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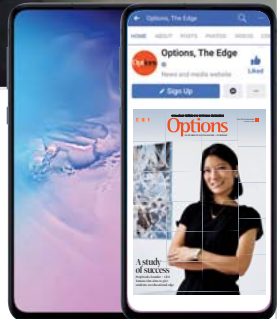
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PICK OF THE WEEK

WHO:
Glenmorangie

WHAT:
Grand Vintage Malt 1997

HOW MUCH:
RM3,787

Seventh in Glenmorangie's Bond House No 1 Collection — a selection of the highland distillery's most prized parcels specifically chosen for ageing in unique barrels — the Grand Vintage Malt 1997 is Glenmorangie's first to be aged in rare Bordeaux wine casks. Inviting a greater synergy between whisky and wine, this vintage is uniquely finished in casks from the prestigious Château Montrose estate in Saint-Estèphe, Bordeaux. Aged for 23 years, it offers a lively and floral expression of Glenmorangie's award-winning whiskies. The Grand Vintage Malt 1997 comprises floral notes intermingling with soft red fruits and mint toffee. On the palate, a slightly tingling, gently spicy mouthfeel is followed by a symphony of sweet candy flavours, more soft red fruits, pineapple chunks and a taste reminiscent of pears and mandarin segments in fruit jelly.



ATHLETES, ACTIVISM + THE OLYMPICS



BY ANANDHI GOPINATH

In recent years, sporting events have become an increasingly visible platform for protests as athletes take advantage of the global spotlight to highlight causes they believe in. Most famous in recent history is Colin Kaepernick, who in 2016 knelt during the national anthem at the start of the NFL games in protest of police brutality and racial discrimination in the US. At the start of the 2020 Formula One Grand Prix season, Lewis Hamilton also took a knee before the first race, wearing a Black Lives Matter T-shirt, and atop the winners' podium at the Tuscan Grand Prix in September of that year, unzipped his black race overalls to the waist to reveal a T-shirt that read "Arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor", in reference to a 26-year-old medical technician who was shot by police in the US during a botched raid.

But the NFL and F1 are single sport events — if you want to make a point, there is no other platform like the Olympic Games to do it. In 1906, Irish track and field athlete Peter O'Connor, who had to compete under Great Britain's flag, protested by climbing a flag pole and unfurling the Irish flag. (The Irish War of Independence would be fought from 1919 to 1921, after which Ireland was a free state.) In 1968, 200m sprint winners Tommie Smith and John Carlos donned black gloves and raised them to the sky instead of across their chest to highlight the Black Power

movement, while Australian athlete Peter Norman stood with them in solidarity.

It was after this world-famous incident that Rule 50 — the Olympic policy which bans forms of protest — reached its modern form, Jules Boykoff, a professor in the Politics & Government department at Pacific University in Oregon, told CNN. The goal, he explained, was to suppress protests and "keep the games as neutral and apolitical as possible". Rule 50 of the Olympic Charter states that "No kind of demonstration or political, religious or racial propaganda is permitted in any Olympic sites, venues or other areas".

There has been a huge amount of pushback to the rule leading up to the Tokyo Olympics. While Japanese citizens themselves have protested against the Games being held as the nation battles the Covid-19 pandemic, athletes — particularly those from the US — have also made their feelings about other issues known. Fencer Race Imboden, for example, took a knee during the National Anthem at the Pan American Games in 2019, while hammer thrower Gwen Berry, at the medal ceremony during the Olympics qualifying games in June, turned away from the US flag as the national anthem played, holding up a T-shirt reading "activist athlete" over her head.

"The IOC's approach to freedom of speech and expression consists of an attempt to restrict, redefine and control the way that the athletes exercise their fundamental human right," EU Athletes,

a federation representing sportspeople across Europe, said in a statement in April. "Threatening to sanction athletes who peacefully protest issues such as racism is not only inconsistent with human rights, but also goes against the values the IOC claims to support."

The IOC responded to this growing sentiment by amending the rule on July 2 to allow for some demonstrations on the field of play before the start of competition, but athletes say it is not enough. This cautious approach to amending the rule could be in anticipation of the Winter Olympics in China come 2022 — Beijing's alleged repression of the Uyghurs has the potential to inspire protests among Muslim athletes, for example, in a country that does not have the same freedom of speech protections that are common in much of the West.

It is undeniable that the Olympics is a hugely important stage to make a point. At Rio 2016, Ethiopian marathon runner Feyisa Lilesa crossed his wrists at the finish line, drawing international attention to human rights issues affecting Oromo people in his country. Prior to that, many people had never even heard of the Oromo, let alone the injustices they faced. If the purpose of the Olympics is to show how the world can come together through sport, activism should be allowed in the way it brings humanity together. If even one human being stands to gain from an athlete taking a knee or taking a stand, the objectives of the Games would still have been achieved. ■

I'm embarrassed to ask, but I'll be shameless for my dream for our country to take home the gold medal in the Olympics

— Filipina weightlifter Hidilyn Diaz resorted to appealing for private sponsorship last month on her personal Instagram, but the dream she spoke of came true as the 30-year-old Mindanao native won



the Philippines' first-ever Olympic gold medal in Tokyo on July 27. It was the second gold for a Southeast Asian nation at this year's Games (at press time) after Thailand's victory in women's taekwondo.

If you wanted a trade deal with the UK, now is probably the best time to get one on your own terms. The UK is in a tight situation. It needs to show that leaving the EU was a worthwhile venture.

— Professor of politics and international studies at The Open University in England, Dr Simon Usherwood, told the BBC in response to British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's attempt to rewrite the Brexit deal he signed with European Union, just seven months after singing its praises. This is a risky move that undermines the UK's credibility as a trading partner just as it forges economic alliances outside the EU, Underwood added.

Order a DeGem ring online

Homegrown jeweller DeGem is not letting the pandemic restrictions get in the way of celebrating momentous occasions with precious jewellery, thanks to its new online shopping experience that enables customers to shop virtually from home or on the go. On the mobile-friendly gia.degemdiamond.com/gia, a simple system makes the process of designing and purchasing your own diamond ring — or for a loved one — incredibly simple, and quite enjoyable too.

First, choose your diamond from DeGem's online inventory of natural diamonds, sorted based on shape and the four Cs (colour, clarity, carat and cut). All diamonds are graded by the Gemological Institute of America, and consist of stones from the company's existing inventory as well as those from DeGem's insider network of exclusive miners and artisanal diamond cutters. The second step is to select a ring design from over 20 choices that ensure comfort, maximum sparkle and durability. The final step is to select size, preferred metal choice (white gold, rose gold, yellow gold or platinum) and engraving details, after which the ring will be ready to ship within a month. Trained executives will be able to help you along every step of the way — including making allowances for extras like additional customisation, shorter production time for last-minute shoppers and overseas delivery.

