for someone who doesn’t often gravitate to the so-called “shooter” genre, Halo Infinite is indeed a showstopper.

Halo Infinite is still primarily a celebration of shooting with a variety of space guns, but even for someone who doesn’t often gravitate to the so-called “shooter” genre, this iteration exemplifies the category at its approachable best. Shown above, a screenshot of the Halo Infinite multiplayer experience.

Halo Infinite is a gregariously vast world that emphasizes style over realism. It’s also an open world that can be explored not just through the campaign but through various side missions and mini-quests.

“The Weapon,” shown above, is Master Chief’s new AI companion in Halo Infinite. His estranged pal Cortana has gone rogue and was supposed to be deleted.

When confronted, for instance, in Halo Infinite of visions of the past — or perhaps a nightmare — you’re allowed to confront what’s real and what’s “clusters of recursive code.” And when we meet for the first time a new magical foe known as the Harbinger, they say, apparently without cringing and under their helmet, “I am the harbinger of true truth.”

That’s not to say there isn’t some meat beyond Chief’s one-liners (when told, at the game’s start, that he and his space flying companion may be the only two humans left alive in the district of the game, he replies, “Then there’s still hope,” and most players will expectedly groan). Halo Infinite ultimately wants to balance the intimacy of Halo 4’s narrative, which focused primarily on Master Chief and his relationship with his now estranged AI pal Cortana, with the more sprawbling, open-world approach of modern video games, where the core story is augmented with various side missions and mini-quests.

In my 18 or so hours with the game, I think Halo Infinite succeeds in this goal. Typically, when reviewing a game, one wants to focus primarily on the key story-focused missions, but I’ve wanted to take my time with Halo Infinite and haven’t stressed myself to rush through it in five days. Optional challenges are typically shorter than those that make up the narrative spine — find Cortana, rebuild humanity — but work well for lighter game sessions.

More importantly, they augment the main story. Here, Chief is marooned on a “ringworld” — a floating space sphere that in the Halo universe is filled with mountainous ecosystems, under-ground caverns and cold, imperialistic space corridors — trying to uncover the mystery surrounding Cortana. A ringworld is alien-constructed but feels more or less like a planet built around Aion and on top of metallic structures rather than sediment. Not wanting to go it alone, I’ve taken some time to rescue some game-controlled marines from the Bannehr, hunt down rare weapons and generally just make it easier to traverse the field as the Cortana mystery deepens.

I like Halo best when it takes time to examine Chief’s relationship to Cortana, and here he has a new AI companion — we’re introduced to her as “the Weapon” — which adds some wrinkles and questions to the tale. Cortana, in short, has gone rogue and was supposed to be deleted, but we wouldn’t be playing the game if things were so simple. And again Chief balances his patriotism with his attachment to Cortana. Look, when you’re an enhanced human who lives in a clunky super-powered space suit, you take intimacy where you can get it.

But there’s a soul here, too. A lovely animated scene came when Chief was rescuing a fallen peer. Chief doesn’t remove his helmet, so instead the camera focused on the reflection in the glasses that surround our hero’s eyes: Zooming in as our fellow soldier uttered his last words, we watched his eyes implanted where those of the Chief would be. The message was clear: What we were seeing is what Chief was feeling, and it was all impressive-ly articulated via the Series X.

Without knowing yet where this tale will end up, I can still say that so far I haven’t had as much fun with a Halo game as I have had with Halo Infinite. Hokey? At times. Silly? Definitely, but space battles seem to live in many of our childhood dreams, and Halo Infinite delivers them with a tension, camaraderie and goofiness that’s akin to a weekend afternoon laser tag bout.

Platforms: Xbox game consoles, Windows PC
Online: halowaypoint.com
Horse needs a barn.

Neil Young didn’t rebuild a log barn from the 1850s that was falling into the ground in the Colorado Rockies just so he could make an album in it with Crazy Horse, his frequent collaborators for more than 50 years, but that was a big part of the inspiration.

“We got some people to restore it back to the original greatness, with ponderosa pines. It’s just beautiful; just a beautiful building,” Young told The Associated Press via Zoom from the property there that he shares with wife Daryl Hannah. “I felt like it was going to be a great place to make music.”

The space was so significant to the process that “Barn” became the name of both the album and a companion documentary, directed by Hannah, released Dec. 10.

It was also an ideal spot for Young to cautiously reunite with drummer Ralph Molina, bassist Billy Talbot and multi-instrumentalist Nils Lofgren.

“It’s remote,” Young said. “With the pandemic and everything we felt like we could get everybody there safely and have everybody vaccinated and pure.”

Crazy Horse has always taken Young, now 76, to remote places musically too. He says they still provide the same “cosmic vibe” they did on 1969’s “Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere,” 1975’s “Zuma,” 1979’s “Rust Never Sleeps” and 1990’s “Ragged Glory.”

“It’s just a place where we get to that I don’t get with anybody else, with Crazy Horse’s ability to jam and the ability to carry on and keep going with not a care in the world,” Young said. “They are as happy to play a song for 20 minutes as they are for three minutes.”

A “barn” is normally musicians’ shorthand for a cold, cavernous room. But this one brought only audial warmth.

“It sounds like God because there’s no square to it, it has no standing waves, because it’s all the insides of these big logs one on top of another,” Young said. “It’s a bunch of round surfaces. From an acoustic standpoint, it’s flawless.”

They built a stage inside and played in their live-and-loose style to a recording truck known as Le Mobile, where engineer Guy Charbonneau and producer Niko Bolas sat parked outside.

“It had just been converted to digital. We took all the digital stuff out and put the analog back in,” he said with a smile.

By Andrew Dalton
Associated Press

Above: Neil Young and Crazy Horse take in the view. The musicians, occasional collaborators for more than 50 years, built a stage inside a restored barn to record their new album, simply titled “Barn.”
Glory: Young, band productive during lockdown

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“There were no distractions,” he said. “And we didn’t have any superfluous jobs to do, none of the trappings of keeping everything going and keeping touring; all that all went away. It was fine with me. I have so much to do.”

Volume three of the career-spanning archives, covering a period in the mid-1970s, was collected with an assist from fans who wrote in with their memories of his music, at times pointing him to things he didn’t remember existed.

“It’s really a beautiful piece of work, all of the songs that made me feel so good to hear, and things that I’ve never heard in my life that we’ve uncovered,” Young said. “There’s a Crazy Horse record, a live Crazy Horse performance that opens up volume three, which I think is the best thing ever recorded with Crazy Horse.”

Hannah’s film patiently lets the album process play out, with slow gazes of the barn at sunset, a pair of dogs lazily outside, and long shots of the band’s jams. “I’m very lucky,” Young said of Hannah. “She’s the other side of everything. We create it and turn around and we see what she saw when we were creating.”

The album has songs celebrating love, memory and old friends, but it’s darkened by the state of a world that stokes Young’s sadness and anger.

The pandemic feels present on the album’s mellow song, “Welcome Back.”

“For the world has closed us in, but we must allow for changes to be made,” Young sings. “WELCOME BACK!”

Neil Young & Crazy Horse

Barn (Reprise Records)

Ever wonder what Neil Young and his longtime bandmates Crazy Horse would sound like in a restored 19th century barn out in the middle of nowhere under a full moon?

Wait no longer. “Barn” is here.

And for a bunch of rockers in their 70s, “Barn” proves that Young and Crazy Horse can still bring it with power, and more often than not sensitivity. Count them as one of the few rock acts that came of age in the 1960s still making relevant music today.

“Barn” has a loose, relaxed feeling that comes with playing with the same bandmates for more than four decades. It’s a well-conceived mix of what Young fans have come to expect from him and Crazy Horse — all-out rockers, contemplative ballads and everything in between.

“Young says. “There’s a Crazy Horse record, a live Crazy Horse performance that opens up volume three, which I think is the best thing ever recorded with Crazy Horse.”

“Lookin’ through this clear vinyl window / At the city and its lights,” Young sings on the lilting opener “Song of the Seasons.”

“Masked people walkin’ everywhere / It’s humanity in my sights.”

