

Chicago Tribune



\$5.75 | SUNDAY, AUGUST 16, 2026 | CHICAGOTRIBUNE.COM

"I'm an outdoors guy, being outside all day and driving tractors and being in the dirt. That's just kind of who I am. So if I can come to church and do the same thing, getting in my own element, outside and not in a building, it's just good."

ANDY GUSTAFSON, who says he feels at home at the Ogle County Cowboy Church



A failure to close funeral home

Missed opportunities preceded discovery of bodies at facility

By Gregory Royal Pratt, Olivia Olander, Caroline Kubzansky, Talia Soglin, Sam Charles, Dan Petrella and Madeline Buckley
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

After city and state officials discovered 56 decomposing bodies in a Chicago funeral home, Gov. JB Pritzker defended the state's response to complaints against the husband and wife in charge of the facility.

Pritzker's message, delivered during a downstate event, was simple: State government did its job.

The comptroller's office, he said, "did what they should do" in shutting down a notorious crematorium run by the same family in the south suburbs where mishandled bodies and hundreds of unreturned remains were discovered in 2025.

The licensing board, he said, "did what it is supposed to do" about the pair who also were running South Chicago Chapel, where the most recent discovery was made.

The people who didn't do what's right, Pritzker said, were the couple, Clark and Johanna Morgan.

"We're talking about some really bad actors," Pritzker said. "The process was followed, the process that's in the law now, and obviously there was no report that came in that would lead anybody to discover this" until late last month, he added at another recent news conference.

A Tribune investigation, however, found regulatory shortcomings that allowed those apparently bad actors to persist, with the state failing to fully shut down Clark and Johanna Morgan's businesses or take their licenses even after they were found to have mishandled human remains at

See **REMAINS** on Page A6

■ South Chicago Chapel families may never know the truth about the cremated remains of loved ones, experts say. **Chicagoland, Page A8**

SALVATION WITH A TWANG

On horseback, under a nearly cloudless blue sky, the pastor removed his cowboy hat and bowed his head, speaking to the Lord during an unconventional Sunday worship service hosted by a nascent Christian ministry in northwest Illinois.

"I pray that this time may be blessed," he said, closing his eyes and holding the reins in one hand. "I pray that you watch over everybody here. And I just thank you that we get to do this. This is insane. I just ask that your message would come forth."

After the blessing concluded, the crowd of around 140 responded "amen" from the wooden bleachers of the horse arena at the Ogle County Fairgrounds in Oregon, roughly two hours west of Chicago.

The pastor, Kerry Hughes, led the service in jeans and cowboy

boots, no clerical collar or vestments.

Many of the worshippers were similarly dressed, some donning sneakers, shorts, riding boots or their work clothes.

A church advertisement for the event had instructed them to forego their "Sunday best" in

favor of something a little more comfortable.

This is cowboy church — a unique form of worship using Western culture and rural life-style to share the Bible, part of a broader movement of similarly country-themed congregations and ministries scattered across

Illinois 'cowboy church' blends worship, Western themes and equestrian culture

By Angie Leventis Lourgos | CHICAGO TRIBUNE

the United States, primarily in the South.

Founded by Hughes and a small group of like-minded worshippers, the Ogle County Cowboy Church held its first service in late September 2025.

Most Sundays, they meet inside a historic college chapel in Mount Morris, a nearby rural town of just under 3,000 residents.

But the 53-year-old pastor said he prefers to preach and pray in more rustic spaces. Barns. Machine sheds. Horse arenas.

His favorite sanctuary for worship is outdoors, among "God's creation."

"I'm not much into brick and stained glass," he added.