Best of all, DeGem provides a worry-free experience from start to finish — as a third generation jeweller with 40 years of experience, it maintains high levels of quality controls and flawless craftsmanship in a facility that combines state-of-art technology and skilled artisanal handcrafting for unrivalled premium construction and finishing. In addition, its membership in the Diamond Exchange of Singapore and the World Federation of Diamond Bourse represents DeGem's commitment to use only conflict-free diamonds from reliable sources that follow ethical practices.



The Cabaret Tourbillon returns

It was with great disappointment that in 2013, collectors and connoisseurs witnessed the curtain descending on A. Lange & Söhne's Cabaret Tourbillon collection, which combined a unique rectangular case, a tourbillon and a stop-seconds mechanism. Eight years later, it makes a return as part of the Handwerkskunst series — the German watchmaker's limited-edition timepieces that requires exceptional craftsmanship, usually with dials and movements enhanced by rare finishing and engraving techniques.

Within the Cabaret Tourbillon Handwerkskunst's white gold case, six hour markers and four Roman numerals stand guard in the outer zone of the dial, serving as a stage for a hand-engraved dial with semi-transparent enamelling for added effect. The separately integrated subsidiary dials for the small seconds and the power-reserve indicator are rhodium-coloured gold, while apertures reveal the one-minute tourbillon suspended between two diamond endstones and Lange's signature oversized date. Its beating heart is the lozenge-shaped manually wound Calibre L042.1, which has a twin mainspring barrel that delivers a power reserve of 120 hours. A masterpiece of technology and craftsmanship, it comprises 370 parts, of which no fewer than 84 are integrated in the filigreed tourbillon that weighs only a quarter of a gramme.

Unfortunately, the launch of the Cabaret Tourbillon Handwerkskunst, understandably limited to just 30 pieces, does not mean the Cabaret will be brought back as a production watch, as a small watchmaker like Lange does not have the resources to channel to a passion project like this. The manufacture's long-time director of development Anthony de Haas may not have categorically ruled out a future Cabaret, but for now we'd say the Handwerkskunst is the best bet for collectors who really want one.



Bentley unveils new hybrid

Luxury British carmaker Bentley proves that you can have your cake and eat it too with its new Flying Spur Hybrid, which combines premium performance and some serious planet-friendly creds to boot. Anchored by a highly innovative third powertrain delivering the most environmentally friendly Bentley to date, the Flying Spur Hybrid establishes a family of Bentley hybrids for the first time, emphasising the marque's commitment to its Beyond100 strategy to become an end-to-end carbon neutral organisation and the world's leading sustainable luxury mobility company.

The new powertrain combines a 2.9-litre V6 petrol engine with an advanced electric motor, delivering a total of 536 bhp (544 PS) and 750 Nm (553 lb.ft) of torque — this works out to 95 bhp more than the Bentayga Hybrid, and has an impressive range of 700km when fully fuelled.

But significant increases in efficiency and fuel consumption do not come at the expense of performance — it easily achieves 100km/h in a mere 4.3 seconds, ensuring that the car maintains the effortless, refined and powerful driving experience for which it is known.

The new Flying Spur Hybrid incorporates a class-leading portfolio of intelligent and intuitive equipment tailored to the driver and passenger, and, of course, the luxurious interiors for which the marque is known. There are a few unique visual cues to signify its cross-bred status, though — a 'Hybrid' front fender badge, quad oval tailpipes and a covered universal charging point on the left-hand rear fender.

All Flying Spurs are manufactured at Bentley's home in England's Crewe, the world's first carbon neutral factory for luxury car production. Deliveries are expected to begin by year-end; booking information and other details are available on kualalumpur.bentleymotors.com.



Editricks

The editor of *Options* shares her schedule, work and life hacks, and general inspo for the week

BY DIANA KHOO

In the blink of an eye, it is August already; and guess what's back? Mooncakes. One of the earliest-to-market players this year is **Oh Cha Matcha**, which has just released healthy new flavours to try, well in advance of the Mid-Autumn Festival on Sept 21. Dairy-free, sugar-free, gluten-free, vegan-friendly and guilt-free, the tasty treats come in Matcha Mung Bean, Hojicha Mung Bean and Genmaicha Mung Bean flavours and encased in pretty, pastel green tea, beetroot, purple sweet potato and blue spirulina snowskins. Priced at RM60 for a box of four; pre-order yours today. (ohchamatcha.com)

Am dithering over whether to order from Book Depository (and wait ages) or chance a visit to Kinokuniya in KLCC, but there is no doubt that handbag maven **Anya Hindmarch**'s book, *If in Doubt, Wash Your Hair: A Manual for Life* (about RM85) is at the top of my shopping list. In such trying, uncertain times, one is well inclined to digest mother-of-five and globally renowned businesswoman Hindmarch's nuggets of wisdom and advice, from the flippant to the profound. And in case you have not realised it, the title of the tome is the author's answer whenever she is asked what her best piece of advice is. Best read with cat on lap and mug of steaming Earl Grey nearby. Cookie is optional. (malaysia.kinokuniya.com)

The recent heat wave has wreaked havoc on the skin despite our staying indoors. Thankfully, **Shiseido**'s latest Ultimune Power Infusing Concentrate III is a beauty serum that means business. The award-winning product has recently been upgraded with The Lifeblood, which aims to activate skin's inner defensive power while working to prevent ageing damage. Heart leaf extract and fermented Roselle flowers are also used to boost circulation and hydration. It is ideal for all skin types and promises visible results after about two months. Prices range from RM135 for 15ml to RM450 for 50ml. (shiseido.com.my)

Brows are big news now that our faces are half-covered by a mask most times. Popular label **Nudestix** has just expanded its brows and mascara product line-up to ensure our eyes still have it, despite the new normal. Choose from (or heck, get them all) the Nudestix Boost + Set Gel XL (RM120), Lash Lengthening Mascara (RM120) and Vegan Splashproof Mascara (RM120). (sephora.my)



Collaborations have been a dime a dozen in the fashion world of late, but one that is getting the market all excited is **H&M**'s tie-up with **Sabyasachi Calcutta**. If Desi designs delight you, chances are you would be well familiar with beloved Indian couturier Sabyasachi Mukherjee's name already. What makes the H&M collab one to look out for (and splurge on) is his global nomad design outlook — perfect for revenge-travelling in. And if it's not too early to start shopping for Deepavali, expect to fall in love with the high-street behemoth's first sari too! Sabyasachi x H&M will be launched on Aug 12. (hm.com)

Still on the collab theme, **A Bathing Ape (BAPE)** has teamed up with celebrated robot-art illustrator Hajime Sorayama on a new range of merch. If you miss largin' it at fun and futuristic joints such as Shinjuku's iconic Robot Restaurant or the newer Dawn Avatar Robot Café in Nihonbashi, Tokyo, treat yourself to a piece of this to reignite memories. Alternatively, if you are feeling generous, your trendy kid, niece or nephew would appreciate a cool gift. Given that life is still lived largely in lockdown, the Bape x Hajime Sorayama shark T-shirt (RM609) is the most useful item to purchase right now. (bape.com)

