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“ THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN’ ”

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THE MACAU SAR SAW SOME 1,000 CONVENTIONS AND EXHIBITIONS IN 2023, ACHIEVING THE CITY'S SET TARGET

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TRANSPORT BUREAU PLEDGES EXTRA PAYMENT METHODS AT HZMB PARKING

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HK PROSECUTORS SAY JIMMY LAI URGED PROTESTS, SANCTIONS AGAINST CHINA

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AP PHOTO



Japanese rescue workers and canine units searched urgently through rubble yesterday ahead of predicted bitter cold and heavy rain in what the prime minister called a race against time after powerful earthquakes killed at least 73 people in western Japan. 15 people were listed as officially missing and possibly trapped under collapsed buildings.

AP PHOTO



Israel The chief of Mossad intelligence service vowed that the agency would hunt down every Hamas member involved in the Oct. 7 attack on Israel, no matter where they are. He made the pledge a day after the deputy head of the Palestinian militant group was killed in a suspected Israeli strike in Beirut. Israel was on high alert yesterday for an escalation with Lebanon's powerful Hezbollah militia after the strike in Beirut killed Saleh Arouri, the most senior Hamas member slain since the war in Gaza.

AP PHOTO



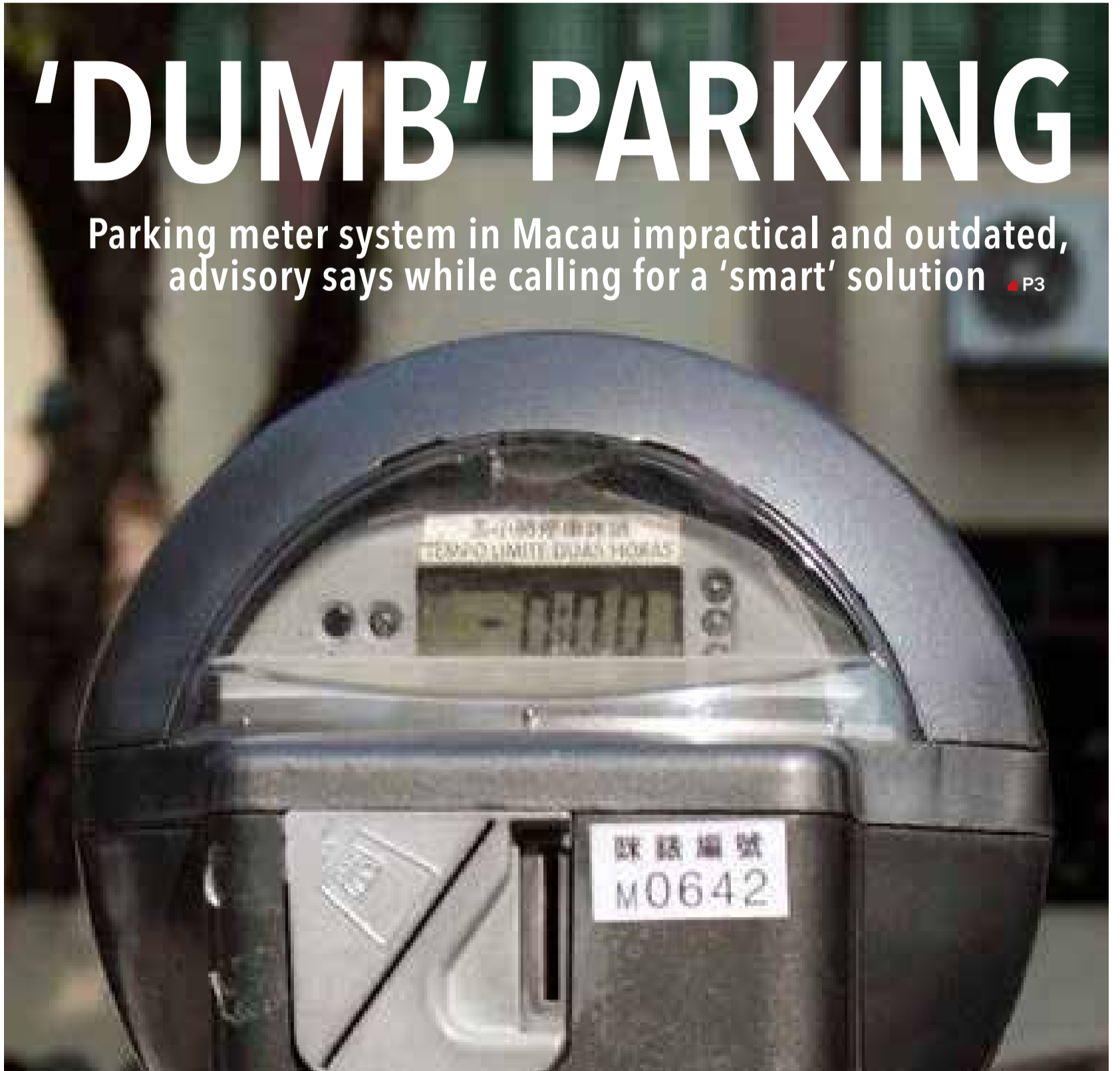
Iran Two explosions minutes apart in Iran targeted a commemoration for a prominent general slain in a U.S. drone strike in 2020, killing at least 103 people and wounding at least 141 others as the Middle East remains on edge over Israel's war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. No group immediately claimed responsibility for what Iranian state media called a "terroristic" attack shortly after the blasts in Kerman, about 820 km southeast of Tehran.

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'DUMB' PARKING

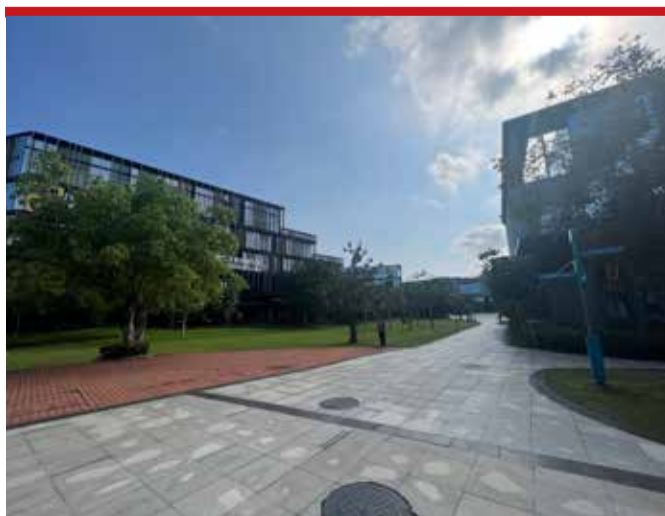
Parking meter system in Macau impractical and outdated, advisory says while calling for a 'smart' solution

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**GAMING 2024
GGR TO
GROW 28%:
MORGAN
STANLEY**

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**GBA
12,000
RESIDENTS
LIVE AND
WORK IN
HENGQIN**

P4

**WILLIAMS WINS
2023 MACAU
SNOOKER MASTERS**

Welsh player Mark Williams clinched the title at the 2023 Macau Snooker Masters last week. The final afternoon session saw Williams hold a lead of 5-3 against England's Jack Lisowski, maintaining that advantage through the evening session to secure a 9-6 victory. Expressing his satisfaction with the result, Williams praised Lisowski's commendable performance. Eight of the world's top snooker players, including world No.1 Ronnie O'Sullivan and China's Ding Junhui, competed in the event.

**HZMB WELCOMES
OVER 16 MILLION
PASSENGERS IN 2023**

More than 16.3 million inbound and outbound passengers and 3.26 million vehicles passed through Zhuhai port of the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge (HZMB) in 2023, 1.29 times and 3.8 times that of 2019, respectively, official data shows. Data shows that in 2023, more than 45,000 mainland tour groups traveled to and from Hong Kong and Macau via the bridge. In 2023, the highest single-day passenger flow via the bridge reached 115,000, hitting a new high since the bridge entered into operation, noted a staffer at the station.

**HOTEL GUESTS NEARLY
DOUBLE IN NOVEMBER**

A total of 1,202,000 guests checked in at Macau's hotel establishments in November, leaping 194.5% year-on-year. The latest Statistics and Census Service report showed guests from the mainland and the Hong Kong SAR jumped 173.8% and 788.2% year-on-year to 882,000 and 154,000, respectively. The number of visitors arriving via package tours totaled 206,000 last month. Meanwhile, 39,000 Macau residents purchased outbound services through travel agencies, an uplift of 486.7% year-on-year.

**UNEMPLOYMENT RATE
DROPS TO 2.3% IN
SEPTEMBER-NOVEMBER**

The general unemployment rate from September to November was 2.3%, down slightly by 0.1 percentage points from the August-October period. The latest report from Macau's Statistics and Census Service said local residents' unemployment rate was 2.9%, down 0.2 percentage points from the August-October period. The total labor force residing in Macau reached 380,700 people during the September to November period.

