

2024 QUALITY SERVICE AWARDS WINNERS

NEW ZEALAND
Reader's
Digest



**SEARCHING
FOR SANTA**
Where Is His
Real Home?

PAGE 72

**ADDING UP
TO HAPPINESS**
The Maths Of Joy

PAGE 44

**13 ILLUMINATING
FACTS About**
Fireworks

PAGE 54

Locked In The
LION'S JAWS

PAGE 36

DEC 23/JAN 24 \$6.50



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CONTENTS

72

44

DECEMBER 1979

Adding Up To Happiness

How to subtract the bad and multiply the good.

FREDELLE MAYNARD

54

13 THINGS

Illuminating Facts About Fireworks

Behind the pyrotechnics that light our skies.

SAMANTHA RIDEOUT

60

MEDICAL DRAMA

The Family That Never Gave Up

The fight to save a baby born with half a heart.

ROBERT KIENER

72

TRAVEL

Searching For Santa Claus

Where does Santa really house his workshop?

KATHERINE LAGRAVE FROM AFAR

80

HUMOUR

Bitten By The Dance Bug

Moves to resist an insect invasion.

RICHARD GLOVER

Features

24

PERSPECTIVE

Tantrums To Tinsel

Every year, over-excited children and determined parents queue for their cheery Santa photo.

CHERINE FAHD FROM THE CONVERSATION

28

PSYCHOLOGY

The Upside Of Anxiety

Worrying has its benefits, alerting us to things that need to change.

PATRICIA PEARSON

36

SEPTEMBER 1977

Locked In The Lion's Jaws

As the massive lion latched onto his head and neck, the conservationist waited for the end.

ARNOLD SAPIRO

54



PHOTOS: (COVER) GETTY IMAGES; (ROVANIEMI) ANNA MARDO/GETTY IMAGES; ILLUSTRATION: (FIREWORKS) SERGE BLOCH

ON THE COVER: LOCKED IN THE LION'S JAWS – PAGE 36

CONTENTS

82

PHOTO FEATURE

Subterranean Treasures

Explore a stunning collection of caverns and sea caves.

DORIS KOCHANEK

88

INTROSPECTION

The Sound Of Silence

Not talking and only listening during a 1000-kilometre pilgrimage transforms a man's life.

D.G. MARSHALL FROM
TORONTO LIFE

102

HEALTH

How's Your Liver Feeling?

A build-up of fat in the liver affects function.

LISA BENDALL



114

110

QUIZ

What Would The World Be Without Paper?

Can you complete our quiz without a cheat sheet? KARIN SCHÄTZLE

114

TRAVEL

Heart & Seoul

South Korea fuses the ancient and modern.

DIANE GODLEY

120

BONUS READ

Her Gift To The Elephants

Injured and aged elephants find a safe home. DOUGLAS ANTHONY COOPER

Departments

THE DIGEST

18 Health

22 News From
The World Of
Medicine

REGULARS

4 Letters

5 Editor's Note

8 My Story

13 Smart Animals

50 See The World
Differently

58 Quotable Quotes

HUMOUR

34 Life's Like That

70 Laughter, The Best
Medicine

100 All In A Day's
Work

THE GENIUS SECTION

132 Puzzles

135 Trivia

136 Puzzle Answers

137 Word Power



QUALITY SERVICE AWARDS 2024

Discover Our Annual Survey Winners, *Page 139*

PHOTO: (KOREA) DIANE GODLEY

LETTERS

Reader's Comments And Opinions

Wonderful World

I enjoyed 'Vision Quest' (Oct/Nov '23) about the family who travelled the world before their kids lose their vision to a rare genetic condition.

I have a friend who has a daughter with autism and she did something similar before her condition worsened, as sadly it did. She travelled around Australia, New Zealand, Thailand and Singapore for 18 months when her daughter was eight.



Who can blame parents for wanting their children to see more of this wonderful world while they can fully appreciate it?

Good luck to this lovely family.

RIA HARDING

Staying Connected

I was intrigued by the article 'Let's Be Friends' (Aug/Sept '23). I grew up in Sri Lanka and at 75 migrated to Australia with my wife to follow our daughters. I am now 85 and still have contact with most of my friends back home, including a school classmate, thanks to electronic media. I have started several social

contacts in Australia, too. We meet up casually but not very often. I felt somewhat lonely after the death of my beloved wife three years ago, but life is not dull. Social contacts, reading and writing help keep loneliness at bay. Reading Reader's Digest and using social media are keeping me well 'connected'.

DAYARATNA WEERASEKARA ►

Let us know if you are moved – or provoked – by any item in the magazine, share your thoughts. See page 7 for how to join the discussion.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Leaving Worry Behind

THE END OF ONE YEAR and the start of another is the ideal opportunity to refocus our thoughts on what's great in our world, and as individuals aim to keep our mood buoyant and health strong. To this end, in 'Adding Up To Happiness' (page 44) we look at a wise and amusing formula that one woman used to manage the pressures of her social life, while in 'The Upside Of Anxiety' (page 28) we look at how anxiety can actually be beneficial, making us more motivated to achieve outcomes suited to our specific needs. We also delve into the largely silent yet common condition of fatty liver disease in 'How's Your Liver Feeling?' (page 102).

Also, this issue marks ten consecutive years of our annual Quality Service Awards. We are proud of our involvement in the awards, which for a decade has asked everyday people to tell us which companies deserve to be acknowledged for customer service excellence. We hope this guide helps build your confidence in the businesses whose service is above the rest.

Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year from everyone at Reader's Digest.

Louise

LOUISE WATERSON
Editor-in-Chief



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Kindness On Wheels

I was absolutely delighted to read 'The Paper Delivery Boy' (My Story, Aug/Sept '23). It was a very kind gesture of Abdul Kader to buy the young boy a bicycle. It took me back to 1976. We had sold our house and while waiting to move into the new one we stored some things under my in-laws' house.

Unfortunately, the bicycle which my parents bought my six-year-old son for Christmas was stolen. I wrote to our local newspaper about it. It was not instrumental in finding the thief, but a lovely man by the name of Frank Bartlett rang me. He said after reading the letter he felt compelled to buy my boy a bicycle. He bought the exact bike and I have never forgotten that man's kindness. **JUDITH HOOPER**

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ON THE KNIGHT SHIFT

We asked you to think up a funny caption for this photo.

On the way to growing an Iron Man.

FATIMA KHATUN

I'm not in the right headspace.

MERRAN TOONE

Boss in shining armour.

EUGENE YEO

Good knight everyone.

ANURUDDHA FERNANDO

Antique's roadshow.

PARVEZ RAHIM

Congratulations to this issue's winner, Merran Toone.



CAPTION CONTEST

Come up with the funniest caption for the above photo and you could win \$100. To enter, email editor@readersdigest.co.nz or see details on page 7.

NEW ZEALAND Reader's Digest

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Smart Animals Up To \$100

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MY STORY

A Teacher's *Dream*

A drive to succeed saw a village school compete with rivals from the city

BY *Sujeva Wijeratne*



When handball was introduced to Sri Lankan schools in 2010, I wanted to bring it to my school, St Anthony's, in the remote village of Wasalakotte in central Sri Lanka. This became a challenging task as the sports teacher was reluctant to initiate anything other than traditional sports, such as cricket, rugby and basketball.

I was not a sports teacher and I had never played handball before. In fact, I was an English language teacher before assuming my post as deputy principal. However, I was determined to start this game at any cost. Handball is a fascinating game which combines speed, strength, stamina, agility, technical precision,

skill and teamwork. As a new sport, I foresaw it as a golden opportunity for our school as we had never secured a place in traditional sports.

The boys were immediately interested and 40 students aged between 13 and 19 signed up to play. I had the support of their parents but I still couldn't convince the sports teacher to agree. Ultimately, I used my position as deputy principal to get the game going.

Heshan Pradeep, a St Anthony's old boy who graduated some nine years earlier, volunteered to coach the team. He was a member of the Air Force handball team and was happy to take on the role in his free time. He assigned exercises and drills to do in his absence.

Although handball is an indoor game, we trained outdoors as our school had limited facilities. Training started early in the morning before class and continued after school until it was dark. The boys loved the game and were enthusiastic about training.

“This handball craze will ruin your studies!” grumbled some of the teachers in an attempt to discourage the game. Whenever the boys were late for class after morning practice they were scolded or punished by their teachers, but I was able to keep them cheerful.

After three months of dedicated training we were able to send an under-19s boys’ team to compete with 50 other schools at the first three-day, all-island school handball tournament held in Colombo – the country’s most populous city. Initially, the School Handball Association rejected our application because we weren’t association members, but thankfully some members believed any school on the island should be welcomed.

Our boys played remarkably well and reached the semifinals. And that was when the real game started. Students, parents, teachers

and old boys from Colombo schools joined forces against us, saying they wouldn’t allow the cup to be taken out of Colombo.

Although my students did not belong to the Vedda community, a Sri Lankan indigenous group, the Colombo students from privileged schools considered it a disgrace to lose a match against boys from a rural village school who couldn’t even speak English (due to lack of staff and opportunities).

Some Colombo students wore leaves and danced and sang Vedda songs to insult and intimidate our boys. Even the referees favoured the Colombo schools, resulting in our team being deprived of the victory they deserved. Defeated, the boys fell to the ground, sad and disappointed. And Heshan and I were angry.

However other Colombo students were supportive, saying “Don’t cry, brothers. You’re the champions. You must come again next year and claim your victory.” If not for the kind words of these boys, our team may never have returned to Colombo for another tournament.

A few weeks after the defeat, Heshan and I met the national handball coach to discuss our treatment by the referees. He apologised and offered to send a Korean professional handball coach – who happened to be on the island at the time – to our school for

Sujeewa Wijeratne currently works as a Deputy Commissioner of Examinations at the Department of Examinations in Sri Lanka. He lives in Colombo with his wife and son.

two weeks training. Coach Vonho arrived as promised and turned our handball team from good to great in just two weeks. Vonho, like our boys, spoke little English but managed to get his message across.

The team's mothers showed their appreciation by preparing Vonho delicious traditional meals, such as chicken and vegetable curries, *kiribath* (rice cooked in coconut milk), hoppers with *lunumiris* (ground chilli, shallots, Maldive fish, black pepper and lime juice) and bread with *polsambol* (coconut relish). The boys' fathers showed their appreciation by providing Vonho with something to drink to accompany his meals. And Vonho fulfilled his duty to the letter - I have never seen a more enthusiastic, supportive and encouraging trainer.

The following year, nobody could stop our team from winning the all-island schools handball championship. Our team of 14 boys played so well that teachers from other schools advised their players to watch our matches. The team's moves were technically perfect.

Unexpectedly, media attention was drawn to the tournament. A member of the School Handball Association asked me to comment

in English about the tournament on the Colombo Sports Network television channel. I found this rather ironic that they chose a teacher of a so-called 'Vedda' school to provide commentary in English.

It is no exaggeration to say that the victory sent the whole village into carnival mode.

There was a *perahera* (procession) to welcome us home. A large banner was hung at the village junction. Fathers lit firecrackers while mothers made *kevum* (a deep-fried Sri Lankan sweet). The youth beat drums and children danced.

Celebrating their victory in such a fashion was most deserved. The players and their parents had dedicated much towards this win. Many families had sacrificed a lot - some parents had borrowed money to pay for the uniforms while others pawned precious belongings such as gold ornaments.

Heshan and I were immensely honoured to have shown the boys that dreams can be fulfilled. They were so thrilled they called Vonho in Korea to share their joy.

COACH VONHO TURNED OUR HANDBALL TEAM FROM GOOD TO GREAT IN JUST TWO WEEKS

Do you have a tale to tell? We'll pay cash for any original and unpublished story we print. See page 7 for details on how to contribute.

SMART ANIMALS

Animals can be heroes and seek out a hero



Louie The Brave

ANTHONY SMETANIN

One sunny afternoon as I sat on my back porch, I noticed my loyal golden retriever Louie playing in the yard. Suddenly, barking frantically, he bolted towards the chicken coop.

Curious, I walked over to see what was going on. As I approached I saw a small snake slithering along the ground. Louie was barking and chasing the snake around the coop, determined to protect his feathered friends. I watched in amazement as Louie zigzagged around the yard, knocking over flowerpots and garden gnomes in his pursuit. The snake, startled by Louie's sudden

appearance, slithered away as fast as it could. But Louie wasn't about to let it get away. He continued his chase, determined to drive the snake out of the yard.

The chase went on for what felt like ages, with Louie and the snake darting around the yard. Finally, Louie managed to corner the snake near the garden shed. With a triumphant bark, he lunged forward to grab the snake in his jaws – but missed and ended up tumbling into

You could earn cash by telling us about the antics of unique pets or wildlife. Turn to page 7 for details on how to contribute.

READER'S DIGEST

a pile of leaves. The snake, sensing its chance, slipped away into the underbrush. Louie emerged from the leaves, looking a bit dazed but still determined to protect the chickens. He settled down next to the coop, keeping a watchful eye on the area in case the snake came back. The chickens seemed to sense Louie's bravery, and they peered out at him through the wire mesh, clucking their thanks.

And that's how Louie became a hero in our yard.

Frogmouth's Rescue Flight

RHONDA DAVIES

In the summer of 2012, we had a wonderful experience with a pair of tawny frogmouths. My husband and I watched as they built a nest in a deciduous maple in our back garden, about 50 metres from our back door, and then tended the eggs and later the three hatchlings.

When the fledglings were close to leaving the nest, one of the parents visited us. It was around midday, which was strange for a nocturnal bird. It perched outside our kitchen window and made a lot of noise. The bird was distressed and actually peering in at me through the window. I looked outside and saw a 1.5-metre goanna climbing up the tree towards the nest. What to do? The goanna has a right to eat, but unfortunately for this monitor



lizard, it was not going to be the chicks in the nest if I had anything to do with it.

With a bit of gentle coaxing with a bamboo pole along the goanna's tail, it headed back down the tree and disappeared into the shrubbery. We also moved a branch that gave the goanna easy access to the nest.

Several nights later, we heard a commotion coming from the nest; the fledglings were on the edge of the nest, flapping their wings and working their way up to taking flight. One of the parents was calling to them from another tree across the yard. The next day, the nest was empty. The family was gone.

I will never forget how the tawny frogmouth sought our help.

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ILLUSTRATION: GETTY IMAGES

THE PATH TO BETTER HEARING, TODAY

A journey that began 120 years ago amid the royal fanfare of a queen's coronation continues to this day, with the quality of life of countless millions enriched along the way.



In 1902, Princess Alexandra of Denmark, who would very soon become Queen Consort of the United Kingdom alongside King Edward VII, found herself enraptured by a fascinating new device that was fast becoming the talk of Europe.

The young princess had been fitted with one of the world's first portable electric hearing aids, and it proved to be a life-changing success.

Back in Denmark, the impact of this event became a clarion call to one Hans Demant, a bicycle manufacturer and purveyor of sewing machines. His wife, Camilla, also suffered from severe hearing loss and so, after a determined journey to London, Hans returned with a precious electric "Acousticon". Witnessing Camilla's progress served as a source of inspiration for Hans

to extend his assistance to a broader community of individuals suffering with hearing loss, and so he initiated the import of hearing devices from America. In 1904, Hans Demant founded the company that would later become known as Oticon, a name now synonymous with cutting-edge hearing solutions, paving the way for the modern hearing aids we know today and bringing new-found joy to millions worldwide.

Hearing health

Hearing health is a such critical aspect of our overall well-being, yet it often goes overlooked until problems arise. In New Zealand, hearing issues affect a surprisingly large portion of the population, with a 2022 EHIMA report estimating as many as one in ten New Zealanders are living with hearing loss. Sadly, a lack of awareness can lead to irregular hearing check-ups, which in turn leads to delayed diagnosis and treatment.

A new world of sounds

A far cry from the bulky hearing aids of over a century ago that were hailed as a miracle in the press and transformed Queen Alexandra's life, the pinnacle of today's devices – such as Oticon Real™

hearing aids – continue to change the way we experience the world of sound.

With their advanced processing capabilities and state-of-the-art technology, Oticon Real can help get back the real sounds of life, precise and optimally balanced, whether it's the laughter of grandchildren, musical notes or simply the rustling of leaves in the wind.

One of the standout features of Oticon Real hearing aids is a unique technology called Deep Neural Network (DNN). This built-in intelligence has learned to recognise all types of sounds, their details, and how they should ideally sound. This means they can instantly adapt to changes, keeping you at your best wherever life takes you.

By analysing and adjusting to your environment, Oticon Real hearing aids ensure that they provide what you need to hear. They do this by reducing background noise, which can help enhance speech comprehension and allow you to engage effortlessly in conversations, even in noisy settings.

Connection is key

In today's digital age, connectivity is paramount, and Oticon Real hearing aids certainly rise to the challenge, offering seamless connectivity to compatible* smartphones and other Bluetooth-enabled devices. You can effortlessly stream phone calls, music and other audio directly to your hearing aids, vastly enhancing your listening experience.

Improved quality of life

Perhaps the most significant benefit of Oticon Real hearing aids is their positive impact on your quality of life. Improved



One of the standout features of Oticon Real hearing aids is a unique technology called Deep Neural Network (DNN)

hearing can lead to increased social engagement, better relationships and enhanced overall well-being. With the help of Oticon Real, you can participate more actively in social gatherings, engage in your favourite activities and feel more connected to the world around you.

Oticon Real hearing aids aren't just devices; they are a life-changing gift that allow you to reconnect with the sounds and people you love. No longer are they fit just for a queen; they are readily available to anyone with the need and the longing to be truly present for life's most cherished moments.

For more information and to find your nearest hearing clinic, visit oticon.co.nz

*For information on hearing aid and device compatibility, visit www.oticon.co.nz/compatibility



oticon
life-changing technology



Heart Of The Matter



High blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, smoking and obesity make it more likely you'll develop cardiovascular disease, but other risk factors might surprise you

BY *Susannah Hickling*

GOUT

A Nottingham University study of more than 60,000 patients with the painful arthritic condition gout found that people who'd had a flare-up had greater odds of having a stroke or heart attack in the following 120 days. Other conditions that, like gout, involve inflammation – such as rheumatoid arthritis, Crohn's and lupus – also make you more prone to coronary artery disease.

HAVING A PREMATURE BABY

Women are by no means spared when it comes to heart disease. Doctors don't yet really understand why, but studies have shown that having a pre-term or low birth-weight baby, gestational diabetes or pre-eclampsia all put mothers on the radar for future heart problems.

MIGRAINES IN WOMEN

In a study of nearly 28,000 female health professionals in the US, women who suffered from migraines with aura had a significantly higher incidence of major cardiovascular events, such as stroke or heart attack, than those who didn't. What's more, the cardiovascular incidence rate was higher than for women who were obese.

EARLY MENOPAUSE

Evidence is mounting of a link between going through the 'change' before the age of 45 and

cardiovascular disease, including heart failure and the heart rhythm disorder, atrial fibrillation.

This may be because women lose the protective effect of oestrogen when levels of this hormone begin to decline in menopause.

PSORIASIS

If you have this skin condition, you are 50 per cent more likely to develop cardiovascular disease, according to a 2021 American study. The worse your psoriasis, the higher your risk.

AIR POLLUTION

Of the nine million deaths worldwide attributed to air pollution in 2019, 62 per cent were from cardiovascular disease. Poor air quality is associated with high blood pressure and diabetes. A Chinese study published last year suggested that even short-term exposure to pollutants might trigger acute coronary syndrome, where there is reduced blood flow to the heart. This collection of conditions includes heart attacks.

SKIPPING BREAKFAST

It can't be overstated how important it is to make your morning oats or egg on toast part of your daily routine. Over time, people who don't have breakfast are more likely to be

MIGRAINES WITH AURA IN WOMEN COULD BE LINKED TO HEART DISEASE

obese, have high blood pressure and develop type 2 diabetes. A study of 6550 American adults found that not eating breakfast brought a significantly increased risk of dying from cardiovascular disease.

SUGARY DRINKS

Long-term consumption of sweet drinks, whether sweetened with sugar or artificial sweetener, makes you more likely to die from a cardiovascular cause, according to a large US study. And the more sweetened beverages you drink, the greater the risk.

So, if you find yourself in any of these groups, it makes sense to keep up to date with health checks and make a few lifestyle changes if you need to.



HEALTH



Eat Your Way To A Bloat-Free Belly

It starts with healthy breakfast choices

BY Marissa LaLiberte

1. DON'T CARBO-LOAD AT BREAKFAST Carbohydrates hold water in your body, which may make your belly bloat. Plus, high-carb, high-sugar breakfast foods like bagels or cereal might fill you up initially, but you'll probably end up searching for more food within an hour, says nutritionist Alissa Rumsey. "Those digest pretty rapidly, and then your blood sugar spikes up and drops back down pretty quickly because they digest so fast," she says. Those extra carbs will more likely cause bloating than if you'd started with a more filling breakfast.

2. GREEK YOGHURT IN THE MORNING Look for a brand of Greek yoghurt that contains live and active cultures, which will promote healthy bacteria in your gut to prevent bloating. Slowly add a little more fibre to your diet every day for a

flatter belly, and increase your water intake to aid digestion, flush out the sodium and reduce bloating.

3. ADD A DOSE OF POTASSIUM Sodium is a big cause of bloating by making your body retain water, but potassium helps counterbalance that salt. Slice banana onto your yoghurt, or scramble up eggs with tomato and spinach, which are other good sources of potassium.

4. SNACK ON CHEESE AND AN APPLE Not only will the protein in cheese keep you full so you're not tempted to snack more later, but it can also help you avoid bloating and gas. Pairing it with an apple gives you an extra kick of nutrients. "Protein helps the flow of digestion and gives you the nutrients your body needs, along with fibre," says nutritionist Jessica Crandall.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

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News From The

WORLD OF MEDICINE

BREAST CANCER SURGERY NOT ALWAYS ESSENTIAL

Patients with breast cancer who respond well to chemotherapy may now be able to skip surgery altogether: improvements made to the drugs have rendered them so effective that they can sometimes eradicate the cancer.

For instance, in a Texas-based trial, published in *Lancet Oncology*, 31 out of 50 women with early-stage HER2-positive or triple-negative tumours had no signs of cancer after chemotherapy. So instead of an operating room, these patients proceeded to radiotherapy – and after two years, none of them saw their cancer return. Larger trials are still needed, however.

A NEW DRUG FOR HOT FLUSHES

Hot flushes affect roughly 80 per cent of women in menopause and can be a huge drag on mood, sleep, concentration and quality of life.

For those who don't want to or are unable to use hormone replacement therapy to treat their symptoms, there's a new option.

Thanks to an improved understanding of how the brain's hypothalamus can trigger hot flushes, a non-hormonal class of drugs called NK3R antagonists is now on the horizon. The results, published in *The Lancet*, indicated that one medication slashed the weekly number of hot flushes almost in half.

YOU MIGHT BE ALLERGIC TO YOUR SMARTPHONE

There's more on the typical smartphone than just data, according to a recent analysis in *Annals of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology*. When US investigators analysed what was on the phones of 15 volunteers, they uncovered some eye-watering evidence. In addition to dog and cat dander, they found beta-D glucans – a marker of mould – and endotoxins, powerful inflammatory agents.

To prevent your phone from triggering reactions such as wheezing or sneezing, clean it frequently, especially if you have allergies or asthma. But stick to the manufacturer's cleaning instructions to avoid damage.





PHOTO : GETTY IMAGES



PERSPECTIVE



Tantrums *To* Tinsel

*Why I love the curious and festive tradition
of the Santa photo*

BY *Cherine Fahd*

FROM **THE CONVERSATION**

In April 1995, my uncle secured a lucrative job in Saudi Arabia. He and my aunt left their home in suburban Sydney and relocated to a western compound (a residential gated community for expats) in Jeddah. My aunt shares stories of life under Saudi's strict laws and how she craved her western freedoms. One such freedom was the celebration of Christmas.

Hailing mostly from Australia, the UK and the US, the compound residents organised their Christmas-es by smuggling in decorations and

creating homemade Santa suits. They even staged the photographic rituals with mums and dads disguised as the shopping centre Santa Claus.

My aunt's eagerness to recreate this photographic ritual with her children stems from her own childhood posing with Santa. My siblings and I were also photographed every year on Santa's lap and we continue the ritual with our own kids.

As a photographer, I have spent years studying my curious desire to participate in this photographic custom. While I do not celebrate

READER'S DIGEST

Christmas on religious grounds and bemoan the increasing consumerism of the season, I participate with overzealous enthusiasm in the Santa Claus photo.

This is evident in the careful way I have cultivated the collection of my children's Santa photographs between 2009-2018, and kept guard of my family's collection from the '70s and '80s that portrays me alongside my siblings and, on one rare occasion, with my parents.

I use myself and my family as a case study. Analysing details like my mother's obsession with dressing my sister and I in identical outfits, and then the ways I consciously made my children dress themselves.

The Santa photo feeds my photographic penchant for overly staged family portraits that signal to the camera 'we are posing together for a photograph'.

PERFECT KODAK MOMENTS

In *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art*, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu famously observed in his 1965 study of amateur photography, that the family represents itself in "ideal moments of celebration" in order to secure its honourable social standing.

Santa photos certainly fit this schema, tied to the so-called 'Kodak moments' where everyone says "cheese".



The author and her family in the 1980s dressed in matching outfits with her sister

Instagram, which today operates as a public family album, reveals a searchable hashtag archive. Across #santaphoto, #santaphotos, #santapictures and #vintagesantaphoto you'll find thousands of images of children sitting nicely on Santa's lap.

Like most family photos, they serve a nostalgic function to take us into our pasts (with rose coloured glasses) and make us laugh at ourselves, at how we used to look, our hair styles, fashions, poses and reactions.

Today there are even photo sessions for pets, and 'sensitive Santa photo sessions' for children with special needs.

With the rise of COVID-19, we see action-packed beach Santa photos proving popular. In the shopping centre, the 1.5-metre social distancing rule is captured for posterity.

But Santa photos capture more than just the idealised moments of family life.

Year after year my mother dressed my sister and I in matching outfits – an indicator of togetherness and the ideal family.

HILARIOUS 'SANTA FAILS'

If the perfect family photograph is where the children are well dressed and everyone is posing and smiling happily, the 'Santa fails' resist the ideal. Santa fails show children reeling from Santa, throwing tantrums, back arching, crying and demanding to leave. Search #santafail on Instagram to see the truth of the matter: we happily and freely deposit our children onto the lap of a total stranger.

The artist Julie Rrap recently shared a story with me about her father who was once employed as a shopping centre Santa. He often came home with a saturated lap from children having wet themselves while seated.

The comic relief that comes with such stories and the Santa fails are over time another ritual enjoyed among family members. But my attraction to the Santa photo goes deeper than comic relief of fearing Santa.

A WORK OF ART

As a migrant family in '70s Australia, we interpreted the Santa photo as an unpretentious custom that assimilated us into the middle-class values of suburban Australia. Participating in this ritual made us feel and appear more Australian, if only to ourselves.

I'm also interested in the Santa photos as a photographic typology. As a photographer, I have done what Bourdieu describes and "elevated the ordinary photo into a work of art".

Through my training I have linked

the seriality of Santa photographs to Rineke Dijkstra's photographic portraits of Olivier and Almerisa. Photographing the same people over many years, Dijkstra captures the subtle changes in their appearance, mood and fashion style, as well as their social and political status.

I am also reminded of the playful fictional photographs of Christian Boltanski which leads the viewer to think they are looking at portraits of a boy growing up.

Like these artworks, Santa photos mark time, revealing what is imperceptible in everyday life. Through the repetition of a performance, a scene and an image we confront ourselves and the people we love changing.

Children and animals are notoriously the hardest subjects to photograph. The training a photographer receives with Santa photography is a baptism of fire. Moving subjects, crying babies, a toddler's inability to sit still, scared children that won't smile and toddlers engaged in escape attempts all combine with the parent's consumer expectations that the photographer should get the right shot.

So, the next time you take your children, pets or yourself to have a Santa photo, keep in mind that the best Santa photos are often not the ones where they're smiling. **R**

CHERINE FAHD IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION IN THE SCHOOL OF DESIGN, UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY SYDNEY. PUBLISHED UNDER CREATIVE COMMONS LICENCE.

The Upside of Anxiety

How to use it as a strength

BY *Patricia Pearson*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TARYN GEE

I am an anxious traveller. I arrive at airports and train stations extra early. I triple-check all of my documents, feel a tightness in my jaw and a slight clench in my stomach until I've arrived where I'm going.

Non-anxious people tease me for being a 'nervous nelly'. I used to feel bad about it, seeing it as irrational, weak. Not anymore. I could write a book on this subject - actually, I did: *A Brief History of Anxiety (Yours and Mine)*. I've learned to respect my tendency to be hypervigilant.

