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SPECIAL REPORT



GREAT WASTE IN THE GREAT LAKES

As plastics clog the waters, industry presses to make more and downplays dangers, Tribune analysis finds

By Michael Hawthorne | CHICAGO TRIBUNE

ERIE, Pa. — On an overcast day in this Great Lakes city, semitrucks pulled alongside railcars parked at a tree-lined siding. One by one, drivers jumped out, connected thick hoses from underneath their trailers and vacuumed up shipments from the Gulf Coast and Ohio River Valley.

Reporting for this story was supported by the Pulitzer Center's StoryReach U.S. initiative.

Sherrri Mason sifted through what they left behind: Amidst the gravel rail bed, thousands of translucent white pellets littered the ground, throwaways from American industry's insatiable appetite for plastic.

"Like stars in the night sky," Mason, a Gannon University educator and researcher who goes by Sam, said as she waved a hand above the detritus. "Seemingly beautiful, until you realize what they are."

Then she nodded toward nearby storm drains that flush unfiltered into Lake Erie, one of five freshwater seas sustaining more than 40 million people in the United States and Canada.

More plastic bits, each barely larger than a grain of rice, scattered across asphalt outside a stop on delivery routes from the railroad.

Plastic pellets, also known as nurdles, are manufactured by petrochemical plants specifically for the purpose of making new products. At least 15 factories here melt and mold the raw materials into water bottles, yogurt cups, fast-food packaging and scores of other goods.

Erie is among hundreds of communities in the U.S. and Canada where nurdles spill into the Great Lakes from chemical plants that make them, trains and trucks that transport them and factories that turn them into consumer products.

Untouched by everyday people, nurdles that don't get used in the manufacturing process, either because of wasteful transportation or production practices, are write-offs for global oil and chemical conglomerates plotting to dramatically expand the use of plastic in every aspect of life.

When confronted about their pollution, industry executives often have blamed consumers, using tactics borrowed from and shared with Big Tobacco, according to a Chicago Tribune review of thousands

See **PLASTICS** on Page A12

Above: Sherrri Mason, a Gannon University researcher, picks up plastic pellets, pieces barely larger than a grain of rice, that litter the ground where they are transferred from rail cars to trucks and delivered to local manufacturers in Erie, Pennsylvania. **BRIAN CASSELLA/TRIBUNE**

Volunteers help immigrants get home after freed by ICE

Some held near their communities, but many sent to other states

By Gregory Royal Pratt
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

After being released from nine months in Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention, Jesus Ramirez Ramos needed help.

The clothes he wore when he was arrested stank from spending the better part of a year in storage, unwashed. ICE lost his cell-

phone at the Michigan jail where he was held, cutting off important contacts. He was arrested and detained far from his Salina, Kansas, home, and had no easy way back to the nation's heartland.

Or so he thought.

When he walked out of the North Lake detention center in Baldwin, a small town in northern Michigan, Delight Lester was there.

A 66-year-old Michigander, Lester is involved with an advocacy group that fills ICE detain-

See **HOME** on Page A6



Larry Gephart, right, assists Jose Angel Miranda, of Nicaragua, who was released from the North Lake Processing Center in Baldwin, Michigan, with a phone call from an attorney outside the facility on May 14. **ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

ILLINOIS LEGISLATURE

Racing to finalize \$55 billion budget

Bears stadium talks take back seat on final day of legislative session

By Rick Pearson, Jeremy Gerner, Dan Petrella, Olivia Olander and Jack O'Connor
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

SPRINGFIELD — With one day left before their scheduled month-end adjournment deadline, Illinois state lawmakers Saturday worked to put together a limited package of tax increases and revenue diversions to finance a new state budget of more than \$55 billion. Finding agreement on a plan aimed at keeping the Chicago Bears in Illinois continued to be elusive.