GAMING

MORGAN STANLEY FORECASTS GGR GROWTH OF 28% IN 2024

RENATO MARQUES

THE gross gaming revenue (GGR) of local casinos should grow this year by 28%, investment bank and wealth management firm Morgan Stanley has forecast.

According to Morgan Stanley analysts Praveen Choudhary and Gareth Leung, the strong performance of Macau's gaming industry, particularly at the end of 2023, bodes well for 2024.

The analysts assert that GGR should, in 2024, grow from 62% of the 2019 level to 80% of the pre-pandemic level, constituting an increase of 28%.

The forecast comes after the release of official figures from both December and the whole of 2023. It acknowledges a stronger-than-expected result for the gaming industry, which closed the year with a gross accumulation of MOP183.06 billion.

The December results contributed significantly to this total figure, closing with a monthly total of MOP18.567 billion. December reported the second highest monthly GGR of 2023, surpassed only by October (MOP19.501 billion).

Commenting particularly on the result of December, the



analysts noted that it "accelerated faster than traditional seasonality."

Historically, December's GGR performance has not been strong. In 2019, the month was, in GGR terms, the second lowest of the year, trailing September's results.

**EXPENDITURE ALSO
LIKELY TO INCREASE**

In an earlier note published in December 2023, the same Morgan Stanley analysts also projected that concessionaires'

expenditure – in terms of both Operational Expenditure (OpEx) and Capital Expenditure (CapEx) – would also likely increase in 2024.

Such a rise would be the result of increases to both employee wages and contracted mandatory non-gaming investments.

"We expect Macau gaming companies to follow the government and increase employee wages by 2% to 3% in 2024," the analysts said, adding that the traditional, one-month salary

bonus should also remain in place.

"The OpEx portion of non-gaming investment, as well as the potential competition between gaming hosts and their clients, could put upward pressure on OpEx. On CapEx, we think companies will accelerate their non-gaming spending in 2024. Sands has the capacity to have 76% of its committed investment in CapEx while other operators will need to spend more on OpEx, which could impact their profit margin."

GAMING

Number of junkets plunges to 18 this year

LYNZY VALLES

MACAU has again seen a reduction of licensed junkets this year after figures from the government show the number of gaming promoters has been slashed to 18.

The figure represents 50% of 2023's numbers, according to information from the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau (DICJ).

The latest reduction comes after the government enforced

the largest gaming law overhaul in Macau's history, as well as the junkets law, which states that junkets can no longer engage in revenue share arrangements with concessionaires.

The Secretary for Economy and Finance has previously ruled that gaming promoters' commissions cannot exceed 1.25% of the (rolling) net amount of the conversion of gambling chips, whatever the calculation basis for converting those chips

may be. As required by the law, gaming promoters can only work with one gaming concessionaire at a time. Additionally, and among other requirements, this contract must be approved by the local government.

Gaming promoters are also required to pay MOP1.5 million to obtain their licenses. Deposits required of junkets, junket collaborators and gaming management companies are set, respecti-

vely, at MOP1.5 million, MOP500,000 and MOP1.5 million.

Macau's junket sector has witnessed a 92% decline over the past decade. Income generated through Macau's casinos peaked in 2014, with gross gaming revenue (GGR) exceeding USD45 billion – three times that of Las Vegas.

At that time, 235 junket operators were registered to operate under licenses in Macau, collectively contributing around 60% of

casino GGR.

Macau's junket operators are companies that lure high rollers to gamble in the city. Before the gaming crack-down and the pandemic, they were responsible for 75% of Macau's annual VIP gaming revenue, which totaled approximately USD3 billion.

In 2023, the number of gaming promoters in Macau fell from 46 to 36 – a far cry from the 235 licensed junkets the city boasted in 2013.

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Parking meter system impractical and outdated

RENATO MARQUES

THE street-side parking meter system was discussed again yesterday at the Central District Community Advisory Board meeting.

Board member António Monteiro raised the matter again, following his own involvement with a wider group that expressed dissatisfaction with the government's decision to remove coin payments from parking meters last year.

Besides the previously-reported conflict between laws 5/2023 and 10/2023 – with the former providing that legal tender, whether in bills or coins, cannot be refused as a payment method in Macau, while the latter exclusively mandates methods of electronic payment for parking meters – Monteiro also noted other problems with the meter system that he considers impractical and outdated.

He noted that while local laws allow tourists to rent and operate vehicles in Macau, they do not adequately alert drivers of the need to possess either a Macau Pass or a specific bank

RENATO MARQUES



card, so as to pay electronically for parking meters. This not only creates logistical concerns but also damages Macau's image as a tourist-friendly destination, said Monteiro.

Additionally, the system does

not offer users the option of displaying the parking meters' on-screen text in English, compounding the system's difficulty for those who cannot read Chinese or Portuguese.

Moreover, the system is com-

plex and far from user-friendly, requiring users to undertake many steps before completing their payment.

Monteiro said that in addition to forcing people to use an electronic method of payment, the system is limited. Whilst it accepts "tap cards" like a Macau Pass, it does not accept other, more common means of electronic payment, such as mPay, Alipay, WeChat pay, Visa or Mastercard.

The same member also noted parking meter users cannot extend their payment time, if needed, or pay remotely. All these facts lead to his conclusion that the current system is both obsolete and even more impractical than the former system, which accepted coins.

He urged the government to develop a new system more suited to Macau's image as a digital yet tourist-friendly and leisure-oriented city.

Recently, the Times observed an event in which a male driver, whose car was registered to the Hong Kong region, was forced to call for help from a nearby shop's security staff to successfully operate the parking meter.

The incident occurred during the New Year's Eve holiday, in the surroundings of Avenida de Dom João IV. The driver said he could not understand the information displayed on the parking meter to pay for his parking.

ACCESS ROAD CONSTRUCTION OF 4TH BRIDGE CONCLUDES ON TAIPA BANK

The construction of access roads to the fourth Macau-Taipa Bridge has concluded on the Taipa bank, with entry onto the bridge now linked via a flyover to Avenida de Wai Long, the Public Construction Bureau has announced. The project of two phases commenced in April 2021 with the construction of a connecting overpass from both Avenida de Wai Long and the Taipa Ferry Terminal to the fourth Bridge's entry and exit. The project covered an area of approximately 44,500 square meters and concluded at the end of 2023.

UM EXTENDS OPEN DAY TO HENGQIN

The University of Macau (UM) will hold its UM Open Day 2024 on Jan. 14, with the event taking place in both Macau and Hengqin. Themed "Connecting Macao and Hengqin," this year's open day will enable visitors, for the first time ever, to explore both the university's Macau campus and Hengqin's Zhuhai UM Science & Technology Research Institute (ZUMRI) on the same day. The day includes admission consultations, sports activities, workshops, science experiments, science symposiums, booth games and tours of campus faculties and residential colleges.

GAMING OPS TO HOLD JOB-MATCHING SESSION THIS MONTH

The Labour Affairs Bureau (DSAL) has joined with the six gaming operators to launch job-matching sessions this month. According to the DSAL, six sessions will provide 478 job opportunities. Online registration is available until Jan. 22, with applicants able to register for positions such as assistant marketing manager, facility management manager or director, information technology analyst and auditor. Wynn, on Jan. 15, will be the first gaming operator to hold its job-matching session, followed by Melco the next day. SJM and Galaxy will, respectively, hold their sessions on Jan. 18 and Jan. 19. Sands China and MGM will, respectively, hold their sessions on Jan. 23 and Jan. 25.

Transport Bureau pledges extra payment methods at HZMB parking

ADDITIONAL payment methods will be introduced at the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge West Carpark, the Transport Bureau (DSAT) has stated in response to an earlier inquiry by the Times.

Before the holidays, the Times reported drivers' complaints about long queues at the parking lot. Drivers returning from holidays outside of Macau expressed frustration at the absence of eight widely accepted mobile payment

methods at the parking facility. As such, the venue's shroff office had long queues because it only accepted Macau Pass and cash.

The Times enquired about the difficulties associated with upgrading

payment options at the parking lot over the past three years. Questions were posed to the bureau regarding whether the venue had the requisite parking management resources to make improvements, and whether fines

would be administered as part of parking management.

The bureau cited constraints within the service contract, which only stipulates three payment options: cash, Macau Pass and contactless Union Pay. It pledged that depending on queue lengths, additional shroff offices would be opened, but did not comment on whether adequate notice would be provided. **AL**

PUBLIC WORKS

SMART TRAFFIC LIGHTS TO INCREASE TO 80%



STAFF REPORTER

THE city's smart traffic lights is expected to increase to about 80% within this year (2024), according to the Transport Bureau (DSAT).

The city has some 130 sets of traffic lights, of which 63% are smart traffic lights.