Recently, I was driving along a rural road at the start of a long trip that would mainly be on a large highway. I began feeling that something



could go wrong. *What if I run out of petrol?* I worried, even though I still had plenty. So when I spied a petrol station just before the on-ramp I was going to take onto the highway, I gave in to my angst and decided to fill up. Just in case.

And that's when I discovered that one of my front tyres was badly deflated. If I'd overpowered my unease, talked down my anxiety, the tyre would have blown at speed on the highway. My urge to plan ahead, even though it wasn't strictly necessary, saved me from a potentially catastrophic scenario.

A growing number of psychologists and neuroscientists are getting the message out that anxiety and other negative feelings have a role to play in our lives. Tracy Dennis-Tiwary, who recently published *Future Tense: Why Anxiety Is Good for You (Even Though It Feels Bad)*, thinks our culture goes overboard in demonising difficult emotions.

She knows what it's like to get swamped by anxiety. "I remember a period at work when there was a lot going on," says the professor of psychology and neuroscience. Worries kept waking her up at 4am. "It was like a yucky cloud of free-floating anxiety," she says, and it kept her from falling back to much-needed sleep.

Instead of trying to suppress this disconcerting feeling, however, Dennis-Tiwary leaned into it. "If you sit with the anxiety, you have an

opportunity to glean information," she says. "For me, this one important ball I'd dropped at work finally rose to the surface of my mind. When I recognised this niggling thing, and gave it space, I learned from it. I wrote down two or three things I could do to address it." The next morning, she felt calmer.

**"IF YOU SIT WITH
THE ANXIETY, YOU
HAVE AN OPPORTUNITY
TO GLEAN
INFORMATION"**

Psychologist Todd Kashdan, director of the Well-Being Lab at George Mason University and co-author of *The Upside of Your Dark Side*, is a critic of what he calls 'gung-ho happy-ology'. We don't always have to be smiley and serene, or worry that there's something wrong with us. Sometimes, he says, it's right to worry. Fear heights? Good, because you won't be the person who falls off a cliff while taking a selfie.

These experts wonder if the natural role that anxiety plays in our lives is being forgotten. For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced in March 2022 that the prevalence of anxiety and depression had increased globally by 25 per cent over the year before

The Upside Of Anxiety



(which was the earlier part of the pandemic). It called the finding “a wake-up call to all countries to step up mental health services and support.” Do we know for certain this data represents a public-health crisis? Or could it mean that millions of people are quite rightly feeling uncertain, stressed out and afraid?

The difference is important. For example, the US Department of Health and Human Services now recommends that family doctors do routine screenings for anxiety. It’s a positive development in that it recognises the impact that anxiety disorders can have on those at risk. But what if initiatives like this funnel some of us into unnecessary treatments and medications? Could it make us lose sight of the benefits of our doubts and ‘what ifs’?

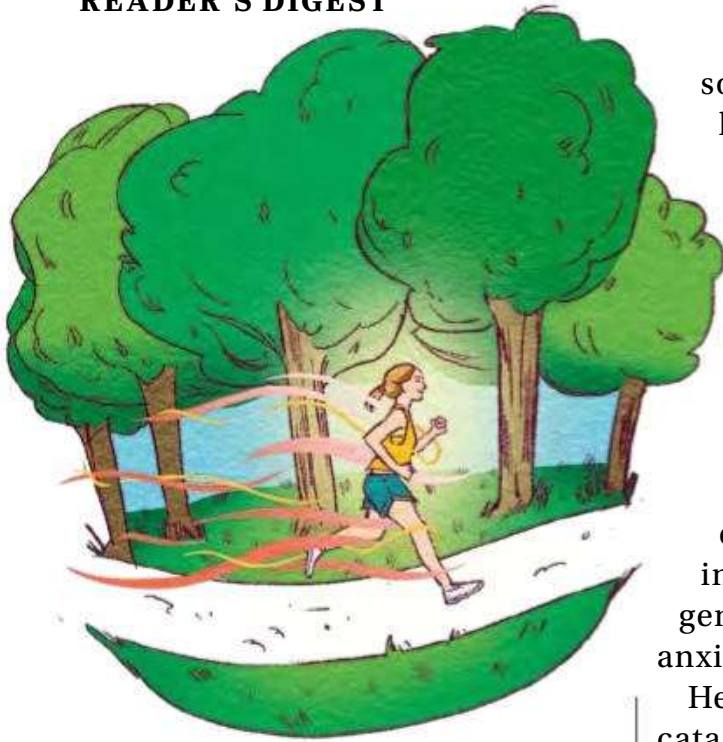
We can experience healthy, often

completely valid, periods of distress without being categorised as mentally ill, according to behavioural psychologists. Anxiety is an adaptive strategy in human evolution. It helps us to prepare for the uncertain future, “to remain vigilant,” Dennis-Tiwary says. Anxiety prompts us to resolve projected unknowns by planning and imagining, by plotting out possible scenarios.

“From an evolutionary point of view, anxiety is the best emotion to help us manage uncertainty because it forces us to run those ‘what-if’ simulations,” she says. “That’s what it’s good for.”

Likewise, neuroscientist Wendy Suzuki points out in her book *Good Anxiety: Harnessing the Power of the Most Misunderstood Emotion* that “if we simply approach anxiety as something to avoid, get rid of or dampen, we not only don’t solve the problem it’s alerting us to, but actually miss an opportunity to leverage the generative power of anxiety.” By generative, she means that it can prompt us to move out of a situation that’s no longer working, to find the energy we need to get unstuck.

When we’re in an anxious state, the amount of dopamine in our brains increases, which prompts us to take action. In evolutionary terms, millions of years ago that might have meant looking for shelter to evade



predatory animals. Today, it might mean leaving a job because of a predatory boss.

By not facing our anxiety, we lose its benefits, and can make things worse. Case in point for me: hiding unopened envelopes from the tax department in a drawer – even if they could be just the routine updates that self-employed people like me receive – until I’ve turned it into a full-blown phobia.

Says Alice Boyes, who has a PhD in clinical psychology and wrote *The Anxiety Toolkit*, coping with unpleasant feelings by avoiding them just reinforces your insecurity, because you’re not getting better at solving the problem: “Over time, you will feel less and less competent.”

The key is to manage unease before it overtakes us, like tending a garden

so the weeds don’t spread. But how? According to Suzuki, solutions include meditation, exercise, compassionate connection such as volunteering, access to nature and mentally reframing what we’re experiencing.

For example, in her book Suzuki writes about a start-up entrepreneur who was beginning to feel daunted by everything that could go wrong in his high-stakes venture. This generated all kinds of ‘what if?’ anxiety that kept him sleepless.

He was, in psychological parlance, catastrophising. After talking to a mentor, he found a new tool: a ‘re-frame’. He turned ‘what ifs?’ into a goal-directed to-do list: “If this were to happen, then what could I do? Well, I could do X.”

Dennis-Tiwary agrees that reframing is crucial. She points to a 2013 Harvard study in which socially anxious people were asked to speak in public. The researchers told some of them that having sweaty palms and a dry mouth or shaky knees was a good sign, a ‘positive coping tool’ that optimises the body for performance. The nervous speakers who heard this message had lower blood pressure and a slower heart rate. In other words, they shifted to that sweet spot where they were ready for the challenge, but not distracted and alarmed by their own nervousness.

The study is a pretty remarkable

discovery. What it says is that we can reframe our fears so that they help us.

Several years ago, I was the last in a long queue of speakers at a TEDx event. The theatre was over-air-conditioned. I sat there shivering and growing tense, worrying that I would forget my speech about a book I'd recently written about death and dying. The longer this mind-body feedback loop of physical tension and mental anxiety went on, the worse it got, until my legs felt so rubbery that I feared I would fall off the stage. It's a miracle I made it through my talk.

SPENDING TIME IN GREEN SPACES CAN HELP RESTORE PSYCHOLOGICAL BALANCE

Knowing what I do now, I would have paced and stretched in the hallway to keep my body warmed up and my breathing calm while I waited, not unlike an athlete before an event. I still would have been nervous, but I would have been taking steps to manage it.

"One of the key problems is that our perceptions about anxiety stop us from believing we can manage it," says Dennis-Tiwary. She argues that anxiety isn't the problem. "It is the messenger that tells us we're facing uncertainty and need to rise to the


challenge. Or it's pointing us to ways that our life needs to change, or that we need support."

We can manage anxiety by 'worrying well', in Suzuki's words. This includes meditation. It has been shown to calm the amygdala, the gland in our brain responsible for sending out alarm signals related to fear and anxiety.

Exercise helps, too. Suzuki experimented with some of her students and found that even just a ten-minute workout helped them feel less anxious before an exam. So, hit the gym, enjoy the dance floor or go for a hike. Just spending time in natural light and in green spaces, what the Japanese call 'forest bathing', can restore our sense of psychological balance. After all, we evolved in companionship with nature.

Because humour increases oxytocin, a hormone that enhances social bonding and relatedness, I sometimes listen to stand-up comedy to calm down. Social connection, touch and a grounding perspective on others' suffering can also soothe us, which is why volunteer and community involvement helps.

These are all well-founded techniques that can keep us from spiralling. The trick, as Dennis-Tiwary says, is to listen to anxiety, then leverage it to make changes – just like I did that day I set off on my road trip.

"Then," she says, "let it go. It's a wave that you need to learn to ride." 

LIFE'S LIKE THAT

Seeing The Funny Side



True Admissions

Reddit users share the moment they realised they weren't as smart as they had thought:

- When someone told me they had the same name as me and I said "Really? What's your name?"
- I was shopping for clothes when I spotted someone I recognised. We made eye contact and smiled at each other. It was just then I realised I was walking towards a full-length mirror.
- After this conversation with my

boss: "I will be in late tomorrow. I have a doctor's appointment."

"Is everything OK?"

"Yes, why do you ask?"

- I said, "I'm consistent, just not all the time." And it really had to be pointed out to me. REDDIT.COM

Silent Rites

A new student at a Catholic high school, I was attending our first Friday mass so naturally I sang my heart out. Suddenly, the principal, Sister Matilda, appeared by my

side. She leaned over and said, "Mr Godfrey, the Lord will not mind if you mouth the words."

SUBMITTED BY DON GODFREY

A Write Off

An author friend of mine was helping a grandchild with some homework and dismissed the complaint "I've got to write a whole paragraph" with the comment, "That's not too bad. I write whole books."

She was floored by the response. "Yes, but mine has to be good."

SUBMITTED BY MAGGIE COBBETT

Hook, Line And Sinker

A shop assistant welcomed my friend and me when we walked into a fishing store. Pointing to the walking canes my friend and I use, I joked, "We really don't need the canes. We just use them to beat off the women."

She shot back, "And you'll need the other end of the cane to hook them." SUBMITTED BY GEORGE BERRIEN

Flight Of Fancy

As we boarded a plane some years back, the two women behind me were voicing their anxiety about flying. That is, until they peeked into the cockpit and got a glimpse of our pilots. "Whoa," one said. "They're both good-looking."

Her friend sounded relieved. "Good," she said. "They have more to live for." SUBMITTED BY PAULA DAVIS



THE GREAT TWEET-OFF: NEW YEAR'S EVE AT HOME EDITION

Not going out to celebrate? You're not alone, according to the stay-at-homes of Twitter.

Shout out to everyone spending New Year's Eve at home, sitting on the couch in pyjamas, eating snacks and watching TV, while scrolling through your phone.

@IMIGHTBEFUNNY1

I'm up for any New Year's Eve party as long as it starts at six, ends by eight, involves food, and doesn't require any social interaction whatsoever.

@ABBYHASISSUES

The weather guy said we may need a raincoat for New Year's Eve, like I'm actually going anywhere.

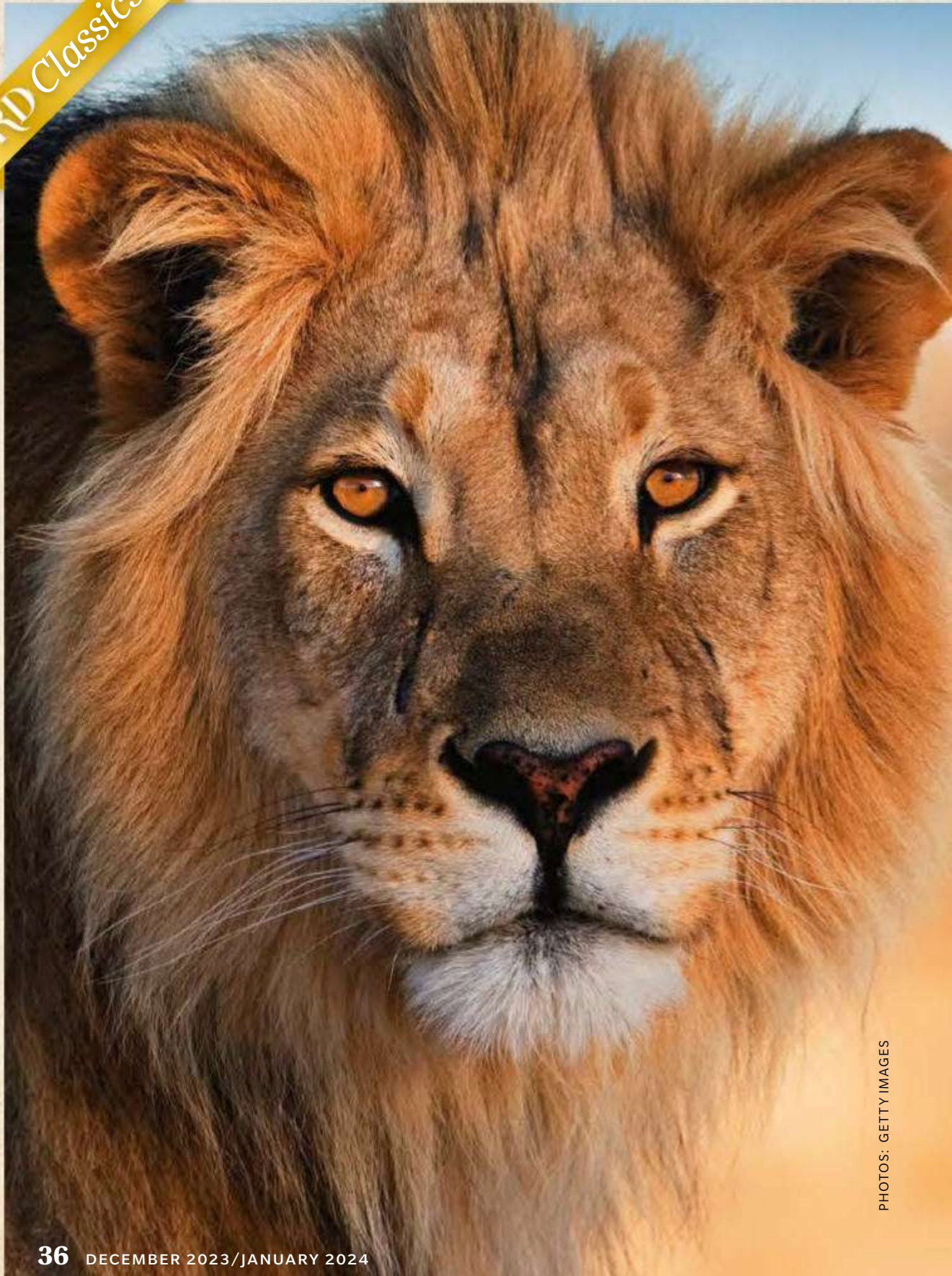
@MCDADSTUFF

We only have small, intimate gatherings for New Year's Eve, because I like to limit the number of people who watch me fall asleep at 10.30pm. @RODLACROIX

"This is going to be the best New Year's Eve ever," I say while bedazzling my dog's jumper.

@SIXFOOTCANDY

RD Classics



PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

SEPTEMBER 1977

DRAMA IN REAL LIFE

LOCKED

In The Lion's Jaws

*As the enormous lion bit down hard,
Tony Fitzjohn felt sure he was about to die.
Then another lion entered the fray*

BY *Arnold Sapiro*

The 18-month-old lion cub, already bigger than a Great Dane, leapt out of the thick underbrush, put his furry front paws up on Tony Fitzjohn's broad shoulders and rubbed heads joyously with his friend. It was Thursday, June 12, 1975, and in lion fashion Freddie was welcoming Tony back to Kora Camp after a two-day supply trip.

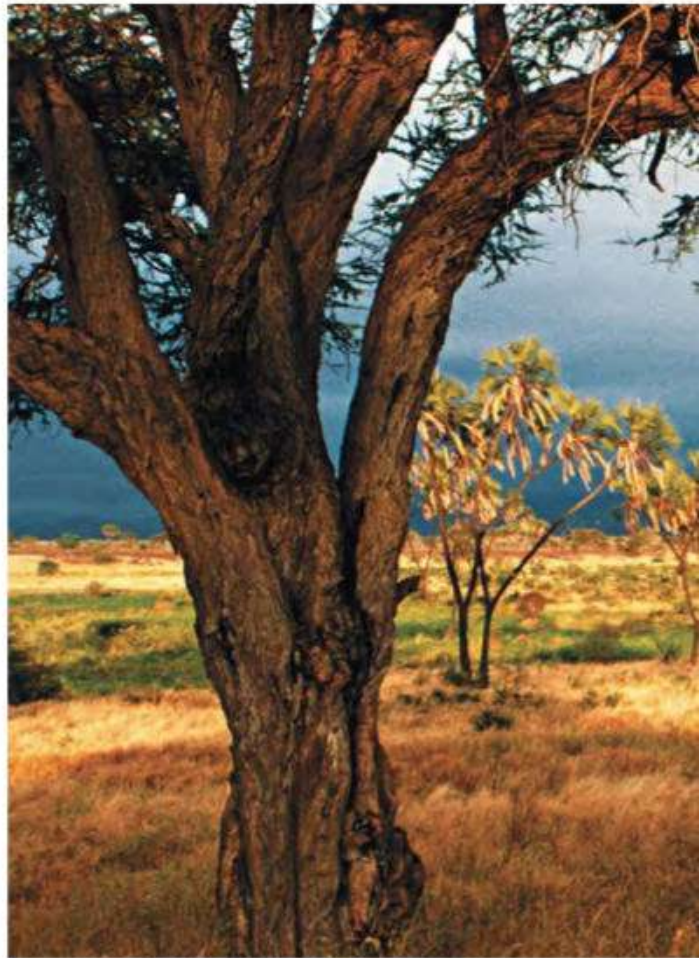
READER'S DIGEST

Kora, an isolated huddle of tents protected by a high wire fence in northern Kenya, was where 70-year-old naturalist George Adamson rehabilitated lions in a unique conservation project. Orphaned cubs or young zoo lions – animals that would otherwise remain in captivity – grew up, reproduced and lived free in an area the Kenyan government had designated a national game reserve.

Conditions at the camp were rugged: intense heat and biting tse-tse flies, no electricity or plumbing and a six-hour drive to the nearest settlement. But English-born Fitzjohn, 31, had read the *Born Free* books as a teenager and been captivated by the story of Joy and George Adamson raising the orphaned lioness, Elsa. Living in Africa and working with Adamson for the last three years had been a dream come true for Tony.

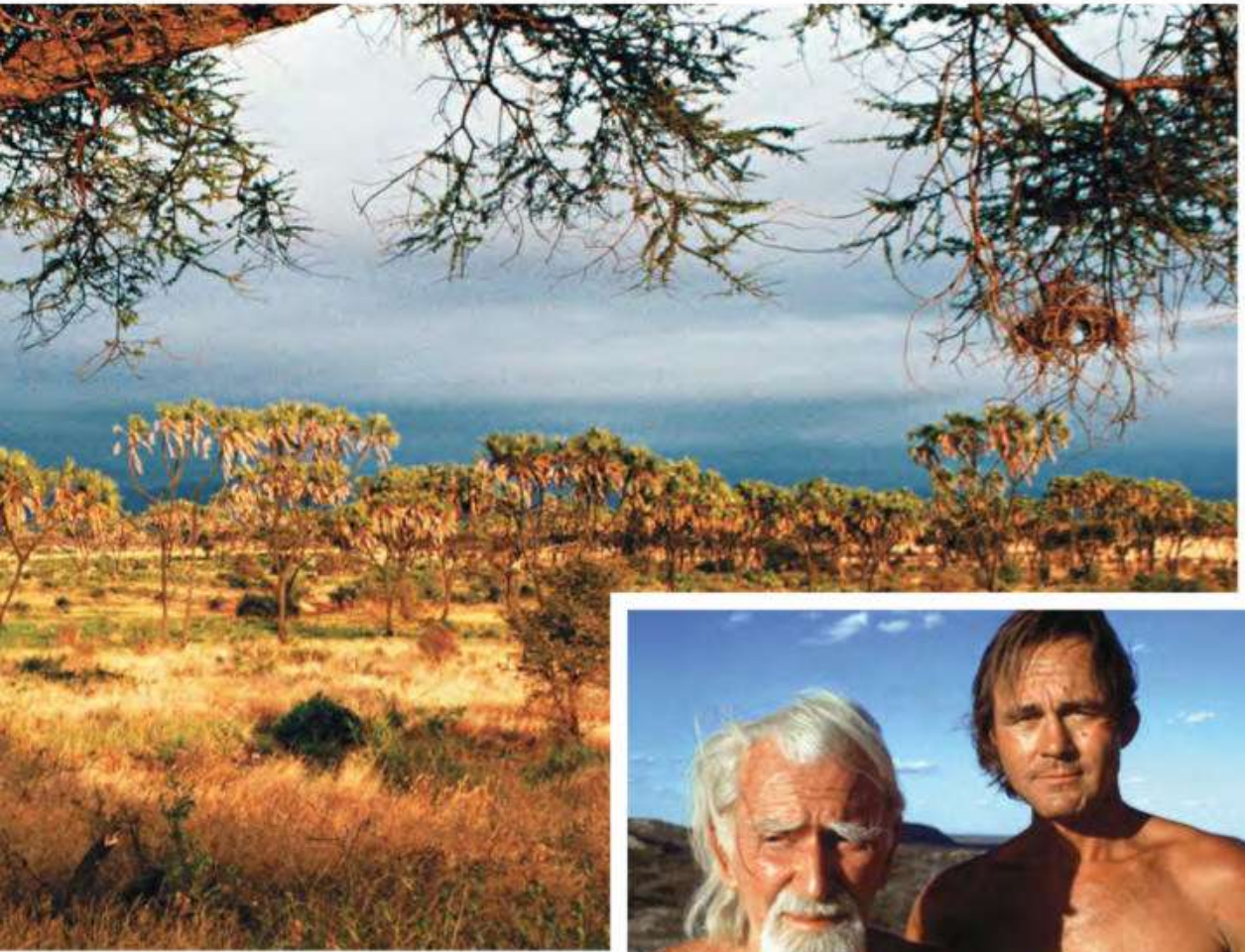
One of his regular jobs was a monthly trip by Land Rover to buy supplies at the tiny outpost of Garissa. This morning, before his return, he had stopped to see the district game warden and thank him for evicting a gang of armed poachers who had been leaving poison traps for rhinos inside the reserve.

The warden had asked about Freddie, the abandoned lion cub he had found in the bush 17 months earlier and turned over to Tony. It was the first cub he'd known. He had taken the frail animal in his arms, driven him home, and named him Freddie.



Later, three more cubs were brought from zoos. But Freddie always held a special place with Tony. Freddie was not only good-natured, but also the bravest of the cubs, scrappier and more inclined to take liberties with the fully-grown wild lions that prowled around the fence. He and Tony had slept in the same bed until Freddie outgrew it. Tony's girlfriend, Lindsay Bell, who was living in Nairobi, had noticed that he was completely relaxed only when he was with his lions.

After two days of rough driving,



Tony was exhausted and glad to be back at Kora. He was dressed only in shorts and sandals, his tan skin glistening with perspiration in the 36-degree heat. It was 5.10pm, time to gather the cubs – the other three had joined Freddie now in welcoming Tony – and take them inside the fence for the night. To settle the frisky Freddie, Tony sat down, his back to the underbrush a few metres away, and began talking quietly. One rule in the bush is never to sit on the ground outside camp, because of the possibility of unexpected

Above (top): The savanna around Kora Camp gave plenty of cover to prowling lions. Above: George Adamson (left) and Tony Fitzjohn at Kora in 1979, four years after the attack

contact with animals. But Tony felt safe just 50 metres from the camp.

Without warning, he felt a giant creature pounce on him from behind. He crashed forward to the ground and momentarily lost consciousness. When he came to, it was



Lions often kill by strangulation, holding a vice-like grip until the prey stops breathing

to the terrifying awareness that his head was locked between the jaws of an enormous lion.

The attacker clamped down hard, then released the headlock and began a barrage of biting and clawing – sharp bites to the neck and head, deep bites to both shoulders, slashing claws to back and legs.

To Tony this horror was a series of jerky slides punctuated by black-outs. His glasses were smashed and he saw flashes of the camp he had thought close; it seemed to be moving further and further away, getting smaller and smaller. Which lion was attacking him? One of George's? He only knew that the beast was fully grown and powerful.

Tony covered his genitals and closed his eyes. More blows from mighty paws struck his head; more

deep gashes from razor-sharp claws opened his face. Because of shock and concussion, he felt no pain and heard no sounds. Paralysed by injuries and bewilderment, he was experiencing his own death as a silent movie.

Now the lion grabbed Tony's neck and bit down. Tony remembered that lions often kill by strangulation, holding their vice-like grip until the prey stops breathing. It takes no more than a minute.

Then he realised that there were two lions in the battle. As he forced his bloody eyelids open, he saw Freddie charging towards him. *Oh, no, not Freddie, too!* he thought.

But Freddie wasn't attacking Tony; he was after the mighty lion, four times as big as he. Proper juvenile behaviour is to submit to adult lions; to attack an enraged adult was suicide.

Freddie, however, snarled and bit at the flanks of the lion who stood astride Tony's torso. For an instant it worked. The lion released his grip on Tony's neck and charged after Freddie, who ran for his life. Tony lay in a pool of blood, gasping for air. The attacker could have torn Freddie apart on the spot, but he stopped his pursuit and ran back to the victim. Again, he clamped down on Tony's neck in the strangulation hold. *God, I'm dying! I can feel it*, Tony thought, then lost consciousness again.

But Freddie returned to the fray and bit the surprised beast's rear, then circled with snarls and yelps, bold charges and nips. Freddie withdrew only when the bigger animal swiped at him with his powerful paw.

Throughout the attack, Tony was a silent victim and the lion a silent killer. The only sounds were Freddie's unrelenting growls and piercing yelps that Tony could not hear.

Freddie's shrill cries were heard by Erigumsa, the compound's cook. At first, he thought two cubs were fighting, but Freddie's distant voice sounded too desperate. The cook ran to the gate and saw Tony being mauled. Erigumsa raced to the dining tent, 25 metres away, where Adamson was having tea.

"Simba ame kamata Tony inje!

Anataka kuua yeye!" he cried in Swahili. ("The lion has caught Tony outside! He's trying to kill him!")

George believed the cubs' playfulness had unintentionally got too rough. So he took only a walking stick, bypassing a loaded rifle, when he ran from the tent.

Outside the gate, George saw Tony's neck locked between the jaws of a full-grown lion. There was no time to return for the rifle. Without a second thought, he charged the lion, yelling and waving the walking stick.

Now George was vulnerable to attack. But the beast released Tony and retreated to stare at George. The lion prepared to spring, but George kept moving forward, shouting and

brandishing the stick. It worked! The lion hesitated, then slunk off into the bush, splashed with Tony's blood.

The next thing Tony realised, he was stumbling back to camp, supported by George. "George, I think I'm dying. Whatever you do," he pleaded, "don't shoot the lion. My fault ... Caught unaware ... Shouldn't have happened."

The minute he got Tony into his tent, George rushed to the shortwave radio to call the Flying Doctor Service in Nairobi. It was too late – the 210-kilometre flight would take an hour and a quarter, and regulations firmly

GOD, I'M DYING, TONY THOUGHT BEFORE LOSING CONSCIOUSNESS

READER'S DIGEST

prohibit landing on a bush strip after dark, even for a critical emergency.

The nurse assured George that the plane would come first thing in the morning and advised him on first-aid treatment for Tony's myriad, deep wounds. George signed off, staring at the setting sun. Could Tony make it through the long night ahead without a surgeon and blood transfusions?

Drifting in and out of consciousness, Tony fought for breath - and life. *I've got to live - for Lindsay, George and the lions. I know if I just think about living, I'll make it.*

At dawn, George and Erigumsa managed smiles; 13 hours after his mauling, Tony was still alive.