So during favorable seasons of weather, worshippers gather

See **CHURCH** on Page A10

Tobias Feick, from left, Nathaniel Davis and Malachi Voight bow their heads in prayer during Ogle County Cowboy Church's "Church in the Dirt" at the Ogle County Fairgrounds in downstate Oregon on July 12. **EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

INSIDE



JOHN J. KIM/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Learning on the job

Rookies and backups carried the load on both sides of the ball Saturday in the Bears' preseason opener, a 34-10 domination of the Browns at a drizzly Soldier Field. **Coverage in Sports**

DEATH OF HORSE RACING

Now that Chicagoland racing has been pronounced dead, the autopsy reveals trouble started with poor decisions made decades ago. **Page A12**

WET ENOUGH FOR YOU?

Chicagoland's wild, wet and severe summer has left plenty of destruction. But none of this year's months rank among the wettest in history. **Page B4**

As pesticides drift onto state schools, parks, residents urge better tracking

By Christiana Freitag
FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

TREMONT, Ill. — On her 43 acres of woods and reclaimed native prairie in rural Tazewell County, Katie VandenBerg walked the edge of her property, inspecting a line of oaks bordered by miles of corn and soybean fields.

The oak leaves are curled and stunted — damage she believes is tied to pesticide applications on nearby farms.

Since buying the land three years ago, VandenBerg, whose family has lived in Tazewell County for seven generations, said she has "gone down a rabbit hole" trying to understand how drifting chemicals are affecting her trees.

Then, this spring, that threat reached her 10-year-old daughter, Genevieve.

Hundreds of children had gathered outside Bethel Lutheran School in nearby Morton for a



Oak leaves that border a nearby farm field curl with repeated exposure to pesticides on property belonging to Katie VandenBerg, back, on Aug. 3 in Tremont. **STACEY WESCOTT/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

jump-rope fundraiser when a chemical odor swept across the parking lot. Across the street, according to Illinois Department of Agriculture records, farmer

Mark Eigsti was spraying pesticides on his soybean fields as wind gusts topped 19 miles per hour.

See **TRACKING** on Page A4

90%

Over six years, Prairie Rivers Network researchers detected herbicides in more than 90% of 127 plant tissue samples they collected from a variety of sites. And during a stretch in 2025, pesticides were found more than 200 times in 10 public Illinois locations.

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: 86 L: 67
MON. H: 80 L: 65
TUE. H: 83 L: 67
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 E7

179th year No. 228
© Chicago Tribune



Slow down in Portugal’s tranquil Tomar



With a rich culture, friendly people, affordable prices and a salty setting on the edge of Europe, Portugal understandably makes a rewarding destination for travelers. Bustling Lisbon and the sunny Algarve coast are well known to tourists (for good reason), but quieter places also offer tantalizing tastes of Portuguese flavor.

About 90 miles northeast of Lisbon, just east of the pilgrimage site of Fátima, is lush, green Tomar — a quaint town of about 20,000 residents, set under a historic fortress. It’s a place with lots of local ambiance, yet remarkably untouristed and well worth a stop.

While there was a settlement here in Roman times, Tomar’s importance started in the 12th century with the construction of a hill-topping castle, Convento de Cristo. Gualdim Pais, a grand master of the Knights Templar religious order, put Tomar on the map by building the castle with Middle Eastern architectural techniques picked up during Holy Land Crusades.

To get the lay of the land, stroll Tomar’s riverside. The tiny Nabão River, running north-south through the middle of town, is all Tomar’s — it starts nearby and flows just a few miles before emptying into the Zêzere River outside of town. Mid-river, a peaceful island with a pleasant park and a rebuilt medieval waterwheel shows off what must have been impressive technology in its day. Once you hit the old bridge, Ponte Velha, head right, through the old town to the main square, Praça da República. The town’s easy-to-navigate grid street plan is a reminder that Tomar was a garrison town built to



Tomar’s central Praça de República is a tempting spot to slow down, nurse a drink at a café and enjoy the relaxed tempo of local life. **RICK STEVES**

defend the castle.

Praça da República is a tempting spot to slow down and nurse a drink at a café, enjoying the relaxed tempo of local life. Children on bikes test their training wheels, pigeons strut as if they own the place, old-timers shake their heads at today’s fashions, and tuk-tuk drivers hustle business (negotiating short town tours on motorized rickshaws). The neighborhood offers plenty of inviting spots to grab a bite or a drink, such as the classic Café Paraíso, a time-warp eatery retaining the humble vibe of mid-century days.