For a splashier addition to your wardrobe or if you have been keeping busy reading Greek myths and legends during lockdown, the new La Medusa medium hobo bag (RM7,850) by **Versace** might strike your fancy. Its versatility means it is ideal for work or play (on pause right now, of course) but there is no harm in planning ahead. Aesthetes would also notice its three-dimensional Medusa plaque, synonymous with the maison's décor and which was discovered on the doors of the brand's first headquarters in Milan. (versace.com)



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Fondness for the familiar

Amid the stress of the pandemic, well-worn reads provide some welcome comfort

BY ANANDHI GOPINATH

My daughter often asks me who my favourite author is, and the answer is always the same: I can never choose one because there are different writers to love for different genres. Whenever I pine for a spot of travel, it is Pico Iyer for the way he writes about culture through the lens of a foreigner. When it is whimsy and humour I crave, anything by Sir Terry Pratchett is perfect. My desire for murder mysteries is assuaged by either Agatha Christie, Anthony Horowitz or Shamini Flint, and local author Brian Gomez's *Devil's Place* always makes me laugh.

The pandemic has left me with more time to read and there have been a number of new books I managed to pore over, but I have noticed that stress often drives me to the comfort of the familiar rather than the excitement of anything new. Every time the daily new Covid-19 cases jumped, or I heard of particularly bad pandemic-related news, one author has emerged as my constant — Amor Towles.

Born and raised in Boston, Towles worked as an investment professional for over 20 years before turning to writing full-time, which he now does from his base in Manhattan, where he lives with his wife and two children. His first book, *Rules of Civility*, traces exactly one year in the life of 25-year-old Katey Kontent as she navigates life in late-1930s New York armed with bracing wit and her own brand of cool nerve. His next book, *A Gentleman in Moscow*, is set in 1922 as unrepentant aristocrat Count Alexander Rostov is sentenced to house arrest at the Metropol, and there he must stay even as Russia's history unfolds outside the hotel's doors.

I have read both books multiple times since acquiring them, evinced by their well-worn covers and slightly collapsing spines. I was initially wracked with guilt for not using the downtime to expand my oeuvre, but as it turns out, rereading books you love isn't an unsurprising reaction to the pandemic. There is much solace to be found in tomes of which you know the ending — familiar plots and known emotional registers help stressed-

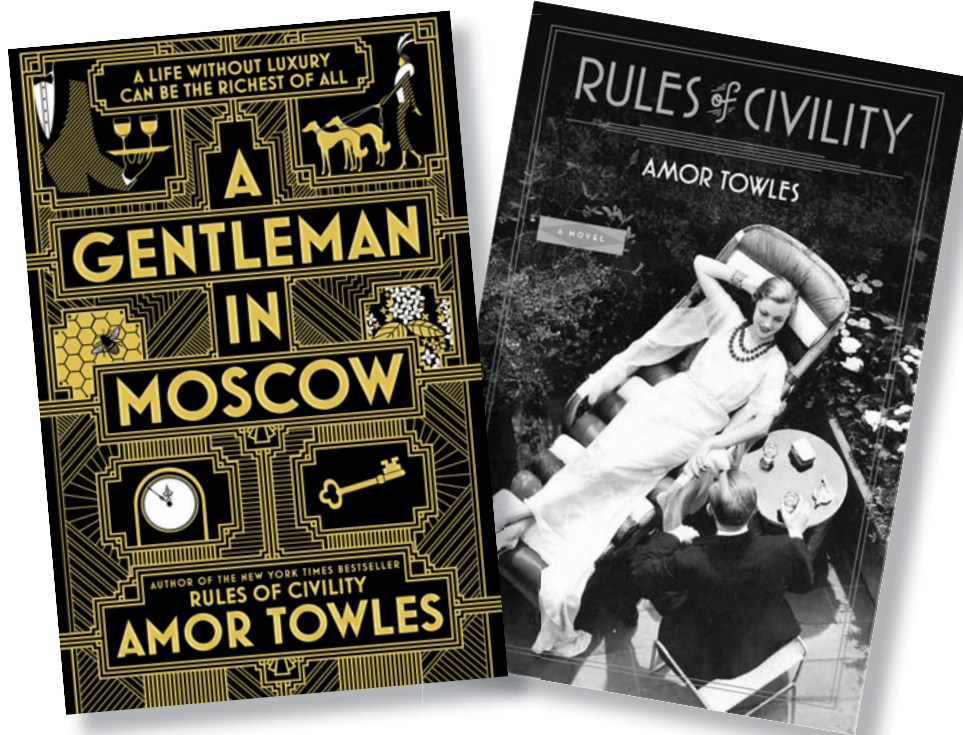


Towles' skill is in creating lead characters readers can connect to

out readers (present company included) avoid suspense and surprises.

Clearly, Towles has a type (as do I) as both his books are set in a defined period of the past — Katey in Depression-era New York, the Count in the suffocating years after the Bolshevik Revolution in Moscow. For anyone who loves history, especially when it is told through the lens of literature, Towles' brand of storytelling is particularly compelling. Fiction and reality seamlessly dive into one another in both books, challenging the reader's understanding (and recollection) of history. Plus, the man really writes quite beautifully.

Towles' skill is also in creating lead characters readers can connect to. For example, Katey very quickly becomes someone I would have liked to be friends with, right from her fierce independence, dry wit and love of books. Told from the vantage point of an older woman, looking back to the year when everything went wrong — and sort of right — in her life, Katey finds love, watches it slip away and somehow gets hold of part of her future in a fascinating 12-month period. You can't help but root for her as the book progresses, even though there



is no doubting that she will find all she seeks, as she is too smart and tough not to.

Borrowing from *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and a little of *The Great Gatsby*, the charm of Towles' debut novel is not its originality, but the romance of jazz bands at 3am, gin martinis in fancy apartments and the slick glamour of 1930s New York. This is a flesh-and-blood story you can buy into completely, decked to the rafters with fabulous details of the period it is set in. It is a fun, glamorous, semi-literary tale worthy to be lost in, and I did — many times over.

If Katey was someone I wanted to forever be friends with, the Count is the handsome, fascinating gentleman that crashes my dinner table whose company I thoroughly enjoy, but at the same time, who I am also relieved to escape from at the end of the meal. Since Russia's new Soviet masters have sentenced him to house arrest, the Count passes the decades making a whole world out of a hotel and the people in it — a precocious nine-year-old, a moody chef, the French maître d' and so on.

In both books, the geographical setting is secondary to the story at hand. Katey would be

just as likeable in London and the Count could have just as easily been locked up in a hotel in Paris. *A Gentleman in Moscow* is especially insular, since the protagonist is under house arrest, and one of the most heart-warming references to the outside world is the way he, the chef and the maitre d' manage to find the ingredients for a bouillabaisse in war-ravaged Moscow — a process that takes three years. "With the very first spoonful, one finds oneself transported to the port of Marseille — where the streets teem with sailors, thieves and madonnas, with sunlight and summer, with languages and life," Towles writes.