Lindsay was the first one out of the Flying Doctor aircraft when it touched down - George had radioed her the night before about Tony's condition. "I was expecting bad wounds, but not all over his head," she recalls. "He could hardly breathe. The right side of his neck was completely open and his wounds were oozing. It was horrible."

During the flight back to Nairobi with Tony, Lindsay broke down and wept. "I knew how much he loved his work," she says. "If he lived, would he ever want to return to the lions?"

Tony spent two hours in surgery when they got him to the hospital. There were three dozen wounds - some so deep and dangerous they couldn't be stitched at that time. His trachea had been squeezed but not broken. Miraculously, the lion's teeth



Tony Fitzjohn raised Freddie from the time he was a cub

had not severed any nerve, artery or vein. Tony would be one of the few people ever to survive a lion-mauling.

The day after the attack, a large lion appeared outside Kora with dried blood on his chest and muzzle. It was a 30-month-old wild animal George had known since infancy, a creature so placid that he'd been named Shyman.

Now Shyman was growling menacingly at the cubs. George drove outside the compound and positioned the Land Rover between Shyman and the frightened cubs. Then he observed Shyman carefully. His movements were erratic and unusual.

The once-gentle lion had probably eaten from a poisoned carcass left by the rhino poachers. Since he had attacked once, he could do it again. The

lives of humans and other lions were in jeopardy. After an hour of watching Shyman, George sadly raised his rifle and put a bullet into the lion's brain.

Such a mauling as Tony had received would make even the bravest soul re-evaluate the risks of work in the bush. The scars on his face and neck would be with him always. But Tony remembered how a lion cub whom he loved had tried to save him.

Two months after the accident, Tony returned to Kora, wondering what kind of greeting he'd receive after his absence. When the cubs saw Tony, they rushed towards him, Freddie in the lead, making woofing sounds all the way. Typical lion greetings last less than a minute; this one lasted close to ten as the excited cubs leapt all over Tony.

"I never had any thoughts about not going back," Tony said later.

"We're creating an animal reserve. People from all over the world can eventually come and see our lions, and the lions can live free and unmolested in nature. I belong here." **R**

Update: Tony Fitzjohn continued to work at Kora until 1989, when he moved to Tanzania to lead efforts to rehabilitate a national park that had been decimated by farmers and poachers. Elephants are once again flourishing in the area, and Fitzjohn also helped bring rhinos back to Tanzania. In 2006 he was awarded the Order of the British Empire for his conservation work. In 2020, he returned to Kenya with his son Alexander to restore Kora, which had fallen into neglect after George Adamson's death in 1989.

Tony Fitzjohn died in May 2022 of a brain tumour at the age of 76.

DECADES OF DRAMAS

IT WAS IN MARCH 1943 that we started a department called *Drama in Everyday Life*, about people overcoming ordinary troubles. But the approach (and name) changed in 1966 with a thrilling hostage story called 'A Stranger at the Door'. Since then, *Drama in Real Life* has been a reader favourite around the world. These stories are about regular people who refuse to die: people who have been abandoned in oceans and in deserts, or fallen into wells, off cliffs and down

mountainsides. People escaping war zones or who have lost a limb and are far from help. We've shared moment-by-moment accounts of people attacked by bears, dogs, snakes, kangaroos and killer bees. And when the survivor can't endure any more, we've celebrated the brave people – friends, family, trained rescuers and medical professionals – who have the smarts and determination to save them. We are proud to carry on that storytelling tradition more than five decades later.

RD Classics



ALL ILLUSTRATIONS: GETTY IMAGES



DECEMBER 197



ADDING

Up '10

HAPPINESS

Solutions to many of our most perplexing personal problems can often be found by applying a kind of creative arithmetic

—
BY Fredelle Maynai

Over lunch recently, an old friend and I talked about life. She admitted that she'd been lonely since her husband died. "Yet I can't complain," she said. "I had a good marriage. The kids are on their own. My job isn't exactly thrilling, but it's secure, and I retire in 15 years. So what else is there?" What else indeed! A woman of 50 – able, experienced, attractive – assuming, in effect, that her life is over. I've seen this often, and in much younger people – the resigned conviction that change is impossible. What many of us fail to realise is that it's possible at any age to improve the quality of our life.

But we have to initiate the process ourselves. By taking a new job or moving to a new locale, we can propel ourselves, forcibly and excitingly, into the stream of life. It's like pruning an overgrown tree: the result is new growth and more fruit. A widow I know sold her house and bought a van so she could travel the country showing her silverwork at craft fairs. She has made friends wherever she goes and looks ten years younger. "There's so much I haven't seen yet," she said. "It's not too late."

It's almost never too late to do, on some scale, what you've always wanted to do. The key is to move forward, to make changes. The path many of my acquaintances have taken to greater happiness may be thought of as a kind of creative arithmetic,

with additions, subtractions, multiplications and divisions. Chances are these steps will work for you, too.

Add to your life by trying something new. Remember the first-day-of-school challenge? That annual shake-up obliged you to mix, reach out, discover. Last winter, I decided to take a plumbing course. Like most girls of my generation, I had been programmed to be hopeless with tools, but very soon I found I was intrigued by vises and wrenches and the fact that I could use them.

When I consider which of my friends seem happiest, most alive, I observe they're the ones who are constantly expanding their skills, interests and knowledge. Ronnie had never grown so much as a cactus when she was asked to tend a neighbour's prized pink African violet. One day she found a leaf that had broken off and stuck it in water. Now she has a unique collection.

ADD TO YOUR LIFE by turning limitations into opportunities. If your life has a built-in constraint, struggle against it, or use it to your advantage.

When an industrial accident confined Martin to a wheelchair, he was overwhelmed by the feeling of uselessness. One day I asked if I could give his telephone number to my daughter's teacher, in case there should be an emergency when I couldn't be reached. Soon he was performing a similar service for other

working mothers. Word got around, and now he runs an answering service. The money he earns helps pay for extras his pension wouldn't cover. "Above all," he says, "I'm doing something, and touching other people's lives."

SUBTRACT FROM YOUR LIFE possessions that are a burden, activities that you no longer enjoy. When I was growing up, I admired my mother's wedding china, which stood in a cupboard and was brought out only for dusting. "Someday this will be yours," mother said. During my young married years, when I longed to entertain with style, that fine china remained in her cabinet. When

it all came to me last year, I realised that at this stage of my life I don't want possessions requiring special care. So I passed the china on to my daughter. She's delighted; I'm relieved of a chore.

MULTIPLY YOUR POINTS of contact with other people. My life has been enhanced since I began trying to know people whose assumptions

and lifestyles are unlike mine. For example, because I cultivate friendships with the children of friends, I have been introduced to music, poetry and ideas I otherwise would never have understood.

A woman I know 'adopts' grandparents. Usually she finds them through

volunteer work, but sometimes she makes a direct approach. "I met Harry in the supermarket," she told me. "He seemed to have trouble reading prices, so I offered to help. I ended up driving him home; he asked me in for tea and now we regularly shop together. My children love Harry's stories. Harry thinks we do a lot for him, but he gives our family something priceless, a sense of the past."



TURN LIMITATIONS INTO OPPORTUNITIES

MULTIPLY YOUR CONNECTIONS with the life around you. "My wife was the social one," Philip told me. "After she died, I was terribly lonely. Then it occurred to me that I met lots of people every day. I just hadn't been seeing them."

He struck up a conversation about fly tying with the hardware store manager and discovered a shared



interest; the two men have since gone on several trout-fishing expeditions.

Whether you live in a city or a village, it's possible to find friends in the course of routine activities, just by taking an active part in the community. But you must make the special effort, whether it be to help out at a youth centre or distribute campaign literature.

DIVIDE YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES into manageable units and delegate some of those units to others. Living well is partly a matter of making wise choices and compromises.

DIVIDE PROBLEMS INTO SEGMENTS THAT CAN BE TACKLED ONE AT A TIME

If you want more time, more freedom or simply more help, accept the fact that some things won't be done the way you'd like.

DIVIDE SEEMINGLY intractable problems into segments that can be tackled one at a time.

Jenny left college, over her parents' objections, to marry a musician. Two years and two children later, he vanished, leaving her with a mountain of unpaid bills. "I used to lie in bed in the mornings," she told me, "unable to face the day." She began to gain strength when, instead of

contemplating the whole discouraging picture, she isolated priorities. Convinced that her best hope lay in completing her education, she listed things to be done, one at a time. "Sell car for money to tide us over. Find out about educational loans. Reapply to university. Find apartment in safer neighbourhood. Find good daycare centre. Write to Mum and Dad. Get in touch with creditors and arrange to pay when I can." By the time she contacted her parents, who'd cut off communication when she married, Jenny couldn't help but impress them with her resourcefulness.

RAISE YOUR EFFORT LEVEL to the nth degree. I used to wonder why TV advertisers repeat the same commercial so often. But of course repetition – intensification – has a special force. The principle of raising to the nth degree works in all areas of life. Take home decorating. For years I've collected wicker furniture. Scattered through the house, it added up to very little. Yet when I gathered every bit in one room, placing the furniture

together and covering one wall with baskets, the impact was stunning.

In human relationships, where it matters most, intensification of effort may produce important gains – as it did for my friend Paul. He lives far from his mother's nursing home. Though he regularly sent long, newsy letters, his mother was always querulous when he telephoned.

"I was beginning to wonder if I had a son," was her usual greeting. Paul would protest he'd just written; she would insist she'd had no word for weeks. So he gave up the letters, concluding that his mother's concentration on the letters wasn't the same as his own. Now he sends a daily greeting, very short. Sometimes it's just a postcard, a snapshot, a note saying, "Thinking of you." He never misses a day – and the change in his mother's attitude has been remarkable.

HAPPINESS IS ALWAYS an individual matter, and so is the path to happiness.

The most important thing, if you're not satisfied now, is to act. **R**



Walking Companion

Not feeling ready to have another dog of her own, a Perth woman enquired on a social media community page if anyone in her area had a dog that needed walking. Next thing she knew she was inundated with offers. She chose dachshund Louis, who she now walks four times a week. "It's a win-win situation because he gets a walk... and I've got company on my daily walks." ABC.NET.AU

SEE THE WORLD...

Turn the page »



...DIFFERENTLY

In summer the Maharloo, a salt lake in southwestern Iran, often takes on an intense pink colour. The reason comes from the algae in the water. During periods of dry weather, evaporation causes the lake to have low water levels and it starts to glow. If you want to admire the pink splendour, however, you should first check whether the Maharloo has any water at all. In the hot season, it frequently dries up completely.

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO



13 THINGS



Illuminating Facts About Fireworks

BY *Samantha Rideout* ILLUSTRATION BY *Serge Bloch*

1 There's a good chance the fireworks you admire every year were made in China: about 90 per cent of the world's fireworks are produced there. The biggest importer is the US, which shipped in more than US\$650 million worth in 2021. Sydney's spectacular New Year's Eve harbour display typically

costs around NZ\$8 million. To welcome in 2023, eight tonnes of fireworks were burnt through.

2 Fireworks are Chinese in origin and are surprisingly ancient. The specific details of their invention are lost to history, but numerous folk legends try to

illuminating Facts About Fireworks

fill in the gaps. According to one, a monk named Li Tian created fireworks around 1400 years ago by packing gunpowder into hollow bamboo tubes. His purpose: to scare off evil spirits.

3 An explosive mixture of gunpowder and flammable compounds is what makes fireworks splatter across the sky in all those pretty colours and fun shapes. Copper, for instance, burns bright blue; strontium sparks deep red. Together they produce purple. The images they make depend on the placement of these compounds inside the shell of the firework. Crowd favourites include 'comet', featuring a long trail of sparks; 'peony', a spherical, flower-like burst; and 'strobe', which produces a blinking effect.

4 Every summer, world-class pyrotechnic artists gather in Montreal, Canada, for the world's largest fireworks competition, L'International des Feux Loto-Québec. Roughly three million spectators watch as teams compete with themed musical programmes such as 'Bells and Drums' (Mexico's lively entry last year) or 'A Tribute to Prince', which featured many shades of purple. There's no cash prize, but winners take home trophies known as Jupiters – fittingly named for the Roman god of the sky and thunder.

5 Italians were the first to mix in extra metals to produce different colours in the 1830s. Before that, all fireworks were orange, the colour of fire. The patterns, however, come from more recent technology. The first patch of sky to see them was above Washington, DC, in 1991, when the US welcomed home troops from Operation Desert Storm with explosions of purple hearts and yellow bows.

6 The single biggest firework shell ever shot was part of a 2020 winter-carnival display in Colorado, US, according to Guinness World Records. Weighing a hefty 1268 kilograms, it rose more than a kilometre into the sky before bursting, turning the night sky red.

7 For centuries we had to light each firework fuse by hand to set it off, but since the 1980s, there's been another option: computer-controlled igniters. Automating fireworks allows for more precisely timed explosions, making musical displays all the more synchronised and satisfying – not to mention safer.

8 But it doesn't always go according to plan. In 2012, an American Independence Day celebration in San Diego, California, went awry because of a computer glitch. A display that was supposed to last 18 minutes got compressed into less

than one. First, the spectators were bombarded with clamour and light while roughly 7000 shells exploded at the same time. Then they waited around, confused, for the rest of the show they'd been promised.

9 Other cultural holidays that feature fireworks include Malaysia's Merdeka Day, the Diwali Festival in India and the UK's Guy Fawkes Day. The latter event commemorates the failure of a plot to blow up London's Parliament buildings with gunpowder in 1605. Fireworks serve to remind celebrators of the deadly explosion that was averted.

10 We're used to seeing fireworks displays paired with music. Think 'Auld Lang Syne' on New Year's Eve. But sometimes it's the sparklers that inspire the tunes. George Frideric Handel's joyous *Music for the Royal Fireworks* (1749) was composed to help mark the end of the War of the Austrian Succession. More than 150 years later, Claude Debussy's *Feux d'artifice* (Fireworks) used the piano to evoke thrilling blasts with anticipation-filled pauses in between.

11 The pops and whistles that some fireworks make are due to the craftsmanship of chemists, who add metal tubes or flakes that hiss and sizzle as they burn. Of course, most fireworks go off

with a loud bang, which many people (and animals) don't enjoy. Newer 'quiet' fireworks that don't need as much energy to burst are already popular in Europe and are starting to catch on elsewhere. However, totally silent fireworks aren't really possible as they typically require some noise to flare up, but the noise level of 'quiet' fireworks is not anywhere near the level of normal fireworks. That's good news for the animals.

12 As you might imagine, fireworks emit large amounts of pollutants into the atmosphere. They can also release hazardous substances: potassium perchlorate, for example, a chemical that has been linked to thyroid problems. As a result, some cities have banned their use. Environmentally friendly fireworks (that emit up to 65 per cent less air pollution compared to regular ones) were developed at the request of the Walt Disney Company, which received smoke complaints in the 1990s from residents who lived near the California resort.

13 An even greener alternative – recently adopted and enjoyed around the world's skies – is using swarms of drones to trace flashy patterns in the sky. Another perk: there's a much smaller risk of sparking bushfires. The future of fireworks, like so much else, may be robotic. **R**

ADVERTORIAL PROMOTION

THE BIDET IS A GODSEND

If you are anything like me, life gets more and more complicated with each birthday. I refer to it as the “complications caused by aging”. I know that people all over and of all ages are faced with the same if not more complicated issues. But toileting for me became a hindrance.

As I got older, I was hit with all the additional bathroom related issues: incontinence, UTI's, haemorrhoids and constipation just to name a few...

I am not as nimble as I used to be. I have arthritis in my wrist, elbow and knees and toileting became a hated moment in the day. I spoke to my doctor about assistive technologies and that's how I found out about The Bidet Shop.

They have a dedicated health care team that works with funding agencies and medical professionals. They arranged for the perfect bidet and accessories to meet my needs. Delivery, installation and funding were all a breeze.

For me it was not only free but freeing, it has been my godsend.

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QUOTABLE QUOTES

Tidying up means dealing with all the 'things' in your life. So what do you really want to put in order?

MARIE KONDO,
TIDYING EXPERT



In many instances parents encourage children to get something from the world outside, but in truth they must get into their children's inner world, the real place where learning begins.

ANGELICA LEE SINJE,
ACTRESS AND DOCUMENTARY
MAKER

With the new year comes a refuelled motivation to improve on the past one.

GRETCHEN BLEILER, ATHLETE

Marriage is the punctuation mark and the celebration of what you already have.

JULIETTE LEWIS,
ACTRESS



I think when you do the right thing for the world, most of the time, the profits follow.

MARTIN KON, PRESIDENT OF
AN AI STARTUP

WE'RE ALL GOING ABOUT TRYING TO MAKE BEAUTY IN THE WORLD AND TRYING TO MAKE ORDER OUT OF CHAOS. AND THAT'S WHAT ART IS.

REBECCA MAKKAI, NOVELIST



Zoom in and obsess. Zoom out and observe. We get to choose.

RICK RUBIN IN THE BOOK
THE CREATIVE ACT

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

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MEDICAL DRAMA

*Doctors said there was
slim hope for the baby born
with only half a heart*

THE FAMILY THAT NEVER GAVE UP

BY *Robert Kiener*

ILLUSTRATION BY **ZACHARY MONTEIRO**

It seemed so real, thought Rob Velez about the dream he'd had the night before.

Lying in bed after waking from a long night's sleep in his home outside London, he smiled as he remembered the wonderful scene. He had been holding his newborn daughter in his strong arms. As she looked lovingly into his eyes, he was so overcome with emotion that the former US Marine had started to cry. He'd never felt this much love for anyone.

Amazing, thought the 50 year old as the morning sun streamed through his windows. This was more than a dream. He threw back his covers and got dressed. He had to tell his partner of four years, Zofia Fenrych, what he had learned from his dream.

Fenrych, a 40-year-old homeopathic therapist, listened as he told her about his dream. "You're pregnant," he said. "We're having another baby."

Fenrych laughed. They had a daughter, age two, and both had 16-year-old sons from previous relationships. "No way I am pregnant," she said.

"Honey," he said, "we are having a little girl. I saw her. And she will be beautiful!"

And to prove it, Velez zipped downstairs to the pharmacy to get a pregnancy test kit. An hour later, two red

lines appeared on the pregnancy test strip. Fenrych was indeed pregnant. She screamed in delight and they embraced. "We're going to have a beautiful daughter," he said. "I know. I saw her last night."

Four months later, in February 2022, the couple went to the doctor's office for a 16-week ultrasound. They held hands as the sonographer moved an electronic probe over Fenrych's abdomen. A two-dimensional image of their baby 'Dorothea' appeared on the nearby screen.

"We saw her tiny fingers and toes and watched as baby Dorothea, my dream daughter come true, actually moved," Velez remembers. "She was sucking her thumb. Then both of us let out a shout, as it looked like she waved at us. She was so tiny, so beautiful!"

The sonographer kept moving the probe, then suddenly stopped. "We have a problem," she said. She called in a paediatric expert from a hospital nearby. An hour later, the expert dropped a bomb. "I am so sorry," she said. She explained that the baby had hypoplastic left heart syndrome (HLHS), a rare, often fatal, condition. Dorothea had only half a heart; the rest was undeveloped. And because of that she had little chance to survive.

"Her best advice was that we elect to, and I'll never forget the word, 'terminate' the pregnancy," says Velez, choking back tears. "This was the moment that everything – our entire lives – changed forever."

The Family That Never Gave Up

Never. That was the response both Velez and Fenrych gave when they heard the doctor's advice to have an abortion. "Forget about it!" I shouted at the paediatrician," recalls Velez.

After digesting the news, Dorothea's parents decided to enjoy every day they had with her. They took day trips to the seaside and visited nearby parks where they would walk for hours and keep up a steady conversation with their unborn baby, explaining what they were doing and seeing.

On one trip to a botanical gardens, as their toddler, Batsheba, screamed with joy while she chased ducklings, Fenrych caressed her belly and told Dorothea, "See, your sister is having so much fun." At home, Fenrych would play the piano, her son would play the violin and Batsheba would sing to her unborn sister. "We wanted to include Dorothea in everything," remembers Fenrych.

Velez, who had been stationed in England when he was younger and had moved back there in 2014, was employed at a private equity firm that worked with healthcare startups. He pulled every string he could to get a second opinion, only to hear the same diagnosis and the same suggested medical path: terminate the pregnancy.

Obsessed with saving his daughter's life, Velez quit his job and devoted all his time to researching HLHS. He and Fenrych dipped into their savings to survive. He wrote countless messages to doctors, surgeons, specialists and hospitals around the world, hoping to find someone who could help.

A foetal echocardiogram at 24 weeks revealed even more bad news: in addition to HLHS, Dorothea also had a severe blockage in her heart. Their baby had only a five

Zofia Fenrych with daughter Batsheba a few days before baby Dorothea was born



PHOTO: COURTESY ZOFIA FENRYCH

per cent chance of survival, Velez and Fenrych were told.

Then they found out about a complex and risky in-utero foetal operation that might repair her heart. But since no one in the United Kingdom could carry out the surgery, the couple looked elsewhere, eventually finding a paediatric surgeon in Texas who agreed to perform the procedure. But it would cost more than \$4 million.

THE DOCTOR EXPLAINED THAT HE HOPED TO BASICALLY 'REWIRE' AND 'REBUILD' HER HEART

To raise the money, they started a publicity campaign, doing countless media interviews. Velez also wrote scores of letters to celebrities and, as he remembers, "every billionaire I could think of". But they only raised about \$80,000 – far from what they'd need. As the days ticked by, their chances of saving their unborn baby's life looked more and more hopeless.

LOOK CLOSER. It was in the middle of the night when Velez heard the voice in his head. He was sitting alone in his home office despairing that he'd failed his family. *Am I going crazy?* he thought. *Now I'm hearing voices!*

Look closer, the voice repeated.

"What are you talking about?" he answered aloud. "I've tried everything."

Look closer to home.

Fine, thought Velez, *I'll try again.* He googled 'impossible cases', 'miracle surgeon', 'UK paediatric expert' and 'HLHS'. Almost immediately a link to a Facebook page about Dr Guido Michielon, a cardiothoracic surgeon, popped up in the search results.

Velez pored through the page, reading message after message from enthusiastic parents thanking Dr Michielon for 'saving our baby's life', 'giving us hope', and 'changing our lives'. Even more remarkable, Velez discovered that the Italian-born surgeon was an expert in HLHS and had done more than 2000 open-heart procedures with a special focus on neonatal surgeries.

How did I miss him? Velez wondered as he wrote an email to the London-based surgeon, describing Dorothea's issues and including medical notes and copies of her sonograms. Within hours he got a reply: "I am in Italy now but will be back this Friday. I've moved you to the top of my appointment list."

Five days later, at the end of a long Skype conference call, Dr Michielon gave the anxious parents the news they'd been praying for: "I can help you. I will operate on Dorothea after she is born and stabilised."

He explained that he hoped to basically 'rewire' and 'rebuild' her heart

and veins days after she was born. And, instead of costing them millions, the operation, called the Norwood Procedure, would be fully covered by the National Health Service (NHS).

Velez and Fenrych were ecstatic. But they were jolted back to reality when the surgeon warned, “A child with HLHS has a very low chance of survival. And Dorothea’s complications are even more severe than most. We will do our best. But please remember, the odds are not in our favour.”

On July 7, at London’s Royal Brompton Hospital, surrounded by a 20-strong team of medical personnel and a bank of beeping monitors, baby Dorothea was born by Caesarean section. Velez, dressed in surgical scrubs, stood alongside Fenrych and peeked over a curtain to see his newborn daughter. “Look!” he said joyfully. “She has a full head of hair!”

The medical team rushed Dorothea into a resuscitator unit and placed an oxygen mask on her tiny face. A priest Velez had asked to come along hurriedly baptised her as she was being scanned.

As he left the operating room, Velez noticed a group of doctors looking at a screen that showed a sonogram of his new baby’s heart. Minutes later, chief paediatric cardiologist, Dr Alain



Dr Guido Michielon and his patient after one of her operations

Fraissé, told Velez, “I don’t know how to explain this but, somehow, there are four or five new veins in her heart that have appeared out of nowhere.”

He explained that these veins, which no one had seen on earlier scans or MRIs, were helping drain her heart. In other words, they were keeping her alive. He sounded astonished.

Dr Michielon came out and hugged Velez. “She is stable and she is beautiful. Congratulations!”



As ill as Dorothea was, her parents never gave up hope

The mood shifted dramatically on July 12, when Velez and Fenrych met with Dr Michielon and his team at the hospital to discuss the Norwood Procedure operation, which was scheduled for the next day. Velez instantly sensed there was something wrong. The normally ebullient physician seemed distant.

A hospital administrator delivered the bad news: “We’ve decided that there is such a small chance your baby will survive the surgery that we cannot allow it to go forward.”

The room fell silent. And if she did survive, the administrator continued, “There’s a very good chance she would suffer irreversible brain damage.”

Velez looked at Dr Michielon for help. He was looking at the floor. The administrator said, “We recommend compassionate care.”

“You mean we should let her die,” said Velez curtly. “After we’ve come this far?”

“You know I want to operate, but I cannot without the support of my team,” said Dr Michielon.

Velez went home and sent pleading messages to the hospital CEO and the hospital legal counsel. He also spoke to a human rights lawyer who had a successful record fighting for NHS patients. Twenty-four hours later, the hospital administrators relented.

The operation would take place.

The next morning, at 7.30am, Dr Michielon, assisted by three paediatric cardiac surgeons and a team of nurses, began the delicate open-heart surgery that would reconstruct the right ventricle of Dorothea’s heart so that it would pump blood to both her body and her lungs without the need of the malformed left ventricle.

After Dorothea’s chest was opened, she was hooked up to a heart-lung machine that would take over while doctors operated on those organs. Surrounded by flickering monitors and the gentle whirring of the heart-lung machine, Dr Michielon began the intricate

The Family That Never Gave Up

procedure of building a new, larger aorta by joining the pulmonary artery to Dorothea's existing aorta, which was just one millimetre wide.

This is time-consuming, painstaking work; a baby's heart is only about the size of a walnut, and Dorothea's veins and arteries were so tiny, "really a hair," says Dr Michielon. He needed to wear high-powered magnifying lenses to see as he expertly cut and sewed vessels together.

The hours dragged by as Dr Michielon and his team performed the delicate surgery. Their last step was to install a shunt from the right ventricle to the pulmonary artery, connecting them to direct the blood flow to the lungs. Nearly 11 hours after he and his team began, Dr Michielon finally began to relax, as he double-checked his work that had essentially re-plumbed this newborn's faulty heart.

By late afternoon, Dr Michielon, exhausted and still dressed in scrubs, found the parents in the waiting room. "Looks good," he told them, smiling broadly. "She is stabilised." The three embraced in a celebratory hug. But within minutes, Velez and Fenrych were startled by the screech of emergency alarms. A team of doctors and nurses rushed into the room where

Dorothea was recovering from surgery. People shouted orders. A doctor yelled, "Cardiac arrest!" The alarm kept wailing.

After a few minutes, a nurse dashed out to tell them, "Dorothea's heart has stopped. She's had a heart attack. We are trying to revive her."

Ten minutes later the nurse returned with the same message.

Fifteen minutes later she came back: "We're still doing CPR."

Rob Velez and his 'dream girl'



Zofia with her
two little girls



An agonising hour later, they were ushered into the ICU and were shocked to see their tiny daughter tethered to a dialysis machine and life-support unit. Her chest was covered with dried blood and was swollen from more than an hour of CPR. She was battered and bruised, but with the help of a bank of high-tech machines, she was still fighting to stay alive.

Velez and Fenrych reached beneath the network of tubes and held her hand. Velez felt his daughter squeeze his index finger in her tiny hand and said, "You are a fighter, you did it. You're going to be okay."

For the next five weeks, Velez and Fenrych rarely left Dorothea's side in the ICU. They talked to her, played music for her and caressed her.

On August 26, Fenrych's birthday, doctors removed Dorothea's breathing tube and took her off the ventilator, moving her to only light breathing support from a CPAP machine. She would need a second open-heart operation in a few months, and doctors warned her parents that to survive that surgery, Dorothea

would need to put on weight and get stronger.

She was moved out of intensive care and gained more than a kilogram in less than two months. Dorothea's heart was working well and her oxygen levels became normal.

On September 14 she was taken off the CPAP machine and began breathing for herself. Dr Michielon performed the second surgery on her heart on November 24, and declared her prognosis excellent. On December 21, Dorothea finally went home with her parents, just in time for Christmas. She had lived up to her well-earned nickname: the miracle baby.

Today, says her proud father, she is a chubby, healthy baby who is constantly smiling and laughing. "You know, right after we found out we were having a baby girl, we named her Dorothea. That's derived from a Greek phrase that means 'gift of God,'" he explains.

