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'Caught in the middle'

Keeping federal agents in check still a challenge one year after Operation Midway Blitz launched

By Madeline Buckley, Caroline Kubzansky, Dan Petrella and Olivia Olander
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

A Schaumburg police officer responded to a 911 call in June from a federal immigration agent who reported being followed, then turned off his body camera at the agent's request.

A Forest Park parking enforcement worker moved a federal agent's car in July while police leaders let the agent slip out the back of the village police station, where he'd ducked in to avoid an activist's camera.

An Evanston police commander defended his officers' response to the mayor in October after immigration agents drove away from a violent confrontation with residents on a north suburban street.

These incidents and many others like them underscore how — a year after President Donald Trump launched Operation Midway Blitz — quick, chaotic encounters involving immigration authorities, local police and Chicago-area residents continue to leave the public and elected officials alike grasping for answers and seeking accountability.

During and after the immigration crackdown, which amounted to a

small-scale military incursion into Chicago and its suburbs, local officials have been beset by disagreements and hand-wringing over how to meet the moment, according to dozens of Tribune interviews and a review of hundreds of pages of documents obtained through public records requests.

The blitz was the most dramatic test to date of the rules of engagement Illinois has established for how local law enforcement deals with federal immigration agents. In the months since, the Tribune found, those rules have grown no clearer.

Local police and other officials "were not prepared for the type of blitz that came in," said Rubén



A U.S. Border Patrol agent reaches over Chicago police officers while threatening to use a canister against protesters in Brighton Park on Oct. 4, 2025. **ARMANDO L. SANCHEZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

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GREAT WASTE IN THE GREAT LAKES



THE OVERWHELMING PROBLEM OF PLASTIC

From flax that can be used in clothing and cars, to robotic skimmers, to stricter laws, researchers, activists, volunteers fight an industry intent on making more of the material

By Michael Hawthorne | CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Spending more than a decade documenting the spread of plastic waste throughout the Great Lakes took a psychological toll on Melissa Duhaime.

Scary findings. Seemingly few solutions to intractable problems. Scientists stacked against the world's most clout-heavy corporations bent on tripling production of fossil fuel-based plastics.

Duhaime, a University of Michigan biologist, found solace — and maybe a chance to build her own business while bolstering the regional economy — in a plastics-free alternative dating back to ancient Mesopotamia, now known as Iraq.

She decided to adjust her research and focus on flax, a plant that can be spun into linen and woven into clothing instead of polyester, acrylic or other synthetic fabrics that shed plastic fibers every time they are laundered.

The stems of flax, mostly grown in America these days for versatile, nutritious seeds, also are a proven substitute for petroleum-based carbon fiber in automobiles and construction.

"Our farmers are interested, some big companies are interested," Duhaime said in a recent interview. "We have the potential to create a new manufacturing sector when it comes to the growing and processing of (flax) fibers, spinning and weaving them, and developing new products."

Duhaime is among a cadre of researchers, environmental activists, policymakers and volunteers striving to curb the onslaught of plastics in every aspect of life.

Some focus on legislation in state capitals and city councils and push for a global treaty that would limit plastics production.

Innovators seek to swap plastics for sustainable options and develop new methods to skim plastic litter out of the environment.

Beach cleanups draw attention to a throwaway culture spawned and encour-

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

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If 7-OH is banned, many may seek care

Addiction recovery providers brace for influx of new patients

By Lisa Schencker
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Many Illinois residents have likely never heard of 7-OH, even though a federal official has warned that the substance — often sold in tablet, liquid and gummy form in vape shops and convenience stores — could drive the next wave of the opioid epidemic.

Now, a federal proposal that would ban 7-OH has sent Illinois business owners scrambling to clear it from their shelves, and led some addiction recovery providers to brace themselves for an influx of new patients if 7-OH products are no longer available.

"We've seen a threefold increase in new patients due to 7-OH," in recent weeks, said Dr. David Kushner, medical director at Brightside Recovery, a substance use disorder treatment provider headquartered in Northbrook. "It's been dramatic."

The compound 7-OH, short for 7-hydroxymitragynine, is found in very small amounts in the kratom plant. But in recent years, companies have started selling tablets, gummies and liquids containing artificially high concentrations of 7-OH, which acts like an opioid on the body.

Over the summer, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration proposed temporarily adding products containing elevated levels of 7-OH to its list of Schedule I substances — a designation reserved for drugs with no acceptable medical use and a high potential for abuse, such as LSD and heroin. The move would make 7-OH products illegal.

A comment period related to the proposed change ended Sept. 10, and it's unclear if or when the change might be finalized. A DEA spokesperson said in a recent email that it's "still in process, and we do not have anything to report in respect to a timeline."

If the change goes into effect, an order could be issued placing 7-OH on Schedule I for up to two years, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

But Illinois businesses selling the product haven't waited for a final decision to take action.