Since Tomar is inland, pork and beef are staples on any menu here. All over town, you’ll notice loaves

of bread stacked into a very tall “crown,” decorated with flowers. Women carry these on their heads in a festival every four years, incorporating pagan and harvest rituals into Catholic celebration during the Festival of the Trays in late June or early July (next up in 2027). Thanks to this tradition, expect fantastic bread with any meal here. Sip a glass of local Tejo wine or try a Portuguese craft beer as you take in the warmth and history right beside you.

Towering above Tomar is its castle, with an Oz-like oratory built 800 years ago. This circular chapel is where knights would go to be blessed before battle as they defended Portugal against the Moors,

protected pilgrims heading for the Holy Land or championed Portugal in the Age of Discovery. The Knights Templar was a rich organization — both as a popular Christian charity and as originator of Europe’s first great banking system. Pilgrims from western Europe would deposit their money with the Templars before leaving home, were given a “check” (safer than cash to travel with) and could make withdrawals along their pilgrimage as they ventured east. You could call the Templars the first multinational corporation. When pilgrims died on their journey, which was all too common, the Templars kept their estate. (When banking, always read the

fine print!)

The Convento de Cristo’s interior gives a glimpse of the mystical wonder of the Knights Templar. The original castle and oratory were built when such impressive architecture was new in Europe. The oratory was designed so horses (important in the Templars’ success on the battlefield) could be ridden in and blessed. Later, under Portuguese King Manuel I, a big conventional church was added. The oratory’s wall was cut open to connect the church and the oratory with a grand, triumphal arch. The church’s nave is decorated in the incredibly intricate Manueline style — motifs that pay tribute to the sea trade that made Portugal

rich. Ornamental shields and coats of arms are decorated with castles, crosses, lions, flags and crowns. There are even designs that duplicate ropes used on ships during Portugal’s Age of Discovery.

Even though Portugal is increasingly on the tourist map, it still has plenty of untrampled, authentic places like Tomar. That’s good news — you can never exhaust Europe of its wonders.

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.



The K-pop group WHIB recently released the mini-album “Cherry Pie.” **CJES STUDIOS**

CELEBRITY TRAVEL

K-Pop artists have US sites in mind

By Jae-Ha Kim
TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

Since its 2023 debut, The K-pop group, WHIB, has won over international fans with its precise showmanship, infectious catchy songs that transcend languages, and sharp wit. Its second mini-album “Cherry Pie” continues to showcase the members’ fluid blend of sweet vocals with intense rapping.

“Since our start, our music style has changed a little,” said Jaeha. “We’ve matured and grown as artists and performers, which is to be expected. But it still feels huge to us.”

This interview was conducted in Korean and English with the Seoul septet and has been edited for clarity and length.

Q: What type of music are you listening to these days?
Haseung: I like South American Latin music. Baile funk. And I love (guitar) band music like Xdinary Heroes.
Jaeha: I like to hear K-pop music a lot.
Jinbeom: R&B music.
Wonjun: Jazz!
Kim Junmin: I like hip-hop.
Leejeong: I love indie rock.
Ugeon: I like pop-punk or band sounds.

Q: Have any of you been to

the United States yet?

Jaeha: The other guys haven’t. But I’ve been to Kansas, because my sister lives there. I don’t remember all the cities I’ve been to, but I’ve been there.

Q: Jaeha, how did you become fluent in English?
Jaeha: My mom, sister and I lived in Canada for a year when I was in second grade. My dad remained in Korea because his job was there. My school was kind of like an international school, so there were other Koreans, Chinese people, Japanese people and lots of other people (from different backgrounds). So I didn’t stick out.