Velez watches Batsheba, now age three, snuggle up next to her baby sister. "We sing happy birthday to Dorothea each morning, because every day with her is a miracle." **R**



Bear Arrested For Misbehaviour

A black bear was captured in August after 152 reports of 'conflict behaviour' including 28 home break-ins in a wealthy Californian neighbourhood. The public rallied for the bear to be spared, and she was later transferred to a Colorado animal sanctuary. NPR

LAUGHTER

The Best Medicine



"I wish everybody became vegan."

No Hair, Don't Care

I'm a positive person. To me, going bald is not about hair loss, it's about face gain. It's not a receding hairline, it's an advancing facial frontier. It's exciting. One day, I'll have a whole head of face.

SHENG WANG, COMEDIAN

Make It Count

Santa Claus has the right idea – visit people only once a year.

VICTOR BORGE, COMEDIAN

Easy Going

A reporter, interviewing a man celebrating his 110th birthday, asks, "What's the secret to your longevity?"

"No matter what, I never ever argue with anyone," says the elderly man.

"Surely there must be more to it than that," insists the reporter. "What about factors like genetics, diet, exercise?"

The old man shrugs.

"Maybe you're right."

SUBMITTED BY GARY KATZ

Seasonal Songs Made Up By Parents

"Jingle Bells, my teen smells, he won't take a bath."

"Dashing out the door, late again to school."

"All I want for Christmas is my kid to brush her teeth."

"On the first day of Christmas my kid gave to me, another stomach flu."

@MARYFAIRYBOBRRY

Starry Eyes

"How much do you love me?" she asked.

I said, "Look into the sky and count the stars. That's how much I love you."

"But the sun is shining!" she said.

"There you go." UPJOKE.COM

Oh, Brother

During the Christmas holidays, I often see my sisters, who still, even after all these years, can't seem to agree with me. They take silly, indefensible positions, such as denying that my parents loved me more because I was the better child.

WILLIAM BRUCE CAMERON, AUTHOR

Power Play

My landlord told me that he would like to have a chat with me soon about the house's sky-high heating bills this last winter.

I told him: "Sure thing, whenever you want. My door is always open."

WWW.MENSHEALTH.COM



*Santa lives at the North Pole, right?
Don't say that to the people of
Rovaniemi in northern Finland*





TRAVEL

Searching For Santa Claus

By Katherine LaGrave

FROM **AFAR**



**The people of Finland
have claimed Santa as
one of their own**

READER'S DIGEST

Christmas elves, light-footed and cheerful, flit about a pine forest in northern Finland, assisting Santa Claus at his command centre and toy factory. The scent of freshly shaved spruce rises from the wood-working stations and a whirring machine stuffs fluff into velvety pink unicorns.

I'm in the Santa Claus Secret Forest – *Joulukka*, in Finnish – a place that does not appear on any map, and where visitors are welcome only with prior arrangement. It's a night so dark and fuzzy that I feel like I am inside a mitten. The only things guiding my way are candles in the snow and the high-pitched voices of elves cutting through the cold.

"How long have you been an elf?" I ask one of them.

"One hundred twenty-seven years going on 128."

"Are you ever scared out here?"

"No. We have lots of animal friends that help us."

"Where is the restroom?"

"I will show you to the magic hole where travellers go to help their tummies feel better."

The visit was part of a two-week journey across Finland in November



Above: Elves lead the way to the Santa Claus Secret Forest. Right: Santa Claus Village sits on the Arctic Circle. Below: Rovaniemi as seen from across the Kemijoki River

2021. I was on a mission to find the man who seemed to be everywhere and nowhere at once: Santa Claus.

In 1927, Finnish radio host Markus Rautio announced that Santa Claus's



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home had been 'located' on Korvatunturi, a mountain in Lapland, Finland's northernmost region. From there, Rautio suggested, Santa could hear even the quietest whispers carried by the north wind.

Niilo Tarvajärvi, another renowned radio and television personality, raised the idea of capitalising on the Santa Claus mythology in the 1960s after visiting Disneyland in the United States, but it wasn't until the 1980s that efforts gained any real momentum. That's when the Finnish Tourist Board launched a new

tourism strategy for Lapland, which despite its many assets – one of Europe's few remaining untouched wilderness areas; the strong culture of the region's native Sámi population – had not been able to attract enough tourists. The solution? Make Lapland the home of Santa Claus.

Korvatunturi was deemed too remote, so authorities focused their efforts on Rovaniemi, Lapland's capital, which sits 364 kilometres to the southwest, just below the Arctic Circle. Ninety per cent of Rovaniemi had been destroyed during World War II,

PHOTOS: (ELVES, VILLAGE) COURTESY OF VISIT FINLAND; (ROVANIEMI) ANNA MARDO/GETTY IMAGES



READER'S DIGEST

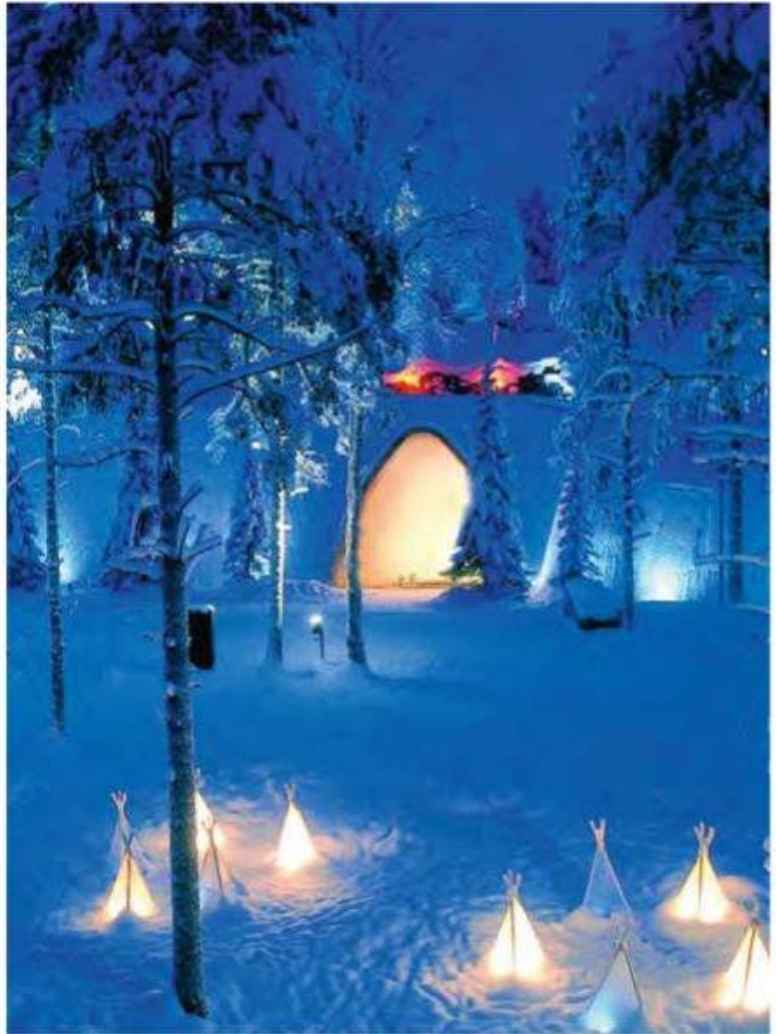
but in 1945, Alvar Aalto, the country's greatest architect, started rebuilding it – designing the city in the shape of a reindeer head and antlers.

In 1984, the governor of Lapland declared the province 'Santa Claus Land'. A Concorde jet began making Christmas flights from London to Rovaniemi's airport – re-branded as 'Santa's Official Home Airport'.

A year later, the Finnish Tourist Board oversaw the creation of Santa Claus Village just north of Rovaniemi. The attraction, which is operated by roughly 50 private companies, offers reindeer rides and includes the Santa Claus Post Office, which receives up to half a million letters annually (address: Tähtikuja 1, 96930 Arctic Circle, Finland). The village is open 365 days a year, a veritable winter wonderland in winter, spring, summer and autumn.

Today, the image of Finland's Santa Claus is controlled by the Santa Claus Foundation, a private company that partners with 40 brands, including national airline Finnair and VisitFinland.com.

To spread the message that Finland



The tunnel entrance to SantaPark, a former air-raid shelter

is 'the true Christmas country', the foundation ensures Santa is visible practically everywhere, whether he's shooting hoops with the Harlem Globetrotters in Helsinki or taking a goodwill train tour through Asia. Foundation CEO Jari Ahjoharju calls him "the best-known Finnish person."

Santa Claus is so embedded in the Finnish consciousness that to suggest he might be from somewhere else is

received as a joke at best, and a slight at worst. “Santa Claus is not from the North Pole,” a Finnish woman told me at a friendly business lunch, rapping her knuckles against our table in the strongest display of firmness I would see in my time in the country. “He is from Finland.”

THE REAL-LIFE INSPIRATION for the legend of Santa Claus is St Nicholas of Myra, who lived in the third and fourth centuries in what is now southern Türkiye. Known for his generosity, grace and goodness with children, St Nicholas was venerated across Europe for his miracles. The anniversary of his death, December 6, was long celebrated with deeds of charity and kindness.

In 1810, one of the founders of the New York Historical Society, John Pintard, commissioned artist Alexander Anderson to design an image of St Nicholas for the society’s December 6 celebration. Anderson’s illustration portrays the saint as the giver of gifts to children, with stockings hanging by the fireplace.

References to the saint in poetry, prose and illustrations snowballed, and in time, he transformed from a slim bishop to a portly friend of the people, circling the world in a sleigh pulled by reindeer. He was renamed Santa Claus, a variation of his Dutch name, Sinterklaas.

But it is thought that Thomas Nast, in a cartoon published in the US

magazine *Harper’s Weekly* in December 1866, was the first artist to show Santa living at the North Pole.

The Finnish word for Santa Claus, *Joulupukki*, or ‘Yule Goat’, references both St Nicholas and early pagan traditions celebrated by Finns, in which men dressed in horned goat costumes demanded Yule feast leftovers. Charity eventually replaced collection, and *Joulupukki* began handing out gifts, first knocking on doors and asking “Are there any well-behaved children here?”

Each year around 740,000 overnight visitors bring 260 million euros (A\$430 million) in revenue to Rovaniemi. In all, tourism employs 1800 people in the city, which has a population of 62,420. From November to March, there are direct flights to the airport from all over Europe, including Paris, London, Brussels and Düsseldorf. Citing the beautiful, snowy landscapes and the northern lights, Sanna Kärkkäinen, managing director of the local tourist board, puts it plainly: “Santa couldn’t be happier elsewhere.”

One of the city’s Christmas-themed attractions is SantaPark, which opened in 1998. Katja Ikäheimo-Länkinen and Ilkka Länkinen, the owners of a local hotel, bought a majority stake in the park from the Finnish government and the city of Rovaniemi in 2009. At the time, its main attractions were carousel rides and souvenir shops, and it had yet to

post a profit. Says Ikäheimo-Länkinen, "We asked ourselves, *How can we make this better? How can we make the perfect fairy tale come true?*" The couple reworked and rebuilt SantaPark, adding Joulukka to its attractions.

Built in Syväsenvaara Mountain at the site of a former air-raid shelter, SantaPark is accessed via a sloping 50-metre tunnel, a simulacrum of the northern lights reflecting green and purple off the walls. As my group descended into the belly of good cheer, our giggling 'elf' guide Sophina – an adult human – became more animated as we advanced. My mind, unaccustomed to seeing such unchecked exuberance in anyone older than ten years, pinballed between amusement and wariness.

By the time we reached the centre of SantaPark, we had crossed the Arctic Circle. Soft white lights twinkled from trees and pine boughs, and presents were piled everywhere. Elves, too, were everywhere, sorting letters in the post office, teaching in the elf school, and assisting Mrs Claus in the gingerbread kitchen. All felt calm, all felt bright.

I boarded a sleigh-shaped train and scooted through interactive winter wonderland scenes, stumbling off five minutes later feeling mildly queasy. Later, I was told that one boy had taken the ride more than 2000 times.

In the elf workshop, I sat at a log table and made a Santa ornament out of

red felt wood, and wool. With Sophina beaming by my side, I nailed it to the wall alongside dozens of other Santa ornaments: Santas with short beards and poofy ones, rosy cheeks and white ones. Yet Santa was not in the post office or his office; his wooden chair, covered with pillows and reindeer fur, was empty.

Ikäheimo-Länkinen smiled when I asked how many Santas there are in SantaPark. "We actually only have one – one who will visit all the houses all around the world," she said. I wondered: *When would I get to see him?*

Finland's official Santa Claus wears only clothing approved by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment. His waistcoat, for example, must be made of red felt and paired with a light-coloured linen shirt, moss-green trousers, white gloves, wool socks, and a red felt hat, according to *A Little Book About Christmas*, written by Ilkka Länkinen. Other 'important elements' include a large stomach and glasses, which can be round or rectangular but must have metal frames. Santa's conduct is also tightly controlled. He "never appears to be in any kind of rush," the book states, he will not discuss politics or religion, and he "does not drink alcoholic beverages."

In 2017, Finland's Ministry of Education and Culture added "the Santa Claus tradition" to the National Inventory of Living Heritage alongside 51 other items, including sauna bathing

and the right to visit anywhere in nature. “The Santa Claus tradition in Finland is known everywhere in Finland and in many other countries as well,” wrote the directors of the National Board of Antiquities, which is responsible for the list.


NEVERTHELESS, THE FINNISH home of Santa Claus is in peril. The Arctic is warming three times faster than the global average, and a 2021 report by the Finnish Climate Change Panel predicted that Rovaniemi would be one of the areas in Finland hit hardest by climate change. “A warming climate makes winter tourism with its snow- and ice-based activities extremely vulnerable,” Dr Kaarina Tervo-Kankare, a researcher in Arctic tourism and changing environment at the University of Oulu, and two colleagues wrote in 2013.

About three-quarters of Finland, which has pledged to become carbon neutral by 2035, is covered by forest and it has some of the cleanest water and air in the world. The country has 41 national parks and about 200,000 reindeer. Now Finland is making tourism promotion synonymous

with protection of its natural assets. The goal is to transform Finland into the most sustainable travel destination in the world.

In June 2020, the country launched a seven-step programme to help companies and destinations adopt more sustainable practices. Those that have completed the training and audit receive a Sustainable Travel Finland label, which is reviewed every one to two years. By protecting their part of the world, Finns hope to attract travellers committed to doing the same.

Decades have passed since my childhood, but some things never change. On the night I finally spot Santa, he is sitting on an intricately carved wooden chair in his command centre in Joulukka. Fresh pine boughs hang above his head, and elves linger by his side, agents of cheer. His boots are wet from the snow.

Smiling, I wait my turn to see him, and when he holds out a white-gloved hand to me, I approach. Then he asks what I want for Christmas, and I tell him. 

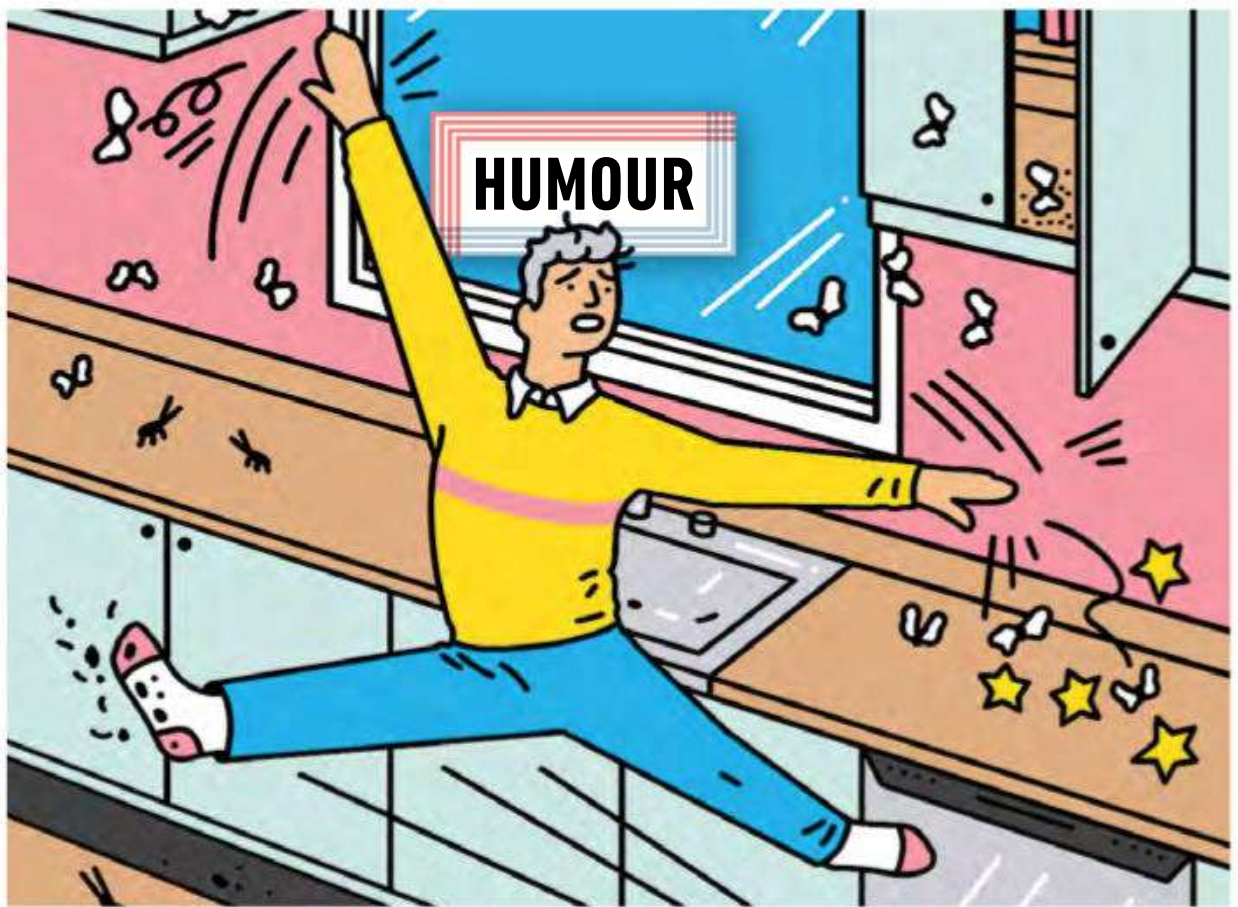
FROM AFAR (DECEMBER 14, 2021), © 2021 BY AFAR MEDIA



Is It A Bird, Is It A Plane?

South Korea aims to put flying vehicles in the skies by next year.

Seoul city government plans to conduct test flights in 2025 of urban air mobility, ie flying cars, which will fly at low altitudes in metropolitan areas and won't need runways. M.KOREATIMES.CO.KR



Bitten By The **Dance Bug**



BY *Richard Glover*

My exercise regime now includes 40 minutes of vigorous dance in the kitchen just before bedtime. I leap into the air like a youthful Nureyev, performing a grand jeté to the left and then one to the right. Next it's tap work, madly stamping the ground like a frenzied Fred Astaire.

The cause is a double insect infestation. Pantry moths fill the air; cockroaches scurry across every surface. I'm determined to win my battle.

I say the cockroaches 'scurry', but that's not the right word. Rather, it's a brisk, purposeful walk. They have no fear; they own this place. From the dignified manner of their

ILLUSTRATION: SAM ISLAND

perambulation, I assume they've already contacted my bank and taken over the mortgage.

I have tried traps, of course, which the cockroaches regard as mobile housing, dotted around the place for their convenience. I have tried insecticide, which has a worse effect on me than on them. There are so many cockroaches, I wonder if they'd mind fetching my asthma puffer from my bedroom drawer before I spray.

The pantry moths are also oblivious to products that promise their eradication. Chief among them is the moth trap – essentially a sheet of sticky paper impregnated with female pheromones. It's like an insect version of a nightclub.

The problem: while it works on 95 per cent of the males, the ones that survive and breed with the females are, of course, the strongest ones. My pantry is now home to accelerated evolution. Wait three weeks and the moths will be the size of bats. Wait three months and you'll open the door to be greeted by the dragons from *Game of Thrones*.

And so, I'm left with my dance routine. I pluck the pantry moths from the air with my hands; the cockroaches I dispatch with my feet.

For reasons that are unclear, the insect infestation is my fault. Or at least my responsibility. "It's repulsive," says my wife, Jocasta. "When are you going to do something about it?"

She means: "When are you going to hire a real man to solve the problem?"

In fact, I've already called a real man, a professional pest controller, only to be told a visit will cost \$365. It's a figure that instantly brought new energy to my dance moves. I'm now more like Mikhail Baryshnikov with a side order of Jackie Chan, leaping from one side of the kitchen to another, a flying machine of death. I go to bed each night panting with exhaustion and calculating the bugs' nightly losses against the breeding that will inevitably occur overnight.

Female cockroaches can produce eight egg capsules in a lifetime, each holding as many as 40 eggs. How many is that? Just multiply eight and 40 and you'll get the answer: Eww!

Actually, that's nothing compared to a female pantry moth, which lays 400 eggs at a time. They take as little as seven days to hatch. This is too much, even for Baryshnikov. I'll need a whole corps de ballet.

Apparently the pantry moth smuggles itself into your home through your shopping, so by freezing all your dry goods, you can kill off the eggs. Not so practical, though. Worse, who knew that flour, rice, almond meal and the rest of it are full of moth eggs?

The only thing I can do is wait. Or maybe I'll get over my reluctance to spend \$365. **R**



T *Subterranean* **Treasures**

Dazzling caves and grottos captivate visitors

BY *Doris Kochanek*

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/WESTEND61

A full-page photograph of a cave interior. The ceiling is covered in numerous long, thin, greenish-brown stalactites hanging down. The floor is a mix of sandy ground and large, jagged rock formations. A diver in a dark wetsuit is swimming in the center of the cave, illuminated by a bright light source. The water is clear and blue. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and adventurous.

PHOTO FEATURE



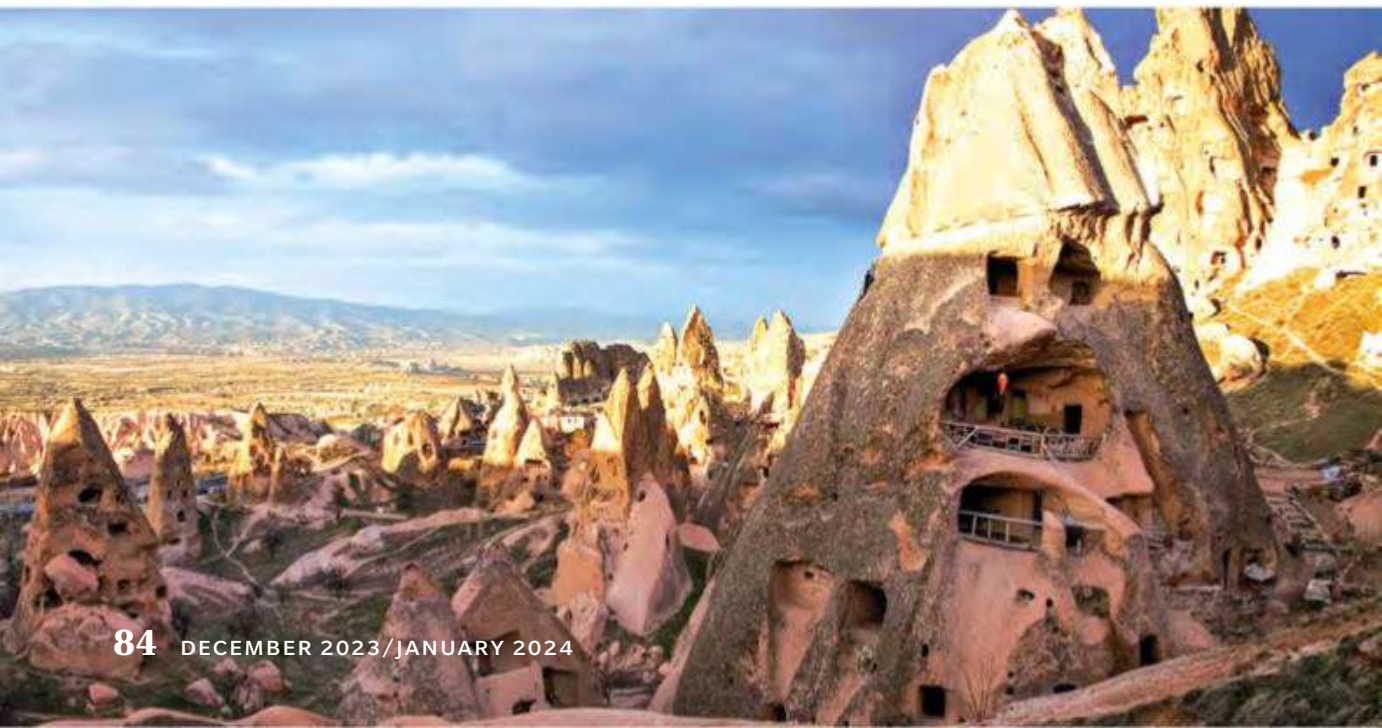
▲ **Probably the largest** underwater cave system in the world is located near the city of Tulum on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. Cave after cave line up for 347 kilometres. According to tradition, the Maya believed that this was the entrance to the underworld.

◀ **The rock paintings** in the Lascaux cave in southwestern France are literally as old as stone. They were created in the Upper Paleolithic period of the Stone Age, around 19,000 to 17,000 years ago.

▶ **The waves** of General Carrera Lake in the Patagonian region of Chile formed a natural work of art consisting of caves, columns and tunnels from a huge block of marble. The Marble Caves are known for their beauty and light reflections.

▼ **Cappadocia** is the home of the fairy chimneys. This is the name given in Turkish to the rock formations typical of this region. In the past, some fairy chimneys were inhabited – but by ordinary mortals.

PHOTOS: (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) PICTURES FROM HISTORY/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES; GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO/R.M. NUNES; VALERY KRAYNOV/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO









▲ **The Gstaad Cheese Grotto** in Switzerland is quite something: Around 3000 cheese wheels are stored and ripened here. The local dairy proudly calls it 'our Fort Knox'. Visitors are allowed into the cheese grotto – unlike the storage facility for the US gold reserves.

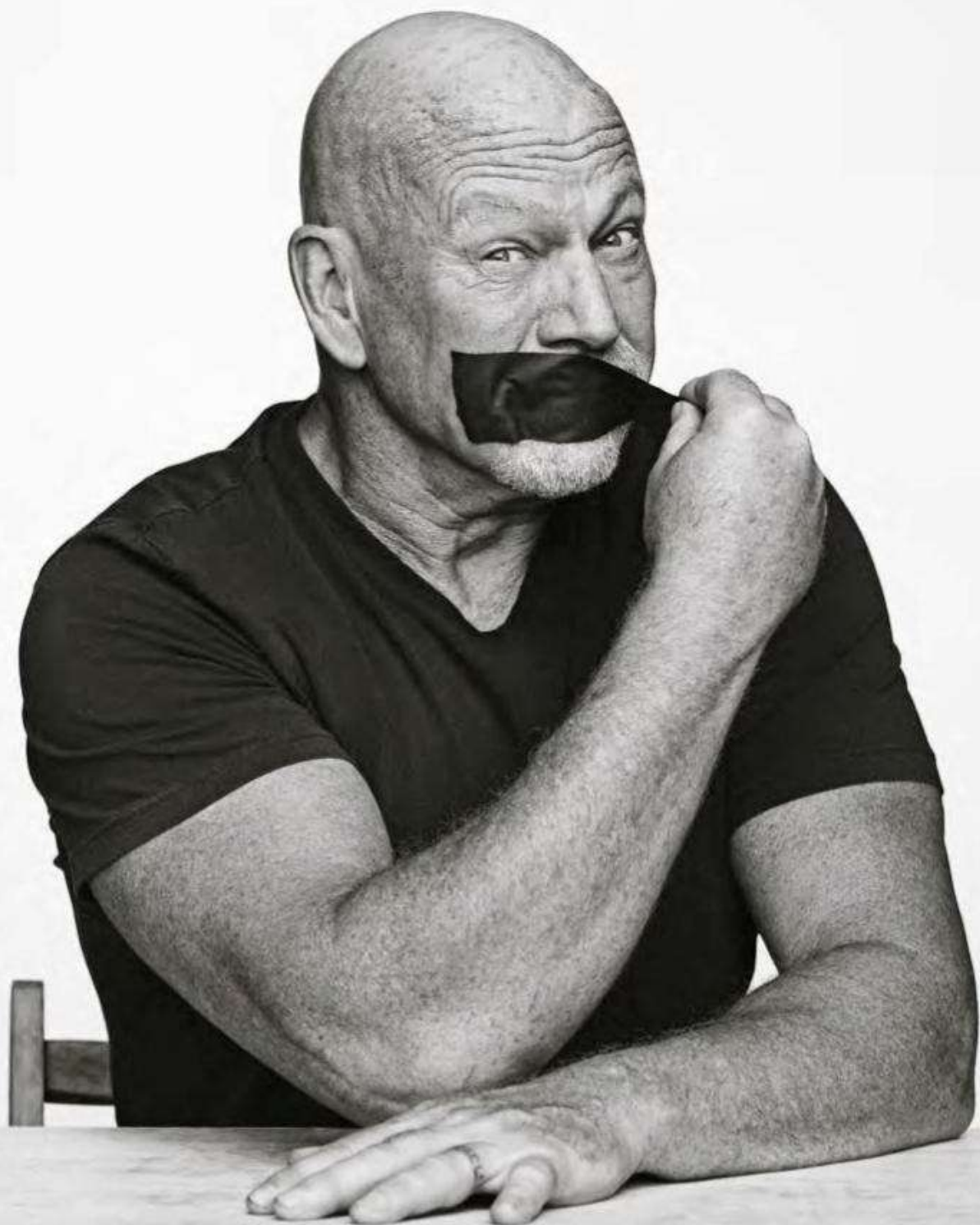
◀ **Some 200 Buddha** figures give the Khao Luang cave in Thailand an almost mystical atmosphere. Also worth seeing are the rock paintings and magnificent stalactites.