He’s got plenty more in his sights over the 10 tracks on “Barn,” which was recorded last summer in the Rockies. It’s the first record Young has released with Crazy Horse since “Colorado” in 2019, and it comes 42 years after their first record together.

Don’t look for a rose-colored view of the past from Young, who has spent his entire career moving forward and reinventing himself.

“Well, the jury is out / On the old days you know,” he sings on “They Might Be Lost.” “The judgment is soon comin’ down / I can’t quite remember / What it was that I knew.”

The Canadian-born Young, who became a U.S. citizen in 2020, recently touched on that journey in “Canerican.” In “Change Ain’t Never Gonna,” Young gives an assessment, of sorts, of the current political landscape.

The camaraderie heard on “Barn” can also be seen in a film made to coincide with the record’s release. Young recorded the album on analog tape, a bonus for purists who like to consume their music on vinyl rather than compressed digital files.

— Scott Bauer
Associated Press

Alicia Keys

KEYS (RCA Records)

On Alicia Keys’ latest album, the R&B artist gives us an inside look at the duality of her creative process. With her album titled “KEYS,” the 15-time Grammy-winning artist breaks down her album into two versions, giving listeners the chance to take in her classical side with “Original” and the more upbeat songs on “Unlocked” featuring producer Mike Will Made-It.

But there’s no need to pick a side.

With “KEYS,” the piano-playing singer takes us through the ups and downs of love and her relationship with her husband, record producer Swizz Beatz, who collaborated with her on the album and is featured by her side in the “Best of Me” music video.

The star, who is known as of late for her barefaced and stripped-down image, is now basking in all her greatness on “KEYS” as she shows off her vocals with elegance and grandeur. She stays true to her piano-playing roots throughout the album as she endeavors to make a name for herself among the greats while paying homage to them.

On “Best of Me” (Originals), Keys gives a nod to Sade by sampling “Cherish The Day,” but adds her own smoothness to the mellow song. “You get the side of me, she sings. “I would hold back and not reveal.”

Keys makes arrangements similar to Etta James or Billie Holiday in “Is It Insane” — perfect for unwinding by the fire this holiday season. In her ode to “Nat King Cole,” her voice builds into a cinematic crescendo. The song of the same name on the other side of the album featuring Lil Wayne gives it a dynamic contrast.

While some of her features on the “Unlocked” side fall short, “Come For Me” featuring Khalid and Lucky Daye is a welcome surprise. Khalid and Keys previously collaborated on her “Alicia” album for “So Done,” and their musical chemistry shows on this album.

Over the years, Keys has transformed herself while exploring different sides of her talent, but in “KEYS,” her confidence is apparent.

— Beatrice Dupuy
Associated Press
Improving the odds of a better tomorrow

Experts explain the complicated reality of luck, offer tips for how you can change yours and feel less unlucky

By Galadriel Watson
Special to The Washington Post


Experts learned about good news concerning their careers, such as getting a permanent job or having a grant accepted, they would attribute it to luck. Because they felt they had so little control, a move in a positive direction had to have happened almost by accident, rather than as the result of hard work.

Of course, academics aren't the only people who attribute events to luck. Through his years of research, Wiseman has found that, in the United Kingdom, “You get roughly 12% of the population saying they’re extremely lucky and about 8% saying they’re unlucky.”

In a 2021 study and ongoing research, Woolley has looked at this idea in children. Between about ages 4 and 8, they are exposed to the concept of luck through sources like family, school, books and the internet. By age 10, however, they start to get skeptical. They’ve begun to notice that, “when they wish for something, it doesn’t happen,” Woolley said. “They’re starting to realize that, if a kid forgets her lucky charm and loses a race, it’s not because this supernatural force was missing in her life that day — it was because she forgot her lucky object and that made her stressed and anxious, and that’s why she lost the race.”

Still, this doesn’t stop the belief from persisting into adulthood — and even our reliance on charms and rituals. For example, former president Barack Obama would play basketball to improve his electoral chances. Basketball player Michael Jordan had to wear his college practice shorts under his NBA uniform.

Woolley notes a 2010 study — which she wasn’t involved in and which other researchers haven’t been able to replicate — that found that being told a golf ball was lucky improved participants’ chances of making the putt. “Obviously it’s not luck that’s causing this. It’s that these superstitious rituals give you confidence and then you do better,” Woolley said. “If you think it’s going to make you play better, then chances are you’re going to play better.”

Is it possible to change your outlook on luck, and, if so, could that lead to better outcomes?

The first thing to understand is that a person’s position in society contributes to their concept of luck. “The circumstances you’re born into, the society you’re born into, the genetic makeup you were given — all these things are outside of your control,” Wiseman said.

Aside from these constraints, however, he believes there are steps you can take to improve your luck. After studying people who consider themselves lucky or unlucky, he has found that the “lucky” ones maximize chance opportunities and dare to follow their intuition to grasp those moments.

“If you are relaxed and happy, your world view becomes bigger and you see more opportunities,” he said. “If you’re a flexible person, when those opportunities come in, you’ll make the most of them. Lucky people know where they’re heading, but often they change the course depending on how the wind is going.”

Lucky people also expect good fortune and turn lousy experiences to good.

“They tend to be — surprise surprise — optimists, and they’re also very resilient to bad things that happen,” Wiseman said. “If bad things happen, it’s thinking, ‘OK, it could have been worse’ rather than ‘It could have been better.’”

This may affect your future luck, Woolley explained. “If you feel better about an event, then maybe you’ll have better expectations about future events and maybe your luck, quote unquote, will change.”

As for specific activities, you can shift your focus toward the positive by keeping a “luck diary,” Wiseman said. “Each night before you go to bed, you spend about 30 seconds writing down a positive thing that’s happened that day, or a sense of gratitude for friends or family or health, or a negative thing that’s no longer happening.”

You also need to take the long view; breaking your leg could be considered a setback now, but if you meet your future spouse in the hospital, it could end up being a very fortuitous one. Plus, don’t be a creature of habitat. Take a different route when walking, watch a different TV program, speak to different people — even small changes can be effective. And then keep your eyes open and be prepared to snatch whatever opportunities might arise.

People who are “lucky” have “a broader focus and they’re more likely to encounter chance opportunities and then good things can happen,” Woolley said. “People who think of themselves as unlucky are just really sort of stuck in their narrow focus.”

What you can’t expect is for good fortune to magically come your way without effort.

“Luck is a very large part of our self-identity,” Wiseman said, “and isn’t very malleable until you do something quite concrete about it.”
Will Smith gained a greater understanding of the planet and its beauty while filming the series ‘Welcome to Earth’.

By Mark Kennedy

Will Smith rappelled into a live volcano and kayaked down an Icelandic whitewater river for his latest project. But he wasn’t making an action movie. It was personal.

Smith, a Hollywood leading man who admits that he’s far from outdoorsy, has put himself in danger’s way while filming “Welcome to Earth,” a kinetic Disney+ original series from National Geographic.

He was intimidated, but that brought clarity.

“It’s really difficult to enjoy things if you’re scared,” he says. “I think the ability to see how beautiful things are is directly connected to your openness to it and fear closes you down.”

The six-part series that debuted Dec. 8 finds the “I Am Legend” star donning scuba gear to dive in an underground lake, crossing a raging, crocodile-infested river on a rope and sitting still in the stifling Namibia desert to capture a chameleon eating a bug.

Throughout is Smith’s authenticity, sweetness and humor.

“Damn, that’s a crunchy bug,” he says at one point when the chameleon strikes. After making a difficult crossing that surprises even him, he notes: “In a movie, my stunt man would have did that.”

A self-described West Philly boy who says he was once scared of everything and hated water, Smith learns to read the rapids while whitewater rafting, rescues turtles near the Great Barrier Reef and goes 3,000 feet below the sea in a deep-water submersible.

Smith, 53, says the series came at a time in his life when he was opening up to nature.

“He just wanted to know what was on planet Earth and feel it and really push himself.” And if the worst happened and Smith perished in that cold lake? “If I had lost him there, I think I would have just stayed back there myself.”