One Chicago-area vape shop owner, who asked not to be named

See **7-OH** on Page A5

Postseason on the horizon

The Cubs extend their reign of chaos with a relocated finale in Florida and playoff seed at stake. Plus, how the Sox defied history. **Sports**



Aglow once again

After a prolonged dormant period, the weather bell on the Rector Building in the Loop is now repaired and restored. **Arts & Entertainment**

Heavy rain batters Northeast

A slow-moving, powerful storm crept along the Northeast, producing high winds, heavy rains and flooding. **Nation & World, Page B5**

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179th year No. 270
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Despite several changes, Venice still charms



I've been traveling to Venice for more than 40 years. On a recent trip to research my guidebook, I had to admit: the city felt different. While still one of Europe's most romantic and distinctive destinations, globalization and modern life are changing Venice — for better and for worse.

As I wandered Venice's meandering streets and canal-side walkways, it became obvious just how much the city has changed, even over just a few decades. A solitary local gestured frantically with his hands while pacing back and forth across a bridge and talking on his cell-phone. Litter grew out the tops of garbage cans like bums with bushy heads of hair. A bridal veil floated in a canal like a dead jellyfish, discarded from yet another bachelorette party the night before. More multilingual menus featured Korean and Chinese, thanks to a huge increase in visitors from that part of the world.

Tourism continues to keep Venice afloat — but it's no longer as lucrative. Many tourists blitz in for the day from cruise ships and cheap mainland hotels — meaning fewer overnights in Venetian hotels and fewer dinner-time customers at restaurants. The city has attempted to address this by introducing an "Access Fee," which charges day-trippers €5-10 per person to visit the historic city center. In theory, the funds will help offset the drawbacks of overtourism — but the jury's out as to how much impact a relatively small fee can have.

While midday crowds fill the streets and blockbuster sights, mornings and evenings in Venice are serene. Travelers willing to hunker down for a few



As travelers come and go during the day, those who spend the evening in Venice seem to have the city all to themselves. **DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCCELLI**

days will have the city to themselves in the early and late hours. Getting up at 7 a.m., I was struck by how St. Mark's Square was an entirely different experience without the mobs.

At Caffè Florian, the most venerable café on the square, the manager lamented how, in the last decade, the café's elegance has been trampled with poorly dressed tourists (not unlike me, I must admit). Still, I love this place, with its smoke-stained mirrors, white-tuxedoed waiters, and finicky piano and string quartet, which somehow gets called an "orchestra." While you can enjoy a romantic drink here with live music and all the tourists, a quiet cup of coffee in the morning, surrounded by

the patina of faded elegance, is also a treat. In so many ways, when you get up early and stay out late, you enjoy a different (and it seems more real) Venice.

Likewise, on the vaporetto water buses, there's a stark contrast between the midday mobs and the easygoing joy of riding at quiet times. Venice is two cities: one garishly touristic and the other so romantic and tranquil that it makes you go fortissimo in describing it.

It's not just cruise ships that are changing Venice — globalization is too. The city has long been known for its exquisite glass, produced on the isle of Murano since 1292, when the furnaces were moved to prevent fires on the main island

(and to protect the secrets of Venetian glassmaking). The island's factories still produce ornate vases, beaded necklaces, and other goods. But these days, many glass trinkets being sold to tourists are made in China or Mexico, and it's undercutting the economy of the local glassmakers. There's a strong push to encourage people to buy genuine Venetian glass with the Murano seal.

In this new, more-diverse Venice, sometimes it seems that restaurants and market stalls are run by as many Sri Lankans as Italians. And odds are that the strolling accordionist sussing out tips at your dinner table is Romanian, not Venetian.

Venice's resident population continues to drop,

thanks in part to the challenges of raising a family here. (Imagine living in a small and expensive apartment that occasionally floods — or pushing a stroller over arched bridges while carrying groceries.) An electric reader board in a pharmacy window ticks down with each person who moves out or dies. On my first day it read 47,759. The next day it was 47,756.

In many ways, Venice seems built for romantics. But romance isn't what it used to be either. It seems there aren't even lovers on gondolas anymore. Everyone is too busy scrolling their iPhones or taking selfies.

If you see a wedding party posing in front of a famous sight, it's most likely a big

shot from Asia or Eastern Europe.

Despite all the changes, Venice still awes me with its ethereal beauty and lovely views — which can hit you from any direction (that's why I recommend that you always look both ways when you pass over a Venetian bridge). In fact, if you pause anywhere in Venice and simply observe, from that single viewpoint you find the unique wonder of this forever unique city on the lagoon.

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

Musician drawn to ancient locations

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

Musician Jasmin Stone describes her latest album, "Broken Moon," as being warmer, softer and having a more comforting touch than her previous work.

But she said that "on the other hand, the music videos bring out a sense of surrealism and sometimes even a touch of madness or alienation. These vibes are less noticeable in the songs themselves, so the videos complete them. I truly hope to touch listeners and viewers in a completely new way this time."

Based out of Israel, Stone is an avid traveler who enjoys exploring the world.