▶ **Glowworms** (*arachnocampa luminosa*) light up the Waipu Caves in Northland, New Zealand. Particularly convenient for visitors: the tiny creatures cavort near the entrance to the caves.

FOTOS:
PHOTOS: (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT) MARCEL GROSS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO;
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Subterranean Treasures







INTROSPECTION



THE SOUND OF SILENCE

*How shutting up for three months and walking nearly
1000 kilometres transformed my life*

By D.G. Marshall



FROM **TORONTO LIFE**

PHOTO: KATHERINE HOLLAND

As long as I can remember, my mouth has been getting me into trouble. Growing up, I would say anything to get a laugh, no matter how crude or cutting. I used the gift of the gab to get what I wanted from my parents (money, a later curfew) and to get out of what I didn't want (chores, groundings). I was asked to leave four different schools, mostly because I talked too much, and every one of my school reports said some variation of the same thing: I'd do much better if I would just shut up.

My mouth may have served me terribly as a student, but it set me up perfectly for a career in radio. In 2003, I launched a talk show on an AM station. I would ask people about their religious beliefs and the role faith played in their lives. In my 16 years hosting the show, I interviewed rabbis, nuns, witches, Wiccans and Satanist high priests, and had celebrities, politicians, religious leaders and spiritual gurus share the 'why' behind their beliefs.

I think the show succeeded because it engaged people who don't usually listen to religious radio – people like me. After growing up in a churchgoing household and eventually becoming a pastor, I slowly began to reject organised religion. Still, I was fascinated by others' beliefs.

Consumed by the need to understand the unknown, I travelled the world in search of answers. I prayed among ancient petroglyphs (rock art)

in Australia, slept at Stonehenge in England and wept at the Holocaust memorial in Jerusalem. I thought I'd find some divine truth if I visited all the sacred sites and interviewed every spiritual leader.

But the only truth I discovered was this: I was a selfish, egotistical, judgemental jerk. It hit me when I was close to turning 50 and almost every significant relationship in my life was in tatters. My wife of 28 years wanted a divorce. My kids weren't my biggest fans, and when I asked my daughter what I was doing wrong, she told me she didn't have enough time to explain it all.

I knew this much: the hunt for transcendence made me unbearable. I prioritised my radio-show guests, with whom I might spend an hour, over the people who meant the most to me. I was constantly tearing into anyone whom I perceived as less enlightened than I was. Profanity and

sarcasm were my default modes of communication. I drank too much and listened too little. I was miserable, as was everyone caught in my caustic orbit.

My school reports had been right – I'd do a lot better if I would just shut up. If my mouth was the root cause of my problems, maybe it was time to stop talking altogether.

Years earlier, I'd watched a movie called *The Way*, starring Martin Sheen. It followed the main character's journey along the Camino de Santiago, a series of 1200-year-old trails that converge on the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, in north-western Spain, where the remains of Saint James the Apostle are said to be buried.

So in 2016, I decided to take a three-month sabbatical from the radio show and walk the almost 1000-kilometre route without saying a single word. My plan was to finish the trek on my 50th birthday as a changed man.

When I arrived at the start of the Camino, in early October 2016, I was already worried that my quest was doomed. I was terrified that I'd accidentally speak, that my bum knees would prevent me from finishing the route, that even if I made it the whole way, I'd return home still a schmuck. Nonetheless, hungover from the night before, I walked out of the charming French town of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port and began my two-month journey.

D.G. Marshall in a moment of quiet contemplation



PHOTO: COURTESY OF D.G. MARSHALL



Marshall takes a break during his silent pilgrimage in Spain

The first stretch of trail was a steep incline into the Pyrenees, and my body hated every step. I quickly realised that my hiking boots were too narrow for my feet. My 13-kilogram backpack felt heavier with every stride. My knees started to creak, and sweat permeated my clothing.

One hour in, I wanted to give up. I don't know whether it was my ego or the goal of becoming a better person that propelled me forward. Either way, I kept walking.

Around the 12-kilometre mark, I trudged into the first *albergue*, one of hundreds of hostels along the Camino. The rustic abode, equipped with bunk beds and a rudimentary kitchen, was crawling with hikers speaking a potpourri of languages. It

was there that I began to understand that the physical challenge, excruciating as it was, would be far easier than the vow of silence.

When the hostel staff or fellow travellers spoke to me, I pointed to my mouth, mimed the act of talking with my hand and then slid my index finger across my neck. I could usually get what I wanted using improvised hand signals. (To ask for milk in my coffee, for instance, I pretended to milk a cow.) If that didn't get the point across, I'd show people a note on my phone: "Please forgive me for not talking. I'm travelling for three months in a vow of silence. You can still talk to me :)."

And people did. Along the Camino, I was joined by pilgrims from

Switzerland, Holland, Israel and Ireland. Some walked with me in silence; others shared their life stories. A gay man from Ireland told me about the rejection he'd experienced from his family. A woman shared her struggle to go on after the death of her child. I yearned to ask questions, to offer advice or condolences. But all I could do was awkwardly type out a few questions on my phone.

Yet I couldn't keep my judgemental side entirely in check. One morning, about a month into my trip, I woke up around 5.30 am, grabbed my pack and walked downstairs to the hostel lobby. There, I spotted a skinny, scruffy guy in his late 50s with his hair in a ponytail, staggering around and slurring his words. *Drunk before dawn? What's your problem, dude?* I didn't want him accompanying me on the trail, so I skipped breakfast and left.

Later that day, I checked out one of the many historic and architecturally stunning churches that dot the Camino. When I returned to the path, I heard a voice say, "Buen Camino," a common greeting among pilgrims. It was the guy I had tried to avoid. I smiled politely and hurried off, thinking I could outpace him. But three kilometres later, he was somehow still close behind me.

Finally, he yelled out to me, and though I feared I'd spend the rest of my day listening to the ramblings of a drunkard, I let him catch up. The man introduced himself as Nico and

explained that he had Lou Gehrig's disease. It had ravaged his nervous system to the point where he stumbled and slurred. He'd decided to tackle the Camino while his body would still let him. I felt awful.

BY OPENING MY HEART, I COULD ACTUALLY LIKE PEOPLE. AND BY CLOSING MY MOUTH, THEY COULD LIKE ME

Before the Camino, I had absurdly high standards for how a person should be, despite my own shortcomings. In my head, people were boring and predictable, and almost everyone fell into one of the many categories I'd devised: religious wack-jobs, arrogant show-offs, incense-burning virtue signallers, hopeless drunks and so on. Unless they had something to offer me – good looks, wealth, wisdom, a willingness to laugh at my jokes – I treated them as if they didn't exist.

Before I knew anything about Nico, I had pigeonholed him. I nearly deprived myself of a genuine human connection. Instead, we spent three days walking together. He told me about his life as a professional kickboxer, representing Germany internationally. I helped him fasten his

belt and do up his jacket. We developed a profound bond – the very thing my life was lacking. By the time we parted, it was obvious: by opening my ears and my heart, I could actually like people. And by closing my mouth, they could actually like me.

Most days followed a familiar rhythm. I'd rise before dawn, pack my bag, put on my jacket, lace up my boots and walk for six to 12 hours.

HOLDING ON TO MY REGRET WASN'T HELPING ME OR THE PEOPLE AROUND ME. I HAD TO LET IT GO

Every day was painful. One of my big toenails was black, and my pinky toes were calloused. My shoulders and back ached from the weight of my pack. Because of the orientation of the trail, the sun baked the left side of my face, which would leave me with long-term skin damage.

Still, there were moments of bliss. I was surrounded by endless golden fields, mountainous air and soul-shattering sunrises. I snaked through deserted country villages and rested in the pews of majestic cathedrals.

One morning, a little over half-way through my trip, I spotted the

Spanish city of León in the distance. For most pilgrims, León serves as a brief dose of civilisation, a place to sleep in a proper bed, to wine and dine, to visit a museum or gallery. For me, it was a reckoning: the city of 125,000 shared a name with my mother, Leone.

She and my father adopted me when I was an infant. They were a loving couple who ran a funeral home together and raised me and my sister in the apartment above the business. They were kind, patient people of integrity who gave back to their community.

Despite their love and affection, I could never shake the fear of rejection. I'd do anything for other people's approval. As a kid, I once accepted a dare to give a bag of multicoloured rocks to a developmentally challenged child and tell him they were pieces of chewing gum. It was just one of many times throughout my life that I'd done something for a laugh at someone else's expense.

I put my parents through hell. After Grade 9, I dropped out of school entirely. But I refused to get a job and even stole the funeral hearse for joyrides before I had my driver's licence. When my parents tried to discipline me, I would rage at them and run away from home.

Just after I turned 17, I left home for good to work on a farm. Despite receiving numerous letters from my mother, I never called or wrote back.



Marshall at the end of the route (left); at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela

Four years later, she died of pancreatic cancer. I didn't get to say goodbye.

By the time I was old enough to grasp how much pain I'd caused my mother, it was too late to apologise. That truth ate at me every day. I hated myself because of what I'd done, and that disdain emanated from me like a toxic cloud, infecting every relationship that followed.

Outside León, I continued along the trail past a cemetery, where I noticed an elderly lady carrying flowers to a gravestone. As I approached, her face broke into a warm smile. I was stunned. She looked exactly like my mother. "Buen Camino," she said, continuing on her way. I almost chased her down - to do what, I don't know. Even if I did speak, what would I say? *"You look just like my dead mother. Can I give you a hug?"*

I knew it couldn't be her, but the sight of her made me realise how much I missed my mother, how much I wished I could tell her I was sorry. I broke down in tears as pilgrims and cyclists passed me by.

A few days later, I came upon a monument called the Iron Cross. Compared to the elaborate ruins and ornate churches along the route, it was a remarkably ordinary structure: a metal cross atop a tall wooden post. At its base were tens of thousands of stones left by pilgrims. It's a Camino tradition to leave a rock, symbolising the unloading of a burden.

Knowing this, I'd brought one from home. I held it in my hand, thinking of the regret I'd carried with me since my mother's death. Nothing will ever excuse the way I treated her. But holding on to my regret wasn't

helping me or the people around me. I knew I had to let it go. Sobbing, I threw the stone on the pile and continued walking.

On November 30, 2016, I woke up at 3.30 am, buzzing with excitement. I was only a few kilometres from the end of my journey. Just as I had planned, it was my 50th birthday.

I SPOKE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN 90 DAYS. IN A CROAKY, UNEVEN VOICE, I APOLOGISED TO MY WIFE FOR EVERYTHING

My final destination was Cape Finisterre, on the west coast of Spain; its name means 'the end of the earth'. With less than an hour left in my 62-day hike, I wandered off the path to climb to a high point in the pre-dawn darkness. Sitting alone, I watched the sun inch above the horizon, casting the clouds in shades of pink and orange as fishing vessels began to leave the harbour. It was the most awe-inspiring sunrise I'd ever seen.

Climbing down from my perch, I soon arrived at a worn metre-tall stone marker denoting the end of the trail. An unfamiliar feeling swelled up inside me: pride. I had done it. My back was spasming with pain, and

my whole body throbbed, but I was elated. I'd overcome my fears, completed the journey and kept my vow of silence. I felt good about myself for the first time in a long time.

To cap off my trip, I'd arranged to spend a few weeks in a monastery on the Canary Islands, just off the western coast of Africa, silently writing and reflecting. The Camino was everything I'd hoped it would be. I had seen the good in humanity. I had shed my shell of negativity. And I had begun to make peace with the deep-seated pain that was preventing me from being the person I wanted to be.

What would the monastery reveal? This: one night, I awoke and realised that I needed to repair the most important relationship in my life. My marriage.

I met my wife when we were both 20. She got pregnant, so we got married. We weren't madly in love, at least not then, but we were bringing life into the world, so it felt like the right thing to do. We had a son, then a daughter a few years later, and we poured ourselves into our kids' lives, ferrying them to school and sport.

As they got older, my wife and I retreated into our jobs. She worked at a youth camp, and I had my radio show. By the time our kids were adults, we were sleeping in different rooms. Our love had gone cold.

When she turned 50 in early 2016, she went on a solo trip to Australia and did some reflection of her own.



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A blend of **luxury & comfort**. Our Emma Signature Bed is crafted with **premium fabrics, luxurious upholstery, and a padded headboard** for a timeless & classic look. It's also **quick & easy to assemble**, and was built with our **extra-strong EmmaFlex bed frame & FlexiSlats** for **strong support & ultimate pressure relief**.

Emma Foam Pillow

The first **All-Foam Customisable Pillow** made for all types of sleepers. It has **removable foam layers**, so you can easily adjust its height and comfort for the perfect sleep experience. It's also **non-toxic, naturally hypoallergenic, and easy to clean**: simply remove the cover and throw it in the wash.

Emma Comfort Mattress

An **All-Foam Mattress** designed by our Sleep Experts to bring comfort to the next level. Designed & built to give you **optimal support and pressure relief**, the Emma Comfort is **perfect for all types of sleepers**. It also comes with Emma's Zero Motion technology for **undisturbed sleep, a removable & machine-washable elastic mattress cover** with the perfect fit, and is certified by OEKO-TEX® Standard 100, ensuring that it's **safe for babies & toddlers**.

Emma.

Two weeks after she left, she sent me an email: she wanted out of our marriage. I was gutted, but I wasn't surprised. Yet before I left for the Camino, I had convinced her to stay.

Lying in the monastery bed, I shuddered at the thought of ever letting her slip away again. Despite our ups and downs, she was the person I needed most in the world. She tolerated me with saintly patience, and I loved her intensely for it. My worst mistake was that I'd neglected to show it.

After returning home that December, I spoke for the first time in 90 days. On Christmas Eve, in a croaky, uneven voice, I apologised for everything and asked my wife to remarry me. She said yes.

I wish I could tell you that was my happily-ever-after moment. That, after all my soul-searching, I restored all my relationships and never acted like a jerk again. But life isn't a Hallmark movie.

Months after my return, my wife explained that she'd felt ambushed by my sudden proposal. She hadn't wanted to bring me down from my Camino high, so she'd said yes. Not long after that conversation, she left. It felt like the end. But after a couple years of separation, we started going on dates again, and then we signed up for couples' therapy. We concluded that investing in a future together was worth a shot. Giving up after 36 years of shared history seemed too easy.

It took two years for me to realise that there was no squaring the new me with my old life. Returning to the radio show, I felt myself reverting to the irritable, judgemental person I once was. The more I talked, the more I yearned for the serenity of unplugging from everything, which the Camino had given me.

Eventually I decided that if I was truly dedicated to becoming a better person, I needed a radical, permanent change. I quit the radio show, got rid of my phone, abandoned my social media accounts and moved back in with my wife on a 40-hectare farm.

Silence is now a part of my daily life. I am perfectly happy sitting on our front porch, literally watching the corn grow. Four horses, seven dogs, 30 chickens and a donkey keep me company. When I crave social interaction, I ride my horse.

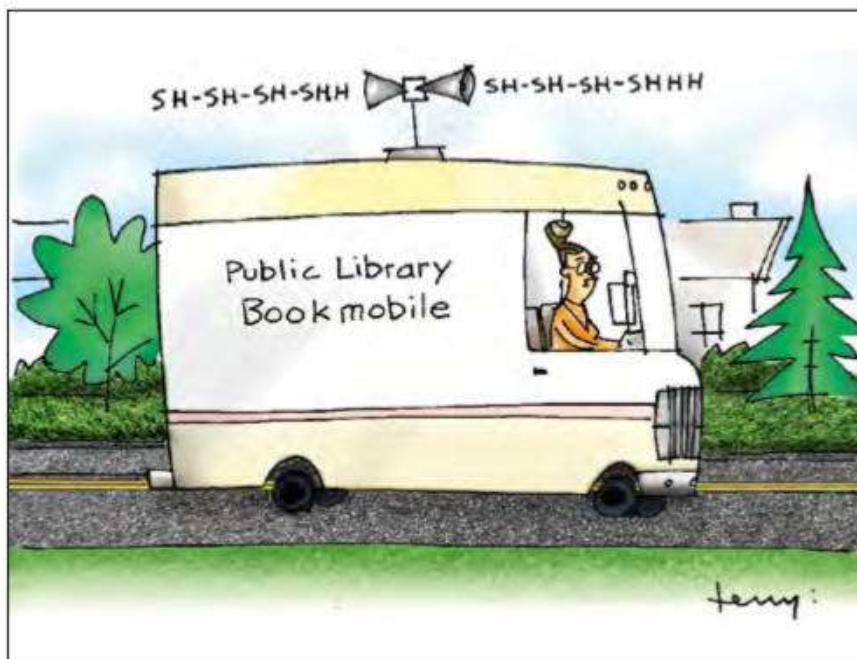
It still takes all my effort to keep my inner jerk at bay, and I fail often. But I've found a way to keep the lessons of the Camino close at hand through SOS Retreats. A couple of times a year, I welcome groups of people to the farm for a weekend during which they walk a 50-kilometre trail in silence. In the evenings, we relax and verbally debrief around the fire.

All I'm offering is a place to slow down, shut up and listen. Because I know that it's in the silence that the important stuff gets louder. **R**

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ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

Humour On The Job



Right Candidate, Wrong Job

Three of us peppered the job candidate with questions regarding an opening in our department. When we got to the end of the interview, we asked the candidate whether he had any questions for us.

He replied, "Yes, I have. What job am I interviewing for?"

SUBMITTED BY KARIN GREEN

Picking It Up

"Why are they stealing our rubbish?!" (My kid, horrified that the garbage men are doing their job.)

@MOMSENSE_ENSUES

Making Good Time

As a single mother, I found that getting the kids off to school and then driving 45 minutes to work was a struggle. Luckily, my boss was very forgiving. In fact, one day he greeted me with a cheerful smile, exclaiming, "Today's the earliest you've been late all week!"

SUBMITTED BY PAT SICHK

Paw-don Me

I was screensharing in a meeting and realised I had multiple tabs open searching "do cats feel love?"

@KATEWILLETT

Artistic Bent

On the first day of school, I asked each of the kids in my Year One class to say what they wanted to be when they grew up. One boy said "artist".

"Oh, that's wonderful!" I gushed. "What kind?"

He replied, "Con."

SUBMITTED BY SARA LIDTKE

Masters Of The Universe

I was walking near New York's Wall Street and popped into a delicatessen. I ordered a sandwich and chatted with the owner. I asked whether being in the financial district ever led to his getting valuable stocks and shares tips from his informed customers.

He paused. "Every day, those brokers come in here," he said. "They get their bagels, sandwiches, doughnuts, coffee ..."

He pointed towards the door of his shop. "And every day, they're out there on the footpath, pushing and shoving on a door that is clearly marked 'pull'."

STEVEN SCHARFF, IN *THE NEW YORK TIMES*

Working Between Christmas And New Year?

Ohhhh sorry, I thought EOD meant End of December. My bad. Sending now.

@WORKRETIREDIE

The week between Christmas and New Year's Eve is the longest Sunday of the year.

@EMILY_TWEETS

My favourite time in December is when everyone sort of wordlessly agrees, "OK, well, work-wise that's pretty much it for me this year. I'll see you all in January." @SHEASERRANO

FLY THE CHATTY SKIES

"Hi, I'm Captain Amanda Smith. Yes, I'm a female pilot and, as a benefit, if we get lost on the way I won't be afraid to stop and ask for directions."

"I've just been informed that my mother-in-law has passed through security and will be boarding this flight shortly. If you all sit down fast, we should be able to get out of here before she arrives."

"Most of you already have your seat belts fastened. Now we will demonstrate how you did that."

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'd like to share some words with you that my father shared with me when I turned 18: pack your bags and get out."

"Please return your seats to their upright and most uncomfortable position."

SOURCE: BORED PANDA





HOW'S YOUR LIVER FEELING?

*Up to one in three people have fatty liver disease.
But many of them have no idea*

BY *Lisa Bendall*

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **STUART BRIERS**

By the summer of 2019, Jackson Griffiths, then 42 years old, had been feeling tired and lethargic, off and on, for about five years. Yet nothing had been flagged as abnormal in medical check-ups.

But then the holiday company executive based in London suddenly developed swelling and a rash on his legs. This time, after running tests, Jackson's doctor informed him he had type 2 diabetes.

Over the next months, as he adjusted to the diagnosis by learning to test his blood sugar and keep it steady by eating more regularly, his doctor sent him for more tests. They were looking for conditions that often crop up in people with diabetes, such as heart disease and liver or kidney problems.

In early 2021, after an ultrasound of his liver to check for fat and scarring, followed by a liver biopsy, Jackson got some alarming news: He had something called non-alcoholic fatty liver disease (NAFLD). With this condition, the organ damage looks similar to that caused by heavy drinking, but the actual cause is steatosis – a build-up of excess fat in the liver so that it accounts for more than five to ten per cent of the organ's weight.

NAFLD progresses in stages. A fat build-up (stage one) triggers

inflammation (stage two), which, over many years can cause scarring (stage three), also known as fibrosis. The scarring interferes with normal liver function. If a high amount of scar tissue and nodules form, making the liver harder, it's classified as cirrhosis, or stage four. Cirrhosis carries a high risk of liver cancer and can eventually lead to liver failure, which necessitates an organ transplant.

Jackson, who had never been a heavy drinker, was at stage three, with significant scarring of his liver, and was well on his way to reaching the threshold for cirrhosis. "I was in such shock that I didn't register what the specialist was telling me," he recalls. When he asked the doctor if it was a long-term condition, the answer was yes. "I thought, *I'm in trouble here. I'm not going to get better.*"

It was only when Jackson reached out to the charitable organisation British Liver Trust for support that he learned he could gradually reverse some of the damage if he made lifestyle changes and lost weight. "I realised that I had to do something," he says.

Jackson didn't always eat well or exercise, so he was overweight; he'd hovered around 130 kilograms since his mid-20s. He consulted a dietitian to learn about healthy eating and added new foods to his diet, like quinoa, kimchi and wild salmon. He began walking in the park and swimming. He even connected with a

How's Your Liver Feeling?

therapist to help him handle work-related stress. Jackson lost more than 15 kilograms in the year following his diagnosis. He also began participating in online support groups, where he could talk with other people living with NAFLD. "That has helped me deal with the diagnosis," he says. "It's comforting and it's grounding."

ORGANS GET FAT, TOO

A diagnosis of NAFLD usually comes as a surprise to patients, says Dr Eline Wouters-van den Berg, a researcher and resident in gastroenterology and hepatology at the University Medical Centre Groningen in the Netherlands.

"Everybody knows there's an obesity epidemic, but people don't know that organs also get fat."

The liver is particularly susceptible because, among its many functions, it makes and stores fats. When we take in too many kilojoules while sedentary, it creates an imbalance, causing fat in the liver to build up, which can lead to the organ's inflammation. That can result in scarring and cirrhosis.

"I was a comfort eater," acknowledges Jackson, who habitually reached for cake or sugary soft drinks during times of stress. Besides obesity, metabolic conditions such as

type 2 diabetes and high levels of triglycerides (a type of fat that can be measured in a blood test) are strongly associated with fatty liver. The list of risk factors also includes high blood pressure, high cholesterol and sleep apnoea.

While fatty liver disease was once an uncommon diagnosis, it's been skyrocketing as obesity rates have risen globally. Data from 17 countries, collected for a study published in *The Lancet Gastroenterology and Hepatology* in 2022, estimated that the prevalence rate of NAFLD rose



READER'S DIGEST

by more than 12 per cent from 2005 to 2016.

Today, the condition affects as much as one third of the adult population, with the highest rates showing up in countries where obesity is common. According to current estimates, as many as one billion people worldwide have NAFLD. And many of them never realise it.

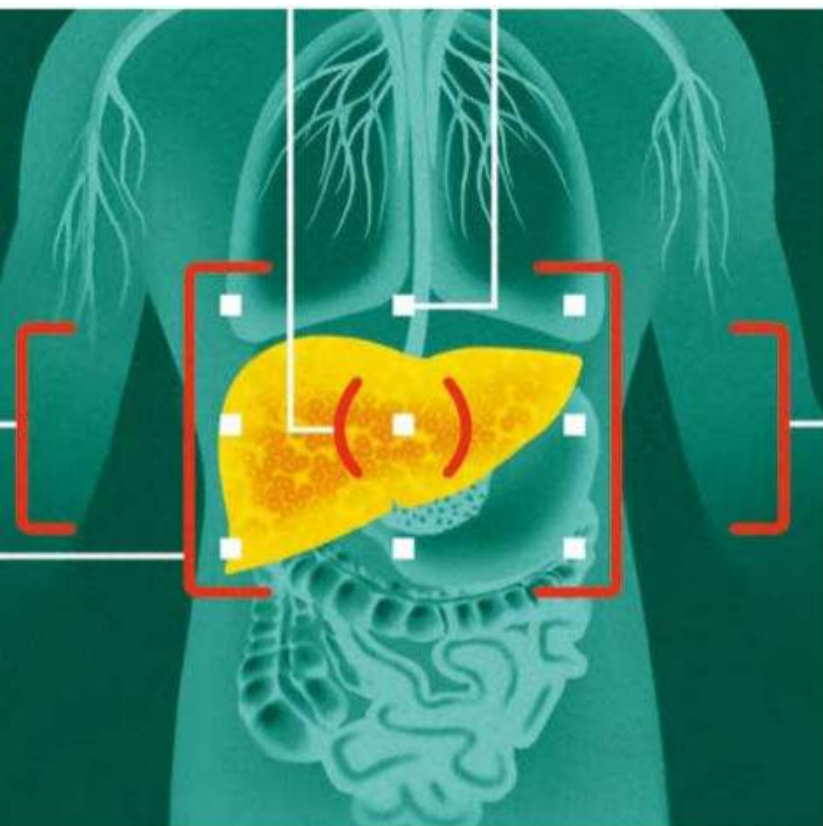
Not everyone with stage-one NAFLD will go on to develop scarring and worsening liver disease, however. Estimates range widely, from three to 40 per cent, depending on the population being studied. And although researchers have uncovered a few clues, they still don't know exactly how to

identify the people most at risk of developing cirrhosis.

Genetics can play a role, says Dr Hannes Hagström, a researcher in the epidemiology of NAFLD and a consultant in hepatology at Karolinska University Hospital in Sweden. "For instance, there are mutations of a particular gene that tend to be associated with a higher degree of liver fat," he says. This might help explain 'lean NAFLD', the ten per cent of people with the condition who aren't obese. Drinking alcohol, even in moderate amounts, can aggravate NAFLD in someone already at elevated risk.

But there's another significant reason that not everyone with NAFLD is destined for liver failure: those who have it are at 37 per cent greater risk than average for cardiovascular events like stroke or heart attack, which are more likely to kill you first since liver disease advances slowly. Says Dr Hagström, "It can take 20 years or more for someone with NAFLD to develop cirrhosis."

It's not clear whether NAFLD worsens cardiovascular disease or vice versa – or whether these conditions just share a lot of the same risk factors. In fact, they're so interconnected that



many experts now prefer to call the condition 'metabolic associated fatty liver disease', or MAFLD.

HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU HAVE IT?

Even if it takes decades to reach end-stage liver disease, NAFLD takes a toll over those years. "These patients have a measurable impairment in quality of life. They do not feel as well," says Dr Jörn Schattenberg, who practises gastroenterology and hepatology at the Mainz University Medical Centre in Germany. "They are also less productive and are absent from work more often."