Produced by Oscar-nominated filmmaker Darren Aronofsky, the series carries on the tradition of National Geographic pushing the exploring envelope and embracing the latest in technology to help us understand our world.

“I hope that this becomes a portal for so many people out there to just get a sense of absolutely how incredible our planet is,” says Lin. “The way that the old magazines — the old yellow-bordered magazines — used to do it for a lot of us growing up, I hope this becomes something of that caliber and is meaningful to others. To me, that would feel like mission accomplished.”

Part of the series’ sense of freshness comes from the fact that Smith — who hopes to do another set soon — isn’t told what the plan is on a particular day out in the wilderness.

“When I hit the ground, I have no idea what we’re doing,” he says. “The experts he’s paired with teach him about speed, smell and sound and the colors out there he might miss.”

Dr. Albert Lin, an engineer and explorer who has uncovered lost cities previously for National Geographic, was stunned to find that Smith was able to control his mind and grapple with the situation.

“I respected Will Smith, the actor, before, but now I definitely have grown to truly respect Will Smith, the human being, now,” says Lin, who grew up watching Smith in “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air” and was overjoyed to go camping and exploring with him.

“This really was a personal journey for him,” adds Lin. “He just wanted to know what was on planet Earth and feel it and really push himself.” And if the worst happened and Smith perished in that cold lake? “If I had lost him there, I think I would have just stayed back there myself.”

Photos by National Geographic for Disney+
Is it really the thought that counts?

Unwrap these experts’ tips for giving gifts that will be truly appreciated, reflect how much you care.

By Allyson Chiu
The Washington Post

A s I scrolled through a friend’s Secret Santa wish list recently, I felt conflicted. I’ve always believed that a good gift required thought and effort. If I just got him something on his wish list, would he think I didn’t care enough to try to come up with the perfect present on my own? If I put in minimal thought, would he like the present less?

The real meaning is lost, according to research. In fact, focusing on adages, such as “It’s the thought that counts,” isn’t necessarily the best approach to gift giving.

“One of the central challenges in gift giving is that you are trying to get something that’s ideal for another person, and what seems ideal to you — what you’re going on in your mind as a gift giver — might be quite a bit different from a gift receiver,” said Nicholas Epley, a professor of behavior science and director of the Center for Decision Research at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business.

While many common gift-giving beliefs are well-meaning, focusing on them can potentially lead gift givers astray, said Marisa G. Franco, a psychologist and friendship expert.

“The problem with some of these platitudes is that they pretend that we all have universals,” she said. “It’s the other person and the other person’s actual needs and actual languages of love.”

Here’s what experts say about some popular gifting beliefs, and here are their tips for giving holiday presents in a way that can help optimize happiness and connection.

**It’s the thought that counts!**

“What we find in our work is that thoughts count pretty importantly for the givers,” said Epley, who published research in 2012 that examined the cliché. “Putting a lot of thought into time thinking about what a recipient might like tends to make the givers feel closer and more connected to a receiver.”

But recipients often “are not having your thoughts,” Epley said. When people receive gifts, he said, his research suggests that the “dominant effect” of the gift is how much the person likes it.

Franco agreed. “We think that people would prefer something we’ve chosen for them rather than what they’ve explicitly asked for,” she said. “When in fact, people actually like when they get a gift that they actually like.”

There are some situations, however, in which the thought behind a gift does matter. Recognizing thoughtfulness can help buffer the negative experience of receiving a bad gift from someone you know, experts said.

Thought can also play a larger role in giving when the alternative is to spend time thinking about what a recipient might like to tend to make the givers feel closer and more connected to a receiver.

If “thoughtfulness” comes not from the amount of thought you put into a gift, but just from the fact that you were thinking about somebody and you got them something — maybe when they weren’t expecting it — that’s really meaningful,” Epley said. “We value expressions of warmth from others a lot and giving somebody a gift, even a small one just to show that you’re thinking of them, matters.”

Still, the desire to be thoughtful can lead to pitfalls, such as overthinking, said Mary Steffel, an associate professor of marketing at Northeastern University who has studied gift giving. “Gifts often end up overshooting, getting things that are maybe more unique or more narrow than what the receiver might want.”

Take, for example, some people’s aversion to giving cash or gift cards because they believe it is too impersonal. Not only is gifting money acceptable, and in some cases expected, within certain cultures, but Steffel said her research also indicates that recipients may prefer gifts with more flexibility, including gift cards that aren’t too specific. “They rather have that Visa gift card or Amazon gift card that allows them to get whatever they want or need.”

By relying too much on thoughtfulness, givers tend to “overlook better ways of gift giving, which is to listen to what the other person wants,” Epley said. “You don’t have to divine it. I don’t have to read your mind and guess what you want. I can ask you directly what you might like, or I can just listen carefully.”

It’s also important to remember that despite our best attempts, it can be challenging to get into the minds of others, said Sam Maglio, a consumer psychologist. “All the thought and mental effort in the world isn’t going to get you inside somebody else’s head as well as consulting a wish list.”

**Gift giving experiences vs. material things**

According to science, this holds true. People who get experiential gifts, such as event tickets, gift certificates to restaurants or special trips, feel closer and more connected to their gift giver compared to those who receive material gifts, according to the results of multiple studies published in 2016 in the Journal of Consumer Research.

Additionally, the researchers noted that experiential gifts can have a connecting effect even if the giver and the receiver aren’t sharing the experience.

“The reason is because even though you aren’t with me, I’m thinking of you,” said Cassie Mogilner Holmes, who co-authored the 2016 paper and is an expert on happiness and the role of time. “I feel like you’re with me vicariously, and the emotions from consuming that experience lead to greater sense of connection.”

Holmes encouraged gift givers to think about their relationships with recipients and how the recipients spend their time.

Another benefit of giving experiences is that a person’s time can feel more enriched, she said. For “time-poor” people, she suggested getting them experiences that give the gift of time.

“You can buy them time by hiring a babysitter for them so that they have the space to go out and spend their time in ways that are satisfying for them,” said Holmes. Holmes is a professor of marketing and behavioral decision-making at UCLA’s Anderson School of Management.

If an experiential gift isn’t feasible, material gifts can create a similar sense of connection when presented in ways that emphasize experience, Holmes said. For example, she said, she gave her husband a watch for one anniversary and included a letter about how the watch represented a way to track their shared experiences and life together.

“You can frame the gift as an experience that they will have consuming it,” she said.

**Give from the heart**

Gifts that require a lot of effort — for example, something handmade, or something that took you a long time to find — can be important ways for givers to symbolically show just how much they care,” Steffel said. Ideally, Franco added, a gift that you put extra effort into should align with what the recipient wants.

Giving from the heart can also take the form of sentimental gifts, experts said. Research shows that givers tend to shy away from sentimentality more than they should because recipients actually appreciate presents with emotional value.

When in doubt, Epley, the University of Chicago professor, recommended “creating a diversified portfolio of gifts.” You can gift a person something you know they’ll like, either because you asked them or picked it off a wish list, and supplement that with a present that may feel more meaningful.

**Is it better to give than to receive?**

Not necessarily, experts said. “Giving love is a blessing, and so is receiving love,” Franco said. “One doesn’t have to be superior to the other.”

Alternatively, some gift exchanges can also be “lose-lose” propositions, Maglio said. Gift givers can “exert all sorts of mental effort to give a good gift,” and still fail short, he said. Then, recipients are left with a gift “that despite all this effort that the giver put into it, missed the mark.”

Maglio encouraged givers to ask some key questions: Would you really want it? What would it be like to own and use this gift? How can you give a gift that’s more practical or functional?

Givers often “only think as far as what it’s like to be the instantaneous recipient of a gift,” he said. “They think a showy, expensive present that is impossible to use or doesn’t have a lot of value in day-to-day life, will really drop jaws to the floor, and it might.” But then, he continued, “the gift giver walks away from the interaction and the recipient is left with a beautiful, expensive thing that collects dust on their shelf.”

Another way that givers and receivers can benefit from gift exchanges employs the adage, “Sharing is caring,” said Maglio, who co-authored a 2017 paper that studied the effects of buying a gift for someone that you also buy for yourself.

