

Chicago Tribune



\$5.75 | SUNDAY, APRIL 12, 2026 | CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

Going back to Venezuela proving to be difficult

Diplomatic hurdles, broken ties make return to home country hard

By Laura Turbay and Laura Rodríguez Presa
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Drawn by the promise of a free flight back to her native Venezuela, Yessica Torres downloaded the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Home app, believing it would cover the plane tickets for Torres and her family.

But after almost a year of waiting for CBP to arrange their travel, Torres now feels stuck in a country that denied her family asylum and whose president has campaigned for their departure. She does not have a passport — the last Venezuelan consulate in the U.S. shuttered years ago — and the CBP Home app, which promised to fly her back as part of a program called “Project Homecoming,” has yet to follow through on its proclamation of cost-free travel and a monetary exit bonus.

“There shouldn’t be so much paperwork, so many permits to leave,” said Torres, 34, who is staying in a shared apartment in Chicago with her partner and two young children. “If that’s what they want — that we leave.”

Torres is one of countless Venezuelan immigrants who want to return to their home country, but have been unable to because of the broken diplomatic ties and bureaucratic hurdles between the two countries. Currently, there are no direct flights from the U.S. to Venezuela, and Venezuelan passports and other vital travel documents are nearly impossible to obtain after the countries broke off diplomatic relations with each other in 2019.

Some Venezuelans have found themselves in the position of making the same harrowing trek they endured to get to the U.S. — traveling across multiple countries, sometimes through dangerous territories — to return home.

“They left the country not looking for anything other than stability and peace,” said Illinois Venezuelan Alliance vice president of the board Jose Morales. Now, he said, they are returning back, in part, “because of the persecution by this government.”

To be sure, since the Trump administration’s ouster of then-President Nicolás Maduro in early January, an easier pathway could be on the horizon. Last month, the U.S. formally reopened its embassy in Caracas — though

See **VENEZUELA** on Page A4

THE REGION: HOME TO STEEL MILLS, BEACHES AND ... THE CHICAGO BEARS?



‘It’s a true community’

By Robert McCoppin | CHICAGO TRIBUNE

David Kubacki has lived in both places where the Chicago Bears are considering building a new stadium — and he knows which he prefers.

Kubacki was born in Hammond, Indiana, but when he was a child, his family moved to Arlington Heights. After returning to attend Purdue University, he never left Indiana, raising his family in Hammond. His friends and family were there, and it made sense financially to stay in northwest Indiana, an area known as “the region.”

“If the wind blows in the wrong direction, you smell the refinery,” he conceded. “But we can be at the lakefront on our boat in five minutes. You can walk down the street at night. People wave. It’s a true community.”

If the Bears move to Indiana, they will become part of the region — a corner of the state that has much in common with both Chicago and Indiana, yet proudly protects its own identity.

“The region” can spark arguments among its own residents as to how the area is defined. Originally named for the Calumet region, bound by its rivers, it generally covers the northwest corner of the state, in Lake and Porter counties.

Many Chicagoans know the area only from driving through, and may think of it as the ruins of the Rust Belt, interrupted by the Indiana Dunes. The region rose from an industrial foundation, but like Chicago diversifying from its stockyard past, it now features a mix of quaint towns, luxury lakefront homes, booming suburbs and farmland.

Still, certain personal traits remain valued: a blue-collar work ethic, street smarts and a feeling of community.

See **REGION** on Page A6

Above: Suzette and David Kubacki have been running the Lenten Friday fish fry at Hammond Mohawks AC&C in Hammond for 18 years. **E. JASON WAMBSGANS/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**



Developer Nick Serra on Tuesday steps onto the future balcony of a newly constructed third-floor unit in a building he’s redeveloping to add rental apartments in Chicago’s Uptown neighborhood. **BRIAN CASSELLA/TRIBUNE**

Pritzker’s housing proposals: More four-flats, looser rules

Plan would ease zoning restrictions that limit residential density

By Olivia Olander
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Above the bay windows that run up the center of a two-story apartment building in Uptown, Nick Serra stands on what had been the balcony for a new third-floor unit he’s adding.