Since an early diagnosis can provide an opportunity to heal some of the damage, and even be lifesaving, it's critical the condition doesn't go undiscovered. Unfortunately, symptoms may be silent or non-specific in the early stages of inflammation: a bit of fatigue, maybe, or a vague ache in the upper right abdomen. "Anybody can have those symptoms," says Dr Schattenberg. "If you have left-sided chest pain, you think it's a heart attack. But when it's right-sided discomfort, and a little tiredness, very few people will think of liver disease."

Unlike other illnesses, there's no routine screening for NAFLD. And while it may be straightforward to figure out who is likely to have a fatty liver based on risk factors like their waist circumference, cholesterol levels and blood pressure, traditionally the only

definitive way to assess the disease has been a biopsy. But extracting a liver sample with a needle to check for fat content, inflammation and damage is costly and invasive. It can lead to serious complications like bleeding – and can even be inaccurate.

"Biopsy isn't a feasible approach for large-scale screening, especially given the high prevalence of the disease," says Dr Michele Vacca, who works at the Roger Williams Institute of Hepatology at London's Foundation for Liver Research.

One non-invasive option is imaging. In wide use only within the last ten years, a specialised ultrasound, sold under the brand name FibroScan, can evaluate the level of liver scarring and track its progress. This is the test that led to Jackson's diagnosis.

Another exciting new area of diagnostics involves looking for biomarkers in a non-invasive way: through patterns that show up on MRIs and in blood and urine, for instance, and which have the potential to provide more precise information. This field has become more high-tech in recent years, with machines that can analyse specific molecules.

Many researchers around the world, including Dr Vacca and his colleague in London, Dr I. Jane Cox, are on the hunt for biomarkers that could not only assess the stage of damage but also reliably predict who is likely to develop serious disease, or could benefit from a future drug treatment.

READER'S DIGEST

Dr Cox says identifying NAFLD early would have significant benefits. "Timely diagnosis, ideally by a simple blood test or urine dipstick test, might allow the patient to clear excess fat from their liver with changes in diet and exercise."

She adds that even though their research requires expensive equipment, it may eventually lead to a cheap urine test that could be widely used in under-resourced areas.

HOW YOU CAN STOP IT

Aside from lifestyle changes, there are some promising pharmacological treatments being tested, says Dr Vacca. But only bariatric surgery (also called gastric bypass surgery) has proven to slow the disease's progression. It's a major step – one that some people choose so they can limit the amount of food they eat.

A 2021 US study found that in NAFLD patients with liver fibrosis who underwent bariatric surgery, the risk for advanced liver disease was reduced by 12.4 per cent over the next ten years. That's almost as much as it was reduced for serious cardiovascular events (13.9 per cent).


For Griffiths, despite his weight loss in 2021, he ended up gaining some of it back. "I lost my discipline and focus," he admits. So he had the surgery in early 2023. He lost 22 kilograms in the first five weeks after the operation, and is hopeful that weight loss will keep his liver condition under control.

While there is no drug for treating or curing NAFLD, researchers are experimenting with new drug therapies that block the ability of fat to cause cell damage, slow the formation of fibrosis and control inflammation. Although a handful of medications are in phase 2 or 3 clinical trials, none has been approved yet for treating NAFLD. It's a slow-moving disease, so it takes time to prove that an experimental treatment may save lives.

But, Dr Schattenberg notes, "even if there were a drug, you wouldn't want to treat someone with it if you could use a less invasive and better measure – like adopting a healthy lifestyle."

Currently, that's the best advice for newly diagnosed individuals: focus on losing weight, eating healthy foods and exercising. It's also a good idea to reduce or eliminate drinking.

Because better nutrition and regular exercise lead to weight loss – ideally in a gradual process, since there is some evidence that rapid weight loss can worsen the disease for reasons not fully understood – the fat imbalance in the liver will also improve, and the inflammation will heal.

"Even a small amount of weight loss could lead to significant decrease of fat, or even scarring, in the liver," says Dr Wouters-van den Berg. "A weight loss of ten per cent, which isn't a lot, has a higher than ten per cent effect on liver fat reduction, and will help tremendously. That's important to know." 



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QUIZ

**WHAT WOULD
THE WORLD BE WITHOUT
PAPER?**

*Test your knowledge of one
of humankind's most
indispensable materials*

BY Karin Schätzle

QUESTIONS

1 Cave walls, stone tablets and animal skins: before the invention of paper, man used all kinds of materials to write or paint on. Who is considered to be the inventor of paper as we know it today?

- a) Cai Lun, a Chinese court official around 100 CE
- b) Darius, a Persian Great King around 420 BCE
- c) Archimedes, a Greek scientist around 500 BCE
- d) Yax Nuun Ahiin, a Mayan King around 380 CE

2 Paper is a precious commodity. Its production requires large amounts of energy, water and fibre. The latter usually comes from wood. Which trees are preferred for paper production?

- a) Deciduous trees
- b) Palm trees
- c) Tropical woods
- d) Coniferous trees

3 What is the difference between paper and cardboard? Cardboard is ...

- a) thicker than paper
- b) heavier for the same size
- c) recycled paper
- d) made from straw

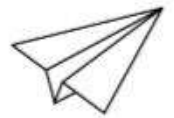
4 If you're sensible, you'll check whether there is any toilet paper left in the cubicle before using a public toilet. In 1890, US business the Scott Paper Company made an

important contribution to the development of this important hygiene product. It came up with the idea of paper ...

- a) wound on rolls
- b) manufactured in multiple layers
- c) that could fit in a dispenser
- d) in a bleached version

5 When computers began to enter offices en masse, some experts predicted the paperless office. That's not what happened. Paper consumption in the world is enormous: in 1970, around 130 million tonnes of paper was produced around the globe. To date, this figure has more than ...

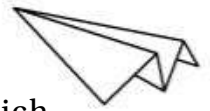
- a) doubled
- b) tripled
- c) quadrupled
- d) increased ten-fold



6 The most expensive piece of paper measures just 3.2 by 2.5 centimetres. It last changed hands at auction in 2021 for US\$8.3 million. What was it?

- a) Leonardo da Vinci's sketch of a flea
- b) a gold-leaf corner torn from a medieval text
- c) a thumbprint of Marilyn Monroe
- d) the British Guiana 1-cent magenta stamp

7 Fold a sheet of paper and you have an airworthy object. This children's game is pursued with a passion by some adults, such as the three men who hold the world record



for the longest distance flight of a paper aeroplane they built themselves. How far did their construction fly?

- a) 23.77 metres, the length of a tennis court
- b) 50 metres, the length of an Olympic swimming pool
- c) 88.3 metres, almost the length of a hockey field
- d) 100 metres, the length of a football (soccer) field

8 In Japan, paper folding – or origami – is a revered art form. A particularly popular motif is the crane. According to Japanese folklore, making a *senbazuru*, or 1000 cranes, is a wish for ...

- a) health, long life and peace
- b) good luck in love
- c) wealth
- d) respect

9 Paper was introduced to Europe in the 11th century. In 1221, Frederick II, a Holy Roman Emperor, forbade its use for important documents. Why did he want important documents to continue to be made of parchment (animal skin)?

- a) He had a monopoly on parchment production
- b) At that time, paper was susceptible to insect damage
- c) Parchment caught fire less easily
- d) He was allergic to paper

Origami is a cherished art form in Japan

10 The metal from which coins are minted has value in itself. Banknotes, on the other hand, have only face value. It was – and is – all the more important for banknotes to be counterfeit-proof. This is why many currencies have watermarks printed into their banknotes. These translucent images in the paper are ...

- a) printed with light-binding ink
- b) milled out after production
- c) embossed during paper production
- d) can resist damage

11 What would writers in times past be if they didn't have paper to record their thoughts on? Which famous author said, "My aim is to put what I see and feel on paper in the best and simplest way."?

- a) Ernest Hemingway
- b) Franz Kafka
- c) Rainer Maria Rilke
- d) Jane Austen

PHOTO: ANASTASIANI/GETTY IMAGES



ANSWERS

what makes this tiny piece of paper extremely valuable.

7c) For more than four months, Dillon Ruble practised throwing the paper aeroplane that he constructed together with Nathaniel Erickson and Garrett Jensen. On their record attempt, December 2, 2022, their construction flew 88.3 metres.

8a) The crane can symbolise health, long life and peace. *Senbazuru* cranes are often folded as a wish for world peace.

9b) In the 13th century, paper was coated with rice starch, which aided ink absorption but also attracted insects. These feasted on the starch, destroying the paper in the process.

10c) A watermark on a banknote will become visible when the banknote is held up to the light because the fibre layer of that part of the paper is deliberately thinner. Paper manufacturers can achieve this by pressing a shape corresponding to the mark into the paper web, which has not yet solidified.

11a) This quote comes from Ernest Hemingway. The 1954 Nobel Prize winner for literature was famous for his terse, laconic style.

1a) Cai Lun, a Chinese court official, is considered the inventor of paper. He is said to have used pieces of discarded cloth, scraps of fishing nets and tree bark for it. People from China were quick to realise how valuable Cai Lun's invention was and began using the material many centuries before the rest of the world.

2d) Coniferous trees are mainly used for paper production. Their long fibres add strength to the finished product.

3b) Paper and cardboard are made from the same basic materials. They differ only in weight. Paper can be as light as a feather, while a square metre of cardboard weighs at least 600 grams.

4a) The Scott Paper Company was the first to come up with the idea of winding toilet paper onto rolls. Individually wrapped to camouflage the 'shameful' product, it became a bestseller.

5b) Today, more than 400 million tonnes of paper are produced worldwide. The quantity has therefore more than tripled.

6d) Only one copy of the British Guiana 1-cent magenta stamp is known to exist. That is



HEART & SOUL

This bustling metropolis will woo you with its melting pot of futuristic architecture, ancient culture and natural beauty

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY *Diane Godley*

Two weeks in Seoul, South Korea's bustling capital, is just not enough time to explore all it has to offer. With ancient temples, palaces and fortress walls rubbing shoulders with sparkling contemporary architecture, exquisite mountain landscapes, parks and forests, plus pumping nightlife and outdoor markets galore, Seoul really has something for everyone.

Founded as the capital of the unified Korean peninsula in 1394, Seoul sits in a basin and is surrounded by four low mountains, which provided a natural defence to the fledgling kingdom. To reinforce this defence, several years into the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) construction started on a wall along the mountain ridges. Much of the fortifications remain today (some have been rebuilt) and are a magnet for tourists.



UNESCO World Heritage listed Changdeokgung, said to be the most beautiful of the five palaces

On our first day in Seoul, we decided to do something cultural and headed to Gwanghwamun Square and Gyeongbokgung – the largest of the five remaining *gung* or palaces in Seoul – where the history of the Joseon Dynasty began. We were going to take a bus from our hotel in the central district of Myeongdong, but there was such a vibrant atmosphere when we stepped onto the street, we decided to walk. Sejong-daero, the main thoroughfare that passes City Hall and leads to Gwanghwamun Square,

was festooned with colourful lanterns – and being a Sunday, the mood was positively festive. We discovered later that many streets and temples across the country are decked out with the lanterns and other decorations during April and May to celebrate Buddha's birthday.

From Gwanghwamun Square – a public space that boasts statues of King Sejong (creator of Hangeul, the Korean alphabet) and Admiral Yi Sunshin – the palace and Blue House (which, up until last year served as the official residence of the president) can be clearly seen, with Bugaksan mountain making a striking backdrop.

Entry into each of the palaces is a tiny 3000 won or around \$3, but if you hire a *hanbok*, traditional Korean clothing, you can get in for free. To our delight, lots of people, locals and tourists alike, embrace the idea of dressing up so we felt like we were on the set of a Netflix period K-drama. Security guards at Gyeongbokgung also dress in colourful historical costumes, as do tour guides who give free tours in several languages. Looking towards the north from inside the palace grounds, Bugaksan and Inwangsan, the two highest northern mountains,

loom close by. Turn 180 degrees and the view is of a sparkling cityscape with Namsan (south mountain) and Seoul Tower in the background.

During my stay, I visited two other palaces, the UNESCO World Heritage listed Changdeokgung and Deoksugung, located across from City Hall. Built in 1405 as a secondary royal residence to the main palace, Changdeokgung is the best-preserved palace of the Joseon Dynasty and is where royalty spent the most time. To the rear of the palace is a secret garden dotted with pavilions for contemplating and writing poetry, a library for learning, ponds for fishing, as well as royal residences. Entry to the secret garden is separate from the palace and needs to be booked online as only a limited number of people are admitted each day.

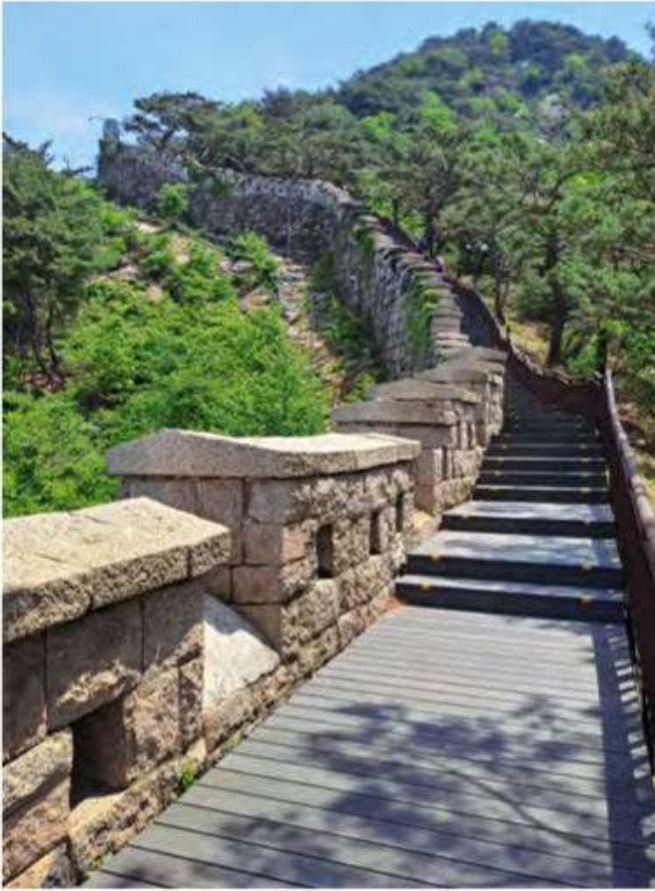
If you don't have time to visit all the palaces, make sure the changing of the guards in front of Deoksugung's main gate is on your to-do list. Performed every day at 11am, the colourful display takes about 20 minutes. From there, stroll along the stonewall walkway the runs alongside the palace. Selected as one of the 100 most beautiful roads in Korea, it is also a popular location for Korean dramas.

On the bus ride back to our

hotel, we missed our stop. But we didn't have any misgivings because we stumbled upon Myeongdong market – streets upon streets heaving with people selling street food, such as *tteokbokki* (rice cakes in a spicy sauce), chicken skewers, dumplings, corn dogs and *hotteok* (Korean pancakes). On every corner people were selling hundreds of types of socks for between \$1 and \$2 – make sure you bring home a pair or ten – as well as souvenirs. At night, fairy lights thread through the laneways and it

Visitors to Gyeongbokgung dressed in *hanbok*, traditional Korean clothing





The ascent up Seoul's highest mountain, Bugaksan, takes you along the fortress wall

is even busier than during the day. Dozens of outdoor markets are found around the capital, but Myeongdong is a good place to start for a taste of Seoul.

The next day we embraced the great outdoors and walked along the fortress wall that snakes up Bugaksan. Rising steeply to a 342-metre summit, it is the highest of Seoul's four guardian peaks and has a difficulty rating of medium – I'm guessing seasoned mountain climbers provided this rating. Bugaksan is part of a

military reserve, therefore it is completely off limits after sunset and photography is limited to a few designated spots. You may think them paranoid, but in 1968, North Korean agents attempted to assassinate the then president sparking a gun fight on the mountain. A tree that was hit by several bullet holes is one of the trail's exhibits.

Several paths can be taken from the summit to descend the mountain, and I think we took the steepest (just happy we were going down and not up like some of the flustered people we passed). At the foot of the mountain we were close to Bukchon Hanok Village. Situated between the two main palaces, it is packed with some 900 traditional Korean houses (*hanok*) that were

originally lived in by the royal family and aristocrats but today are the residences of your average Seoulite. Retaining much of the appearance of the old city, it is a tourist magnet.

A holiday in Seoul wouldn't be complete without the surreal trip to the DMZ (DeMilitarised Zone between North and South Korea). These can be booked online around three months before you intend to visit. Dozens of buses travel to the DMZ every day. Our bus with Korridor Tours left Seoul at 7am in the

morning and reached our first destination around 8.30am – yes, Seoul really is that close to the border, less than 40 kilometres in fact.

The highlights of the DMZ were the third tunnel and the Observatory Deck. The third tunnel is one of four dug across the border by North Koreans trying to infiltrate the South. As part of the DMZ experience, tourists get to walk through the third tunnel that the South discovered (hence the name) until you reach a wall, which indicates you've reached North Korea. Claustrophobic people may want to think twice about doing this though, as we had to stoop for a good section of the tunnel and hard hats were provided to protect against knocks to the head.

Our guide delighted in regaling the story about how the North Koreans spent all their time and energy digging the tunnel for nefarious purposes only for the South to reap financial rewards by using it as a tourist destination.

The Observatory Deck was another bizarre experience. From atop the tower, binoculars are lined up so voyeuristic tourists can get a glimpse of North Koreans going about their daily lives. Through the

binoculars I could see people working in a rice field, and others walking and cycling around a village. It was all a bit surreal; they seemed so near, yet totally out of reach.

The trip back to Seoul took us west along the border with North Korea before turning south. Separated by the Han River, we looked through the barbed wire fencing to an agricultural setting, which contrasted starkly with the industrialised and high density living south of the border. **R**

The great naval commander Admiral Yi Sunshin (1545-1598) watching over Gwanghwamun Square





BONUS READ

*Lek Chailert's sanctuary in Thailand
is home to pachyderms that have
suffered unspeakable abuse at the
hands of their former owners*

Her Gift *To The* Elephants

BY Douglas Anthony Cooper



In the mountainous jungles

of northern Thailand, I am being assaulted by a baby elephant. Her trunk has searched my pocket and, finding nothing of worth, is now bent on stealing the camera hanging around my neck. If this two year old were any larger, the mugging would likely succeed, but Pyi Mai is only one metre tall and 230 kilograms. I've met larger ponies. Her delinquent trunk does, however, manage to coat my lens with elephant slobber.

I am at Elephant Nature Park (ENP), a sanctuary that is home to 118 elephants, ranging from the adorable to the heartbreaking. ENP has rescued the adults from appalling situations: some are crippled, some blind; almost all are traumatised. They are now, unquestionably, happier than they have ever been.

The city of Chiang Mai, 100 kilometres south of ENP, is blessed with exquisite temples and sees as many as seven million tourists a year. ENP is an easy day trip for those who wish to experience living, trumpeting versions of the creatures they've seen carved into the ancient architecture here.

Chiang Mai has also become a favourite hub for digital nomads, which was my prime reason for visiting: to see whether it might be a good place to spend a few years writing my next novel. I thought I might check out co-working spaces and cafés. I did not

imagine I would be converted into an apostle for an elephant sanctuary.

This institution and its many satellites are the life's work of Saengduean 'Lek' Chailert. Her tireless efforts to improve the lot of Asian elephants turned her into an international celebrity more than two decades ago, despite her humble beginnings; she is from a hill tribe, and was at that time the only female from her village ever to attend school. Chailert was named a Ford Foundation 'Hero of the Planet' in 2001. *Time* magazine declared her a 'Hero of Asia' in 2005. And in 2010, she was identified as one of six 'Woman Heroes of Global Conservation'.

Today, her international non-profit Save Elephant Foundation (SEF) is even more influential. It's been directly involved in the rescue and rehabilitation of about 200 elephants. During the pandemic it supported nearly ten times that many across Thailand - helping feed them, offering medical services and improving their living conditions.

Chailert, 61, is known to everyone by her nickname, Lek, which means 'tiny' in Thai slang; she is about 1.52 metres tall. She has devoted her life to the plight of the Asian elephant, the world's second-largest land animal. The only one larger is another pachyderm, the African

Her Gift To The Elephants

savannah elephant, which belongs to a separate genus. The Asian elephant has smaller ears, its head is topped with two prominent domes, and its trunk has only one prehensile finger-like extension, instead of two. They are equally magnificent.

Lek is a humble, soft-spoken woman, with angular features and oversized glasses. In English, which isn't her first language, she tells me that her work to save Thailand's national animal started when she was 16 and

in secondary school. An encounter with elephants in the logging industry changed her life.

"When I went to see the elephants work very hard in the jungle, I saw one bull get abused, beaten badly. Every time he pulled a giant log, he is screaming. And when he look at me, the eyes, that screaming noise..." she points to her temple. "It is difficult to get that out."

She decided to help him, and returned to the logging site with

Elephants develop strong bonds with family and herd members



PHOTO: DOUGLAS ANTHONY COOPER

medicine for the bull's infections. "I asked the owner, 'Why the old elephant still work? Why the blind elephant still forced to work? When they will go to rest?' And the owner said, 'When they die.'"

Lek's initial goal was modest: to rescue only that bull elephant. She wanted to bring him to her home and release him, "to let him play with the mud bath, give him his final time with freedom, dignity." She eventually saved enough money to buy him, but when she returned to the logging site she learned that he had died. Her goal changed: to save all the mistreated elephants in Asia.

FEW REALISE THAT TO MAKE AN ELEPHANT DOCILE ENOUGH TO DO TRICKS, YOU HAVE TO BREAK IT MENTALLY

"And I decided to create our place, not just to rescue elephants, but to educate people, raise awareness, bring more voice."

'Bringing more voice' is critical. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that Thailand had roughly 200,000 Asian elephants at the beginning of the 20th century, half of them domesticated, half of them wild. Today - mostly due

to humans destroying their habitat - perhaps 3800 captive elephants remain, and most experts estimate some 3000 roam free.

Working elephants were integral to the country's teak logging, but when that industry was banned in 1989, their owners looked for a new use for them. They often penned the elephants in camps where tourists could pet and ride them, as well as watch them ride tricycles, manipulate hula hoops and throw basketballs.

Few tourists realise that to make an elephant docile enough to do tricks, you have to break the animal mentally. Called *phajaan* in Thai, this involves beatings with sharp objects like the bullhook (a steel staff with a hooked end). Torture, essentially.

When the pandemic hit, tourism ground to a halt and owners found themselves with giant creatures they couldn't afford to feed. Many elephants starved to death. Pyi Mai and another baby, Chaba - her best friend - were captive at a camp where tourists could ride older elephants, and where the animals put on shows including bike riding. It also had a breeding programme, and the mothers were so emaciated they could barely produce milk.

Their owners would certainly not have entrusted them to ENP before the pandemic. Most people in the elephant business have resented Lek's advocacy; she'd drawn international attention to its cruel practices.

During the lockdown, however, ENP established a food bank. At one point it was feeding almost 2000 elephants, more than half of Thailand's captive population.

The crisis offered an unexpected opportunity: Lek and her people were now aiding businesses that had long considered ENP the enemy. It was a window for diplomacy, and – with gentle prodding – attitudes began to change in the camps.

The two baby elephants and their mothers were at last freed to join ENP, where they have established a small herd. Unrelated female elephants often babysit and develop strong bonds with another elephant's calf; Pyi Mai and Chaba now have their own pachyderm nanny, D-Max.

They also have room to wander, which is essential to an elephant's health. The 81-hectare sanctuary concentrates on rescuing injured and abused creatures that could never survive in the wild. They have wounds that won't heal, problems with mobility, incapacitating psychological issues. The aim is to treat their ailments and provide them with a life that's as close as possible to what they would have experienced had it not been for humans.



Lek Chailert with Pyi Mai

Within the sanctuary, a slow, wide river divides an impossibly green jungle, and in the less wild areas you find odd impositions upon nature: a miniature Stonehenge, for instance, which turns out to be a monolithic back-scratching station. The elephants like to rub up against the rough stones as they consume astonishing quantities of watermelons, bananas and sugarcane during scheduled lunches. Other items rarely found in the wild are a massive scale for weighing elephants, and a giant artificial hydrotherapy pool where disabled elephants can work on movement. The weightlessness they experience in the pool is a relief for legs accustomed to supporting several tonnes.



Chedi Chang Lom ('temple surrounded by elephants'), Chiang Mai; Sarai Mia at Cambodia Wildlife Sanctuary

Tourists are not allowed to touch the creatures (Pyi Mai chose to make contact with me), but there's often no barrier between humans and elephants. Even the volunteers have only minimal contact; necessary hands-on work is restricted to staff and medical personnel. For a time ENP allowed humans to bathe the animals, but elephants really don't require bath attendants; they just trundle into the river. The point is to let them be elephants.

A captive elephant in Thailand typically experiences torture and

humiliation, gruelling labour and separation from its family. Their complex psychology and social behaviour are callously disregarded. It used to be common, for instance, to take baby elephants into the city as props to aid in begging. Many of these elephants would never see their mothers again. Yet in the wild, a baby is never far from its mother, and a female stays with the matriarchal herd for life.

Lek Chailert is changing this, despite some venomous opposition – including online harassment and

PHOTOS: DOUGLAS ANTHONY COOPER

even death threats – from people wedded to the old barbaric ways.

Her influence has spread across Thailand, and is reaching into Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Myanmar.

I meet a Nepalese family here who have been running an elephant safari in Nepal; a former volunteer from ENP told them about Lek's revolution, and they want to convert their operation to an ethical sanctuary. They've come here to see these principles in action.

ENP is not restricted to pachyderms alone. The team also cares for 100 water buffalo, 150 wild boars, 130 cows, 30 goats, a 'kingdom of cats' – approximately 2000 of them – and 650 dogs, 50 of them disabled, many rescued from Bangkok during severe floods in 2011.

The sanctuary has three veterinarians who specialise in elephants, six general vets and a posse of veterinary nurses. They're experimenting with elephant prosthetics and other devices: I'm shown a fibreglass contraption that they hope will stabilise an injured knee. ENP is working on a fully equipped elephant hospital and plans to complete it in 2024.

The volunteers I encounter – from Australia, the USA and the UK – are impressively cheerful and range from their teens to their 90s. Everyone dines communally in a rustic open pavilion, and I join them for lunch, an outdoor buffet featuring Thai vegan cuisine of the highest order. They

tend to have rapturous stories about a near-religious conversion, about how an encounter with Lek and her organisation caused them to reorient their lives towards an unexpected goal: elephant rescue.

I meet Lee and Roger Denison from the UK, who first visited ENP in 2018 just after Roger retired at age 60. This is their third time volunteering; they'll be here for two weeks. Much of the work while I'm here involves cleaning the banks of the river in the wake of the worst flooding in at least 20 years. But the tasks are numerous and diverse: preparing food for

VOLUNTEERS HAVE MINIMAL CONTACT WITH THE ANIMALS. HERE, ELEPHANTS CAN JUST BE ELEPHANTS



various species and presenting it to them, mucking out stables, helping build roads.

Between work sessions, volunteers relax with the elephants. "It's going to be part of our holiday every year now," says Lee Denison. "We've even made provisions in our will for ENP!"

Kathy Snyder is a volunteer from California; this is her fifth time at the sanctuary, and she'll be staying for a month. "When I first came here,

Lek said, 'I hear you're a nurse. I have a sick elephant that needs medical care. Can you help me out?'" That was six years ago. Since then, caring for elephants has been one of Snyder's chief joys in life.

Snyder, who has volunteered at several other sanctuaries around the world, stresses that she's a 'human nurse' but that the skills are transferable; wound care, for example.

"IT'S WONDERFUL TO GET CLOSE TO THESE ANIMALS, BUT YOU'RE ALWAYS AWARE OF WHY THEY'RE HERE"

Moreover, she says, most mammals "have the same bones and organs; they're just bigger or smaller or in a different spot."

In 2018, Snyder helped with laser treatments for an elephant named Dalah. Before she was rescued, Dalah's legs had been badly wounded during a forced breeding session and she had also suffered organ damage. Forced breeding sometimes involves chaining a female by all four feet. The male elephant, typically between the ages of 10 and 15 and experiencing a spike in testosterone that increases their volatility and aggression,

is jabbed with a bullhook until he mounts the female.

Despite what the team accomplished for Dalah's legs, she did not survive her internal injuries. The hydrotherapy pool is named in her memory.

"I make it a point to come here as often as I can," says Snyder. "It gets in your heart. You can't stay away."

During my visit, I'm squired around by the foundation's project director, Ry Emmerson, a cherubic ex-cop from northern England. Now 35, he was once a corrections officer at a high-security prison for men. "Very challenging and risky people," he says. "Part of my job was talking with offenders about why they committed their offence in order to better understand how to help them reduce their risk of offending in the future."