Q: What are you looking forward to seeing when you get to visit the U.S.?
Haseung: I want to go to In-N-Out Burger.
Jaeha: The Chicago Theatre. I saw that place in a lot of movies and a lot of videos, and I want to go there.
Leejeong: Our fans. And city views.

Q: When you are in other countries, do you try the local food?
Jaeha: Of course. But we also have to eat Korean food eventually.

Q: Out of the seven of you, who is consistently the biggest over packer?

(Jaeha pointing to Ugeon): Him.
Leejeong: He takes a lot of clothes.
Jaeha: We go away for maybe three days, and he packs for 12 days. He’s prepared for everything!

Q: What are some memorable concerts you’ve attended?
Jaeha: Haseung and I went to the Stray Kids concert in Korea. That was a big hit.
Leejeong: When I was a trainee, I went to a Seventeen concert.
Wonjun: I’ve never attended someone else’s concert.
Kim Junmin: I never went to one either.

Q: What was a memorable childhood trip?
Wonjun: Mongolia. When I was young, I went there. The sky was so beautiful and blue, so I remember that.
Leejeong: I went to Guam.
Jaeha: Yeah, like I mentioned, I went to Canada in my second grade.

Q: Which destinations are still on your travel bucket list?
Jinbeom: Spain, Paris, Italy.
Haseung: United States in general.
Jaeha: New York and Chicago.

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

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Refund sent to wrong institution after Viva Aerobus cancels flights

By Christopher Elliott | KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

I booked flights with Viva Aerobus from Tijuana to Hermosillo. The airline canceled the flights, and I requested a refund. But Viva Aerobus wouldn’t refund it to my American Express card.

Instead, it said that it had to wire the money to my U.S. bank account. I sent the airline the details for an international transfer. My bank is Northrop Grumman Federal Credit Union; I found a SWIFT code for the bank online and included it in the forms.

It turns out that my bank doesn’t use a SWIFT code or an intermediary bank. To make matters worse, Viva Aerobus performed the transfer but used a different SWIFT code than the one I provided. It sent the money to Navy Federal Credit Union. I’m not a member there, so this bank won’t help me.

I’ve sent several emails to customer service and the CEO, but nobody will reply. I also filed a formal complaint with PROFECO, Mexico’s consumer protection agency.

Can you help me get my \$844 refund?
— Carol Bartell, Carlsbad, California

A: When an airline cancels a flight, it’s required under federal rules to refund you if you decide not to travel. But what we have here is a comedy (or maybe a tragedy) of banking errors, and it’s difficult to know who gets the blame.

Let’s start with the refund itself. Viva Aerobus should have simply reversed the charge on your American Express card. It’s unclear why the airline insisted on a wire transfer, but this requirement set the stage for the confusion that followed.

You admitted in your correspondence that you searched for your bank’s SWIFT code online. This is dangerous. You should always contact your bank to verify wire instructions. As you found out, your credit union doesn’t use the SWIFT system.

However, Viva Aerobus made a significant error as well. You provided

a specific code, but the airline’s records show that it sent the money to a different one. As you correctly point out, it directed your refund to Navy Federal instead of Northrop Grumman.

When a wire transfer hits a bank where the beneficiary doesn’t have an account, the funds are typically rejected and returned to the sender. This process can take time, and money often sits in limbo while banks reconcile the error.

You did the right thing by escalating your complaint; you contacted the airline’s executives. (I list the names and numbers for Viva Aerobus executives on my consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org.) You also filed a complaint with PROFECO; for Mexican airlines, PROFECO is often the most effective route to a resolution because it has regulatory authority over carriers like Viva Aerobus.

Since the airline stopped responding to you, it may have been ignoring you. When a consumer protection agency gets involved, your case may get transferred to a different department that handles government complaints. Unfortunately, this often freezes direct communication with the customer to instead handle the issue through the official legal channels.

I contacted Viva Aerobus several times on your behalf. Finally, Viva Aerobus responded to you via your PROFECO complaint. It processed a new refund for \$844 — the full amount of your ticket.

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.