Democratic Gov. JB Pritzker and the Democrats who lead supermajorities in the House and Senate, House Speaker Emanuel "Chris" Welch and Senate President Don Harmon, used the day to follow the advice and admonition that late Republican Gov. Jim Edgar once gave to Pritzker — that the governor's most "important job is to pass a balanced budget."

Talks on the fate of the Bears — who are being lured by a taxpayer-financed stadium package in Hammond, Indiana — and a proposal to allow the team to negotiate local property taxes for a site it purchased in the northwest suburb of Arlington Heights continued but were a lower priority than the budget. However, representatives

See **SESSION** on Page A15

INSIDE



JOAN MARCUS

Theater in Chicago heats up for summer

After a customary late-May lull, Chicago's theater gets back into action in June with several lively summer offerings, ranging from new musicals with star-encrusted casts to an in-the-round Sondheim to an experimental vampire show. **Arts & Entertainment**

Middle East awaits decision on war deal

President Donald Trump said he was meeting with advisers to make a "final determination" about a proposed deal with Iran. **Nation & World, Page B5**

Sox rolling, but now without Murakami

The Sox hit three home runs — without Munetaka Murakami, who is out with a hamstring injury — extending their winning streak to four games. **Sports**

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WEATHER FORECAST

TODAY H: 75 L: 55
MON. H: 76 L: 54
TUE. H: 75 L: 52
Complete details on Page A22

INDEX

Almanac A17
Crossword ... In Comics
Editorials B1
Horoscope ... In Comics
Letters B3
Obituaries A18
Rides G7
Success G4
Television E11

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Spunky Cardiff serves up taste of Wales



Rick Steves

Just an hour from major English destinations such as Bath and the Cotswolds, spunky Cardiff offers a taste of Welsh flavors that will leave you with great memories.

Most travelers planning a trip to Britain don't realize you can hop a train in London and, in just over two hours, find yourself in Wales' revitalized capital.

Cardiff, like so many Industrial Age giants, has re-emerged with fresh vigor from its time as a run-down, rust-belt city. Its castle has medieval intrigue as well as Victorian bling, its downtown is vibrant, and its port — which shipped 20% of the world's fuel when coal was king — is now a delightful place to stroll.

While not on many bucket lists, Cardiff (pop. 380,000) offers plenty of reasons to visit. Rugby and soccer fans know it as the home of Principality Stadium — famous for having Britain's first fully retractable roof. Sci-fi fans know it as the place where "Doctor Who" is filmed.

But the Welsh proudly view Cardiff as their political and cultural capital. To savor the city, stroll through one of the many impressive Victorian-era arcades burrowing through the city center, check out a smattering of museums, and wander the impressively modern waterfront.

One of the city's top sights is Cardiff Castle, a fun complex that contains within its medieval wall bits of fortresses erected here since Roman times. It was the Normans in the 11th century who made the most impact, building a fortified tower (or "keep") on a man-made mound (a style known as "motte-and-bailey").



Overlooked Cardiff has a historic port, a vibrant downtown and bits of medieval intrigue and Victorian bling scattered throughout. **RICK STEVES**

After rambling the ramparts and climbing the keep, you can also check out a World War II bomb shelter, an impressive Welsh military museum, and some Victorian-era castle apartments that are not very historic, but dazzling just the same.

Rebuilt by John Crichton-Stuart, whose income from the thriving coal trade made him one of Europe's wealthiest men in the late 1860s, the rooms were turned into a whimsical, fantastical take on the Middle Ages. It's the Welsh equivalent of "Mad" King Ludwig's fairy-tale castles in Bavaria (built in the same Romantic decade).

After this dose of history, head down to the revamped Docklands area on Cardiff Bay to discover the city's

most lively and thriving development. I like to get here by scenic boat from downtown, slowly ambling down the River Taff.

The one-time world capital of the coal industry, Cardiff was nicknamed "Coal-opolis" during the steam-powered Industrial Revolution — when Welsh coal was recognized as the world's finest. But by the mid-1960s the last shipment left Cardiff and, like many blue-collar British hubs, the economy slumped severely.