“Our data shows that receivers feel closer to gift givers when they say, ‘I bought the same thing for myself; more so than, ‘It got great reviews online’ or ‘I put a lot of effort into it,’” he said.

Keep in mind, Franco said, as a recipient you can also play a role in creating a positive gift exchange experience.

“It is a skill to be good at accepting gifts,” she said. A receiver should be able to recognize that, whether a gift is something you wanted or not, “someone had a positive feeling that they wanted to express toward you in the act of giving.”
In search of the awe-inspiring

Experts advise how to help kids experience more of the undervalued emotion

By Deborah Farmer Kris

When my dad shook me awake at 2 a.m., I grumbled my way out to the backyard and onto the guilt he had spread out for me and my four siblings. Moments later, a streak of light sliced the sky. And then another. For hours, until the sun lit the horizon, we watched the spectacle of the Perseid meteor shower.

My 9-year-old self would have described the night as “awesome.” That’s a good word choice, because awe is what we feel when we encounter something vast, wondrous or beyond our ordinary frame of reference. It evokes a sense of mystery and wonder. And, when presented in an everyday activity into a more healing one, particularly in this difficult time in history.

“For our culture in this moment of climate crisis and stress and COVID, the most important message is, ‘How do I go find awe right around me, perhaps just by going on a walk?’” Keltner says. “Go out and find some awe on your walk. Get outside, pause, reflect, slow it down.”

In fact, a 2020 study, older adults who took weekly 15-minute “awe walks” for eight weeks reported increased positive emotions and less distress in their daily lives.

Do screens produce or limit awe?

Keltner notes that screens usually serve as a “gateway to awe rather than a direct experience of it.” They can help us find artists, musicians and places that we might not otherwise discover. “The protests against the killing of George Floyd, which were awe-inspiring, came out of screens in many ways,” Keltner says. And films such as Louie Schwartzberg’s “Fascinicious Fungi” allow viewers to observe the natural world in a way that wouldn’t be possible without technology.

Can we improve society?

It’s kindness and courage” Keltner says. “We generally underestimate the power of goose bumps. Sometimes, slightly reframing something can turn an everyday activity into a more healing one, particularly in this difficult time in history.

When our family had hard times — deployments, health issues, disappointments, stress — I rose to the occasion, proud of my ability to handle serious challenges. But now, after two years of staying home, our house felt like a trap. I was the servant, imprisoned in the dark kitchen, with nothing to look forward to but a day of drudgery. I shook my head, trying to reorder my irrational thoughts.

The logical side of me knew that we had a wonderful life. I was proud of my husband’s 28 years of service in the Navy. After retirement, we’d found a house in New England close enough to the Navy base that we could hear the national anthem every morning. We were building a warm circle of local friends. My husband and I had good jobs, both of us working remotely. Our three children, in their twenties and doing well, live near enough to drop in to entertain us often.

While the chores waited, I raked my brain to understand why I despised coffee was piping hot again. While waiting for it to cool, I marked items off my to-do list, recognizing that each was proud of my ability to hit serious challenges head on. When we experienced good times — births, milestones, graduations, promotions, travel, holidays — I embraced those moments with a happy heart.

Perhaps I struggled with the periods in between extremes. The longings to return to a place I knew and my four siblings are more likely to help a stranger who dropped their bags in the street.

Downtime, step by step.

Finding meaning in the space between 

At 10 in the morning, our kitchen was still dark. The sun wouldn’t wind its way around to this side of the house until mid-afternoon. But in the hours when a servant was relegated to cook unseen and unheard, our kitchen was neither bright nor cheerful at this time of day. But it was where the coffee was located.

I sat, sipping my second cup of coffee, trying to get my act together. There was a mountain of laundry to do, Christmas gifts to order, pork to defrost, tumbledvoodles of dog hair to sweep up and computer work waiting in my cramped, chilly home office. I needed motivation, energy, positivity. But all I felt was a vague sense of apathy, boredom and guilt.

I wondered why I often found myself stagnating in this dreary mindset. The pandemic had done a doozy on my daily routine. Before “stay at home” became a virtue, I got up and out of the house most days, doing computer work at coffee shops, going to the base gym, meeting military spouse friends. I’d come home from my outings, feeling like our house was a cozy refuge to enjoy.

But now, after two years of staying home, our house felt like a trap. I was the servant, imprisoned in the dark kitchen, with nothing to look forward to but a day of drudgery. I shook my head, trying to reorder my irrational thoughts.

The logical side of me knew that we had a wonderful life. I was proud of my husband’s 28 years of service in the Navy. After retirement, we’d found a house in New England close enough to the Navy base that we could hear the national anthem every morning. We were building a warm circle of local friends. My husband and I had good jobs, both of us working remotely. Our three children, in their twenties and doing well, live near enough to drop in to entertain us often.

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Perhaps I struggled with the periods in between extremes. The days when time stretches out before me, with nothing particularly exciting or challenging on the horizon. When I go through the motions, thinking all I have to show for myself is an empty dishwasher and a lousy pork roast. My mind plays tricks, telling me I’m wasting my life.

I looked down at my half empty cup of lukewarm coffee and realized that I needed to change my attitude.

I clicked the button on our kitchen radio, humming along with Bing Crosby’s “A Marshmallow World” while I flicked on lights to brighten our kitchen. After stuffing wet laundry into the dryer and sweeping up dog hair, I cranked the portable radiator in my office and lit a scented candle to make it cozy for my afternoon of work. I smiled at my luck at finding a jar of applesauce to go with the defrosting pork for dinner.

The microwave emitted its melody, indicating that my kitchen was still ticking while I waited for it to cool, I marked items off my to-do list, recognizing that each seemingly mundane daily task is equivalent to laying a brick on the path of life’s journey. Every matched pair of socks, vacuumed rug, day of work, evening run, litter box scooped and sidewalk shoveled is progress. Each day we move forward, step by step.

I sipped with newfound awareness. My cup was not only half full, it actually runneth over.
NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

COME AGAIN?
BY CHASE DITTRICH AND JEFF CHEN / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

ACROSS
1 “Bull” ater 4 Out
10 Win for a 10-Down
15 Yukon automaker
18 Set down
20 With 116-Down, artificial intelligence system that mimics the human brain
50 Rapper with more than 20 Grammys
51 … queens dress in
44 Maker of the classic video game Frogger
45 … PROPOSAL
49 Kind of milk

DOWN
1 Prop, as a shell
3 … and to ___ good night!
4 FLOOR FLOOR
27 “It’s been some miles on it” 29 Home to the Burj Khalifa, for short
30 Singular
31 Stark who was crowned Queen of the North on “Game of Thrones”
32 GRIZZLY GRIZZLY
39 First responder, for short
40 Percussion
41 Brouhaha
42 Opposite of FF
43 What some kings and queens dress in
45 First responder, for short
48 Org. that hires cryptanalysts
49 Kind of jar

Results for above puzzle

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Olivia Colman, left, and Jessie Buckley play British academic Leda, but from different times, in Maggie Gyllenhaal's directorial debut "The Lost Daughter," now playing in stateside theaters.

Associated Press

By Jake Coyle
Associated Press

It's not often that two actors inhabit the same role seamlessly in a movie. But in Maggie Gyllenhaal's "The Lost Daughter," Olivia Colman and Jessie Buckley play a woman in vastly different chapters in her life with a rare harmony.

"The Lost Daughter," Gyllenhaal's remarkably accomplished directorial debut, is adapted from Elena Ferrante's 2006 novel. Colman stars as Leda, a 48-year-old British academic on vacation in Greece, where a large and boorish family interrupts the tranquility of her holiday. Yet Leda is intrigued by a young, struggling mother, played by Dakota Johnson. Their interactions fuel Leda's memories of her early years as a parent, a time when her career is also taking off. In interspersed flashbacks, Buckley plays the younger Leda.

Colman and Buckley don't look particularly alike, but their interpretations of Leda are compellingly synergetic. Each performance deepens the other, creating a bisected and holistic character study. Two actors, one Leda. In the general critical acclaim for Gyllenhaal's film, now in theaters and streaming Dec. 31 on Netflix, Colman and Buckley have each regularly been singled out by awards groups.