His writing style is elegant and urbane, blending simple turns of phrases with delightfully evocative prose. I am immediately transported to the time and place he describes, a part of the pictures he paints so evocatively of a young girl in New York and a banished Count in Moscow. Is a temporary escape from reality not the objective of a good book, a sign that the author has reached through another person's existence, grasped her imagination and let her dreams soar, even momentarily? **E**

Dirty laundry and a beloved bear

Hospital laundry is one of those things that pile up in a corner of the building, and the hordes who shuffle along sanitised corridors all day hardly pay it any heed. Blankets, sheets, children's pyjamas and patients' gowns stained with all sorts of fluids make Begoña M Rueda wonder who wore them and what has happened to those people.

Rueda works in the laundry room of the Punta de Europa hospital in the Spanish port city of Algeciras. Everything goes into the washers and dryers except for the shrouds used to wrap dead bodies. Her acute reflections on death, dying and the invisibility of workers like her are voiced in *Servicio de lavandería* (Laundry Service), a collection of poems that has won her the Hiperión prize and a book deal with the publishing house that sponsors the award.

The poet, who has seven books and various awards to her name, says in interviews that poetry has to make the working class visible. "At eight, people step on to their balconies to applaud / the labours of the doctors and the nurses / but few applaud the labours of the woman who sweeps and mops the hospital / or of those of us who wash the linen of the infected / with our bare hands."

One half of the book has poems written in the early days

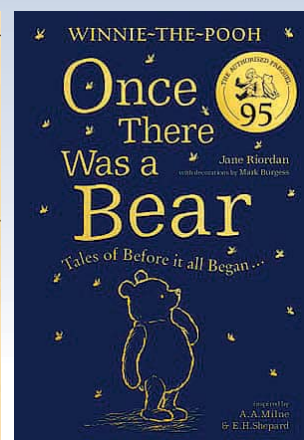
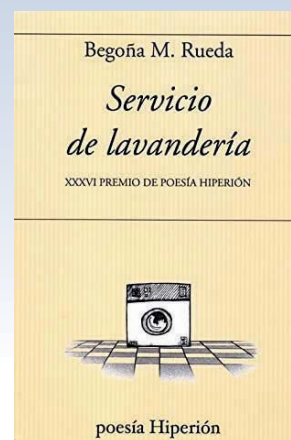
of the pandemic and she saw "coffin after coffin after coffin" in the morgue opposite the laundry. A truckload of soldiers arrives and disinfects the entire hospital but forgets to fumigate the laundry, "as if the linen washes itself", Rueda tells *The Guardian*.

There are scents that linger, defying detergent and the passage of time. "There's a humanity that clings to the sheets and sometimes you can't wash that away," she adds, after catching a trace of perfume while folding a pyjama top.

For 95 years come October, Winnie-the-Pooh has wandered from the Hundred Acre Wood into the homes and hearts of young readers everywhere. What they may not know is that author A A Milne first bought the toy bear from London department store Harrods in 1921 for his son, Christopher Robin.

A prequel of this beloved tale, authorised by the estates of Milne and E H Shepard, who did the original drawings for the Pooh books, is set for release in September. Children's author Jane Riordan has written *Winnie-the-Pooh: Once There Was a Bear* following Milne's style, with illustrator Mark Burgess emulating Shepard's artwork.

There are two authorised sequels to Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh*, published in October 1926. They are *Return to the Hundred Acre Wood* (2009) and *The Best Bear in All the World* (2016). Riordan's



book will be the first prequel and she says in reports that she drew inspiration for it from Christopher Robin's real life.

Once There Was a Bear has 10 stories, two of which sees Pooh exploring Harrods and visiting London zoo, a place Christopher often visited to meet Winnipeg, the Canadian black bear, Riordan tells *The Guardian*. Charmed by the creature, he renamed his toy Winnie. Readers will also get to meet other favourite characters such as Eeyore, Kanga, Piglet, Roo, Owl, Rabbit and Tigger.

Riordan has also written two standalone Pooh stories in Milne's voice. — By Tan Gim Ean **E**



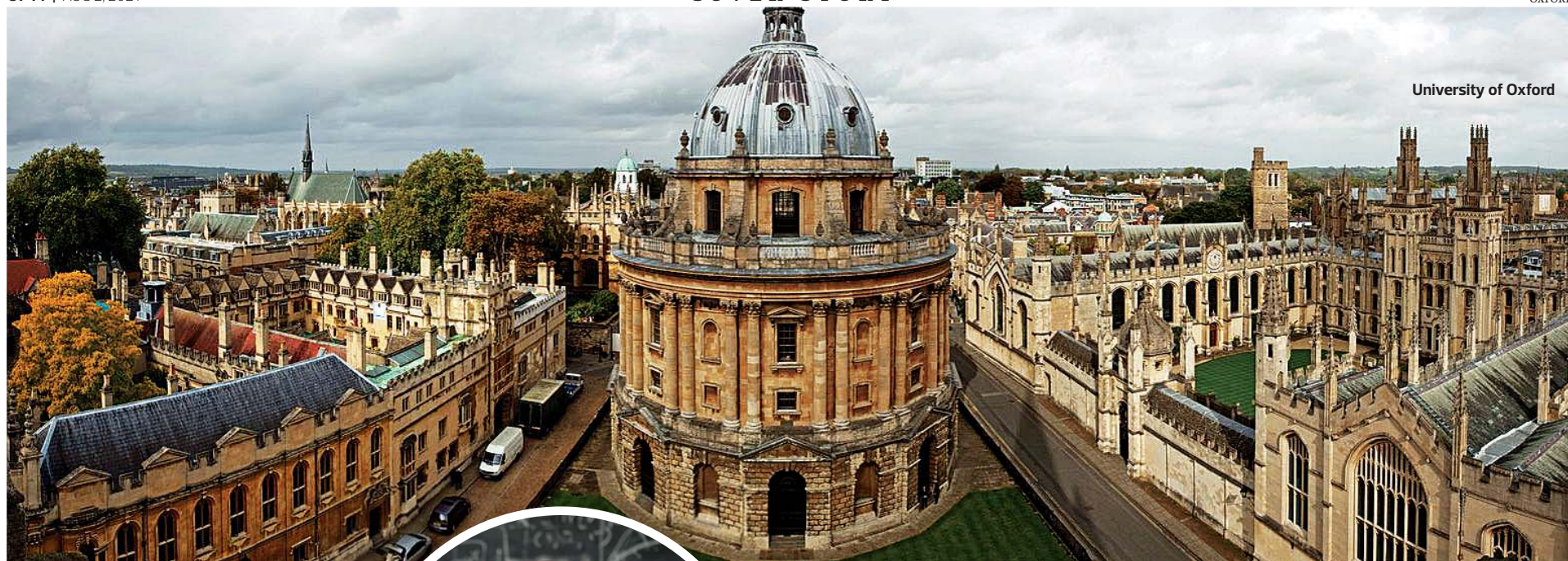
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University of Oxford

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

a little more impatient now and he asked what I drank for breakfast then, to which I answered “Milo”.