Currently, about

40 of them have been equipped with smart gadgets.

The DSAT mentioned that after switching to smart traffic lights, which optimally distribute crossing period for vehicles and pedestrians, vehicular movements in the city's center have become about 25% smoother.

Also, there are 60 road projects proposed by government departments and public utilities in Macau this year.

The DSAT stated that it will continue to inspect the temporary traffic measures of the projects and issue more than 190 advisories to cases where temporary traffic measures are insufficient, mainly involving temporary traffic. Signs and equipment are improperly placed, insufficient or damaged.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER



TOURISM LEADERS HOPEFUL AHEAD OF 2024 AND NEW MEASURES

RENATO MARQUES

LOCAL tourism industry association leaders Andy Wu and Paul Wong are hopeful of 2024 being a good year for Macau's tourism sector, they said in interviews with

the local public broadcaster TDM Chinese channel.

Wong, who presides over the Macau Leisure Travel Services Innovation Association, said the government's recent measure of providing transportation to Macau via a di-

rect and free bus from Hong Kong International Airport would increase visitations by foreign visitors to the city. He also urged bus operators to increase the frequency of their services and proposed they extend their operating

hours, so as to more conveniently cater to international tourists.

Wong also noted that local tourism authorities should concurrently increase their advertising efforts. In so doing, he said, authorities would encourage foreign travel agencies to create better experiences, namely tours which better feature both Hong Kong and Macau.

Wu, who chairs the Travel Industry Council of Macau, focused his proposals on tours including Macau and Hengqin. He also encouraged Macau residents to visit Hengqin more frequently.

Wu said that the first multi-destination tour including Macau and Hengqin should commence after Lunar New Year, remarking that more work should be done to facilitate both eased border crossing procedures and visits to Hengqin.

He noted a previously incentivized tour program to Hengqin had attracted no more than 30 tourists, disappointing organizers' expectations.

Wu suggested the government reduce application conditions for the "Macao-Hengqin Travel Stimulation Program."

GBA

12,000 RESIDENTS LIVE AND WORK IN HENGQIN

STAFF REPORTER

ABOUT 12,000 Macau residents live and work in Hengqin, of which 266 are students, according to the Administrative Affairs Bureau of the Cooperation Zone.

2024 is the year of a "big test" for the effectiveness of the first phase of construction of Hengqin's general plan for building the Guangdong-Macao in-depth Cooperation Zone, the office said in a statement.

In 2024, the cooperation zone begins with the construction of a primary school in the financial area and a kindergarten in the international residential zone.


Meanwhile, over 1,000 residents have purchased an apart-

ment in the Macau New Neighborhood (MNN) residential estate in Hengqin, according to the Macau Urban Renewal Limited.

Earlier this week, the MNN held a ceremony to commemorate the first batch of MNN homeowners to use one-stop services, including online real-estate registration, tax payment, real-estate ownership certificate processing and notarization entrustment.

For the first batch of MNN homeowners, the complete home purchasing process only lasted approximately six weeks, beginning with their submission of applications to obtain real-estate ownership certificates.

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STATS

CITY SEES 1,000 MICE EVENTS IN 2023

STAFF REPORTER

THE Macau SAR saw some 1,000 conventions and exhibitions in 2023, achieving the city's set target.

According to data from the Macao Trade and Investment Promotion Institute's (IPIM) "One-stop Service" for MICE Bidding and

Support, there were 44 projects throughout the year. These projects focused on four major industries, representing approximately 30% year-on-year growth.

Meanwhile, according to data from the Statistics and Census Service, during the third quarter of 2023 the average expenditure per exhibition visitor was

MOP5,072. This expenditure is 1.14 times higher than the average expenditure of a general tourist to Macau.

The high-spending power of exhibition participants visiting the city can stimulate the development of related industries, such as hotels, restaurants, retailers and logistics, to the benefit of various enterprises, including small- and medium-sized businesses.

In 2023, IPIM also enabled nearly 6,000 exhibition visitors to explore and purchase throughout Macau, driving local community economies.

The number of MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions) events is projected to increase by 50% year-on-year, up to 1,500 in 2024, as efforts to return to pre-pandemic levels intensify.

IPIM has previously noted that the industry has experienced growing demand for venue hire and other site-specific services in 2023.

This comes as the sector has faced a severe downturn for the past three years during the onset of the pandemic, due to a halt in activities and border closures.

ON THE MONEY

Why 'bleisure' travel gives short-term rentals like Airbnb a boost over hotels

SAM KEMMIS,
MDT/NERDWALLET

REMOTE and hybrid work has affected many industries, from commercial real estate to downtown restaurants. And it has impacted how many workers, unfettered by office attendance requirements, plan their travels.

Some call it "bleisure travel," "laptop lugging," "workations" or simply "blended travel." The gist is the same: Remote and hybrid employees extend work trips to include leisure activities or work during their leisure trips.

Whatever it's called, it could upend the traditional divide between leisure and business travel.

The travel lodging industry is already seeing the trend's impact. Because bleisure travelers' needs differ from those of traditional vacationers or work trippers, existing lodging options — particularly hotels — can fall short. This has created an opportunity and appears to be fueling a boom among short-term vacation rentals such as Airbnb.

Quarterly demand growth for short-term rentals has outpaced that for hotels since the first quarter of 2022, when travel began to fully rebound from the pandemic, according to a 2023 report from AirDNA and STR/CoStar, hospitality industry analytic services. This shift reflects changing traveler preferences and the ability of short-term rental hosts to react swiftly to these changes.

"We saw more and more people looking to convert their homes



to short-term rentals," says Jamie Lane, chief economist at AirDNA. "So supply could be added in an instant. It takes 10 minutes to create a listing, while building a hotel can take years."

Indeed, the year-over-year growth in supply of short-term rentals has exceeded 15% in every quarter from the first quarter of 2022 through the second quarter of 2023, compared with below 5% growth for hotels, according to the report.

More short-term rentals are available and more travelers are choosing them. How does "bleisure" travel factor in?

A NEW KIND OF TRAVEL — AND TRAVELER

Vacations used to be something that employees squeezed between long periods of work.

That's no longer the paradigm for many office workers with more flexible schedules.

Far from being a pandemic-only trend, the popularity of bleisure travel is increasing. For instance, more than a third of workers plan to do some work on holiday season trips this year (up from 26% during the 2022 holiday season), according to a fall 2023 survey by consulting firm Deloitte.

Importantly, remote employees who planned to work during their holiday trips expected to extend their trips by nine days due to increased schedule flexibility. That is, bleisure travelers are taking much longer trips than they would have if they had to rush back to the office.

This has profound implications for the lodging industry.

"Half of nights booked are now

over a week," Lane says, referring to short-term rental booking data. "And when people are looking to stay longer, there's a higher propensity for them to book a short-term rental."

Many short-term rentals offer discounts for extended stays, which is attractive for bleisure travelers. And they provide home-like conditions that make them more comfortable for longer stays.

"They want those amenities — a kitchen, workspace, etc.," explains Lane.

WE CAN ALWAYS (NOT) GO DOWNTOWN

Combining work and play has shifted what amenities travelers seek, and where they're traveling. While business travel and business hotels are traditionally centered in dense urban cores, bleisure

travelers appear to be looking elsewhere.

"The vast majority of hotel supply is in large cities and along the interstate," says Lane. "The vast majority of short-term rental supply is in the mountains and beaches."

Indeed, small city and rural destinations saw the largest supply uptick in the first part of 2023, followed by suburban areas, according to the AirDNA and STR/CoStar report.

This has led to another change in lodging preferences.

"We're not seeing a recovery on shared rooms or studios, they're still below 2019 demand," says Lane. "We're seeing all that demand growth in larger homes."

Travelers combining work and play are looking for larger accommodations out of major cities that they can rent for longer. All of these changes favor short-term rentals over traditional hotels.

According to Lane, these dynamics are unlikely to shift in the near future as economic headwinds stunt new hotel development, leaving room for the number of homeowners who list their properties on Airbnb to meet demand and fill the supply gaps.

The bleisure travel trend, and its industry-shaking implications, could just be getting started.

METHODOLOGY

Deloitte's 2023 holiday travel survey was conducted between Sept. 12 and Sept. 25, 2023. A representative sample of 5,281 Americans took the survey and of those, 2,531 respondents.

CORPORATE BITS

MGM to pay one-month bonus to team members by CNY



Gaming operator MGM has announced that a discretionary bonus, equivalent to one month's salary, will be

paid to eligible team members. The bonus is scheduled to be paid sometime near to Chinese New Year

in 2024. Over 95% of team members can be rewarded, according to a statement issued yesterday. MGM also celebrated its 16th anniversary at its Grande Praça, in appreciation of "the dedication and commitment of the Golden Lion team."