"Each performance deepens the other, creating a bisected and holistic character study: Two actors, one Leda. In the general critical acclaim for Gyllenhaal's film, now in theaters and streaming Dec. 31 on Netflix, Colman and Buckley have each regularly been singled out by awards groups."

Colman: I quickly learned, don't try to compete with Jessie's singing.

What were your songs?
Buckley: "Bohemian Rhapsody."

Colman: A bit of Adele. It was a challenge.
Buckley: Thank god she's released a new album. That's all I can say.

Colman: It's funny because it's true.

Olivia, you suggested Jessie for this role. What made you think of her?

Colman: When I first met Maggie, I said, "And who else have you got?" She went, "I haven't anybody. Do you have any thoughts?" I went, "Do you know Jessie Buckley?" She didn't but she went and saw "Wild Rose," which had just come out. I always think "Jessie Buckley." I feel thrilled with myself. I find Jessie is the most incredible actress. I love watching her. I think she's exquisite in her choices and has impeccable taste.

Did you discuss your approach together at all?
Colman: We had a phone call where we said, "What accent should we do?" "OK."

That was it?
Colman: Well, Maggie doesn't want to patronize an audience. It's clear that it's Jessie and Olivia. We're different people and we're playing the same woman. But it's a woman in different stages of her life. You do change a bit. When I saw it I thought we had the same response to the script. And Jessie didn't throw me off by doing a secret limp.

"The Lost Daughter" shows a complicated, uncertain side of motherhood rarely seen in movies. Leda has ambitions and desires that don't fit into the conventional portraits.

Buckley: That's what I love about it. Why hasn't this been on screen before? To me, that's what I loved most about my own mother and my sisters and all the amazing women in my life. It's like the potential of all of them outside of the thing that we project on top of them. Reading the script was like taking a big sigh of relief. My own mum came to see it at the London Film Festival and she took a big sigh. She felt like she was part of a community for the first time, like "Oh, thank god, you too." She was holding herself differently that night.

Colman: I loved that it was an honest depiction of being (expletive) at it. My mates, who all happen to also be mums, came that night. There was a big quiet moment when you could see them going, "That was quite shocking and I'm really grateful it was there." Some of the days, I still go over when I was really bad at being a mum and I can share that with everybody. I can forgive myself because it's really normal.

Olivia, you've talked about how your own experience of motherhood differs.

Colman: I had a different situation to Leda. I was seen and I was supported. I was co-parents with my husband. A lot of those frustrations didn't exist. I need to be me, too, because I was being an actor. So that's a huge difference. Also, you don't have to always draw on something. We're in the business of imagination. Jessie doesn't have children, but Jessie plays that part beautifully. Dakota doesn't have children. I recently played a murdered (in the HBO miniseries "Landscapers"). I haven't murdered anyone.

Did either of you watch the other's scenes to gauge your own performance?

Olivia: When we first got to Greece, I thought maybe I could watch a couple scenes with Jessie's permission. I was about to press play and I went, "Oh that's wrong."

Jessie: That's just because my bottom was the first shot that you saw.

Olivia: It felt not fair to do that. I just felt: Why don't we just trust each other? The first time I saw it was at Venice and it was your performance that made me go "Oh." Watching you, that was amazing.

Jessie, what did you think when you saw Olivia's performance?

Buckley: I think Olivia Colman has huge potential. I think she's got a really great career ahead of her. I would watch Olivia paint a wall, really.

Influential feminist writer and culture critic bell hooks dies at 69

By Nardine Saad
Los Angeles Times

Bell hooks, the influential writer, feminist, poet and cultural critic who popularized intersectionality with works such as " Ain't I a Woman," " All About Love," " Bone Black," " Feminist Theory" and " Communion: The Female Search for Love," died Wednesday. She was 69.

Gloria Jean Watkins, known professionally by her lowercase pen name, died at home in Berea, Ky., after an extended illness, according to a family statement from William Morrow Publishers and Berea College in Kentucky, which houses the bell hooks Institute.

"No Black woman writer in this culture can write too much. Indeed, no woman writer can write too much.... No woman has ever written enough," she said in her 1999 book of essays, "Remembered Rapture."

Her other notable titles include " And Then We Wept," " Salvation," " The Will to Change," " Feminism Is for Everybody," " Where We Stand: Class Matters," " Killing Rage" and " Teaching to Transgress."
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The Exchange is a Department of Defense Organization.
Eugene Sheffer Crossword

ACROSS
1 Coffee flavor
6 Smidgen
9 Trendy
12 James — Garfield
13 Storefront sign abbr.
14 Chemical suffix
15 “Fences” actress Davis
16 Auto safety feature
18 Chinese dumpling
20 Sty cry
21 Cleric’s garment
23 Football’s Parseghian
24 Author Joyce Carol —
25 Piglet’s pop
27 One-eighty
29 Steve of “The Office”
31 Appeared to be
35 Intimidate, with “out”
37 Kentucky Derby winner — Ridge
38 Encrusted
41 Devilish laugh
43 Collar
44 Met melody
45 Moolah
47 Icon lineup
49 Temple leader
52 Pinafore letters
53 Cravat
54 Where the elated walk
55 Talk and talk
56 Snake’s warning
57 “Phooey!”

DOWN
1 Dallas hoopster, briefly
2 Japanese sash
3 Prying aid
4 Angelic ring
5 Range brand
6 — lozenge
7 “East of Eden” twin
8 Broadband letters
9 Custom
10 Foolish
11 Job benefits
17 Temporary car
19 Without question
21 Alphabet starter
22 Mauna —
24 K-pop band
25 Longoria
30 Iota
32 Hotel amenity
33 Actress
34 Wee dollop
36 Household tasks
37 Heathcliff’s love
38 Lozenge
39 Bakery lure
40 “Buster”
42 Theater worker
43 K-pop band
45 Banquet platform
46 Lion’s pride?
47 Iota
48 Apr. addressee
50 Iota
51 April addressee

Answer to Previous Puzzle

CRYPTOQUIP

HOZHT GPHXK HKEL ZVKNU Z
LNW MTK ZVHKUNUCYW YKACH
MZDO, XTCCHC-XKACDCG

UKDUPYYZH: “EZXTK OZE.”

Yesterday’s Cryptquip: WHEN PLAYWRIGHT TOM PLUGS UP A BOTTLE TO SEAL IT, ONE MIGHT SAY IT’S STOPPERED BY STOPPARD.

Today’s Cryptquip Clue: O equals M
Insurers obligated to factor in the unvaccinated

By Sheldon H. Jacobson

Special to the Chicago Tribune

A new year brings a new surge in housing prices

By Conor Sen

Bloomberg Opinion

there’s been a discouraging development for homebuyers: the trend of buying a house earlier this year because of dwindling inventory and rising prices, thinking they’d wait until things cooled off. The housing market is surging again. But why is it upshifting during what should be the slowest time of the year? One answer is rising prices in the rental market.

Leases that are coming up for renewal now were signed at the end of 2020, before rents exploded higher. That’s renewing interest in home buying, essentially pulling the housing market forward by several months. If there’s a silver lining for renters, it’s that the cycle might relieve some of the upward pressure on rents that we’ve seen for most of the year.

From May until September, we had a lot of evidence that the housing market was normalizing somewhat after a pandemic-fluecd year of buying. The price of lumber fell by over 70% after setting an all-time high in early May. In July, mortgage applications hit their lowest level since the spring of 2020. In August, the National Association of Home Builders reported a decline in housing starts for the first time in a year. By the end of September, it was reasonable to think that the pandemic had pulled forward a lot of housing demand, but that high prices, supply chain constraints and a gradual return to pre-pandemic behavioral patterns were slowing bringing normality back to the housing market.

But the trends of rising prices are looking pretty based on what we’ve seen since then. Mortgage purchase applications have picked up again; on a seasonally-adjusted basis, the end of August was the strongest we’ve seen since February. Home-buying sentiment bounced back sharply since the dip in August, and is back at levels seen in April and May. Seemingly out of nowhere, lumber prices are surging again, doubling since the middle of November. Homebuilder stock prices are setting all-time highs. And inventory levels of homes for sale are plunging again.