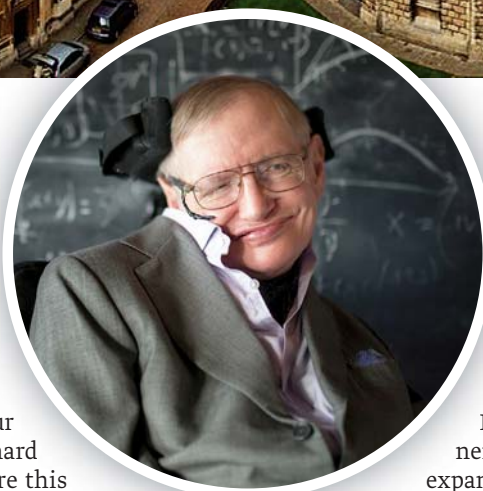
What followed was him asking how much energy it takes to heat the water for my cup of Milo and start from first principles by drawing a waterfall,” Lim laughs. “I must confess to being completely taken aback. And similar to our current situation with Covid-19, it was hard to grapple with the uncertainty of where this question was leading to. But he guided me through as I drew the waterfall, estimating the gravitational potential energy onto it being converted into kinetic energy through a hydroelectric power station, then onto the power grid before being delivered to our electrical socket where the water in a kettle could be heated to make the said cup of Milo. Throughout all this, I had to churn out physics equation after physics equation, namely to do with energy conversions, as well as many estimations such as how high a waterfall is. At the end of the day, it turned out enjoyable and I can tell you it was a relief to finally arrive at the answer with my interviewer’s help! But it was also the first time in my life when I did not know how to prepare for such a high-stakes scenario,” she admits. “And I was the type who always over-prepared — to the point that if I was asked a three-mark question, I would give five points, two for insurance. I was sent to boarding school at age 13, so I had the ingrained belief I was being put through adversity, 8,000 miles away from home in a place I did not want to be in, to get the grades and be accepted into either Oxford or Cambridge. In a way, it was my ultimate mission: to get in.”

LENDING A HAND

A decade on, memories of the high-stakes interview and application process came flooding back when Lim, then working in the commercial oil and gas sector, was helping a couple of her parents’ friends out with their personal statements. “This is another key stage of the university application process,” she says. “Their personal statements had little similarity to the ones I read that had actually won the person a spot in a top university. But what concerned me more was that they mentioned it was upon someone else’s advice. It was then that I decided a service like PrepWorks was much needed to ensure students are on the correct path towards their closest matched dream degree.

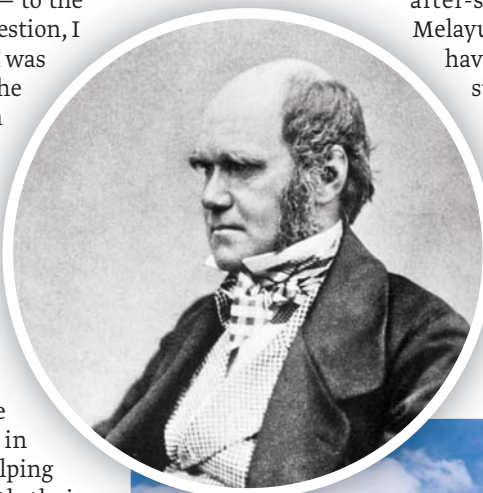
“I also extended it to include my experience and the hurdles one had to go through when applying to competitive boarding schools in the UK, from personal statement writing to entrance exams and interviews. It is not dissimilar to university, but just adjusted for age. I really felt this was an area I could contribute to Malaysian and Southeast Asian society, in pulling together talents who have first-hand experience and a background in coaching students towards competitive university entry ... so that they are more prepared and have an overall higher chance of getting in!”

Those undaunted by Lim’s recollections and who feel their children would thrive under the challenge



Theoretical physicist
Stephen Hawking
studied at both
Oxford and
Cambridge

English naturalist,
geologist and
biologist
Charles Darwin
graduated from
Cambridge in 1831



University of Cambridge

of A-List academia, would definitely not fail to appreciate how a little nudge and extra help could go a long way indeed in helping their little Einsteins achieve their dreams, be it personal or parental. PrepWorks was established in 2015, first along the old Asian Heritage Row just off Jalan Sultan Ismail, Kuala Lumpur. But it has since relocated to the well-to-do neighbourhood of Taman Tun Dr Ismail and expanded its services to include the PrepWorks Method, an approach that focuses on equipping children with the means to succeed — in short, character and skills development to complement their academic development in order to excel. Lim has more than 100 part-time tutors on her roster, with most boasting Oxford, Cambridge or Ivy League backgrounds like herself. “Our services include developing the skills we believe will set up students for success, including critical thinking, studying skills, mindfulness and public speaking,” she explains.

WHO SHOULD ATTEND?

Any child aged between five and 17 may benefit from PrepWorks: the younger ones attend the after-school programme of English, Bahasa Melayu, maths and science while the older ones have regular one-on-one tutoring in academic subjects and skills enrichment classes. Those 15 and above may start early Oxbridge or Ivy League preparation programmes. “We have established an online Primary Academy as an academic-boosting after-school programme, to help ensure students don’t fall behind during lockdown as well as supplement their regular schooling while exposing them

to the PrepWorks methodology. The kids loved it as it is very interactive and stimulating, and we covered the whole UK National Curriculum for Year Group 2, 3 and 4, from March to December 2020, complete with assessments and reports,” says Lim.

To the unfamiliar, the PrepWorks Method is the foundation upon which a student’s success may be set up, encompassing academics and skills and character development. “A student would need to excel in all three to be successful in her endeavours. It is to highlight that if you want to reach places such as Oxford, Cambridge or Harvard, they not only look at good grades. You must be able to critically think on the spot, present yourself well and have characteristics such as diligence, self-awareness and perseverance. Excelling in these areas enables you to walk the harder but ultimately more rewarding path,” says Lim.

Some highlights of PrepWorks’ six years in operation include, of course, seeing its students get into the universities of their dreams. “In our first year, we had a success rate of one out of three students while also helping a school increase its Oxford and Cambridge University entrants from nought to three,” she shares. PrepWorks’ business has grown primarily through word of mouth, with happy clients spreading the word of their positive experiences. “We also conducted many talks, began a key partnership with HSBC Premier Malaysia as its official education advisers and invested in digital marketing,” she adds.