Pansy Ho, chairperson and executive director of MGM China said, "MGM will continue to leverage our strength to create further greatness. We will organize and participate in more iconic events and activities, and our properties will undergo full-scale upgrades, providing the team with a more splendid stage upon which they may shine."

Sands China named in Sustainability Indices



The Dow Jones Sustainability Indices (DJSI) have listed Sands China Ltd. in both their World and Asia Pacific rankings, marking Sands

China's second consecutive year on the former and its third on the latter.

Sands China is one of only two integrated resort ope-

rators named in DJSI World for 2023, alongside parent company Las Vegas Sands Corp. (LVS). It is also the only integrated resort operator listed in DJSI Asia Pacific.

"Sands China is very pleased to be recognised in the Dow Jones Sustainability Indices again in 2023," said Wilfred Wong, president of Sands China Ltd.

"Our company made significant strides in the latest reporting period, achieving measurable advancements in categories such as biodiversity, food loss and waste, talent attraction and retention, occupational health and safety and human capital development."

HONG KONG

Prosecutors allege publisher Jimmy Lai urged protests, sanctions against China

ZEN SOO, HONG KONG

PROSECUTORS yesterday alleged that Hong Kong activist and publisher Jimmy Lai had encouraged the city's residents to protest and urged the U.S. to take action against the Chinese authorities in Beijing.

The 76-year-old media tycoon, who founded the now-defunct Apple Daily newspaper, was arrested in 2020 during a crackdown on massive pro-democracy protests that rocked Hong Kong in 2019. The authorities responded by imposing a national security law aimed at stamping down opposition and restore civil order. Lai has been in jail for over three years.

Lai's national security trial is being closely watched by foreign governments, business professionals and legal scholars. Many view it as a trial of the city's freedoms and a test for judicial independence in the Asian financial hub.

Lai has pleaded not guilty to two charges of conspiring to collude with foreign countries and another count of conspiring to publish seditious material. He smiled at family members as he entered the court yesterday and put his hands together to show appreciation to supporters in the public gallery. One supporter shouted "Hang in there!" and was



Police officers patrol outside the West Kowloon Magistrates' Courts, where activist publisher Jimmy Lai's trial takes place, in Hong Kong

hushed by guards.

Prosecutor Anthony Chau on the fifth day of the trial presented what he said were Lai's instructions to senior management and editors at Apple Daily to come up with ways to urge the Hong Kong public to protest a proposed extradition bill in 2019.

The bill, which was later withdrawn following protests, could have allowed suspects to be extradited from Hong Kong to mainland China, where courts are

accused of handing down convictions "based on political considerations and using coerced confessions."

Prosecutors submitted 31 pieces of allegedly seditious content published on Apple Daily, including articles and commentaries as well as pages urging people to protest. Some of the material even advocated for violence in the protests, the prosecution argued.

In his commentaries, Lai alleged that the Chinese Communist

Party sought to control Hong Kong via "electronic means and totalitarian machines," Chau said. Lai had allegedly also given instructions to Apple Daily to introduce English content for the purpose of asking foreign countries to engage in sanctions against China and Hong Kong, the prosecution said.

WhatsApp messages purportedly showing that Lai had instructed editors to only concentrate on the "yellow" viewpoint — the

color of the pro-democracy camp and the "voice that the world wants to know" — were also shown to the court.

Garnering support from political leaders such as former U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo as well as Sen. Marco Rubio via subscription to the English service would be a "protection" for Apple Daily, Lai had allegedly said in his messages.

Hong Kong is a former British-ruled territory that returned to China's administration in 1997 under a promise the city would retain its Western-style civil liberties for 50 years. That promise has become increasingly threadbare since the introduction of the security law, which has led to the arrests and silencing of many leading pro-democracy activists, according to media reports.

The governments of both Hong Kong and China have hailed the law for bringing back stability to the city.

Hong Kong, once seen as a bastion of media freedom in Asia, ranked 140th out of 180 countries and territories in Reporters Without Borders' latest World Press Freedom Index. The group said the city had seen an "unprecedented setback" since 2020, when the security law was imposed. **MDT/AP**

DIRE STRAIT

Taiwan reports China allegedly sent four spy balloons over the island, some near key air force base

TAIWAN'S Defense Ministry said that China sent four balloons over the island, three of which passed near to a key air force base.

The reported incursions on Tuesday come as China has been upping its threat to use force to annex the self-governing region.

Taiwan is holding elections for its leader and legislature on Jan. 13, and China has used its military, diplomatic and economic power to influence voters to back candidates favoring unification between the sides, according to observers.

However, the pro-independence Democratic

Progressive Party is leading in most polls, reaffirming the electorate's backing for maintaining the status quo.

China regularly sends navy ships and warplanes to waters and airspace close to Taiwan, and its use of balloons to collect intelligence could be a new stage in its campaign of intimidation against the island.

Taiwan's Defense Ministry said three of the balloons passed from east to west, close to the Ching-Chuan-Kang air base, home to much of the Taiwanese air wings dedicated to defending the island against China's military threat. The fourth passed north of the

port of Keelung, which services Taiwan's crucial trade relations with Japan, a treaty partner with the U.S.

A Chinese balloon shot down by the U.S. after transferring North America last February was equipped to detect and collect intelligence signals as part of a huge, military-linked aerial surveillance program that targeted more than 40 countries, the Biden administration said, citing imagery from American U-2 spy planes.

A fleet of balloons operates under the direction of the People's Liberation Army, the military wing of China's ruling Communist



Party, and "is used specifically for spying, outfitted with high-tech equipment

designed to gather sensitive information from targets across the globe," the U.S.

said. Similar balloons have sailed over five continents, it said. **MDT/AP**

BANGLADESH

Sheikh Hasina once fought for democracy; her critics say she now threatens it

KRUTIKA PATHI &
JULHAS ALAM, DHAKA

BANGLADESH'S Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is facing a general election Sunday, a vote she is all but certain to win. Critics say it could further tighten her grip on power after a 15-year-rule that turned a politician who once fought for democratic freedoms into an increasingly autocratic leader.

Hasina's main rival, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, is boycotting the polls, claiming her government cannot ensure a fair vote, and making it increasingly likely the 76-year-old premier will secure her fourth consecutive and fifth overall term in office.

Her supporters say Hasina — the longest-serving leader in Bangladesh's history — and her Awami League have given them a country with a growing industry and humming development projects. The stability has staved off military coups that have shaken the young, predominantly Muslim nation strategically located between India and Myanmar.

But Hasina's political life, like her country, began with violence. On Aug. 15, 1975, a group of military officers behind a coup assassinated her father, Sheikh Mujib Rahman, the first leader of independent Bangladesh.

Some say the brutal act, which also killed nearly her entire family, pushed her to consolidate unprecedented power and motivated her throughout her career in politics.

"Hasina has one very powerful quality as a politician — and that is to weaponize trauma," said Avinash Paliwal, a senior lecturer specializing in South Asian strategic affairs at SOAS University of London.

A source who worked closely with Hasina says her ambition was to create the country envisioned by her father, who led the new nation after its forces, aided by India, defeated Pakistan in 1971.

"She felt her father's work was cut short, and that only she could complete it," they told The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak with the media.

After the assassination, Hasina lived for years in exile in India, then made her way back to Bangladesh and took over the Awami League. But the country's military rulers had her in and out of house detention throughout the 1980s until, after general elections in

AP PHOTO



Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina greets the gathering during an interaction with journalists after official election results gave her a third straight term, in Dhaka, Dec. 31, 2018

"Hasina has one very powerful quality as a politician — and that is to weaponize trauma."

AVINASH PALIWAL
SOAS UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

metro and the country's longest bridge, which she inaugurated in 2021. She has cast herself as the leader of an impoverished nation aspiring to become an upper-middle-income country by 2031.

"Bangladesh will never look back again," Hasina said in 2023. "It will continue marching to be a smart, developed and prosperous country."

But the recent global economic slowdown has not spared Bangladesh, exposing cracks in its economy that have triggered labor unrest and dissatisfaction.

Mohammed Shohid, a driver in Dhaka, said the government has failed to stop price hikes of essential goods — beans and tomatoes have nearly doubled in price over the last two years. "We cannot afford them anymore," he said.

Hasina's critics say her government has used harsh tools to muzzle dissent, shrink press freedoms and curtail civil society. Rights groups cite forced disappearances of critics. The government rejects the accusations.

bankrolled a slew of Bangladesh's infrastructure projects.

She has nurtured historic ties with Russia, even as it presses on fighting in Ukraine while also increasingly courting Western leaders.

"Say what you will about Hasina, but she has managed the great power competition very effectively," said Michael Kugelman, director of the Wilson Center's South Asia Institute.

Hasina also won international praise when she gave shelter to Rohingya Muslims fleeing prosecution in neighboring Myanmar in 2017. Some 1.1 million Rohingya live in overcrowded refugee camps in Bangladesh today, many embarking on deadly sea voyages for a chance of a better life elsewhere.