In many circumstances, the construction work would be a sure sign that another traditional Chicago apartment building was being gutted and converted into a single-family home that could fetch more than \$1 million.

Instead, the new top floor will be a four-bedroom apartment that,

along with other changes Serra is making, will turn the entire building into a six-unit development capable of housing a dozen people.

“Versus, you know, two people and their golden retriever,” Serra said, as he stood last week on the unfinished top floor.

Serra is part of a cohort of developers adding units to existing buildings rather than tearing them down or converting them to single-family homes — a practice many housing advocates say helps with affordability in high-demand neighborhoods. But finding lots zoned to allow the additional square footage and density he needs is difficult, particularly on the North Side, where he primarily works. Under current rules, he has managed roughly two

See **HOUSING** on Page A8

US, Iran hold peace talks

The two countries continued face-to-face negotiations in Pakistan, days after a fragile, two-week ceasefire was announced. **Nation & World, Page B5**

When reports were works of art

Government reports tend to be pretty dry. But Northwestern shows a flashback to a time when they were a bit more scintillating. **Arts & Entertainment**

Bears’ priorities in the draft

With the draft less than two weeks away, a look at the team’s biggest area of need — and prospects who could be available. **Sports**

SUBSCRIPTION

Visit myaccount.chicagotribune.com or call 312-546-7900 to sign up for a subscription. To place an ad, visit placeanad.chicagotribune.com.

WEATHER FORECAST

TODAY H: 77 L: 62
MON. H: 77 L: 64
TUE. H: 80 L: 62
Complete details on Page A20

INDEX

Almanac A15
Crossword ... In Comics
Editorials B1
Horoscope ... In Comics
Letters B3
Obituaries A16
Rides G7
Success G4
Television D7

178th year No. 102
© Chicago Tribune



Engage with history at emigration museums



Rick Steves

Every year, millions of Americans visit Ellis Island, where their ancestors may have arrived from “the old country.” But Europe has many excellent “Ellis Islands in reverse” — museums at the places where millions said goodbye to the land of their birth.

Is there anything more poignant than a person willing to sacrifice everything in pursuit of a better life for themselves and their loved ones? That’s the story of many hard-scrabble Europeans heading off to dreamed-of opportunities in far-off America. Others, who faced persecution or even starvation, really had no choice — it was leave or die. Across Europe, you’ll find excellent museums that tell some of these compelling stories.

One of the best is EPIC: The Irish Emigration Museum. With so much anxiety surrounding immigration in the U.S. today, this thought-provoking experience reminds visitors how many Americans were just as worried about Irish immigrants 160 years ago.

I had never fully appreciated the Irish diaspora until I visited here. Located in Dublin, EPIC celebrates how the little island of Ireland — where population peaked at just 8 million before its period of great immigration — has had an oversized impact on the world. (An estimated 70 million people worldwide claim Irish heritage.)

The museum uses a high-tech approach to explain the forces that scattered so many Irish people around the globe, while historic photos of filthy tenements and early films of bustling urban scenes help you imagine yourself in the shoes of the common Irish emigrant.



The Irish Emigration Museum offers visitors a high-tech look at how the island has had an outside impact on the global diaspora. **ADDIE MANNAN**

On the continent, there are more places to learn about the plight of European emigrants — including the cutting-edge Red Star Line Museum in Antwerp, Belgium, which fills the hall that processed many who passed through this port city on their way to a new life. In late-19th-century Europe, the Industrial Revolution and a tremendous population boom led to political instability and economic difficulties. During the great migration between 1873 and 1935, the Red Star shipping line brought some two million emigrants from Antwerp to New York City.

This was the exit point for people from all over Europe. Jews fleeing pogroms in Tsarist Russia and later Nazi persecution in Germany — among them Irving Berlin,

Golda Meir and Albert Einstein — accounted for at least a quarter of the Red Star Line’s passengers taken across the Atlantic. The 10-day steamer journey transported cargo, luxury travelers, and “steerage-class” peasants alike. Before boarding, emigrants underwent humiliating health exams and nervously waited while clerks processed their paperwork.