It is Lim’s students, however, who remain her best calling card. “Some recently got into Harvard, Yale, Princeton and UC Berkeley as well as Cambridge,” she beams. “Four years ago, I had a student who, at the last minute, needed a place at a medical school in the UK. As perfect timing goes, I knew of a university that had underestimated its quota. They were a perfect match and the student just

JULIUS DUDENAS/UNSPLASH



graduated this year, as updated by his father. To know that this student's life was changed because PrepWorks existed is something that keeps me going. Another memorable moment was when the parents of one of our students from Bintulu asked me to keep running the online Primary Academy because his daughter enjoyed it so much and she had no other avenue of learning, as the international school [nearby] recently closed down and she could not learn in the local school's Malay language curriculum. Additionally, in 2019, two out of three of our students got into Oxford and Cambridge — that was certainly a great moment."

THE FUTURE OF EDUCATION

With Covid-19 throwing a monkey wrench into student life as a whole, Lim says some of the major impacts would be the oversubscription of university places as a result of exams being cancelled and teacher-assessed grades being more positive than the examination outcomes they replaced. "Harvard was at an all-time low in terms of acceptance, with a rate of about 3.43%. But parents remain hopeful of getting their children in, so it's pretty much business as usual — just much, much harder for entry, so they need all the help they can get," she points out. "From a business standpoint, we had a positive outcome albeit having a lot of work to do, moving all our operations and tutoring online. We also expanded to other countries while delivering service from Malaysia. Our Primary Academy has attendees from China, Cambodia and New Zealand, and we have just opened an office in Singapore to service our clients there. The forced acceleration to adopt technology has also opened our eyes to what other e-tools we could develop to improve applicants' chances of reaching the top universities."

Other issues Lim foresees would be an over-competitive landscape. "University acceptance rates generally reduce every year due to overpopulation, not to mention having more hoops to jump through. I mean, back in my day, there were no entrance exams, just the admissions interview. With the pandemic disrupting the entry process, I am concerned that some students' applications will not be treated as fairly compared with a normal year, although I am hoping this will all normalise over the next two to three years." Another potential bump in the road is the worry that student life will never be the same again. "Amid concerns of the virus spreading, students may have to attend lectures online and be more vigilant during social events, which is ironic, as university is meant to be one of the freest times in one's life," she sighs. "There is also a lot of disruption when it comes to sitting for exams. A lot of test dates for SATs

were cancelled last year and US colleges had to adjust their entry requirements on whether to include SATs or not. There is still much uncertainty with changes in process ongoing for a while."

One other disruption comes in the form of courses created by Big Tech, such as Google's new Career Certificates, a selection of professional courses that take just half a year to complete at a fraction of the cost of a traditional degree. But Lim is confident in the staying power of a top-level university education. "A lot of us, although in the 21st century, are still quite traditional at heart. We may go on about how technology can help us but it also hinders us, which is why even the tourism industry is veering back towards nature, less screen time and more mindfulness. To obtain a degree online ticks

a box and is, of course, an achievement but I am hesitant to say it will replace the full university experience as there are other areas of personal development one obtains from attending university, well beyond the lectures and hard content.

"I believe a good university education will always be worth pursuing, mainly because it opens many more doors of opportunity in terms of a global career. Many say you don't need a degree to be successful, which is partly true, but at the end of the day, you shouldn't limit your options to just, say, starting up your own business, a risk in itself. University is also more than a degree; it is an experience best shared, and you will never lose that bond with those you shared it with. An A-List college, in particular, will also expose you to world-class lecturers and allow you to attend conferences and meet people you wouldn't otherwise meet while being a part of teams of like-minded peers who

are extremely intelligent and inspirational, people with a contagious appetite to stand for noble causes or even change the course of mankind one day. A small turn like this, early on in one's life, the exposure, the experiences, could well make a big difference down the road, affecting the decisions one makes and the perspectives one takes."

A mother to three young children herself, Lim's hopes for them are simple but profound. "I wish they will grow up confident in persevering towards their areas of interests and strengths, finding an environment in which they thrive, not just survive, and I hope that will be in a place where they can be challenged to do their best and reach their fullest potential." She then shares a parting nugget of wisdom she picked up while at Oxford: "If you think you can or if you think you can't, either way you are right. Graduating taught me 'I can', simply because my final exams felt insurmountable. Also university is the best training ground to learn how there is always room to have fun and find the humour and awe in life, regardless of its challenges." ■

MAGNA CUM LAUDE MUSINGS STORIES

What some Malaysian movers and shakers say about their A-list university experience

MING THEIN

Founder + CEO, Horologer MING

"In my time, you could only apply to Oxford or Cambridge, not both. I was studying in New Zealand then and chose the former as my aunt was a professor there while one of my teachers was an alumnus. The US was not considered as I would have had to sit for SATs instead of just doing a direct conversion from the colonial education system. Oxford offers a constant and enormous challenge and you are really putting yourself up against the best, really, and coming out at the other end in one piece gives you the confidence to take on whatever you choose to."



NADIAH WAN

Group CEO of TMC Life Sciences + CEO of Thomson Hospital Kota Damansara

"My time at Harvard was where I really grew into my adult self. I was independent — intellectually and physically — and was given the means to explore all sorts of things, from working in a virology lab in Boston Children's Hospital to studying medieval architecture, picking up rowing and even researching hallucinogenic plants in Costa Rica. I met and learnt from many people — professors and friends alike — who were so passionately engaged with what they were doing that you couldn't help but question and develop your own beliefs. Most important of all was the sense of service Harvard imparts to its undergraduates. Until today, I remember the words of Harvard president [Charles William] Eliot inscribed on the gates I used to walk through every day to class: "Enter to grow in wisdom" as you walk into the courtyard, and "Depart to serve thy country and thy kind" as you exit. I have been so lucky to benefit from a Harvard education and I have been trying to give back in so many ways ever since."



DR GEORGE LEE

Consultant urological surgeon, Gleneagles Hospital

"Charles Darwin once said, 'The very essence of instinct is that it follows independently of reasons'. When interviewed for entrance to medical school in Cambridge, my instinct unravelled the reason I was attracted to the paradox of centuries-old customs yet embraced the challenge of tradition. The unique Cambridge degree builds on consolidating the science of the fundamental with the flexibility of venturing into the arts, of unrelated subjects such as law or music. Subsequent clinical training at Addenbrooke's then showcased all the specialities of medicine while constantly nurturing cutting-edge research. It is humbling to share the same path of medical training as Darwin, Watson and Crick in Cambridge. The privilege lies in not just building on the glory of the discoveries of DNA or the evolution of life from past alumni, but this institution truly encourages tapping into the very essence of self-instinct and that follows independently the reasons to transform the instinctive into endless opportunities."