The United States — the biggest export market for Bangladeshi garments — announced visa restrictions in May on anyone disrupting Bangladesh's electoral process. The announcement came after Washington expressed concerns over human rights violations and press freedoms in the country.

Some of the pressure she has been under became evident during a recent news conference.

"If you talk too much, I will shut down everything," she snapped, her salt-and-pepper hair covered by a traditional sari, her grey eyes fixed on the reporters. **MDT/AP**

USA

States and Congress wrestle with cybersecurity after Iran attacks small town water utilities

MARC LEVY,
HARRISBURG (PA.)

THE tiny Aliquippa water authority in western Pennsylvania was perhaps the least-suspecting victim of an international cyberattack.

It had never had outside help in protecting its systems from a cyberattack, either at its existing plant that dates to the 1930s or the new \$18.5 million one it is building.

Then it — along with several other water utilities — was struck by what federal authorities say are Iranian-backed hackers targeting a piece of equipment specifically because it was Israeli-made.

“If you told me to list 10 things that would go wrong with our water authority, this would not be on the list,” said Matthew Mottes, the chairman of the authority that handles water and wastewater for about 22,000 people in the woody exurbs around a one-time steel town outside Pittsburgh.

The hacking of the Municipal Water Authority of Aliquippa is prompting new warnings from U.S. security officials at a time when states and the federal government are wrestling with how to harden water utilities against cyberattacks.

The danger, officials say, is hackers gaining control of automated equipment to shut down pumps that supply drinking water or contaminate drinking water by reprogramming automated chemical treatments. Besides Iran, other potentially hostile geopolitical rivals, including China, are viewed by U.S. officials as a threat.

A number of states have sought to step up scrutiny, although water authority advocates say the money and the expertise are what is really lacking for a sector of more than 50,000 water utilities, most of which are local authorities that, like Aliquippa's, serve corners of the country where residents are of modest means and cybersecurity professionals are scarce.

Besides, utilities say, it's difficult to invest in cybersecurity when upkeep of pipes



This photo provided by the Municipal Water Authority of Aliquippa shows the screen of a Unitronics device that was hacked in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania

and other water infrastructure is already underfunded, and some cybersecurity measures have been pushed by private water companies, sparking pushback from public authorities that it is being used as a back door to privatization.

Efforts took on new urgency in 2021 when the federal government's leading cybersecurity agency reported five attacks on water authorities over two years, four of them ransomware and a fifth by a former employee.

At the Aliquippa authority, Iranian hackers shut down a remotely controlled device that monitors and regulates water pressure at a pumping station. Customers weren't affected because crews alerted by an alarm quickly switched to manual operation — but not every water authority has a built-in manual backup system.

With inaction in Congress, a handful of states passed legislation to step up scrutiny of cybersecurity, including New Jersey and Tennessee. Before 2021, Indiana and Missouri had passed similar laws. A 2021 California law commissioned state security agencies to develop outreach and funding plans to improve cybersecurity in the agriculture and water sectors.

Legislation died in several states, including Pennsylvania and Maryland, where public water authorities fought bills backed by private water companies to force them to upgrade various aspects of their infrastructure, including pipes

and cybersecurity measures.

Private water companies say the bills would force their public counterparts to abide by the stricter regulatory standards that private companies face from utility commissions and, as a result, boost public confidence in the safety of tap water.

“It's protecting the nation's tap water,” said Jennifer Kocher, a spokesperson for the National Association of Water Companies. “It is the most economical choice for most families, but it also has a lack of confidence from a lot of people who think they can drink it and every time there's one of these issues it undercuts the confidence in water and it undercuts people's willingness and trust in drinking it.”

Opponents said the legislation is designed to foist burdensome costs onto public authorities and encourage their boards and ratepayers to sell out to private companies that can persuade state utility commissions to raise rates to cover the costs.

“This is a privatization bill,” Justin Fiore of the Maryland Municipal League told Maryland lawmakers during a hearing last spring. “They're seeking to take public water companies, privatize them by expanding the burden, cutting out public funding.”

For many authorities, the demands of cybersecurity tend to fade into the background of more pressing needs for residents wary of rate increases: aging pipes and increasing costs to comply with clean wa-

ter regulations.

One critic, Pennsylvania state Sen. Katie Muth, a Democrat from suburban Philadelphia's Montgomery County, criticized a GOP-penned bill for lacking funding.

“People are drinking water that is below standards, but selling out to corporations who are going to raise rates on families across our state who cannot afford it is not a solution,” Muth told colleagues during floor debate on a 2022 bill.

Pennsylvania state Rep. Rob Matzie, a Democrat whose district includes the Aliquippa water authority, is working on legislation to create a funding stream to help water and electric utilities pay for cybersecurity upgrades after he looked for an existing funding source and found none.

“The Aliquippa water and sewer authority? They don't have the money,” Matzie said in an interview.

In March, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency proposed a new rule to require states to audit the cybersecurity of water systems.

It was short-lived.

Three states — Arkansas, Missouri and Iowa — sued, accusing the agency of overstepping its authority and a federal appeals court promptly suspended the rule. The EPA withdrew the rule in October, although a deputy national security adviser, Anne Neuberger, told The Associated Press that it could have “identified vulnerabilities that were targeted in recent weeks.” MDT/AP

this day in history

1951 COMMUNIST FORCES TO RE-TAKE SEOUL



Chinese and North Korean troops are reported to be close to capturing the South Korean capital of Seoul for the second time since the war began last year.

The authorities have ordered the evacuation of Seoul and thousands of people have started streaming south out of the city and across the Han river.

Over the past few weeks, many families have taken refuge in Seoul from the advancing enemy. Now they are being forced to move on again, mostly by foot, although some have been lucky enough to get a lift on a military vehicle.

The BBC's cameraman Cyril Page was in Seoul as the communist forces were reported to be less than 50 miles from the city.

His pictures show the only sign of normal life in the city was the trams, which were still running.

To the south, the steady stream of refugees made its way through freezing temperatures to the River Han flats. It was so cold the river had frozen over and people were able to walk across to the relative safety of the other side.

They have left behind them a city devastated and burning.

The United States Eighth Army is also pulling out, but reports of its movements have been banned by army censors.

Speaking at a Pentagon briefing, the US Secretary of Defense, General Marshall, said the advance of the enemy troops had been anticipated.

The odds against the United Nations forces were heavy - “almost incredible in some respects,” he said. The Communists forces outnumber UN troops by three or four to one and they are capable of covering difficult terrain on foot carrying heavy loads.

Lieutenant-General Matthew Ridgway, commander of the Eighth Army, has been reported in press dispatches as saying the flight of the Korean refugees is “perhaps the greatest tragedy to which Asia has been subjected in the course of its long history.”

Seoul first fell to the powerful North Korean and Chinese communist forces last June - days after the invasion began.

In September, a United Nations force led by US marines re-captured the city.

Courtesy BBC News

IN CONTEXT

After a series of offensives, UN forces succeeded in winning back control of Seoul in March 1951.

It was followed by a UN call for a ceasefire, the first since the war began.

Talks finally began in July 1951 but the negotiations at Kaesong broke down.

The war reached stalemate.

In July 1953 talks reopened. The Korean War ended with the signing of the armistice on 27 July 1953. Two million people had died during the war.

In August, prisoners of war were exchanged in Operation Big Switch - 77,000 communists for 12,700 UN men, of whom 3,597 were Americans.

North and South Korea were separated by a demarcation line which was extended by a 2km (1.5 miles) demilitarised zone on either side. A peace deal has never been signed.

MACAU'S LEADING NEWSPAPER

YOUR STARS



ARIES

Mar. 21-Apr. 19

Your lover will cost you dearly if you let them. Sudden romantic connections may be short lived. You should be in business for yourself.



TAURUS

Apr. 20-May. 20

You will be uncertain of your feelings. Don't divulge secret information. You can meet new friends who will let you know just how valuable you are.



GEMINI

May. 21-Jun. 21

Get the whole family involved in a worthwhile cause or cultural event. You may find that relationships are not going as well as you'd like.



CANCER

Jun. 22-Jul. 22

You may not have the same ideas when it comes to what you both enjoy. Don't be too eager to dismiss someone who works under you.



LEO

Jul. 23-Aug. 22

You will be emotional about family matters. Do not borrow or lend money or belongings to friends or relatives if you wish to avoid any hassles.



VIRGO

Aug. 23-Sep. 22

Concentrate on work or make changes to yourself. You need to do your own thing and work on making yourself the best you can be.



LIBRA

Sep. 23-Oct. 22

Sudden changes regarding work and colleagues are apparent. You will meet exciting new people through interest groups or functions that you attend with your children.