The Red Star Line Museum combines personal stories with high-tech presentations to detail the “other end” of the Ellis Island experience. One powerful exhibit — using wraparound video screens — drives home the point that immigration remains as common today as it was in the heyday of Ellis Island. Displays profile immigrants throughout history — from

the first humans who left Africa tens of thousands of millennia ago, to migrant workers of today.

In Hamburg, Germany, the engaging BallinStadt Emigration Museum tells the story of those from Germany and beyond who went first to Hamburg, by train or even on foot, before boarding a ship to cross the ocean.

Creative themed exhibits give a look at the origins of the five million German emigrants who passed through here, the reasons they chose to leave (from poverty to persecution), their experiences on the transatlantic ships, and their challenges forging a new life in the new land. While the museum has less in the way of actual artifacts, its big, colorful re-creations of living conditions and

interactive exhibits offer a dynamic and kid-friendly look at a powerful topic.

For anyone with Swedish heritage, the tidy House of Emigrants in Växjö, Sweden, is a fascinating stop. Its inspiring “Dream of America” exhibit captures the experiences of the nearly 1.3 million Swedes who sought a better life in the American promised land in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Economic woes (and, much like in Ireland, a potato famine) wracked Sweden from the 1850s to the 1920s. Roughly 20% of the men and 15% of the women who were born in Sweden during the last half of the 19th century left. Rounding out the museum is an exhibit that pays homage to prominent Swedish-Americans — including aviator Charles

Lindbergh and the second man on the moon, Buzz Aldrin — and a research department that can help you trace your Swedish ancestry.

With so many of us owing our lives to ancestors who risked theirs emigrating to the U.S., it’s important to learn about their epic journey. A visit to an emigration museum in Europe can help us appreciate our own heritage, while also giving us greater understanding toward those currently seeking refuge on our own soil.

Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European travel guidebooks and hosts travel shows on public television and public radio. Email him at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.

CELEBRITY TRAVEL

Marathon races help Molinaro know cities

By **Jae-Ha Kim**
TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

Joanne Lee Molinaro — better known online as the Korean Vegan — has always offered more than cooking instructions to her millions of social media followers.

Her latest book, “The Korean Vegan: Home-made,” weaves confessional essays and stories about her family with her unique vegan take on Korean cuisine. A former partner at a Chicago law firm, the bestselling author and James Beard Award winner quit her full-time job and relocated to Los Angeles in 2022 to expand her business and launch her latest venture, Korean Vegan Beauty.

This interview with Molinaro has been edited for length and clarity.

Q: What are some of your favorite weekend destinations?

A: The state parks are so beautiful. My nephew, Liam, is 7 years old now, and he loves looking for sea creatures. When you go to the state parks, there’s a ton of rocks all over these large boulders, and they create these little shallow pools. That’s where he would find all of his little creatures — crabs, fish, stuff like that. It was just wonderful for him. But then for the adults, you get to walk along the beach. You’re allowed to bring your dogs with you. My whole family went out. We brought a little blanket and it was so great. And there are so many state parks all over like Malibu State Creek Park. Cheeseboro is right by us. It’s wonderful (for me) hiking trails that go way up high. You can see the entire city and it’s just



Joanne Lee Molinaro says visiting state parks makes for a wonderful time. **JOANNE LEE MOLINARO**

really amazing.

Q: What did you do on your last trip to Italy?

A: We went to Venice, we went to the Dolomites, and we went to Rome, because (my husband) Anthony’s family is in Rome. We did that trip, which was absolutely sensational. The Dolomites are like nothing I’ve ever seen in my entire life.

Q: You’ve run marathons all over the United States. Is there a difference depending on the cities you’re in?

A: There are definitely differences. I have run multiple marathons in Chicago, obviously. I also ran one in Indianapolis, one in Cincinnati, one in New York City. The geography is different, right? ... When I found out I was running in New York, a lot of my training involved lots of hills to make sure that my legs were conditioned — particularly my quads — to handle the incline and the decline of all the different bridges. Chicago is very different. It’s very flat, so I don’t have to do as much hill work, other than Mount Roosevelt, which has a little bit of an incline (before the finish line).

Q: What about the vibe of each city?