The Docklands have since been revitalized with state-of-the-art facilities (such as the impressive Wales Millennium Centre, built for the performing arts) that sit side by side with restored historic buildings and the Senedd, a futuristic government center that houses the

Welsh Parliament.

Cardiff can also be used as a springboard to some of the most interesting sights in South Wales. Just 30 minutes away is St. Fagans National Museum of History, the best look anywhere at traditional Welsh culture. I like to think of museums like this as culture on a lazy Susan — a one-stop shop to experience traditional lifestyles across a wide geographical area.

This 100-acre open-air museum has more than 40 carefully reconstructed and fully furnished historic buildings from all corners of Wales, as well as a "castle" (actually a Tudor-era manor house) that offers a glimpse of how the other half lived. The workshops here feature busy craftspeople eager to demonstrate

their skills. Each house comes equipped with a local expert warming up beside a toasty fire, happy to tell you anything you want to know about life in this old cottage.

Romantics should consider seeing the beloved Tintern Abbey, immortalized in verse by William Wordsworth, and on canvas by J. M. W. Turner. Founded in 1131 on a site chosen for its tranquility, it functioned as a Cistercian abbey until it was dissolved under Henry VIII.

Few ruined abbeys are as big, as remarkably intact, and as picturesquely situated. Most of the external walls of the 250-foot-long, 150-foot-wide church still stand, along with its exquisite window tracery and outlines of the sacristy, chapter house, and dining

hall. The daylight that floods through the roofless ruins highlights the Gothic decorated arches — in those days a bold departure from Cistercian simplicity.

Wales is often overshadowed by its neighbors, England and Scotland, and South Wales is often passed over for the more dramatic castles and scenery in the north.

But in the Cardiff region, you'll get a great dose of history and a glimpse of the area's bright future — all with a lilting Welsh accent.

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

Oliveras plans trip to coastal Portugal

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

In the Broadway production of "The Balusters," Maria-Christina Oliveras plays Luz Baccay, a Filipina housekeeper who has served a wealthy community for 30 years.

"Her power lies in observation and deep listening (and) in knowing what to say and what not to say," the actor said from her New York City home.

"She is an expert at navigating spaces that are not her own, which mirrors much of my lived experience. As a proud first-generation Filipina-Puerto Rican artist from a working-class background in the Bronx, it was vitally important to me to honor her with dignity and grace. She has a fierce sense of humor and ultimately serves as the truth-teller, and the light of the play."

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

Q: Growing up, did you think that this life could be yours?

A: It's complicated. Growing up and even through college, I didn't really feel limited by my identity. I had a lot of support, and I just loved acting. I worked hard, eked out every opportunity I could and even in predominantly white spaces like Yale, I got to play incredible roles. Theater was like a great equalizer. So at the time, it felt like this life was possible. The bigger pressure early on came from being the child of immigrants, where stability and security are emphasized. Though my parents were



Maria-Christina Oliveras says her best vacation memory is taking her mom to the Vatican. **STEPHANIE DIANI**

tremendously supportive, acting was seen more as a hobby and a passion than a profession. It wasn't until I entered the industry that I really started to become aware of the limitations and the lack of role models. I had to learn pretty quickly how to navigate it and advocate for myself.

Q: Have you had the opportunity to visit Puerto Rico and the Philippines?

A: Yes! I've been to Puerto Rico a number of times. It was much more accessible and affordable than the Philippines. My dad is one of 12 children, so we have tons of family there. I was just in Guayanilla, my father's hometown, in July 2025 celebrating his 80th birthday. Unfortunately, I've only been to the Philippines once, in 1985. My mother migrated here in 1971 and rarely made it back, but she wanted my two sisters and me to meet my grandparents. I was only 6 years old at the time. My mom is from Buguias up north in the mountains. It was cool, but so weird for a city kid. We added Tang to our drinking water because it tasted so different, bathed in the river and carried a kettle of boiling water to pour into a tin tub outside to wash up. I also distinctly remember my cousins being obsessed with American music. We had endless guitar singalongs of "Hello" by Lionel Richie. ... I can't wait to go back and visit as an adult.