SCORPIO

Oct. 23-Nov. 21

Don't spend too much on products that promise amazing cosmetic results. Digestive disorders will be a result of family squabbles. Self improvement projects should be your key concern.



SAGITTARIUS

Nov. 22-Dec. 21

Communications with loved ones may be strained. Your social activity should be conducive to finding love. Moneymaking opportunities will surface.



CAPRICORN

Dec. 22-Jan. 19

Do not let others exhaust you financially. You can make professional changes and direct your energy into making all the right moves.



AQUARIUS

Jan. 20-Feb. 18

Family outings should include visiting friends or relatives. You can utilize your versatile mind and dazzle others with your speed and accuracy.

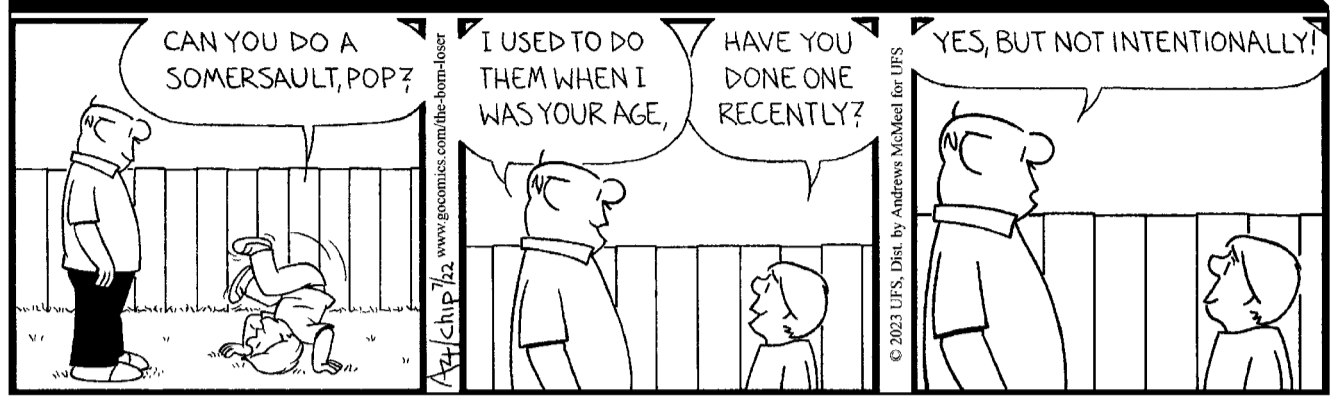


PISCES

Feb. 19-Mar. 20

Look into alternatives that would better suit both your needs. If you haven't already, don't be afraid to start your own small business on the side.

The Born Loser by Chip Sanson



SUDOKU

EASY

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

EASY+

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

MEDIUM

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| | 7 | 8 | 9 | | |
| | | | 4 | | 7 |
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| 4 | | | | 5 | 3 |
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HARD

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| 7 | 5 | 3 | | | |
| | | 4 | | | 9 |
| 2 | | | | | 5 |

WEATHER

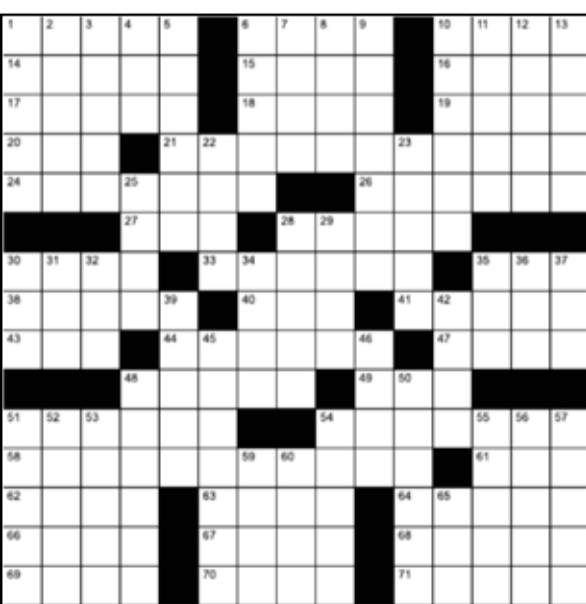
| | MIN | MAX | CONDITION |
|--------------|-----|-----|-----------|
| CHINA | | | |
| Beijing | -7 | 7 | fine |
| Changchun | -11 | 2 | fine |
| Chengdu | 3 | 12 | overcast |
| Chongqing | 9 | 15 | cloudy |
| Fuzhou | 7 | 16 | fine |
| Guangzhou | 10 | 22 | cloudy |
| Guiyang | 5 | 13 | cloudy |
| Haikou | 17 | 23 | cloudy |
| Hangzhou | 0 | 13 | fine |
| Harbin | -13 | -3 | cloudy |
| Hefei | -2 | 12 | fine |
| Nanjing | -1 | 11 | fine |
| Shanghai | 2 | 10 | cloudy |
| Taipei | 12 | 18 | cloudy |
| Wuhan | -1 | 14 | fine |
| Hong Kong | 18 | 19 | overcast |
| WORLD | | | |
| Moscow | -24 | -24 | cloudy |
| Frankfurt | 7 | 10 | rain |
| Paris | 7 | 11 | rain |
| London | 4 | 9 | overcast |
| New York | -3 | 7 | fine |

CROSSWORDS

ACROSS 1- Chilled soup; 6- Graceful horse; 10- ___ take arms against...; 14- Butler's love; 15- Pineapple vendor; 16- Novi Sad native; 17- Nostrils; 18- Bibliography abbr.; 19- Ballet bend; 20- Apr. addressee; 21- Dominance; 24- Crosswise; 26- Establishes; 27- The Greatest; 28- Place for "stompin'"; 30- Corp. VIP, briefly; 33- Make queasy; 35- Cunning; 38- Attach, as a patch; 40- Luau chow; 41- Western; 43- Dallas-to-Houston dir.; 44- Quantity; 47- Turns red, say; 48- Browed sliced bread; 49- Like 1 and 3, e.g.; 51- Public meetings; 54- Like a tacit question; 58- Consolidation; 61- Heston's org.; 62- Mailed; 63- Traditional prayer ending; 64- Lucid; 66- Effortlessness; 67- Balance; 68- Discharge; 69- Dog-powered snow vehicle; 70- Hammett hound; 71- Strikes out;

DOWN 1- Actress Braga; 2- Graph; 3- Severe; 4- Just the Way You ___; 5- Feudal tenant; 6- Masterful; 7- Routine; 8- Banned apple spray; 9- Hold as an opinion; 10- Feathered fisher; 11- Museum piece; 12- Country singer Travis; 13- Follows orders; 22- "Trinity" author; 23- Home of the Black Bears; 25- Baylor's city; 28- Reconnoiter; 29- Related by blood; 30- Double curve; 31- Crosses (out); 32- Lamb's mom; 34- Wall St. debuts; 35- Eye infection, pig house; 36- Bruce ___ was a famous kung-fu movie star; 37- Decade divs.; 39- Model Campbell; 42- Totals; 45- Eyelash cosmetic; 46- ___ avail; 48- ___ titmouse; 50- Moved rhythmically; 51- Melts together; 52- Actor Ryan; 53- Wash cycle; 54- Utah's ___ Mountains; 55- Use a prie-dieu; 56- Rub out or remove from memory; 57- Bar game; 59- Iowa city; 60- Student's hurdle; 65- Bigger than med.;

Yesterday's solution



Crossword puzzles provided by BestCrosswords.com

USEFUL TELEPHONE NUMBERS

- Emergency calls 999
- Fire department 28 572 222
- PJ (Open line) 993
- PJ (Picket) 28 557 775
- PSP 28 573 333
- Customs 28 559 944
- S. J. Hospital 28 313 731
- Kiang Wu Hospital 28 371 333
- Commission Against Corruption (CCAC) 28326 300
- IAM 28 387 333
- Tourism 28 333 000
- Airport 59 888 88
- Taxi 28 939 939 / 2828 3283
- Water Supply - Report 2822 0088
- Telephone - Report 1000
- Electricity - Report 28 339 922
- Macau Daily Times 28 716 081



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Va Fat
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Tou Un
HKD 2,980,000 1 bed 1 bath

Hellene Garden
HKD 11,800/mth 3 bed 2 bath

AD

AP PHOTO



Participants walk around at the Burning Man festival on the Black Rock Desert of Gerlach, Nev., on Aug. 27, 2014

BURNING MAN

'CREATIVE CHAOS' SURVIVED A MUDDY QUAGMIRE. WILL THE EXPERIMENT LAST 30 MORE YEARS?

SCOTT SONNER, RENO (NEV.)

The blank canvas of desert wilderness in northern Nevada seemed the perfect place in 1992 for artistic anarchists to relocate their annual burning of a towering, anonymous effigy. It was goodbye to San Francisco's Baker Beach, hello to the Nevada playa, the long-ago floor of an inland sea.