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

Q: What are some bucket-list travel destinations?
A: I haven't made it to India, Egypt or South America yet. These places completely fascinate me with their statues, mystical temples and enchanting ancient cultures. On the flip side, I am dying to visit Tokyo. To me it represents the ultimate future, a city that is light years ahead of the world, even in its cultural concepts. It is like a digital New York for advanced souls. It brings together so many things I adore, like the Shibuya J-pop scene I am totally addicted to, the worlds of manga and anime, the video games I grew up playing and exquisite Japanese gourmet food. And the ancient history of Japan fascinates me just as much. A lot of people have actually told me that I have a bit



Jasmin Stone has her sights set on visiting Tokyo, saying it represents "the ultimate future." **JASMIN STONE**

of a Japanese personality.

Q: What are some of your favorite cities?
A: London, Milan, Venice, the Transylvania region in Romania, Jerusalem, and the list goes on!

Q: What kind of destinations pull you in?
A: It is so hard for me to pick just one favorite place in the world because every single spot has its own beauty and charm. Generally speaking, I am most drawn to the ancient, the antique, the exotic and the mysterious — grand palaces, ancient castles, hidden caves and lost civilizations.

Q: Where have your tours taken you?
A: I have traveled to perform in incredibly fascinating ancient cities like Nazareth and Acre (in Israel). In Nazareth, the festival organizers put together a trip for us to the Church of the Annunciation. It was absolutely breathtaking with its huge, colorful stained-glass windows and Gregorian chanting. I have also performed quite a bit at the Metula Poetry Festival. Metula is such a magical, rustic little town with charming houses and crisp, clean air, so between shows, I just loved pampering myself with that cozy

vibe. Even when traveling for the premieres of films I scored, I always made sure to combine work with exploring the area. Take Jerusalem, for example. Every single time you visit, you discover a hidden gem you never knew existed. It holds an almost incomprehensible, powerful energy.

Q: Do you enjoy taking cruises?
A: I am absolutely in love with cruises! There is something so special about the combined experience of an endless ocean and a floating city where you get to be a guest. It is a unique experience in its own right. On the ship I have sailed with more than once, they serve the most exquisite, lavish feasts three times a day. You honestly need an iron will to resist tasting every single delicacy the chef whips up.

Q: Are there certain items you take with you when you go away?
A: I always pack a small prayer book with me just to keep the good vibes going and make sure everything turns out well. And a little throat lozenge to prevent hoarseness, just to be safe! Sometimes I also throw in earplugs to ensure a perfect night's sleep.

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

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

Princess Cruises charges extra for meals after passenger paid in full

By **Christopher Elliott** | KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

I booked a cruise on the Star Princess about 18 months in advance. A few months later, I called to upgrade to a suite. A Princess representative quoted me a price of \$1,449, and I paid the additional amount that day. My confirmation sheet showed my cabin and stated "paid in full" with a balance of zero. It also noted that I was entitled to suite benefits, like accessing the Sanctuary and specialty dining.

The trouble started when I tried to make dining reservations. The website tried to charge me for things that should've been included. I called for help and ended up making more than 20 calls to various departments.

During one of these calls, an employee told me that I hadn't been charged enough for the upgrade and wouldn't get the benefits unless I paid more.

Later, I discovered that Princess had added \$3,967 to my booking without my permission. When I called to protest, the cruise line gave me an ultimatum: Pay the extra money, move back to my original mini-suite with a refund of the upgrade fee, or cancel my cruise entirely. I even offered to give up the suite benefits just to keep the cabin that I had paid for, but they refused.

I feel like I was bullied and threatened into releasing my suite. I've reached out to customer relations and corporate management multiple times but received no response. I am a Platinum Cruiser and have never been treated this way on the 70 cruises that I've been on before.

I want the suite I paid for at the price that I was quoted.

— *Deborah Keck, in Sunnyvale, Texas*

A: Princess should've honored the price that it quoted you and confirmed this in writing. When a company sends a document stating that a booking is "paid in full," this is a contract. It shouldn't decide later that it made a math error and demand that you cough up another \$3,967 to cover its mistake.

Most cruise contracts have clauses that allow them to change prices due to fuel surcharges or government taxes, but they don't usually include a "we-forgot to charge you enough for the room" fee. Under basic contract law, once there's an offer, acceptance and payment, the deal's done.

You did the right thing by keeping all the paperwork. You also attempted

to resolve this through the proper channels, contacting customer relations and even executives at Princess headquarters (whose information I publish on my consumer advocacy site, Elliott.org).

I'm deeply concerned about the lack of response from the cruise line. You contacted Princess multiple times for help, but you say that no one responded. My team followed up several times about your case, and I also contacted Princess on your behalf. The response was nothing.

It's a disappointing result. Despite multiple inquiries, Princess refused to provide a resolution or even a comment on why it added \$3,967 to a confirmed booking. This left you with one last option: You could've

taken your case to small claims court. I should note that you're a Platinum-level customer, which means you've been on a lot of Princess cruises.

You'd think that the cruise line would be bending over backward to take care of you. But apparently not.

You accepted a downgrade to your original cabin and didn't pay extra for your cruise, which wasn't exactly the resolution either of us were hoping for. Come on, Princess!

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