Star track

Trendy astrology apps, offering hyper-personalised insights as opposed to forecasts, are a sign of our evolving digital times

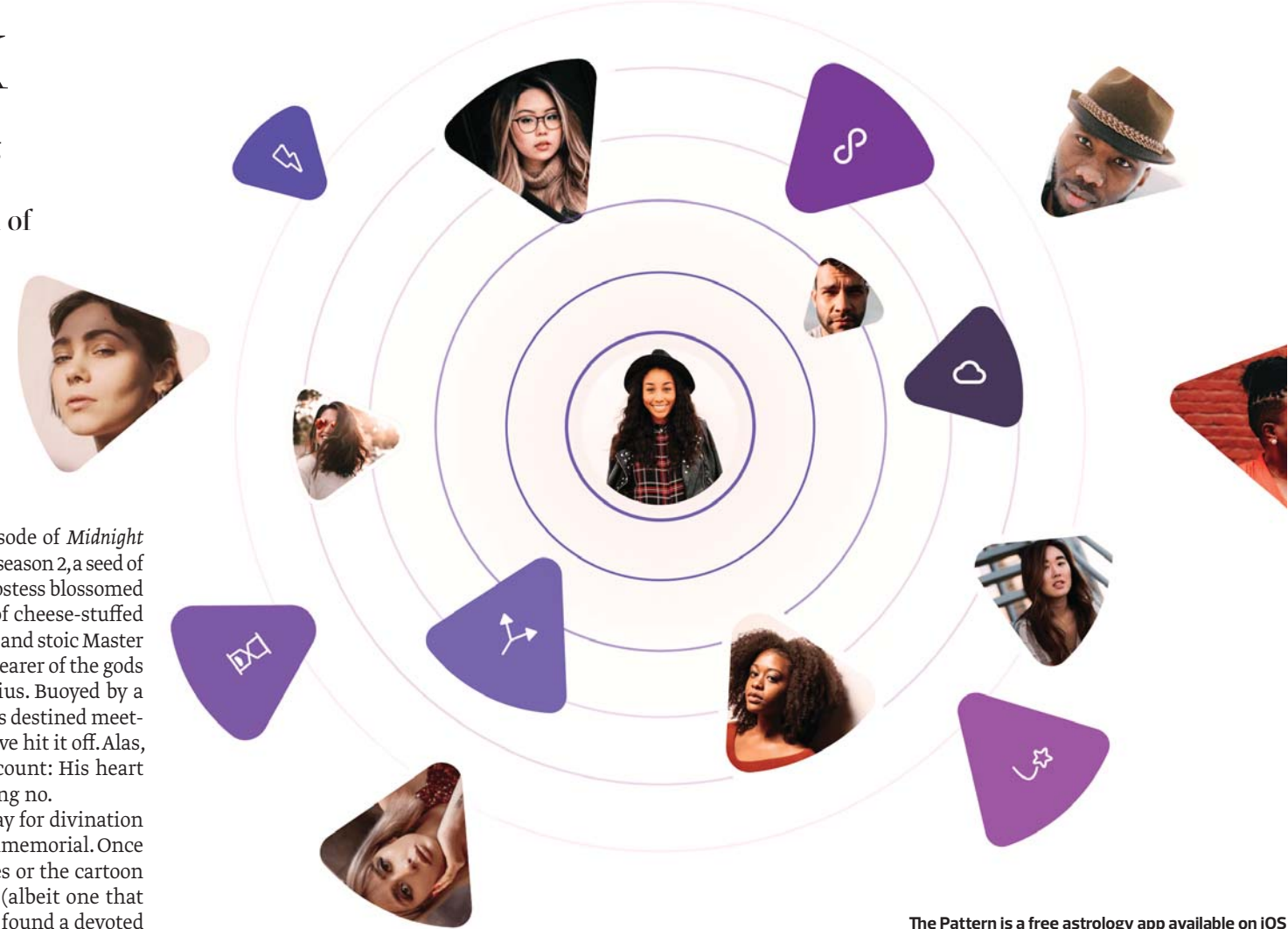
BY KONG WAI YENG

In the second episode of *Midnight Diner: Tokyo Series* season 2, a seed of interest between a magazine writer and a hostess blossomed into an unrequited love affair over a plate of cheese-stuffed chicken cutlet. The cupid was not the soulful and stoic Master of the diner, but Ganymede, the Greek cup-bearer of the gods that was placed among the stars as Aquarius. Buoyed by a shared penchant for astrology and *katsu*, this destined meet-cute on the precipice of romance should have hit it off. Alas, a phantom variable was not taken into account: His heart was saying yes, but her horoscope was saying no.

Planetary alignments have paved the way for divination and fed fantasies of romance since time immemorial. Once relegated to the back of women’s magazines or the cartoon section in the newspaper as a space filler (albeit one that was read religiously), horoscopes have now found a devoted audience in the digital space, thanks to apps that rely on algorithmic and live readings. With individualised birth charts allowing for endless compatibility pairings and personal forecasts, the booming business of astrology now caters for each person, not each sign.

An in-depth blueprint of your life can now be accessed via The Pattern app, a “frighteningly” accurate assessment of your personality based on your gender, place of birth and the time you were born. The response among netizens and celebrities has been astronomical: A flabbergasted Channing Tatum, who has 7.7 million Twitter followers, clamoured about the accuracy of the app with the caption: “You know what, Pattern people, you should just call me. If you know so much, you know how to DM me. I need answers right now.”

The Pattern stands out among a constellation of apps as it eschews all mentions of astrology and star signs, providing a self-analysis not unlike the ubiquitous Myers-Briggs personality test. Avoiding the perfunctory lingo about



The Pattern is a free astrology app available on iOS



Actor Channing Tatum's reaction to The Pattern in 2019 caused a huge frenzy online

the sun or “Mercury is in retrograde”, your results are divided into three main sections — instincts, growth and relationships — which are then broken up into more subsections of your stable traits. Daily notifications urge users to “Go Deeper”, delving into fears and anxieties, or discover the various cycles affecting the global community.

For those who turn to the omniscient for clarity and celestial guidance, The Pattern can seem like a godsend, or your worst offender. The frank insights read like a counselling session with Dr Sean Maguire in the 1997 film *Good Will Hunting*, or unsolicited advice from an intimate witness of your childhood.

“It hasn’t been easy for you,” our first slide of the app proclaimed, as if helping us to rationalise and recognise the gravity of what we have lost.

Like a belated consolation, this invisible voice continued, “From an early age, you may have thought that you weren’t good enough, or believed that something was inherently wrong with you. To be on par with others, you may have felt you needed to compensate and prove yourself worthy. But this lingering sense of being less gives you drive, discipline and capacity to work hard.”

Hold on. How did this artificial intelligence-powered app, which we signed up out of idle interest and has no connection to our past, know?

The answer, perhaps, lies in the power of evoking memories. The Pattern’s insights appeal to even the most hardened horoscope sceptics because it contextualises one’s random life events and emotions by placing them in imaginary indexed shelves. Instead of offering rosy predictions on your health, career or love life (for example, “Sagittarius, a divine union is on the cards!”), The Pattern subverts these tropes by doling out unvarnished truths as well as the doom and gloom

with a reassuring pat on the back. It is as much a tool for introspection and self-improvement as it is fodder for memes.