The tiny gathering became Burning Man's surrealistic circus, fueled by acts of kindness and avant-garde theatrics, sometimes with a dose of hallucinogens or nudity. The spectacle flourished as the festival ballooned over the next three decades.

Some say it grew too much, too fast.

Things came to a head in 2011 when tickets sold out for the first time. Organizers responded with a short-lived lottery system that left people out of what was supposed to be a radically inclusive event. As Burning Man matured, luxurious accommodations proliferated, as did the population of billionaires and celebrities.

Katherine Chen, a sociology professor in New York City who wrote a 2009 book about the event's "creative chaos," was among those who wondered whether Burning Man "would be

a victim of its own success."

Exponential growth led to increasing questions about whether organizers had veered too far from the core principles of radical inclusion, expression, participation and the pledge to "leave no trace."

That last hurdle was never harder to clear than this year as "Burners" tried to leave over Labor Day weekend after torching the 80-foot wooden sculpture that is "the Man."

A rare rainstorm turned the Black Rock Desert into a muddy quagmire 110 miles north of Reno, delaying the departure of 80,000 revelers. Once out, organizers had six weeks to clean up under terms of a federal permit.

By the smallest of margins, they passed the test last month, with a few adjustments recommended for the future. The verdict from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management means Burning Man is in line to use federal land again next year.

Debate over the event's future, however, is sure to continue as divisions grow between the aging hippie types and wealthier, more technologically inclined newcomers. Veteran participants fear the newer set is losing touch with Burning Man's roots.

The event has made a quan-

tum leap from a gathering of hundreds to one that temporarily becomes Nevada's third largest city after metropolitan Las Vegas and Reno. The festival drew 4,000 in 1995 and topped 50,000 in 2010.

It's no wonder seasoned Burners sound a bit like griping cribbage players on a rural town square when they mutter: "It ain't like it used to be."

"Back then, it was much more raw," said Mike "Festie" Malecki, 63, a retired Chicago mortician turned California sculptor who made his 13th trip this year to the land of colorful theme camps, towering sculptures, drum circles and art cars.

"There are more (people) who come out to party and don't participate. We call them spectators," he said.

Senior organizers long have wrestled with whether to become more civilized or remain what co-founder Larry Harvey described as a "repudiation of order and authority."

Ron Halbert, a 71-year-old from San Francisco, has worked support for Burning Man's 90-piece orchestra for 20 years and remains optimistic.

"It's still the gathering of the tribe," he said.

The event is permitted tentatively for the same 80,000 atten-

dance cap next year. Organizers are considering some minor changes, though generally resist making new rules, said Marian Goodell, Burning Man Project's chief executive officer.

Critics on social media howled at the mayhem left behind this year, posting photos of garbage piles, abandoned vehicles and overflowing portable toilets while ridiculing the "hippies" and their leave-no-trace mantra.

But that mayhem may have actually helped bring Burning Man back to its roots.

Katrina Cook of Toronto said it forced people to be true to the founding principles of participation and radical self-reliance.

"The rain weeded out the people who didn't want to be there for the right reason," Cook said.

Mark Fromson, 54, was staying in an RV, but the rains forced him to find shelter at another camp where fellow burners provided food and cover. Another principle of Burning Man, he said, centers on unconditional gift giving with no expectation of something in return.

After sunset, Fromson set off barefoot through the muck for a long trek back to his vehicle, slogging through thick clay that clung to his feet and legs. The challenge, he said, was the mark

of a "good burn."

Nevertheless, Jeffery Longoria of San Francisco, who marked his fifth consecutive voyage to Burning Man last summer, said its core principles are going to evolve no matter what as a new generation takes over.

"The people that created this community, a lot of them are getting older and retiring and there's a lot of new young people coming in, the kind that have, you know, a couple \$100,000 RVs and are kind of just careless about the environment."

Soren Michael, a Los Angeles technology worker who made his 11th trip this year, said the biggest change has been the ability to communicate with the outside world from the desert.

"It was almost part of the appeal to be disconnected," he said.

Twenty years ago, the psychedelic celebration like none other already was attracting academic scholars — anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists and communications professors — curious about how the makeshift civilization functioned without real-world rules.

Burning Man references started popping up in TV episodes and talk show punchlines. The rich and famous began venturing to Black Rock City, as the festival's temporary metropolis is called.

A full-blown exhibit about the phenomenon debuted in 2018 at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington. Even then, veteran Burners complained about the event becoming as much a curiosity to see as to do.

That's in part the problem veterans have with the advent of glam camping, or glamping, in which private companies provide packaged trips to concierge camps with luxury RVs and lavish meals under chandeliers. Some believe the camps violate Burning Man principles.

The growing number of billionaires and celebrities who fly in on private jets to Black Rock City's temporary airstrip "seems to be everyone's favorite thing to hate," Goodell said. But wealth shouldn't be a cause for shame, she said.

"The question is not about glamping," she said. "Comfort doesn't assume lack of engagement. It's whether you have a glamping camp and you're not really engaging."

Burning Man's purpose remains the same: building a creative, stimulating environment, the essence of which people can take back to their own communities.

"We thought that from the beginning," Goodell said. "We just didn't know it would be 80,000 people."

This year, the festival takes place, as usual, at Nevada's Black Rock Desert from August 25 through September 02. **MDT/AP**

TENNIS | UNITED CUP

Poland advances to semis with win over China, France progress to quarterfinals

POLAND became the first team through to the United Cup semifinals with a dominant 3-0 win over China in Perth yesterday after France completed a sweep of Italy in Sydney to progress to the quarterfinals.

Top-ranked Iga Swiatek beat No. 14 Zheng Qinwen 6-2, 6-3 in the women's singles to give Poland an unassailable 2-0 lead after Hubert Hurkacz's 6-3, 6-4 win over Zhang Zhizhen in the men's singles.

Polish pair Katarzyna Piter and Jan Zieliski finished the sweep with a 6-3, 5-7, 10-7 win over You Xiaodi and Sun Fajing in the mixed doubles.

The Poland team will travel across Australia for Saturday's semifinals in Sydney, where they will play the winner of the France vs. Norway quarterfinal.

"I really wanted to go to Sydney especially because my coach (Tomasz Wiktorowski) told me that I can get three days



Iga Swiatek, of Poland, tosses the ball for a serve to Zheng Qinwen, of China, during the UC tennis tournament in Perth, yesterday

off in Sydney afterwards," the 22-year-old Swiatek said. "So for sure Bondi Beach is waiting for us.

"But for now we've got to focus on the semifinal and hopefully the final. I'm really happy with my game and how the at-

mosphere in the team is."

Earlier yesterday in Sydney, Caroline Garcia and Adrian Mannarino led France past Italy.

Mannarino beat Lorenzo Sonego in straight sets before Garcia beat Jasmine Paolini 6-4, 5-7, 6-4 in the women's singles to

give France a 2-0 lead and confirm top spot in Group D.

"We have gone a step further than last year," Garcia said. "Obviously we're very happy with it and we want to keep going."

French pair Elixane Lechemia and Édouard Roger-Vasselin

completed the sweep with a straight sets win in the mixed doubles.

In the final group stage match in Sydney Greece played Canada to conclude Group B.

No. 6 Stefanos Tsitsipas returned after missing Greece's opener against Chile and defeated Canada's Steven Diez 6-2, 6-3 in 77 minutes to give the Greek team an early lead.

Maria Sakkari was playing former U.S. Open finalist Leylah Fernandez next.

Greece must beat Canada to have any chance of advancing to the quarterfinals. A win for Canada will see it advance as group winner.

Serbia — led by top-ranked Novak Djokovic — faced Australia in the night session in Perth.

Djokovic has been bothered by a wrist injury during the tournament but found a way past Jiri Lehecka in Serbia's last Group E match against the Czech Republic. **MDT/AP**

AD

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OPINION

Multipolar World

Jorge Costa Oliveira



ATTACKS ON NAVIGATION IN THE RED SEA, MORE INFLATION IN EUROPE

In recent weeks, invoking solidarity with the Palestinians of Gaza, the Yemeni Houthi Ansarallah movement has attacked cargo ships “linked to Israel” off the coast of Yemen. These attacks have created enormous uncertainty about maritime trade in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, especially in the Bab al-Mandab Strait area, through which 40% of Asia’s maritime cargo with Europe passes.

The world’s major shipping companies have announced that as long as this situation of insecurity and uncertainty persists, they will suspend the use of the Red Sea route and use the circumnavigation route of Africa. The US (and some allied countries) announced the establishment of an international naval mission – Operation Prosperity Guardian – to protect the passage of ships and allow the resumption of commercial navigation in the area. However, the recent attack on the cargo ship Maersk Hangzhou is expected to maintain the suspension of all cargo ship transit through the Red Sea.