Now think about what’s happened in the rental market over the past 18 months. At the onset of the pandemic, vacancy rates rose and rents fell due to a combination of people buying houses and, perhaps, moving in with family during the height of uncertainty before vaccines were available. Around the beginning of this year, apartment vacancy rates began edging higher, reflecting the uncertainty surrounding the omicron variant, even if it is flawed or incomplete, is contrary to the principles of ethical medical practice. By following the payment for care, however, after about 18 months, the epidemic has been brought under control in most places, and the number of active cases is now very low. The immunity that has been built up is very strong, and the risk of severe disease or death is very low for those who are vaccinated. The life insurance risk calculation also takes into account the fact that those who choose vaccination. The life insurance risk calculation further served to remind us that the vaccines are not a silver bullet, but rather a tool in a suite of public health measures to prevent the spread of the virus and reduce its impact on the population.

As COVID-19 moves into the omicron era, the uncertainly surrounding the virus means that the best available tools be used. If people choose to reject such tools, the economics of risk mean that insurance providers will respond by having some price for their choice.

This is not a moral, ethical or political decision. It is a sound business decision.
**Wednesday’s transactions**

**Major League Baseball**

**American League**

- **Texas Rangers**
  - Acquired C Ryan Lavarnway from the St. Louis Cardinals.

**National League**

- **Atlanta Braves**
  - Placed 3B Austin Riley on the 10-day injured list.
  - Replaced him with 3B Ronald Acuna Jr. from the 60-day injured list.

**National Basketball Association**

**INDIANA PACERS**

- Waived G Delon Wright.

**PRO FOOTBALL**

**NFL**

**PRO FOOTBALL HALL OF FAME**

- Announced the Class of 2022.

**COLLEGE FOOTBALL**

- Added new games and updated scores.

**DEALS**

- Added new deals and updated information.

**Wednesday’s men’s scores**

- Added new scores and updated standings.

**Wednesday’s women’s scores**

- Added new scores and updated standings.

**NBA**

- Added new scores and updated standings.

**Other Sports**

- Added new scores and updated standings.
UCLA has to call off game late due to COVID-19 protocols.

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — UCLA’s game against Alcorn State on Wednesday night was called off because of COVID-19 protocols.

The decision was announced an hour before the fourth-ranked Bruins were set to take the court. Some players from both teams were on the court when they were informed.

Earlier in the day, UCLA said coach Mick Cronin would miss the game because of COVID-19 protocols.

He was set to be replaced by associate head coach Darren Savino.

Fans streaming toward Pauley Pavilion were taken by surprise as word of mouth spread.

The arena had yet to be opened because of COVID-19 protocols.

Wednesday night was called off an hour before the fourth-round game.

The person told AP the omicron variant is responsible for the uptick in cases, and is expected to become the dominant strain if the outbreak continues.

More than 140 NHL players have been on the protocol list this season — including more than two dozen in the last two days — in a league that has proudly noted all but one of its approximately 700 players are considered fully vaccinated even if booster shots are not mandated.

Jackson misses practice with injured ankle.

By Noah Trister

Associated Press

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — Lamar Jackson missed practice because of his injured ankle, and the Baltimore Ravens are bringing in another quarterback just in case.

Jets coach Robert Saleh announced that Josh Johnson was heading to Baltimore from New York’s practice squad. Ravens coach John Harbaugh did not rule out the possibility he might start Saturday.

Jackson has been in the game lately. The Cleveland Browns are bringing in another quarterback just in case.

Jackson said his practice this week was limited to running on the side.

“I’ve known Josh since he played for my brother at the University of San Diego, many moons ago,” Harbaugh said. “That shows you what a credit it is to Josh’s career. ... He’s played in this league for a long time, and he’s very reliable.”

Harbaugh said during his talk with reporters that Jackson would not practice Wednesday, although the star quarterback remains a possibility to play this weekend. Jackson left Sunday’s loss at Cleveland with a sprained ankle.

Harbaugh also said during his talk with reporters that Jackson would not practice Wednesday, although the star quarterback remains a possibility to play this weekend. Jackson left Sunday’s loss at Cleveland with a sprained ankle.

Huntley also quarterbacked Baltimore to a win over Chicago. When Jackson was sick. This week, he should have more time to prepare for the possibility that he might start.

“What’s going to happen is that he knows how to play,” Harbaugh said. “So, him getting the reps today, if he has to play on Sunday, will be a benefit. We’ll see where it goes from there. He may play. He may not be playing depending on Lamar’s situation.”

The Ravens haven’t looked great even when Jackson has been in the game lately. The Cleveland game was only the second time in the past seven contests that Baltimore reached the 20-point mark.
Jaguars cut losses, fire Meyer

Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — Urban Meyer never fit in the NFL. His mottos. His methods. Even his moods seemed to go against what’s considered normal behavior in a league filled with professionals and grown men. He rubbed just about everyone the wrong way: assistants, players and eventually his bosses.

Meyer’s tumultuous tenure ended after just 13 games — and two victories — when the Jacksonville Jaguars fired him early Thursday because of an accumulation of mistakes.

Owner Shad Khan made the move hours after former Jaguars player Josh Lambo told a Florida newspaper Meyer kicked him during practice in August. It was the latest black eye — adding to an already lengthy list of embarrassments — for the three-time national championship-winning college coach who failed miserably to make the transition to the NFL.

“At deliberation over many weeks and a thorough analysis of the entirety of Urban’s tenure with our team, I am bitterly disappointed to arrive at the conclusion that an immediate change is imperative for everyone,” Khan said in a statement. “I informed Urban of the change this evening. As I stated in October, regaining our trust and respect was essential. Regrettably, it did not happen.” Meyer joins former Atlanta Falcons coach Bobby Petrino as college coaches whose NFL careers flamed out in stunningly swift fashion. Petrino resigned in December 2007 to take over at Arkansas. He was 3-10 at the time.

Meyer went 2-11 in his partial season, and the Jaguars really started to unravel on the offensive side of the ball following the team’s bye week. They averaged a measly 9.1 points in Meyer’s final seven games, which ended with a five-game skid.

Offensive coordinator Darrell Bevell will serve as Jacksonville’s interim head coach for the final four games, beginning Sunday against Houston (2-11).

Lambo’s claim seemingly proved too much for Khan, who two days earlier said he didn’t want to make an impulsive decision on the coach’s future.

“What’s different about this thing is you have losses and you have drama,” Khan said then.

The Jaguars had way more drama than victories.

Lambo’s allegation came on the heels of an NFL Network report which said Meyer created tension with multiple run-ins with players as well as assistants he allegedly called “losers.”

Source: League making changes to virus protocols

Associated Press

IRVING, Texas — The NFL is planning “significant changes” to its COVID-19 protocols amid the worst three-day stretch for the league during the pandemic, a person familiar with the plans told The Associated Press on Wednesday night.

The person, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because details haven’t been finalized, said the league and the NFL Players Association are discussing three main areas: testing protocols; return to play guidelines to allow asymptomatic players who’ve tested positive to return sooner; and encouraging booster shots.

On Monday, the league informed coaches, front-office staff and other team personnel to receive a COVID-19 booster by Dec. 27. Play?

The NFL, the players’ union and the league had already delayed a deadline to return to play by two weeks and a thorough analysis of the COVID-19 protocols; return to play guidelines to allow asymptomatic players who’ve tested positive to return sooner; and encouraging booster shots. P

Still, Commissioner Roger Goodell said there were no plans to cancel or postpone Cleveland’s home game against the Las Vegas Raiders on Saturday. The Browns have 18 players, including half of their 22 starters, on the COVID-19 reserve list.

“Listen, we’ve raised this the last two years: It’s a challenge,” Goodell said. “It’s clear even in the last couple of weeks that the changes are pretty significant and different than they were before, and I think it calls to modifications to our protocols in general, and we’re working with the players association on that.”