A: I think running a marathon is one of the best ways to get to know a place. The real differences are the personalities. You really get a sense of each city. For example, the sheer

diversity of the different boroughs of New York. You’ll pass the Orthodox Jewish area, which is so distinctly quiet on a Sunday, and then you end up in Central Park, where everyone’s hair is on fire. You run through Brooklyn, and people have their coffee and bagels. In Chicago, I’ll never forget running through Chinatown and through Pilsen. I’ll never forget the little block that was cordoned off by the Korean Americans. In Ohio, it’s a very different Midwestern vibe. Their marathon is called the Flying Pig Marathon, so there was a lot of bacon involved.

Q: When you return to these cities, do you find that they look different than how you viewed them while running?

A: The cities take pains to block traffic, so you literally will never see it in the same way as when you’re running the marathon. And then on top of that, it’s the one day of the year when that city comes out and says, “You know what? We hate each other every other day of the year. But today, we’re going to love each other and support the runners.”

Q: When in a new place, do you enjoy doing touristy things?

A: I’m not into that stuff. I hate tourist things.

For more from the reporter, visit www.jaehakim.com.

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Family books flight directly, but connecting line seeks payment

By **Christopher Elliott** | KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

My family of four flew from Toronto to Marrakech, Morocco, on tickets that were booked directly with Delta Air Lines. The first leg was on KLM, and the connection was on Transavia. When we landed in Amsterdam, Transavia couldn’t find our reservation at first. After two hours of back and forth, a representative said that our tickets weren’t paid in full.

The airline wouldn’t give us boarding passes unless we paid \$1,198 on the spot. We had no choice but to pay. When we returned home, I contacted Delta Air Lines, which advised me to file a chargeback on my credit card.

Transavia admitted that a refund was due and repeatedly told me they were processing it, but the money never arrived. Each time I follow up, they either ask for the same banking details again or insist that the transfer was rejected. My bank has no record of any attempt by Transavia to send the refund.

Transavia now says that it will close my case if I don’t provide the requested information, which I’ve already sent several times. It feels like a runaround. Can you help me get my \$1,198 back?

— *Rachel Newton, Toronto*

A: If you had tickets to fly to Marrakech, you should have been allowed to board the flight without further payment. You had valid tickets that were issued by Delta for flights that were operated by KLM and Transavia. The fact that Transavia claimed that your tickets were “unpaid” was almost certainly a systems error.

I’m not surprised that this happened to you on Transavia. The airline has been criticized for aggressive fees and, in some cases, refund delays that border on obstruction. And the way they handled your refund? Equally unacceptable. Transavia acknowledged multiple times that you were due a refund.

But rather than simply processing it, the airline kept moving the goalposts. This is not customer service — it’s delay by design. When an airline takes money in error, European Union rules are clear; it must issue a prompt refund. Under EU Regulation 261, passengers are also entitled

to assistance and rerouting when airlines mishandle tickets. While this law is better known for compensating delays and cancellations, its core principle is that airlines can’t strand you or extort additional money for a flight that you’ve already purchased.

Delta’s advice to file a credit card dispute was wrong. You always want to work directly with the merchant to resolve a billing problem. If you file a dispute, this usually ties up any refund processes. Fortunately, you didn’t take this advice from Delta.

You can also appeal your case to the executive contacts at Transavia that I list on my consumer advocacy website, Elliott.org. This was a long and frustrating battle for money that you never should have had to give up in the first place. And it’s a reminder: When an airline insists on cash or card at the counter for something that seems wrong, document everything, and if possible, push back before handing over

your credit card.

I contacted Transavia on your behalf. “We fully understand how frustrating this situation must be for her and her family, and we regret the long time this refund process has already taken,” a representative told me. “Our records show that the refund has been initiated twice, but both transfers were rejected by the receiving bank.”

Actually, here’s what happened: You gave the airline a SWIFT/BIC code for the transfer, but it insisted on an IBAN code, which isn’t used by United States or Canadian banks. You ended up opening an account with WISE to obtain an IBAN code and sent it to Transavia. Then you received a full refund, as promised.

Christopher Elliott is the chief advocacy officer of Elliott Advocacy, a nonprofit organization that helps consumers resolve their problems. Contact him at elliott.org/help or chris@elliott.org.