It was good training for his current job, which involves convincing people in the elephant business to change their practices.

How did a British ex-cop end up in the jungle? In 2012, when Emmerson found he was no longer satisfied with his work, he took a career break and began travelling, often volunteering at animal rescue operations in various countries. In Thailand, he experienced ENP with awe. Then, seven years ago Emmerson was hired as project director on an elephant sanctuary that Lek's organisation was building in Myanmar, Thailand's neighbour to the west.

Her Gift To The Elephants

With the ongoing political turmoil in Myanmar, the sanctuary proved unworkable, and he found himself helping with other projects supported by SEF. “My role now includes a bit of everything,” says Emmerson, the only foreigner working at the office in Chiang Mai. That includes project management, handling international media and coordinating Lek’s schedule. And, crucially, when an elephant organisation approaches SEF because it wants to be more ethical, Emmerson is the one who goes in to help them change.

“I have to go places where I see elephants in horrific conditions,” says Emmerson. “In Myanmar, I met with a family whose business

was poaching elephants. You have to control yourself as you listen to what they’re telling you. Because if you start to cry when you hear how brutal what they’re doing is, they’re not going to tell you.”

Later that today I learn most baby elephants are born into captivity as a result of forced breeding. At one time, trapping elephants often involved slaughtering elderly herd members and trafficking the younger ones to entertain tourists. Even the most hardened cop would likely have a hard time not being reduced to tears by. Just visiting ENP is emotionally complicated. It’s wonderful to get close to these animals, but you’re always aware of why they’re here.

Pyi Mai and a mahout; Ry Emmerson



Tourists pay 2500 baht (about NZ\$115) to visit ENP for a day. Volunteers pay 12,000 baht (around NZ\$560) for a week. That includes shared accommodation, three meals a day and transfers from Chiang Mai. Visit elephantnaturepark.org for info.

Emmerson takes me to meet the baby hellraisers, Pyi Mai and Chaba. "They're inseparable," he says. "Everywhere they go they create chaos." When he greets Pyi Mai, he puts her trunk up to his mouth and blows into it, as if playing a didgeridoo. Apparently, an elephant can tell a lot from your breath. "She wants to know, 'Where have you been? Which other elephants can I smell?'"

We go for a walk to meet Mae Sri, who's in her 70s and dotted with blue-green spots, which are wound treatments. Until she was rescued in 2018, Emmerson tells me, Mae Sri had been abused in the riding industry.

"When she came here she was skin and bones, with many open wounds." She has arthritis and when she falls, a truck-mounted hydraulic crane helps her up. The sanctuary has built her a special 'bed', a sloping sand bank, so that she doesn't have to lie down: she simply leans at a 45-degree angle.

Every elephant I encounter is accompanied by a dedicated *mahout* (elephant handler). When you rescue an elephant, you generally have to rescue their mahout – they come as

a unit – or pair the elephant with a new handler. Hence, ENP houses an entire community of mahouts, often refugees from Myanmar or hill tribesmen. The park employs their wives in traditional roles – working in the kitchen, or housekeeping – and gives scholarships to their children.

Mahouts have to be convinced to change habits passed down for generations. "They have been taught that if you don't chain an elephant, it will kill you; that if you don't use the hook, it will kill you," says Emmerson. Bullhooks are routinely used to inflict pain, enforcing behaviour. The hook is jabbed into a sensitive area, often behind the ear.

There's no question that elephants can be dangerous, especially when tormented. Males, generally far more aggressive than females, can pick up a large rock with their trunk and throw it at you with accuracy. Nevertheless, the most effective way to manage elephants – and the only decent way – is with positive reinforcement.

The inhumane elephant camps for tourists have to be taught this approach, and to be shown that, thanks to the growing demand for ethical tourism, there are alternative ways.

ENP is proof tourists will pay for the chance to observe elephants happily being elephantine. But Emmerson is realistic. "Elephant owners in Thailand are not changing overnight because they suddenly love their elephants. It's about the business model."

The economics were rendered much more difficult, of course, by the pandemic. ENP relied upon various ingenious programmes to generate money in the absence of tourism. It developed a system to foster an elephant from afar, and the option to remotely present an elephant with a birthday 'cake' (a whimsical fruit arrangement). It may be your elephant-besotted daughter's birthday, but it's the excited elephant who gets the cake; your daughter gets the video. This ritual was so popular that ENP has maintained it.

These programmes were devised, however, as stopgaps until the tourists returned, and that remains an uncomfortable paradox: ENP is devoted to saving elephants from exploitation by tourists, but the hard financial truth is that keeping these creatures alive, even in a rigorously ethical sanctuary, requires some form of tourism. It's not a question of ending elephant tourism, but reinventing it.

My last experience at Elephant Nature Park is watching a glorious daily ritual late in the afternoon. The elephants swim down the river into camp to spend the evening, led by the precocious 11-year-old Kham La, who has somehow taken charge of companions at least twice her age. An overhead complex of viewing platforms, the SkyWalk, allows visitors to observe the herd climbing onto the banks, trumpeting and rolling in the mud. They're clearly enjoying

life. If tourism is a necessity, then this is how it should be done.

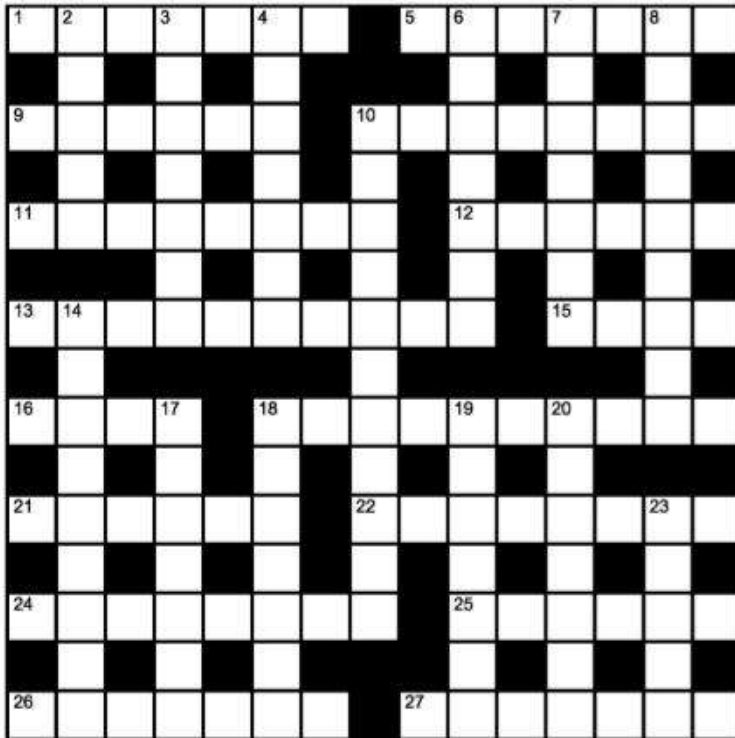
Emmerson is unsurprised by how ENP has affected me. Even after decades of animal activism I don't have the stomach for stories of abuse, and it shows in my face – as does my admiration for the wondrous things they're accomplishing here. He suggests I visit their project just outside of Siem Reap in Cambodia. Even before the pandemic, it hadn't been drawing sufficient visitors and volunteers – despite being less than a two-hour drive from the Angkor Wat temple complex, the nation's most popular tourist destination.

Cambodia Wildlife Sanctuary sits in a vast swathe of jungle, 13,000 hectares guarded by ex-poachers. Only three of their many rescued animals are pachyderms, but one of them is Kaavan, infamously known as 'the world's loneliest elephant'. Kaavan had been chained in a miserable zoo in Pakistan; a mass Twitter protest in 2016 caught the attention of the late singer Cher, who wrote 'Walls', a song about his suffering, and spearheaded a campaign for his release.

This is how it starts. I had come to Chiang Mai to tour the temples; I was lured to Elephant Nature Park because, like so many people, I care about elephants; and now I'm catching a flight to Cambodia to feed Kaavan. And when I return home, I'll talk about my experience, loudly and widely, to anyone who will listen. **R**

PUZZLES

Challenge yourself by solving these puzzles and mind stretchers, then check your answers on page 136.



Crossword

Test your general knowledge.

DOWN

- 2** Wear away (5)
- 3** Polar wrecker (7)
- 4** Established form of words (7)
- 6** Queensland, from Sydney (2,5)
- 7** Picked democratically (5,2)
- 8** Adaptable (9)
- 10** Eavesdropping (9,2)
- 14** Thoughtless state (9)
- 17** African state on the Red Sea (7)
- 18** Elaborate Hispanic parties (7)
- 19** New York baseball team (7)
- 20** Energise (7)
- 23** Plural of this (5)

ACROSS

- 1** Low sculptures rising from a flat surface (7)
- 5** Pull through (7)
- 9** Peeping Tom (6)
- 10** Enduring (4-4)
- 11** Sources of income (8)
- 12** Spokelike (6)
- 13** Its capital is Dhaka (10)
- 15** To achieve something, you ____ it (4)
- 16** Eye ailment (4)
- 18** Some of them are Grimm (5,5)
- 21** Shaft key (6)
- 22** Chosen as a career (4,4)
- 24** Formerly a Norman Manor in today's Derbyshire (8)
- 25** Tooth covering (6)
- 26** *Salome* composer (7)
- 27** Guided (7)

Puzzle Answers

PAGE 136

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

Sudoku

HOW TO PLAY: To win, you have to put a number from 1 to 9 in each outlined section so that:

- Every horizontal row and vertical column contains all nine numerals (1-9) without repeating any of them;
- Each of the outlined sections has all nine numerals, none repeated.

IF YOU SOLVE IT WITHIN:

15 minutes, you're a true expert

30 minutes, you're no slouch

60 minutes or more, maybe numbers aren't your thing

BRAIN POWER
brought to you by



"Write, Erase, Rewrite"

FAMILY FUN

**Puzzle
Answers**
PAGE 136

Spot The Difference

There are 12 differences. Can you find them?



Complete The Set

Which of the four options given completes the set?

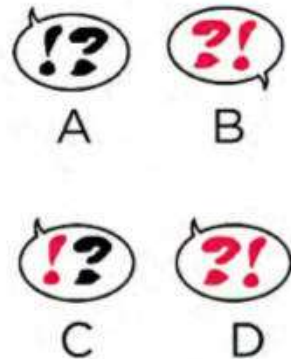


ILLUSTRATION: GETTY IMAGES

TRIVIA

Test Your General Knowledge

- 1.** The Philippines declared independence from what country in 1898? *1 point*
- 2.** What large semiaquatic mammal was once thought to be a herbivore, but sometimes eats meat? *1 point*
- 3.** In what country was writer and theologian C.S. Lewis born? *2 points*
- 4.** What European country's government has had more than 65 cabinets since 1945? *1 point*
- 5.** Cristiano Ronaldo was the first football player to score in five World Cups. True or false? *1 point*
- 6.** What is the only mammal that can fly? *1 point*
- 7.** What beloved 1813 novel was originally titled *First Impressions*? *2 points*
- 8.** Which zodiac sign in Western astrology is born in the first half of January? *1 point*
- 9.** What computer component weighed more than a ton when it was first developed by IBM employee Reynold B. Johnson in 1956? *1 point*
- 10.** On January 1, 1877, Queen Victoria became the Empress of which British colony? A: Malaysia; B: Australia; C: India. *2 points*
- 11.** Pop singers Madonna, Rihanna and Beyoncé all perform under their real first names. True or false? *1 point*
- 12.** A Motorola engineer performed the first of what in 1973, marking a major event in the evolution of the telephone? *1 point*
- 13.** What hot, gaseous celestial body can fit more than one million planet Earths inside it? *1 point*
- 14.** What two countries have the most Michelin-starred restaurants in the world? *2 points*
- 15.** In what country was Caesar salad invented? *2 points*



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

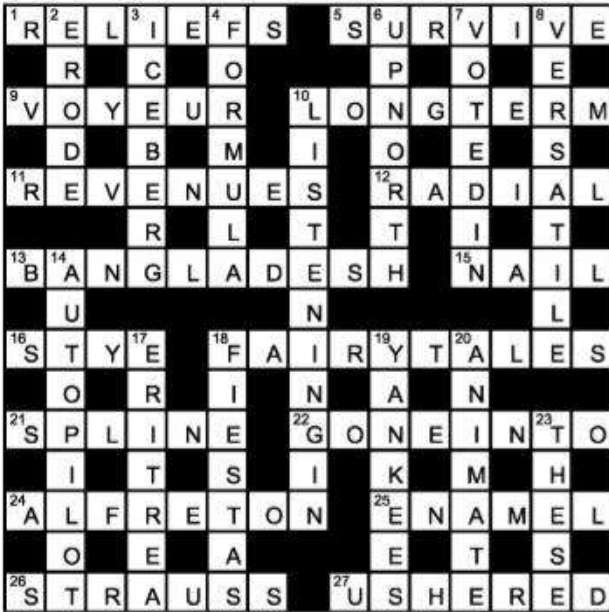
16-20 Gold medal **11-15** Silver medal **6-10** Bronze medal **0-5** Wooden spoon

ANSWERS: 1. Spain; 2. Hippo; 3. Ireland; 4. Italy; 5. False. It was Brazil's Marta Vieira da Silva at the Women's World Cup in 2019; 6. Bat; 7. *Pride and Prejudice*; 8. Capricorn; 9. Hard drive; 10. C: India; 11. False. Rihanna is Robyn Fenty's middle name; 12. Mobile phone call; 13. The sun; 14. France and Japan; 15. Mexico, by Italian chef Caesar Cardini.

PUZZLE ANSWERS

From Page 132

Crossword



Sudoku

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

Spot The Difference



Complete The Set

Which of the four options given completes the set?





WORD POWER

Party Time

Dress up your vocabulary with these festive terms

BY *Beth Shillibeer*

- 1. shindig** – A: barbeque. B: large, lively party. C: country dance.
- 2. sideshow** – A: small show within a larger exhibition. B: unofficial entertainers, as in buskers. C: rigged game at a carnival.
- 3. zeal** – A: sleight of hand. B: enthusiasm in pursuit of something. C: musical instrument similar to a zither.
- 4. ebullient** – A: crowded and noisy. B: waning energy due to exhaustion. C: cheerful and full of energy.
- 5. symposium** – A: flower festival. B: gathering that features an exchange of ideas. C: music festival.
- 6. marquee** – A: large tent set up for an outdoor event. B: seating area for dignitaries. C: carnival vendor.
- 7. hippodrome** – A: oversized float in a parade. B: giant balloon, often animal-shaped. C: venue for equestrian events.
- 8. dudelsack** – A: German bagpipe. B: Bavarian strudel. C: clown pants.
- 9. gilly** – A: carnival slang for patrons. B: circus master of ceremonies. C: truck used to transport circus equipment.
- 10. soirée** – A: puppet show. B: mystery prize bag. C: formal social gathering.
- 11. saturnalia** – A: stargazing party. B: wild revelry or indulgence. C: victor's wreath or crown.
- 12. bazaar** – A: marketplace. B: strange. C: stringed instrument.
- 13. feria** – A: Spanish market festival. B: costume designer. C: parade horse master.
- 14. mela** – A: ceremonial dress. B: type of Indian dance. C: religious festival.
- 15. rave** – A: dance party. B: cherry-blossom festival. C: annual festival of the sea.

Answers

- 1. shindig** – B: large, lively party. Marie's 30th birthday promised to be a real shindig, as it coincided with the folk music festival.
- 2. sideshow** – A: small show within a larger exhibition. Although the rodeo was the main event, Jorvak preferred the sideshows.
- 3. zeal** – B: enthusiasm in pursuit of something. The dogs raced over the obstacles with zeal at the World Agility Open.
- 4. ebullient** – C: cheerful and full of energy. At the Highland Games, the Scottish reelers were so ebullient that they inspired the crowd to dance, too.
- 5. symposium** – B: gathering that features an exchange of ideas. Band teachers and students from all over the country shared ideas about performance at the annual symposium.
- 6. marquee** – A: large tent set up for an outdoor event. The children watched excitedly through the fence as the marquee went up.
- 7. hippodrome** – C: venue for equestrian events. Pierre always attended the prestigious Prix d'Été race held at the Trois-Rivières Hippodrome.
- 8. dudelsack** – A: German bagpipe. The dudelsack players made their

way through the streets of Schleife, Germany, during the International Bagpipe Festival.

- 9. gilly** – C: truck used to transport circus equipment. Once the gillies were loaded up, the convoy began driving to the next town.
- 10. soirée** – C: formal social gathering. Jack attended a glamorous soirée at the ambassador's residence last night.
- 11. saturnalia** – B: wild revelry or indulgence. Thomas enjoyed some saturnalia after finishing a big contract at work.
- 12. bazaar** – A: marketplace. Emira appreciated seeing all the handmade items for sale while wandering through the bazaar.
- 13. feria** – A: Spanish market festival. Jules booked his trip to Spain for April so he could see the Spring Feria in Seville.
- 14. mela** – C: religious festival. Ravi was excited to join millions at the Kumbh Mela.
- 15. rave** – A: dance party. Locals have been horrified by the flocks of tourists heading to their town for all-night raves featuring electronic dance music.

VOCABULARY RATINGS

5–9: Fair

10–12: Good

13–15: Word Power Wizard



QUALITY SERVICE AWARDS 2024

*See the brands New Zealanders have voted as
offering the best service in the country*

www.qualityserviceawards.co.nz



QUALITY SERVICE AWARDS 2024

100% voted by New Zealand consumers

IT'S THE WARM SMILE of the barista at your local café. It's the empathetic voice of an insurance consultant when you're making that dreaded claim. It's the patient lesson from a salesman guiding you through your purchase. Good customer service can make your day, just as it can make or break a business.

In recognition of the special role that quality service plays in our lives, Reader's Digest is proud to announce the winners of the 2024 Quality Service Awards. This is an initiative that celebrates and honours those companies that go above and beyond in creating remarkable customer experiences.

The champions of this year's Awards know that business success can't be measured in profits alone. In a world saturated with choices and competition, consumers no longer make decisions based solely on price and product. They seek something more, something intangible yet invaluable – a memorable experience.

While the prestigious Quality Service Awards have been running for ten years, few have been set in as difficult a landscape as 2024.

New Zealanders have continued to feel the pinch of inflation, with living costs, interest rates and rents all rising sharply in the past 12 months. Meanwhile, the world has

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES



IN SUCH A CHALLENGING TIME, NEW ZEALANDERS ARE MORE DISCERNING THAN EVER BEFORE.

watched in horror the conflict in the Middle East and Ukraine. That's all with the not-too-distant memory of the pandemic hanging in the background.

In such a challenging time, New Zealanders are more discerning than ever before. Their loyalty can't be bought through discounts and promotions; it must be earned through superior service and genuine care. The stakes have never been higher for businesses to foster

relationships and craft personalised experiences for their customers.

Earning a place on the revered list of Quality Service Award winners is no easy feat. Hundreds of companies are put to the test in an independent consumer survey conducted by top market research agency, Catalyst Consultancy and Research (CCR). CCR asks everyday New Zealanders to assess companies on their ability to personalise and simplify transactions, understand customers'



IT ALL STARTS WITH A COMMITMENT TO CUSTOMER CARE.

needs and exceed their expectations. This year, consumers have recognised 62 companies for their top-tier performance in the retail and service sector.

The list of winners spans 31 categories, which range from cruise operators and car rental companies, to healthcare and insurance providers. Although the list of categories is diverse, the qualities that contribute to excellent service are consistent.

It all starts with a commitment to

customer care. Companies that truly value their clientele understand that every interaction is an opportunity to create a lasting impression. This commitment starts at the top, with leadership that champions the idea that the customer is not just a source of revenue, but a valued partner in the business.

Training and empowering employees is another essential step. This year's winners continue to invest in programmes that equip staff with the skills, knowledge, and empathy to understand and meet customer needs. Companies are increasingly pairing this training with the introduction of new technologies designed to enhance the customer experience.

No matter how advanced their tools may be, the best organisations are those that are willing to address their flaws. Whether it's after an online shopping spree, or a visit to a brick-and-mortar store, customers expect their feedback to be heard. Winning companies are open to criticism and take it as an opportunity to improve.

In 2024, every cent counts. Consumers will not part with their hard-earned money unless they can be certain it is being invested with an organisation that will treat them with the utmost care. Thanks to the Quality Service Awards, it's never been easier to find out which companies will do just that.

Survey Methodology

We commissioned independent market research agency Catalyst Consultancy & Research to survey a representative sample of 1570 New Zealanders.

Respondents were asked which companies in 31 categories had provided the highest levels of customer service over the past 24 months, rating each organisation, company or service provider from one to ten across five key pillars of customer service:

■ **PERSONALISATION:** How well was the company able to provide the consumer with an individualised customer experience?

■ **UNDERSTANDING:** How effectively was the company able to demonstrate a genuine insight into the customer's needs?

■ **SIMPLICITY:** How quick and easy was the process of dealing with the company?

■ **SATISFACTION:** To what level did the company meet or exceed the customer's expectations?

■ **CONSISTENCY:** Did the company deliver ongoing quality service?

To calculate each company's Quality Service Score, the average score of the five key pillars was determined, and then

multiplied by ten to obtain a metric score out of 100.

The highest rated company in each category has been awarded the status of Gold Standard Winner, with the second-highest rated company awarded the status of Silver Standard Winner. This prestigious award recognises companies that truly understand consumers' needs.

If you are keen to know where to go for the best service from carpet or tiling stores, used vehicle dealerships or internet service providers, and more, then the survey results will provide the answers. Turn over to see which companies New Zealanders voted as offering the nation's finest customer service.

QUALITY SERVICE

CATEGORY	WINNER	SILVER
Car Insurance	★ AA Insurance	★ AMI
Car Rentals	★ Avis	★ Budget
Cruise Operator	★ Princess Cruises	★ P&O Cruises
DIY Home Improvement Stores	★ Mitre 10	★ Bunnings
Early Childhood Centres	★ BestStart	★ Central Kids
Electricity Providers	★ Mercury	★ Powershop
Flooring Stores <i>(exc. Tiling Stores and DIY Home Improvement Stores)</i>	★ Carpet Court	★ Flooring Xtra New Zealand
Funeral Insurance	★ Momentum Life	★ New Zealand Seniors
Garden Centres	★ Kings Plant Barn	★ Palmers
Gas Providers	★ Genesis	★ Frank Energy
Health Insurance	★ Southern Cross Health Insurance	★ AA Health
Hearing Services	★ Bay Audiology	★ Triton Hearing
Home & Contents Insurance	★ AA Insurance	★ AMI
Home Design & Build Services	★ Signature Homes	★ Jennian Homes
Internet Service Providers	★ 2degrees	★ Skinny
KiwiSaver Providers	★ Fisher Funds	★ Milford Asset Management

AWARDS 2024



CATEGORY	WINNER	SILVER
Life Insurance	★ Southern Cross Life Insurance	★ AA Life
Liquor Outlets	★ Liquorland	★ Super Liquor
Manufacturer Certified Used Car Sales	★ Toyota Signature Class	★ Honda Certified Used Cars
Mobile Phone Service Providers	★ Skinny	★ 2degrees
Optometrists	★ Specsavers	★ OPSM
Paint & Decorating Stores <i>(exc. DIY Home Improvement Stores)</i>	★ Resene	★ Guthrie Bowron
Pet Insurance	★ Southern Cross Pet Insurance	★ PD Insurance
Real Estate Agencies	★ Harcourts	★ Ray White
Retirement Villages	★ Summerset	★ Oceania Healthcare
Roadside Assistance	★ AA Roadservice	★ State Insurance
Supermarkets	★ New World	★ PAK'nSAVE
Tiling Stores <i>(exc. DIY Home Improvement Stores)</i>	★ The Tile Depot	★ Tile Warehouse
Travel Insurance	★ Southern Cross Travel Insurance	★ 1 Cover Travel Insurance
Tyre Retailers	★ Bridgestone	★ Beaupairs
Used Vehicle Dealerships	★ Turners Cars	★ 2 Cheap Cars

GOLD

Car Insurance

AA INSURANCE



MORE THAN 500,000 NEW ZEALANDERS trust AA Insurance with one million car, home, contents, and small business policies. This is testament to AA Insurance's commitment to putting the needs of its customers first, which it has been doing since the award-winning company launched in 1994.

As its people are the primary drivers behind the brand, employees are empowered to do the right thing for the customer so they can help get things sorted for them when the unexpected happens. The AA Insurance team genuinely cares, and this shows in their empathetic approach. Should a customer make a claim, AA Insurance's team of expert

Customer Managers will help guide them through the claims process from start to finish, getting to a resolution as quickly and efficiently as possible.

AA Insurance has Customer Service Centres in both Auckland and Hamilton. These one-stop-shops help get customers back on the road again after an accident. The company understands how

important quality is to its customers, so it provides a 'Lifetime Repair Guarantee to work' that is carried out by any approved AA Insurance Quality Repairer.

AA Insurance is continually refining its customer experience by measuring and reviewing its service delivery. This ensures customers have the very best experience whether it is on the phone, via the website or through AA centres nationwide.

● **Visit aainsurance.co.nz for more information.**



GOLD
Car Rentals
AVIS



'DRIVEN BY BETTER' is more than just a tagline for Avis; one of the world's best known car rental brands. The trusted travel partner has been driving change for over three decades, demonstrating a tireless commitment to create a smoother car hire experience for customers in over 5,000 locations across the world, including 37 locations in New Zealand alone.

Here in New Zealand, Avis' most recent dedication to innovation and customer service is reflected in the new location design at Nelson and Auckland airports. At these locations, Avis has removed the

traditional customer service counter and has transitioned to portable tablets and small pods to assist customers. Holiday makers can now enjoy a more welcoming start to their escape.

Ultimately, Avis wants customers to feel like they can bypass the worries when they rent with Avis. This effortless car hire experience is elevated even more for members of Avis Preferred. The complimentary Avis membership program offers priority service benefits around

the world, as well as faster bookings and more ways for members to manage their rental. When renting with Avis in New Zealand, Avis Preferred members receive a free additional driver with every rental.

To contribute back to the community, Avis recently partnered with the Royal New Zealand Ballet and became the naming rights sponsor of Waikato Bay of Plenty Magic netball team. The partnership not only supports young athletes, but aligns Avis with the team's values

of hard work, passion and commitment to excellence.

● **Visit [avis.co.nz](https://www.avis.co.nz)**





PRINCESS®

Introducing Sun Princess®

Sun Princess is our largest-ever ship and she will accommodate 4,300 guests and boasts stunning views, innovative entertainment venues, multi-storey dining rooms and next level stateroom accommodations.

Sun Princess will sail an inaugural season of Mediterranean cruises from early 2024 followed by Western and Eastern Caribbean voyages.



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SCAN ME

BOOK NOW | Visit your travel agent | 0800 780 717 | [princess.com](https://www.princess.com)

SILVER *Cruise Operator* P&O CRUISES



WHEN THE TIME COMES to book an unforgettable holiday, P&O Cruises is a no-brainer for those looking to relax, unwind and create memories that will last a lifetime.

Australia's first cruise line burst onto the scene in 1932, booking out its maiden voyage from Sydney to Norfolk Island in a single day.

More than 90 years later, Aussies and Kiwis are still choosing P&O for awe-inspiring adventures at sea.

The onboard teams are renowned for their amazing service, warmth and welcoming nature, and going above and beyond to create personalised touches for guests is part of their daily routine.

Appreciation and acknowledgement from those travelling comes through time and time again via formal and informal feedback channels. P&O's customer-centric culture was especially obvious during its 90th birthday celebrations in 2023, when delighted guests took to social media to share their favourite experiences; there



were messages about delicious meals, posts reminiscing about fantastic entertainment and an overwhelming gratitude for the crew.

P&O Cruises prides itself on fostering a culture of togetherness, innovation and improvement, with the delivery of exceptional guest experiences top-of-mind in everything they do. The crew always works to make the experience personal, memorable and seamless, ensuring all guests have an amazing time, every time.

● Visit www.pocruises.co.nz



P&O CRUISES



PACIFIC EXPLORER®
cruising from
AUCKLAND



Pacific Explorer offers great dining experiences, world-class entertainment and spaces designed for you and your family to unwind. This is cruising made easy!

BOOK NOW AT POCRUISES.CO.NZ | VISIT YOUR LOCAL TRAVEL AGENT | CALL 0800 780 716

GOLD

Flooring Stores

(excl. Tiling/DIY Home Improvement Stores)

CARPET COURT



an important skill set expected of Carpet Court sales consultants. As such, they continually participate in the Rhino Academy Flooring training programme where they complete a multitude of online training courses

IT'S NOT SURPRISING THAT CARPET COURT has won gold in the Quality Service Awards for seven years in a row. Its qualified staff are specialists in residential and commercial flooring solutions, and have an honest desire to help people. Priding themselves on delivering exceptional service, Carpet Court customers are treated in the highest regard and given the utmost care.