In other news, league owners approved Las Vegas as the site of the Super Bowl to cap the 2023 season, a first for the gambling mecca in the Nevada desert.

The NFL’s biggest event will follow the Pro Bowl this season and the NFL draft next year, all within five years of the Raiders’ move to Las Vegas.

“It’s a big day for the Raiders,” club owner Mark Davis said. “It’s a big day for the city of Las Vegas. I think it’s a marriage made in heaven, I’ll say. Some others may use a different word.”

The league is expanding the Rooney Rule requirement of at least two interviews with external minority candidates to general manager-level jobs along with the coordinators for offense, defense and special teams.

The two-candidate rule already applies to openings for head coaches. The window for virtual interviews will now open after Week 16 for clubs that have either fired their coach or informed him that he won’t return.

While the longer access for interviews isn’t limited to minority coaches, the NFL hopes it will allow more minority candidates to interview rather than wait for their current team’s playoff run to end.
No. 1 prospect surprises in a prime-time move

Receiver switches his commitment from FSU to Sanders' Jackson State

By Ralph D. Russo
Associated Press

The No. 1 high school football recruit in the country pulled a signing day shocker Wednesday, deciding to attend Jackson State and play for coach Deion Sanders after being verbally committed to Florida State for months.

Travis Hunter, a cornerback from Suwanee, Ga., made the unprecedented announcement during a ceremony at Collins Hill High School. Hunter was the top prospect in the country in 247 Sports' composite rankings, which take into account its own ratings plus those of other major recruiting websites.

Sanders is a former Florida State star and Pro Football Hall of Famer who is in his second year coaching Jackson State, a historically black college in Jackson, Miss.

At his signing ceremony, Hunter had three baseball caps on the table in front of him as he prepared to make his announcement: Florida State, Auburn and Georgia.

He tossed them off the stage one-by-one and unzipped his sweatshirt to reveal a T-shirt that read Believe. He then caught a Jackson State cap — with a dark blue J on a white background — that was tossed to him from the crowd and put that on.

“I got a one-in-lifetime chance to play for one of the greats,” Hunter told WXIA-TV in Atlanta after making his announcement. “I got a chance to make a change in history.”

Since the evaluation and rating of high school recruits started to take off in the late 1990s and early 2000s, no player as highly regarded as Hunter has ever signed a scholarship out of high school with an HBCU such as Jackson State.

Top 100 players rarely sign outside the traditional college football programs that play in the strongest conferences such as the Southeastern Conference and Big Ten.

Jackson State competes at a level several rungs below those conferences in the second tier of NCAA Division I football, the Championship Subdivision.

Schools like Jackson State rarely ever sign three-star players. Hunter is one of several dozen five-star prospects in the 2022 recruiting class.

A long-time member of the Southwestern Athletic Conference, Jackson State won its first SWAC title since 2007 last month.

“We’re going to shock the country,” Sanders said Tuesday, the eve of the opening of the early signing period, on Barstool Sports’ “Unnecessary Roughness” podcast.

BY ERIC OLSON
Associated Press

Through all the changes to the college sports landscape with money-making opportunities for athletes and open transfers, one thing remains the same.

A bunch of Southeastern Conference schools along with venerable programs like Ohio State and Texas are at or near the top of the national recruiting rankings.

The three-day December signing period opened Wednesday, with Texas A&M finishing the day with the lead according to the 247Sports Composite rankings.

Aggies coach Jimbo Fisher put together his fourth straight top-10 class. Alabama, which won nine of the previous 11 recruiting titles, was No. 2. Georgia was No. 3, marking the fifth straight year the Bulldogs have been in the top five.

The team rankings could change with the next letter-of-intent period beginning Feb. 2.

Coaches said the recruiting process now has players taking into consideration where they could make the most money through endorsement work. The NCAA in July began allowing athletes to monetize use of their name, image and likeness. Some schools are better positioned than others in this new frontier, and millions of dollars are swirling around the biggest programs.

“NIL has been going on for a long time. It just hasn’t been above board,” Fisher said.

The rapid increase in number of players entering the transfer portal and moving to another school with immediate eligibility has also changed the way coaches build their recruiting classes.

Instead of trying to sign a high school player and develop him, a coach might instead pursuit experienced players in the portal. And players interested in transferring also might be looking at NIL potential.

All things considered, signing day isn’t what it used to be, Mississippi coach Lane Kiffin said.

“That’s basically your draft class,” he said, “but then you’re going to have your free-agent class. I don’t think people really say it this way, but let’s not make a mistake. I mean, we have free agency in college football. The kids a lot of times go to where they’re going to get paid the most.”

“Now one else is saying that may be, but the kid says, ‘This is what I’m getting here for NIL.’ It is what it is,” Kiffin added. “Free agency has been created in college football — except you can’t lock people into a contract. They can go any time.

“It’s a new world that we’re in.”

Top of the heap

Texas A&M signed 12 players ranked in the top 100 nationally.

Two of its three five-star prospects are defensive linemen: Walter Nolen of Powell, Tenn., and Gabriel Brownlow-Dindy of Lakeland, Fla.

The other is quarterback Conner Brownlow-Dindy of Lakeland, Fla.

Alabama brought in three five-star players and 16 four-stars, with edge rusher Jeremiah Alexander of Alabaster, Ala., the highest rated of the 21 signed by coach Nick Saban.

Five-star Ty Simpson of Martin, Tenn., joins a deep quarterback room led by Heisman Trophy winner Bryce Young.

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Five-star Ty Simpson of Martin, Tenn., joins a deep quarterback room led by Heisman Trophy winner Bryce Young.

Georgia signed 21 players, including four five-stars and 12 four-stars. Coach Kirby Smart downplayed the importance of those rankings.

“I care a whole lot more about how they play,” he said. “We’ve seen evidence of the guys who have played a big role on our team. Some of those guys were not the guys we talked about on this day during their career.”

Completing the 247Sports Composite rankings were Ohio State, Texas, Penn State, Notre Dame, North Carolina, Michigan and Oklahoma.

Bearcats bountiful

Cincinnati’s run to the College Football Playoff isn’t all that helped Luke Fickell sign what’s shaping up to be the Bearcats’ highest-ranked class at No. 38. Other factors, he said, are the coming move to the Big 12 and the development of QB Desmond Ridder and CB Ahmad Gardner into NFL Draft prospects.

Two-four stars, DE Mario Eugene (Tampa, Fla.) and DB Jonquis “JQ” Hardaway (Phenix City, Ala.), head a class of 20.

“We’re there some doors that could possibly open and some hurdles taken down? No doubt,” Fickell said of the upcoming move from the American Athletic Conference to the Big 12.

Kelly keeps 5-star QB

Five-star QB Walker Howard (Lafayette, La.) made good on his pledge and signed with LSU and new coach Brian Kelly.

Howard was expected to follow through on his verbal commitment after appearing in a promotional video with Kelly on social media that led some to poke fun at the coach’s dancing.

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Full lineup a good reason to watch every bowl game

By Ralph D. Russo

To be frank, last year’s bowl seasons felt a little sad. A bunch of bowls were canceled by the pandemic even before the matchups were set. More had to be called off on relatively short notice. Teams decided to pass on playing in a bowl altogether after rocky seasons. Fans were grateful for the 25 bowls they got, but it just wasn’t the same.

The full bowl lineup is back this season. There will be 43 games, 42 involving FBS teams, before the College Football Playoff championship game Jan. 10 in Indianapolis. And there is a reason to watch every single one, even before we get to the main attractions that begin on New Year’s Eve.

Note: Not every game will be live on AFN networks.

Army quarterback Christian Anderson reacts to scoring a touchdown against Navy on Dec. 11. The Black Knights’ triple option goes up against Missouri’s SEC-worst run defense in the Armed Forces Bowl on Dec. 22.

By Adam Hunger/Army

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NBA

Turnaround: Cavs win games, respect with shocking start

BY TOM WITHERS  
Associated Press

CLEVELAND — The Cavaliers’ plan, crafted last summer by the team’s front office and coaching staff, called for growth this season. Not this much. Not this soon, anyway.