Taking Rotterdam as a destination example, the use of the route through the Cape of Good Hope translates to an increase of +3457 nautical miles and +9 days, with the inherent additional costs. The increase in war risk insurance premiums is also significant, depending on the type of ship, but especially for long-range tankers (LR), incurring tens of thousands of dollars of additional costs for a seven-day journey.

Analysts fear that a prolonged stalemate in the Red Sea could trigger price increases. The increase in crude oil benchmark indices will have a knock-on effect on gas, while shipping companies will respond to longer journey times and higher insurance costs by charging higher prices to their business clients for maritime freight, which will, in turn, be passed on to final consumers.

Futures markets will soon show us the extent of these additional costs and the most affected sectors (e.g., fuel, food products). While this new inflationary outbreak seems inevitable, its scale is uncertain, as is its progression. What seems clear is that in addition to the uncertainty generated by these events, the inflationary impulse will erode the disposable income of households and halt any inclination to reduce benchmark interest rates determined by central banks. It is also possible that geopolitical tensions in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden area may worsen and spread to the Persian Gulf.

On December 16, a spokesperson for Ansarallah said the group had been involved in negotiations mediated by Oman with unidentified “international parties” regarding their operations in the Red Sea. However, the inflexibility of the Israeli government regarding the war in Gaza has been exploited by Iran-controlled movements (such as Ansarallah) to radicalize their “defense of the Palestinians” position and tactically corner the Saudis and their allies in the region. No agreement is to be expected. In addition to the war in Ukraine, it is time for Europe and Europeans to realize that this war between Israel and Hamas affects them greatly.

INVESTIGATORS FOCUS ON AIR TRAFFIC COMMUNICATION AFTER A FATAL TOKYO RUNWAY CRASH

THE BUZZ

A transcript of communication between traffic control and two aircraft that collided and burst into flames at Tokyo’s Haneda Airport showed that only the larger Japan Airlines passenger flight was given permission to use the runway where a coast guard plane was preparing for takeoff.

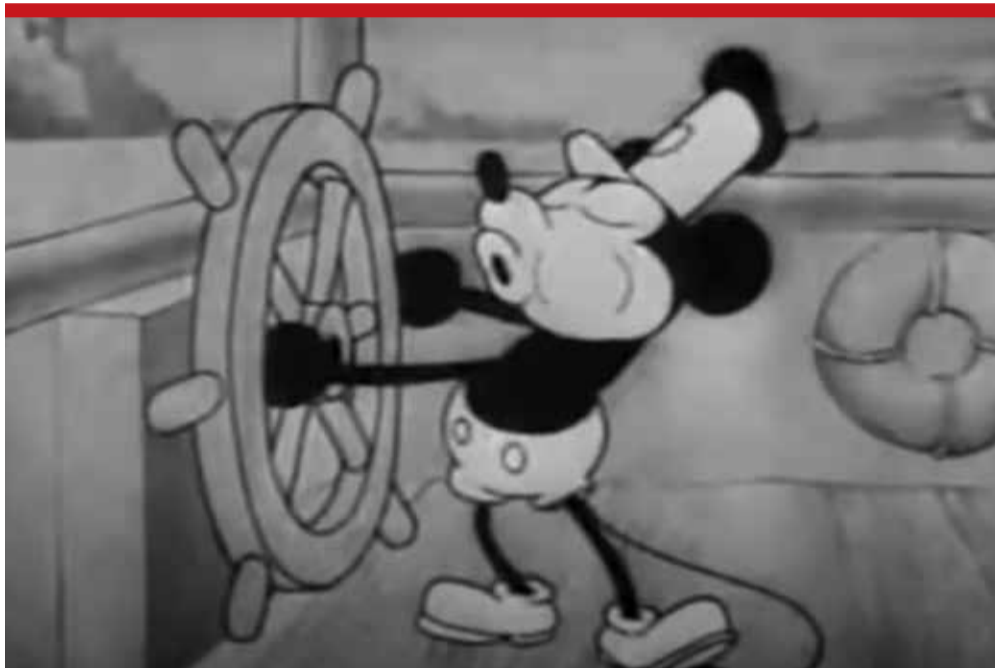
An orange fireball erupted from both aircraft on Tuesday evening as the JAL flight 516 continued down the runway covered in flames and spewing gray smoke. Within 20 minutes, all 379 passengers and crew members slid down emergency chutes and survived. The pilot of the coast guard plane — a Bombardier Dash-8 — evacuated with injuries but five crew members were killed.

The Transport Ministry yesterday released a transcript of air traffic control communication of about 4 minutes and 25 seconds just before the crash. It showed no clear takeoff approval was given to the coast guard plane. According to the text, the Tokyo air control gave the JAL Airbus A350 permission to land on Runway C, noting that there is a departing plane, with the JAL pilot repeating the instruction.

The coast guard plane said it was taxiing to the same runway, and the traffic control instructs it to proceed to the stop line ahead of the runway. The controller noted the coast guard gets the departure priority, and the pilot said he was moving to the stop line.

Their communication in the script ends there.

AP PHOTO



This still image from video provided by Disney shows the character Mickey Mouse in the 1928 animated short “Steamboat Willie”

IN PUBLIC DOMAIN, EARLY MICKEY MOUSE VERSION WILL STAR IN HORROR MOVIES

THE earliest iteration of Mickey Mouse is on a rampage, barely two days in the public domain.

Slashed free of Disney’s copyright as of this week, the iconic character from “Steamboat Willie” is already the focus of two horror films. On Monday, just hours after the 1928 short entered the public domain, a trailer for “Mickey’s Mouse Trap” dropped on YouTube. Another yet-to-be-titled film was announced yesterday [Macau time].

“Steamboat Willie” featured early versions of both Mickey and Minnie Mouse. Directed by Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks, it was the third cartoon featuring the duo they made but the first to be released. In it, a more menacing Mickey, bearing more resemblance to rat than mouse, captains a boat and makes musical instruments out of other animals.

It’s perhaps fitting, then, that the first projects announced are seemingly low-budget and campy slasher movies — and not unprecedented. Winnie the Pooh entered the public domain in 2022.

In the trailer for “Mickey’s Mouse Trap,” directed by Jamie Bailey, what appears to be a human in a comically small Mickey mask terrorizes a group of young people at an arcade.

“A place for fun. A place for friends. A place for hunting,” text flashed during the trailer reads. “The mouse is out.”

“We just wanted to have fun with it all. I mean it’s Steamboat Willie’s Mickey Mouse murdering people,” director Jamie Bailey said in a statement cited by trade publications. “It’s ridiculous. We ran with it and had fun doing it and I think it shows.”

No release date has been set.

The second movie is from director Steven LaMorte, who previously directed a horror parody of “The Grinch,” which is not in the public domain (the movie is thus called “The Mean One”).

“A late-night boat ride turns into a desperate fight for survival in New York City when a mischievous mouse becomes a monstrous reality,” is the logline for the untitled film, per a post on LaMor-

te’s Instagram.

“Steamboat Willie has brought joy to generations, but beneath that cheerful exterior lies a potential for pure, unhinged terror,” LaMorte said in a release cited by the trades. The movie has yet to begin production.

With the expiration of the 95-year copyright, the public is allowed to use only the initial versions of Mickey and Minnie — not the more familiar character designs.

“We will, of course, continue to protect our rights in the more modern versions of Mickey Mouse and other works that remain subject to copyright,” Disney said in a statement ahead of the characters entering the public domain.

LaMorte told Variety that the producers of his film are working with a legal team so as not to run afoul of Disney, and will call their raging rodent Steamboat Willie instead of Mickey Mouse.

“We are doing our due diligence to make sure there’s no question or confusion of what we’re up to,” he said. **MDT/AP**

AP PHOTO



Russia said yesterday it shot down 12 missiles fired at one of its southern regions bordering Ukraine, as Kyiv’s forces seek to embarrass the Kremlin and puncture President Vladimir Putin’s argument that life is going on as normal despite the 22-month war. The situation in the border city of Belgorod, which came under two rounds of shelling yesterday, “remains tense,” said regional Gov. Vyacheslav Gladkov.

AP PHOTO



UK Thousands of doctors walked off the job yesterday, the start of a six-day strike over pay that was set to be the longest in the history of the state-funded National Health Service. Managers said tens of thousands scheduled appointments and operations will be canceled during the walkout across England and Wales by junior doctors, those in the first years of their careers. Senior doctors and other medics have had to be drafted in to cover for emergency services, critical care and maternity services.

AP PHOTO



USA It’s small in stature, big on activity and known for a “smile,” and it’s ready to compete with 200 other dog breeds. Say hello to the Lancashire heeler, the latest breed recognized by the American Kennel Club. The organization announced yesterday that the rare herding breed is now eligible for thousands of U.S. dog shows, including the prominent Westminster Kennel Club show.