Carpet Court provides an extensive range of beautiful and innovative flooring solutions – including carpet, vinyl, luxury vinyl tiles, laminate, timber, rigid, garage carpet and underlay – from award-winning floor brands such as Rhino, Bremworth, Godfrey Hirst, Feltex and Quick-Step, while product knowledge is

that ensure they have excellent knowledge of market compliance as well as the products that they sell.

Carpet Court sales consultants take pride in providing seamless and enjoyable sales experiences to their customers to ensure they continually achieve their goals.

Finally, a smart use of technology, such as CRM, data analytics and weekly support surveys, all make certain that Carpet Court customers' needs are met in a timely manner and any issues are followed up thoroughly, so that every customer becomes a Carpet Court brand ambassador.

● Visit www.carpetcourt.nz





*Thanks
New Zealand,
we've done
it again!*



we promise to keep
flooring
you with our service!

carpet | vinyl | wood | tiles

0800 787 777
carpetcourt.nz



carpetcourt



SILVER
Funeral Insurance

NEW ZEALAND SENIORS



SINCE LAUNCHING IN 2019, New Zealand Seniors has helped countless Kiwis protect their family's financial future with quality, cost-effective insurance products. Meeting their goal of delivering funeral insurance specifically designed for the needs of over 50s, New Zealand Seniors have been recognised by both their customers and the wider industry for their high-quality products, award-winning customer service and customer-first approach.

New Zealand Seniors are committed to delivering the best possible customer experience and have a team of dedicated sales, support and claims specialists to guide customers on their insurance

journey. By providing multiple channels for the voice of the customer to be heard, New Zealand Seniors use the feedback provided to make service improvements and innovate their products to meet the needs of Kiwis over 50.

In 2022, New Zealand Seniors launched Term Life Insurance, providing customers with further choice when it comes to financially protecting the future of their loved ones. There's no medical or blood tests needed to apply, and once approved New Zealand residents aged 45 to 79 can be covered for up to \$100,000. Cover is for up to 20 years or until age 85, whichever comes first.

New Zealand Seniors also continues to provide support and understanding to customers who are suffering financial hardship, enabling them to keep their cover in place through various financial assistance options.

● **To talk to their friendly team, call 0800 430 011 or visit nzseniors.co.nz**



Protect your family financially with Seniors Funeral Insurance

- ✓ New Zealand residents aged 18–79 are guaranteed acceptance
- ✓ Flexible coverage from \$3,000 to \$30,000
- ✓ 100% of the benefit paid upfront for terminal illness diagnosis*
- ✓ Triple benefit for accidental death – up to \$90,000



Call us today
0800 430 011
or visit nzseniors.co.nz

* Cover for accidental serious injury and accidental death only in the first 12 months. Terminal illness with diagnosis of 12 months or less to live.

This is general information only. Consider the PD at nzseniors.co.nz to ensure the product suits your needs. New Zealand Seniors is a trading name of Greenstone Financial Services NZ Ltd (NZBN 9429047013582). Seniors Funeral Insurance is issued by Pinnacle Life Limited (NZBN 9429030397248). Terms and conditions apply.



GOLD

Health Insurance

SOUTHERN CROSS HEALTH INSURANCE



IN THE HIGHLY COMPETITIVE INSURANCE BUSINESS, there are few companies that can claim they're not in it for the profits. That's where Southern Cross Health Insurance stands out. The not-for-profit Friendly Society has been providing private healthcare to New Zealanders for over 62 years. Without shareholders to answer to, Southern Cross can focus on putting members first.

Recruiting only the most skilled and experienced professionals is just the first step in ensuring exceptional customer service. New hires undergo an intensive induction and mentoring programme to perfect their skills and learn everything there is to know about the insurance company's products and services.

While recruitment and training lay the foundations for superb service, its unwavering commitment to feedback is what sets Southern Cross apart. The insurer actively seeks feedback through its Voice of the Customer Programme after a claim, a phone conversation, or treatment. "The lady who helped me was



amazing. She listened, she understood exactly what I was asking, she offered solutions, but she was genuine and intentional," said one satisfied member.

If a member is dissatisfied or escalates a complaint, this information is collected and scrutinised in a monthly report, which is then shared with the relevant business teams and the executive and board.

It's this commitment to customer care that has seen over 940,000 New Zealanders choose Southern Cross as their health insurer.

● southerncross.co.nz/society



Providing top quality service as voted by YOU

They helped me get healthcare when I needed it most

Awesome company to deal with

Very friendly and easy to deal with

Great price & super easy claims process

Friendly, reassuring & informative

LOVELY CUSTOMER SERVICE TEAM



Mariah
Customer Service Consultant



Southern Cross
Health Insurance

With you

GOLD

Hearing Services

BAY AUDIOLOGY



HEARING LOSS IS A DEEPLY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE. Many people notice issues with their hearing long before they decide to visit a hearing services provider. This can mean that they struggle in everyday communication for years before seeking help.

Bay Audiology's dedicated professionals are passionate about getting the very best hearing outcome for clients and are supportive in understanding their clients' unique hearing needs.

One Bay Audiology client, who was unable to hear his loved ones, said "They truly treated me with dignity, and that to me, counted a lot."

Another client was appreciative that her individual needs were taken into account to find the best hearing

solution for her, "It wasn't just one-size-fits-all, it was specialised service to my needs."

When you buy hearing aids at Bay Audiology, it's not just a one-off transaction either, it is the start of an ongoing relationship with a company that cares about its clients' hearing needs for many years. AfterCare Plus is offered with most hearing aid purchases. This allows clients to

drop in any time to a Bay Audiology clinic for support and advice, free clean and checks of hearing aids and hearing aid adjustments for the first six years of hearing aid ownership.

The ability to support clients at every step of their hearing journey is key to building a long-term relationship with clients and ensures that they get the best hearing experience over a number of years.

Bay Audiology is full of kind, caring and empathetic people who want the best for their clients and to support them well throughout their hearing journey.

● Visit www.bayaudiology.co.nz



“They explained everything so fully. It was just quality all the way through.”

Experience the difference great service makes with Bay Audiology - 7x Quality Service Award winner.

To find out more, visit bayaudiology.co.nz or call **0800 700 853** to book a free hearing check.



Free hearing checks are available to anyone aged 18 years and over.



QUOTABLE QUOTES

“We see our customers as invited guests to a party, and we are the hosts. It’s our job every day to make every important aspect of the customer experience a little bit better.”

Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon

“Some companies and products provide such a *perfect, seamless experience*

that it has raised the bar.

In fact, it’s so easy and seamless that we kind of forget to be impressed.

But what they’re doing is making the ones that don’t deliver that kind of great experience all the more obvious.”

Susan Weinschenk, chief behavioural scientist and CEO, The Team

**“STOP SELLING,
START HELPING.”**

Zig Ziglar, motivational speaker

“We don’t want to push our ideas on to customers, we simply want to make what they want.”

Laura Ashley, fashion designer and businesswoman

“QUALITY IS NEVER AN ACCIDENT; IT IS ALWAYS THE RESULT OF HIGH INTENTION, SINCERE EFFORT, INTELLIGENT DIRECTION AND SKILLFUL EXECUTION.”

John Ruskin, writer

**“WHEN THE CUSTOMER COMES FIRST,
THE CUSTOMER WILL LAST.”**

Robert Half, staffing firm founder

GOLD

Home & Contents Insurance

AA INSURANCE



CONSISTENT AND OUTSTANDING quality service is why New Zealanders have once again voted for AA Insurance in the Reader's Digest Quality Service Awards.

The company's commitment to customer service excellence starts when people join the team. AA Insurance has a focus on recruiting people who believe in doing the right thing by their customers to deliver on their purpose of caring, helping and getting things sorted.

Delivering excellent customer service has always been a priority at AA Insurance. Customers can get in touch in a way that suits them; they can choose to contact AA Insurance online through Aria the chatbot, on live chat or talk to the NZ-based customer service team on the phone or face-to-face at an AA Centre.

AA Insurance home and contents policies have been popular with New Zealanders since the company launched in 1994. Their policies provide cover for your home and belongings, so when the unthinkable happens, you can rest assured that things will get sorted.

AA Insurance is committed to making insurance clear and easy to



understand for all New Zealanders. In recent years, AA Insurance has focused on simplifying their policy documents to help customers understand what they are covered for. Policy documents are written in plain language, removing unnecessary jargon, and presented in an 'easy-to-read' format. In fact, AA Insurance's personal insurance policies received the WriteMark Plus Plain Language Standard, which means their policy documents meet a very high standard of plain language and have been user tested by their customers.

● Visit [aainsurance.co.nz](https://www.aainsurance.co.nz)





GOLD

Home Design & Build Services

SIGNATURE HOMES



IN HOME BUILDING, a few names stand as testaments to excellence and enduring commitment to customer satisfaction. Signature Homes, a proudly Kiwi-owned brand, is one such name. It is currently celebrating its 40th anniversary, marking four decades of delivering quality homes.

Founded in 1983, Signature Homes had modest beginnings, focusing on constructing solid-wood homes. Over the years, this pioneering brand has become the largest Kiwi-owned home-building brand. Its comprehensive range of new home services is available through a well-established network of franchises nationwide.

Signature Homes' journey to this level of success is a testament to its unwavering commitment to quality, innovation, and, most importantly, ensuring customer satisfaction.

One of the standout offerings that sets Signature Homes apart is its building guarantees programme, which remains unmatched in the industry. Introduced in 2007 during the global financial crisis, this programme was designed to

provide clients with unmatched security, protection and peace of mind throughout the home-building process and well into the future.

Attesting to its commitment to delivering outstanding service, Signature Homes has received the prestigious Reader's Digest Quality Service Award. This dedication to exceptional customer experiences is further supported by glowing feedback from clients, assessed independently by an external survey company.

Gavin Hunt, owner and director of Signature Homes, shared his thoughts on this significant milestone: "I'm humbled that Signature Homes has become the largest Kiwi-owned home-building brand, a testament to our excellence, tireless efforts, and the trust

of thousands who chose us to build their homes."

● signature.co.nz



Signature
HOMES Est. 1983

YOUR HOME. YOUR WAY.

Quality
through
the *years*



Signature Homes has secured the first-place position for the Reader's Digest Quality Service Award in the Home Design & Build Services category. This achievement is a testament to our unwavering commitment to delivering exceptional service to our valued clients.

START YOUR NEW HOME JOURNEY TODAY.

signature.co.nz

"Receiving this award is a great honour, reflecting our dedication to excellence since 1983"

Gavin Hunt, Owner & Director
Signature Homes



GOLD

Life Insurance

SOUTHERN CROSS LIFE INSURANCE



SOUTHERN CROSS HAS BEEN

LOOKING after the health of New Zealanders for more than 62 years. In 2016 the trusted insurer extended its offering to life insurance, joining hands with Chubb Life Insurance New Zealand Limited. This partnership has provided a legacy of assurance that gives members peace of mind that their loved ones will be protected, if the worst was to happen.

Southern Cross Life Insurance has mastered the art of making complex matters simple and understands its members often seek support in their toughest moments. That's why its New Zealand-based Contact Centre team is so highly trained. Empathetic and well-informed consultants understand the unique needs of their customers and are with them every step of the way.

Southern Cross handpicks talent with a customer-first philosophy for its customer-facing teams, and moulds them into industry leaders through a rigorous induction programme. This covers everything from product knowledge and problem solving, so its teams can



focus on listening, understanding, and providing genuine care.

Southern Cross is also committed to providing members with simple, easy and fast access to life insurance cover online and over the phone with their specialist team.

● **Visit southerncrosslife.co.nz**



Providing top quality service as voted by YOU

Good service & always quick responses

Helpful and well organised

Perfect service

Available support when needed

QUALITY CUSTOMER CARE :)

They provide good service



Lara

Life Insurance Consultant



With you

GOLD

Liquor Outlets

LIQUORLAND



EARNING THE LOYALTY OF KIWIS

for more than 42 years, Liquorland is well regarded in the New Zealand market. With over 170 franchised locations across the country, and brand equity nearly double that of its competitors, Liquorland's reputation speaks for itself.

Liquorland knows that it's not just about what's on the shelf that matters; it's the people who stand behind the counter. Recruiting only the very best franchisees means that every Liquorland customer is greeted with a warm smile and expert guidance, no matter which store you choose.

Staff go through a comprehensive training programme when they join Liquorland. This includes modules around sales skills, asking the

right questions to ascertain a customer's needs, and product training so staff can speak confidently about the features of everything from a single malt whisky from the Scottish Highlands, to the nuances of a local Hawke's Bay chardonnay.

To make the customer experience even more appealing, Liquorland recently revamped selected stores with

a new design. Offering a premium environment in which to shop, the bright modern stores help showcase world-renowned brands, as well as a fantastic range of local wines, spirits and RTDs. Liquorland also understands that shopping local is important to customers, and is a strong supporter of New Zealand brewers and distillers.

Liquorland recently expanded to integrate Henry's stores in the South Island and established a presence in the West Auckland Trust region. And, for the ultimate in convenience, a delivery service is on the horizon.

● **Visit liquorland.co.nz**



GOLD
Mobile Phone Service Providers
SKINNY



NEW ZEALANDERS LOVE SKINNY! Why wouldn't they? Launched in 2012 as a market challenger, the brand continuously strives to stay true to its brand purpose of 'we will do anything to keep prices low and customers happy'. By using Spark's network, it covers 98 per cent of where Kiwis live, so you can count on always being connected.



Skinny's model is built around using common sense. By stripping away the things you don't use, you only pay for the stuff that you want!

Skinny's strategy has always been about engaging conversations with customers.

Skinny's strategy has always been about engaging conversations with customers. The business does this by providing constant training to employees to help them with conversation flows that are casual, relatable, and friendly.

Connecting, qualifying the situation and need, recommending solutions; and resolving the issue

with any promised follow up – that's the Skinny model.

Skinny is pretty chuffed at having won an array of awards, including six Reader's Digest Quality Service Awards over recent years. But the multi-award winning mobile phone provider doesn't rest on its laurels. Skinny is all about continuous improvement and the business is always looking for ways to improve the customer experience across every touch point. It does this by instilling its brand values with its teams to ensure they send the right message to the right customer at the right time.

● skinny.co.nz



Call 0800 555 110

to record this radio ad

“

To keep prices low, Skinny has printed this radio script in a Reader's Digest in the hope that someone like me will call the number provided and record it for free, saving Skinny thousands on recording costs.

Yep, a magazine ad doubling as a radio ad, tripling as a low cost way to tell the nation about Skinny's incredible mobile network. They might not be paying me a cent, but who cares, because I'm on the radio. Hi mum! Get the Skinny!

”



GOLD

Optometrists

SPECSAVERS



NAVIGATING LIFE WITHOUT GOOD GLASSES

is a daily adventure of decoding street signs and mistaking strangers for old friends. That's where Specsavers steps in. The optical retailer knows that quality glasses aren't just a fashion statement; they're a passport to a world where clarity reigns and mishaps take a backseat.

Specsavers is committed to changing lives through better sight, that's why it selects only the most qualified and experienced optometrists to join the business, and in-store team members who prioritise customer wellbeing and satisfaction above all else.

Specsavers is committed to providing local, friendly service to every visitor to its stores and is constantly listening to customer feedback and evolving the customer experience to ensure it is not only efficient, but enjoyable and exceptional.

Right from their first day on the job, new team members take part in an award-winning training programme. Specsavers



optometrists are constantly updating their knowledge on optics, products and client support while in-store teams focus on connecting with customers so that they not only enjoy their visit, but leave with products that exceed their expectations. They are also armed with technology that alerts them when a customer needs help, whether that's simply an adjustment, support in using a new product, or a frame change to better suit their needs and style.

● Visit [specsavers.co.nz](https://www.specsavers.co.nz)





Quality service award for Optometrists



Your care is
our business

GOLD

Paint & Decorating Stores

RESENE



Staff have ongoing training and there are specialists available to provide extra technical advice. As Resene manufactures its own products, staff learn about the products from the company that makes them.

Resene selects friendly staff with a can-do attitude, excellent attention to

RESENE COLORSHOPS, which started in 1946 in an Eastbourne garage in Wellington, sell paint products direct to trade and retail customers. They place a huge emphasis on customer service, with the 53 Resene ColorShops averaging ratings of over 9 out of 10, and many consistently scoring 10 out of 10 in their customer feedback programme. This feedback, plus website and social media responses, helps improve products and services.

Resene has developed its own staff training course called 'Best System Selling' to help customers choose products and accessories to achieve the best result.

detail and an interest in helping the customer. They are regularly trained and tested to increase their product knowledge. Incentives are in place each year, such as the 'Cool Blacks' trophy and rewards whereby Resene ColorShops compete against each other, plus rewards are given to the Resene ColorShop with the highest rating by customers.

Customers often remark that they feel like Resene staff have taken their project under their wing and guided them along the way. Customers also often drop gifts into Resene

ColorShops to show their gratitude for the help and advice.

● **Visit [resene.co.nz](https://www.resene.co.nz)**



Got a paint or colour query?

Get free expert advice!



Visit your local Resene ColorShop for answers to all your paint, wallpaper and colour questions. Or ask our experts free online.

Ask a Technical Expert

www.resene.co.nz/technicalexpert

Ask a Colour Expert

www.resene.co.nz/colourexpert

*Get the right advice before you start
and enjoy a quality finish.*

Resene

ColorShop

your decorating experts

www.resene.co.nz/colorshops



GOLD

Pet Insurance

SOUTHERN CROSS PET INSURANCE



RECENT RESEARCH that a sick or injured pet has a significant impact on their owner's wellbeing provides little surprise to Southern Cross Pet Insurance CEO Anthony McPhail.

"Our customer service team has to answer questions about cover and claims from very stressed people whose pets are gravely sick or injured or sadly have just died.

"These conversations can be emotional – to say the least – which is why I'm so proud of what our team does daily and that their work has been recognised with our ninth Reader's Digest Quality Service Award," he says.

With pet ownership in New Zealand dramatically increasing during the pandemic, Southern Cross Pet Insurance has seen a corresponding growth in demand for pet insurance. Today, the business provides accidental injury and illness cover, and accident only cover to over 65,000 pets – making it the country's largest pet insurer.

"Our proposition revolves around providing easy-to-understand and easy-to-use pet insurance, so naturally great customer service is at the heart of what we do.

"Whether you're buying pet insurance, trying to understand your cover, or making a claim, pet insurance can be confusing, so we've emphasised the need to put everything in plain language, be that over the phone or in other communication."

McPhail says this is why the business has recently focused on simplifying its online claiming process, and re-drafting policy documents so they're easier to understand and Southern Cross Pet Insurance is easy to deal with.

"It's so important to us to make sure we're there for pet owners when they need us and we're easy to deal with."

● **southerncrosspet.co.nz/pet-hub/real-stories** for customer case stories.



Providing top quality service as voted by YOU

Answer all my questions quickly & clearly and accurately

HAVE HELPED WITH ALL MY PETS OVER MANY, MANY YEARS

Always super helpful, friendly & professional

Amazing and helpful staff

They are reliable and trustworthy



Thomas
Customer Service Consultant

SILVER
Pet Insurance

PD INSURANCE



REGARDLESS OF WHETHER YOUR PET IS accident prone or not, pet insurance can offer lasting peace of mind. With an average claims turnaround of two business days, PD Insurance is a no-brainer when it comes to creating that safety net for your furry family member.

The New Zealand-based specialist has turned the pet insurance game into a tale of simplicity, compassion, and top-tier support. Headquartered in Auckland and run by a team of local animal lovers, PD Insurance has a singular focus: safeguarding pets from unforeseen veterinary expenses. It's not about complex jargon or convoluted policies; it's about providing a

straightforward path to quality vet treatments and a 'soft landing' when things go wrong. "They truly go above and beyond," wrote a relieved pet parent. "All my claims have been easy."

Despite its clear mission, PD Insurance's approach is far from one-size-fits-all. It treats each customer as a unique member of its extended family, delivering

personalised care.

Whether it's through engaging with organisations like Dogs NZ, or providing insights on pet parenting, PD Insurance goes the extra mile to understand what the community and their companion animals need, while addressing customer concerns with sensitivity.

The company also regularly conducts market research, consumer surveys and team audits in a bid to streamline services and address feedback. It's this unwavering commitment to customer service that makes PD Insurance a trusted

choice in safeguarding your furry friend.



● Visit pd.co.nz



**AWARD
WINNING**
Pet Insurance



AFFORDABLE, SIMPLIFIED PET INSURANCE WITH CARING SUPPORT

PD Insurance is delighted to have won the prestigious Reader's Digest Quality Service Award!

Our pet-loving team is committed to helping you protect your furry family members with our simple and affordable pet plans. Find out why pet parents across NZ are choosing PD Insurance:

- 🐾 Get 1 month FREE*
- 🐾 Choose your own vet.
- 🐾 3 low-cost, high value plans.
- 🐾 100% reimbursement.^
- 🐾 2 business-day claims turnaround.
- 🐾 Save even more with a 5% multi-pet discount.



Scan to get
your quote.

*Terms and Conditions apply. For 1 Month Free details and Policy Wording, visit pd.co.nz.

^100% reimbursement on eligible vet bills, minus your fixed excess, up to the claimable limit.

PD Insurance is a product of Pacific International Insurance Pty Limited, NZBN9429041356500, FSP394846.

GOLD

Real Estate Agencies

HARCOURTS



WITH A RICH HISTORY THAT GOES BACK 135 YEARS, Harcourts' legacy has been crafted through a steadfast commitment to its core values: putting people first; doing the right thing; and being courageous. Harcourts prides itself on upholding these principles as its team of professionals serve their clients and inspire others in the real estate industry.

As New Zealand's largest real estate company, Harcourts has earned the trust of countless Kiwis when it comes to selling, buying and renting properties. Even in the face of challenges, Harcourts continues to adapt and innovate. For example, in 2023 it undertook the biggest technological project in the history of the organisation.

Notably, the Harcourts Foundation

plays a vital role in supporting local community groups, making a significant difference through the generosity of Harcourts employees nationwide. The foundation also works closely with hospices, providing funds through the Hospice NZ Grants Programme for specialised equipment and improved care for individuals

with life-limiting illnesses.

In 2022, Harcourts raised an impressive \$167,652.45 for Gumboot Friday, enabling 1215 free counselling sessions for Kiwi kids in need. Harcourts is thrilled to support this nationwide youth mental health initiative once again in 2023, believing it will lead to positive outcomes for struggling New Zealand children.

Furthermore, Harcourts takes immense pride in winning the Reader's Digest Quality Service Gold Award for Real Estate Agencies for seven consecutive years and the Most Trusted Brand for Real Estate Agencies for 11 years in a row.

● Visit [harcourts.net/nz](https://www.harcourts.net/nz)

Harcourts

GOLD

Retirement Villages

SUMMERSET



LOVE THE LIFE YOU CHOOSE

For more than 25 years, Summerset has created retirement villages that go beyond mere living spaces; they have evolved into thriving communities. Currently, Summerset has 36 villages from Whangarei to Dunedin with more than 7,500 residents enjoying the secure, vibrant, and welcoming resort-style villages.

Summerset has always been guided by a deep respect for residents and the philosophy of creating a home you'd be proud to live in. To meet the range of resident needs, they offer several independent living and care options including serviced apartments, care suites and state-of-the-art memory care centres.

With a strong focus on delivering person-centred care to help residents make the most of every day, and a 24-hour on-site team, residents can enjoy security and peace of mind.

Summerset firmly believes that retirement should be a time of relaxation, enjoyment, and pursuing long-held interests, so they have a range of fantastic facilities that



residents love. Staying active is made easy with many villages offering swimming pools, bowling greens and gyms on site. A full calendar of organised activities and social events caters to all interests and there are plenty of teams and clubs to join for those who would like to keep up a hobby or learn a new one.

Summerset regularly surveys residents to help drive improvements that are important to them. With this approach to continual improvement, Summerset ensures they're delivering quality services and facilities to their residents. ● **Visit [summerset.co.nz](https://www.summerset.co.nz)**



GOLD

Tiling Stores

(excl. DIY Home Improvement Stores)

THE TILE DEPOT



fast, friendly and efficient service at its 14 showrooms and warehouse. The passionate team is well known for going above and beyond what customers expect, moving heaven and earth to ensure they get their products in full and on time.

Established in 1995, The Tile Depot has grown to become one of New Zealand’s largest importers and retailers of quality tiles. “Tiles

GOING THE EXTRA MILE at The Tile Depot is just part of its friendly, everyday service. “We are a ‘roll up your sleeves’ organisation,” says General Manager Mike Syddall. ‘Everyone touches the tiles’ is a core value of the business, and “everyone, including managers, regional managers and senior managers, can be found working the floor, helping customers to choose the right flooring for their project and loading cars with their new purchases.”

The Tile Depot understands that the company’s success is due in part to its knowledgeable customer care staff who are committed to providing

are generally at the end of a build or renovation,” says Mr Syddall. “By this time many things have often gone wrong on the project and people’s patience and stress levels are being tested. We focus on controlling the controllable.”

While The Tile Depot accepts that most customers won’t require more tiles for some time, the New Zealand business is confident that good customer service and quality products at a fair price will bring them back when they are renovating again. ● **Visit www.tiledepot.co.nz**

the tile depot



From our family
TO
YOURS

the **tile depot**

GOLD

Travel Insurance

SOUTHERN CROSS TRAVEL INSURANCE



TRAVEL IS 'HOT' POST-PANDEMIC AND SHOWS NO SIGNS OF SLOWING DOWN!

Extensive research from Southern Cross Travel Insurance (SCTI) indicated 95% of New Zealanders are planning to travel over the next 12 months to see family and friends, relax and unwind and to experience an adventure.

However, the travel industry has continued to face significant disruptions over the past year, as travel has 'returned to normal'. During this time, SCTI has continued to focus on enhancing the services, experiences, and products it offers to travellers of all ages.

"We're very customer-focused," says Jo McCauley, CEO. "It's important to us that we are with our customers when they need us."

"This means everything from

organising medical evacuations from Europe or the Pacific, to launching easy-to-understand insurance products, refreshing others and making it easier to submit a claim. Earlier this year we also stood up a dedicated team to help thousands of customers affected by severe

weather events here in Aotearoa."

McCauley says SCTI has scaled up the business to meet the needs of a growing market. "We have expanded our team by 150%, bringing some exceptional people on board with fantastic customer service skills. These skills are essential when we're helping people who are having difficulties overseas or at home. Our people love what they do and are genuinely buzzed when connecting with customers and meeting and exceeding their expectations. Winning Gold for the 5th year in a row for Quality Service is testament to how much we put our customers first." ● **Visit www.scti.co.nz**



Providing top quality service as voted by YOU

Excellent customer service

Genuinely helpful & nice people

They are always reliable & quick

Quick process friendly team

Really easy

THEY ARE SIMPLY THE BEST



Kerengapu

Customer Services Representative



Southern Cross
Travel Insurance

With you

SILVER

Used Vehicle Dealerships

2 CHEAP CARS



DRIVING BETTER DEALS EVERY DAY

is much more than a tagline, it's at the very heart of the 2 Cheap Cars' promise to its customers.

Over 13 years, 2 Cheap Cars has built its enviable reputation by following this mantra when putting people behind the wheel.

Driving a better deal starts with selecting a wide variety of quality, used cars in Japan, including a market-leading, massive range of popular EVs and HEVs. Those cars are then shipped to the company's Auckland hub for further meticulous mechanical checks and detailing before being dispatched to 2 Cheap Cars 12 dealerships around New Zealand. Sharp pricing and great service are the final steps to ensure customers get the best possible deal.

2 Cheap Cars CEO Paul Millward says the business is passionate about living their values.

"A better deal is not just about money, although that's really important especially when life is getting more expensive. But it's also about quality, choice and ultimately, the customer experience is everything.

"We are really proud to have people returning again and again



to 2 Cheap Cars and referring us to friends and family. That's huge for us because it means we're delivering what we said we would. You can't put a price on loyalty and keeping customers happy," he said.

With seven branches in Auckland and locations in Hamilton, Tauranga, Palmerston North, Wellington and Christchurch, there's a 2 Cheap Cars yard near you.

● Visit www.2cheapcars.co.nz



2CheapCars

★
WINNER
OF THE READER'S DIGEST
SILVER QUALITY SERVICE AWARD
★



TO VIEW ALL VEHICLES, VISIT WWW.2CHEAPCARS.CO.NZ
OR CALL 0800 223 370

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SINCE 1894

Give
the gift



of great
taste



DELICATE 33% COCOA CREAMY MILK SHELL.
SMOOTH HAZELNUT GIANDUJA FILLING.