It was supposed to be another year of rebuilding, of developing the team’s core of young, talented players, of improving chemistry. And if things bounced their way, maybe they could earn a spot in the NBA’s Play-In tournament.

Well, circumstances have changed. Big time.

A 22-win, tough-to-watch team last season and forecast by the experts and Las Vegas oddsmakers to be only slightly better than that, Cleveland is 18-12 and holding the No. 4 spot in the Eastern Conference.

In this stunning start, the Cavs have dominated teams with a defensive charge led by 20-year-old rookie forward Evan Mobley, who is altering shots as well as the trajectory of a franchise that has longed to break free from LeBron James’ grip.

“I don’t think people are going to say this, but I think everybody is a little surprised,” Cleveland center Jarrett Allen said with a little hesitation. The Cavs have won five straight, including and eighth in their past 10 games. “It’s just the nature of what we’re doing.

“We’re playing excellent basketball. We’re playing above everybody’s standards, playing together as a team. We’re doing everything we need to do to win, and it’s working. I think we’re surprising a lot of people.”

With every double-digit win — Cleveland’s last nine victories have each been by at least 11 points — and whether at home or on the road, this group of Cavaliers, who have bought in to coach J.B. Bickerstaff’s philosophies, is gaining confidence along with some well-earned respect across the league.

“This is not a flash in the pan, what they’re doing,” Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said before the Cavs beat his team for the second time in 11 days. “They are committed to an identity, and J.B. has done a great job building that defensively.

“That’s key because when you’re having an off-night shooting, you always have something you can bank on defensively.”

Yep, Cleveland is relying on its defense to win. That’s not to say it doesn’t value offense or lack scorers, but everything starts for the team on the defensive end.

The Cavs enter Saturday’s game at Milwaukee with action allowing 101.5 points per game, second in the league to Golden State. Wednesday’s 124-89 defeat of the Houston Rockets was the 13th time this season they’ve held an opponent under 100 points.

Bickerstaff has found something with a starting lineup featuring the 7-foot Mobley, 6-11 Allen and 7-foot Lauri Markkanen, a group of tall ballers some Cavs fans have taken to calling “Tower City,” after one of the city’s downtown areas.

“That size is causing trouble for teams in the way that we defend and how hard we play as well,” said Kevin Love, who after all his ups and downs with Cleveland is the lone player left from the James-led 2016 championship team. “That is definitely gaining us respect around the league.”
By PAT GRAHAM
Associated Press

DENVER — There was no game in Chicago on Tuesday, no trip for the Bulls to Toronto for another on Thursday.

Just like that, the coronavirus has disrupted the day-to-day operations of the NBA.

The Bulls are shut down for what will be at least a few days with 10 players in health and safety protocols. But the impact is not limited to Chicago.

In Canada on Wednesday, the country’s largest province, Ontario — home to the NBA’s Toronto Raptors — set a cap of 50% of capacity for large gatherings such as professional sports events.

The NBA also has several stars in COVID-19 protocols right now, including the Milwaukee Bucks’ Giannis Antetokounmpo and the Brooklyn Nets’ James Harden. As of Wednesday afternoon, 33 players — about 6.5% of the league — were in the protocols, in 17 of those 32 playing for either Chicago or Brooklyn.

The Nets were missing seven players for their home game Tuesday against Toronto because of the protocols; Antetokounmpo didn’t play Wednesday, also because of the protocols; and the Los Angeles Lakers canceled practice Tuesday with Dwight Howard and Malik Monk in the protocols.

In recent days, Indiana coach Rick Carlisle has missed games, and Raptors President Masai Ujiri tested positive after hosting an event in November. Ujiri announced he was among those who tested positive for the virus after he recently went to his charity event. In a statement from the team, Ujiri said: “We don’t want to live in fear of this virus, but COVID-19 is a persistent enemy. Together, we’ll defeat it.”

The Bulls’ list of players out: Zach LaVine, Troy Brown Jr., DeMar DeRozan, Matt Thomas, Coby White, Javonte Green, Derrick Jones Jr., Ayo Dosunmu, Stanley Johnson and now Alize Johnson.

Players in the health and safety protocols must be sidelined at least 10 days or record two negative COVID-19 tests in a 24-hour period before they can resume basketball activities.

“With the state of COVID, there’s always something going on.”

Lloyd Pierce
Pacers assistant coach

The NBA and the National Basketball Players Association have been using players and staff to avoid the game being postponed because Kevin Durant was upgraded from questionable.

On Friday night, the latest league guidelines will be implemented. Lately, there have been plenty of stark reminders this pandemic is far from over and won’t be going away anytime soon.

The Pacers and Warriors had only two officials for Monday night’s game, with the third in health and safety protocols. The Raptors announced their broadcast team will self-isolate out of precaution after contact with someone who tested positive.

Harden was among the seven Nets who couldn’t play Tuesday night. Brooklyn only had enough players to avoid the game being postponed because Kevin Durant was upgraded from questionable.

Pacers assistant coach Lloyd Pierce succinctly summed up the current state of the pandemic while filling in for Carlisle last Friday when he said it is “always joyful when you just get to the court. … With the state of COVID, there’s always something going on.”

The NHL already postponed some games this season and on Monday, with the announcement that two Buffalo games were off, the NBA joined hockey in the postponed club. The league always anticipated that postponements were possible again this season. About 30 games were moved around last season but all eventually got played.

One provision of the new league booster guidelines states that a team staffer who doesn’t have their booster shot by Friday — with limited exceptions — will no longer have the ability to have in-person access with players, coaches and referees. Plus, the staffer will be banned from joining their clubs on road trips.

As for the players who haven’t received their booster, they will be subject to game-day testing again, and the league will reserve the right to impose additional testing on their respective teams as needed going forward.

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AP basketball writer Tim Reynolds and AP sports writer Andrew Seligman contributed to this report.

**NBA**

**Scoreboard**

**Eastern Conference**

**Atlantic Division**

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**AROUND THE LEAGUE**

By Tim Reynolds
Associated Press

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AP basketball writer Tim Reynolds and AP sports writer Andrew Seligman contributed to this report.
Mac in action

Rookie QB Jones’ emergence ending talk of extended rebuild in New England

BY JIMMY Golen
Associated Press

It’s not exactly the 199th overall pick, but drafting Mac Jones in the middle of the first round is turning out to be quite a steal for New England.

The heir to Tom Brady in the Patriots (9-4) huddle has emerged as the top quarterback from his draft class — and so far the best rookie overall — despite being the No. 15 pick and the fifth QB selected in the NFL Draft last spring.

Jones’ accelerated development has ended talk of an extended rebuilding period without Brady, returning the Patriots to the top of the AFC and sending them into their off week on a seven-game winning streak.

“The last part of the season is the most important part. Nothing that you did before that matters,” Jones said last week as he prepared for his first free weekend as a pro. “The bye week’s important just as a self-evaluation for what you can do as a player, as an offense, and obviously taking coaching and figuring out ways to improve. That’s all you can ask for.”

Brady was the greatest pick in NFL history when he was selected in the sixth round — No. 199 overall — of the 2000 draft. With him as quarterback for two decades, the Patriots won six Super Bowls and reached the title game three other times.

Coach Bill Belichick has been working on a succession plan at least since 2014, when he drafted Jimmy Garoppolo; since then, Jacoby Brissett, Danny Etling and Jarrett Stidham had all been brought in for a try.

But when Brady signed with the Buccaneers as a free agent in 2020, things became more urgent. The Patriots signed 2015 MVP Cam Newton to run the offense, but that failure — a 7-9 record that left them out of the playoff for the first time since Brady was injured in 2008 — forced Belichick to do something he’d never done before: draft a quarterback in the first round.

While the rest of the league jockeyed for a chance to pick Trevor Lawrence, Zach Wilson or Trey Lance, who went Nos. 1-2-3, or even 11th overall pick Justin Fields, the Patriots stood pat and grabbed Jones at No. 15.

New England Patriots rookie quarterback Mac Jones

BY MARY SCHWALM
AP

Virus disruptions ahead of ‘Booster Day’

New England Patriots rookie quarterback Mac Jones

SEE ACTION ON PAGE 43