Q: Where did you film

"Vivien & The Florist"?

A: We filmed in Philadelphia, which I'd never been to before. I loved it. We stayed right on Rittenhouse Square. It's such a walkable city, full of culture and history. The Philadelphia Museum of Art is beautifully curated. While I'm not a huge meat eater, I had a cheesesteak, and it did not disappoint.

Q: Do you have any upcoming trips planned?

A: Yes! I've booked a trip to Lisbon after "The Balusters" closes. I'd also love to hit up Santa Fe and maybe make a quick stop in Denver, where I went to grad school.

Q: What is your best vacation memory?

A: Bringing my mom to the Vatican. My mom is devoutly Catholic and has never asked me for anything. So when she finally got her citizenship in 2019, she said, "Maria, I want to meet the pope." She had never been to Europe, so last October, off to Rome we went. She's about to turn 80 and is still incredibly vibrant and energetic. She tired me out! It was such a special mother-daughter moment, and I'm so grateful we got to do it. And the day we went to the Vatican, seven people were being canonized. So not only did she meet the pope, she witnessed the new saints being welcomed into the Church.

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

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Error turns simple return trip from Greece into costly odyssey

By **Christopher Elliott** | KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

My wife and I recently flew from Cleveland to Athens, Greece. Our return flights from Thessaloniki to Cleveland were booked through Delta, but the first leg of our return flight was on SKY Express, a regional airline.

When we tried to check in online for our SKY Express flight from Thessaloniki to Athens, we were blocked because of a 185 euro balance that was linked to a third passenger with my name — an obvious error. SKY Express refused to correct the mistake and told us that Delta had to fix it.

We called Delta's reservations department. The agent canceled the original SKY Express flight and rebooked us for a new segment from Thessaloniki to Athens. But this also caused our return flight from Athens to Cleveland to be canceled. We had to pick up our luggage in Athens and rebook our flights home.

We had to pay \$435 for a new reservation on Aegean Air to Athens. Delta promised us a refund for the canceled flight, plus 12 euros for seat assignments, but then denied our claim. We're seeking the refund that was originally promised by Delta.

— *Robert Kempke, Rocky River, Ohio*

A: Your experience shows how quickly a minor airline error can snowball into a full-blown travel nightmare. It looks like there was a duplicate passenger entry that the airline's system flagged. This prevented you from checking in online, ultimately invalidating the entire reservation and forcing you to book a new SKY Express segment.

But this also broke your original itinerary, leading to the cancellation of your return Delta flight. You had to buy a new ticket to Athens, and you had to pick up your luggage in Athens and recheck it for your return flight to the United States. What a headache!

You documented everything — receipts, seat assignment fees, call notes and Delta's denial of your claim. This paper trail was essential in resolving the dispute. It also helps to

know your rights. Under the U.S. Department of Transportation's rules, passengers are entitled to automatic and prompt refunds for flights that are canceled by the airline. European Union Regulation 261/2004 applies to flights within or departing from the EU. Knowing these protections gives you leverage when requesting reimbursement.

How did this error happen? Somehow SKY Express booked two tickets for you on one leg of your return journey. I'd have recommended confirming your flight before you left. But you did so, and Delta indicated that you were all set. There was no way to know about this trouble before you arrived in Greece.

One thing is clear: If Delta promised a refund, it should have made good on

its offer. When an airline goes back on its word, you have options, including an appeal to a Delta executive. (I list their names, numbers and emails on my consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org.)

I contacted the airline on your behalf. Delta's Customer Care team reviewed your case and reimbursed the full amount for the canceled SKY Express segment, honoring the refund that was originally promised to you.

While the transaction was handled poorly, your diligence and documentation made a successful outcome possible.

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.