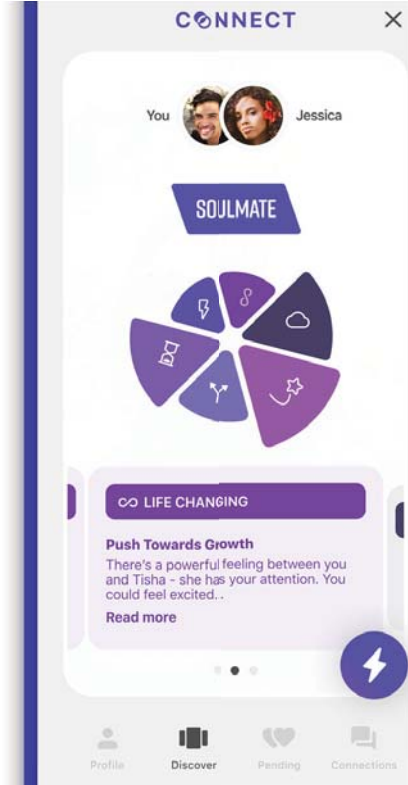
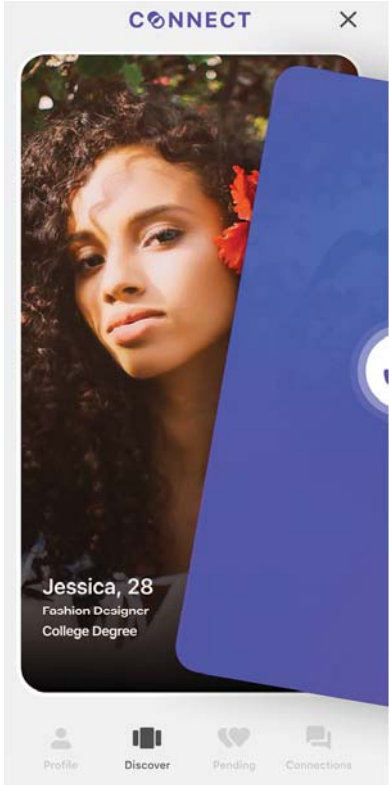
The amalgam of stress and overwhelming uncertainty during these pandemic times is an ailment for which astrology and self-help apps can seem like an ideal balm. As we continue to contend with more unpredictability than usual, from worrying when we will get vaccinated or whether we would lose our jobs tomorrow, it is not hard to see why we are seeking answers beyond the physical world. People are desperate to find meaning and solace in things that would give them a semblance of normalcy or an escape — so they know that they are not stuck in this bleak moment forever.

Naysayers and vociferous critics would laugh off these insights as basic generalisations (because they are so vague and general, they apply to virtually anyone) or a facet of human’s unrelenting capacity for confirmation bias, a tendency to favour information that resasserts one’s beliefs or hypotheses. Yet, more millennials and the tech-savvy are gravitating towards astrology apps as a cheap substitution of therapy. This broad cultural acceptance may have something to do with an obvious paradox: Millennials are so comfortable tethering between scepticism and belief because they spend much of their lives on the internet, a realm that is real and unreal simultaneously.

Preoccupations with personality inevitably slide into questions of compatibility. The success of The Pattern, which recently crossed the 15-million user mark, has prompted founder Lisa Donovan to create a dating feature within the app called Connect. In this recently launched beta version, users can run “bonds”, which categorises your potential partners into these qualitative designations: soulmate, extraordinary, powerful, meaningful, complex, delicate or challenging. “Right out of the gate, you can communicate if you’ve had a karmic link,” the tech CEO and former American YouTuber enthused.

Connect’s methodology of bringing people together in a deeper way would have yielded a different ending for the star-crossed couple in *Midnight Diner* if it had been invented earlier. Having said that, no matter how personalised the app gets, it can never really know you. Of course, it does not hurt to entertain a horoscope’s tip (like wearing a striped shirt to a date) once in a while but the idea is not to entrust your life to a higher power — it is to find refuge amid the hullabaloo and think through all the muck. These days, modern astrology apps are more of a convenient framework that rarely tells you what you will become, but often helps you realise what you already are.

At the time of writing, The Pattern pinged us with a daily reminder to “trust that it is okay to be different as it is part of who you are”. For a machine, that is not the worst advice the universe has offered so far.



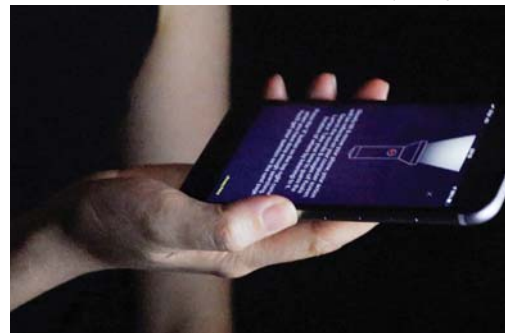
This year, The Pattern rolled out a dating feature called Connect

SITE + SOUND

Media artist Weng Nam Yap's interactive installation, *The Blind Men & the Elephant*, in Kuala Lumpur prompts viewers to share their memories of the city



Participants of the physical installation were given a torch to navigate a dark room



Virtually control the torchlight with your phone



The KL installation highlights the contrast between the old and new



Viewers can guess the location on the website's map

BY EMILY YAP

If you close your eyes and try to visualise downtown Kuala Lumpur, what do you see? What can you hear?

The parable of *The Blind Men & the Elephant* tells the story of a group of visually impaired fellows who attempt to learn what said elephant looks like. Each of them perceives only a small part of the pachyderm and, as a result, a disagreement arises. In the same way, one's visualisation of KL may differ greatly from that of the next person. That does not mean anyone is being inauthentic but, rather, collective information is what brings the bigger picture together.

These questions and the story are at the heart of media artist and graphic designer Weng Nam Yap's installation, which is named after the ancient Indian fable. The concept of the work involves entering a dark and empty space, where the participants play the role of the blind men. They are given a torchlight to navigate the dark and, when they shine the torch on light-sensitive spots in the projection, it will trigger a composition of sounds, alongside masked images of a scene. The participants are then invited to piece the information together and guess the specific location.

The audio-visual installation was first exhibited in 2016 in Hokkaido, Japan. KL-based Yap was invited to host his debut solo exhibition in Sapporo and he produced *The Blind Men & the Elephant*, in Sapporo specifically for it. When he was approached with the offer, he had little time to figure out what to exhibit. "I had to find content that was related to Sapporo. I also had to think of how to move the piece of work to Japan. That was the starting point," says Yap, 35.

"I asked myself whether it was possible to create an exhibition that has nothing to exhibit. At the same time, I wanted to create a work that enabled me to travel. So, it wasn't just something that would end up in Sapporo, but would be possible to recycle in other places with different content."

"The elephant in the room" was one of the key phrases he pinned for inspiration, which eventually led to *The Blind Men & the Elephant*. The former denotes an obvious situation or problem that people do not want to talk about while the latter involves figuring out something that people have no knowledge of. Both "elephants" can mean the same thing, in Yap's case, with the former describing those who have experienced the installation and know the answer, and the latter, those who have not.

He spent time interviewing locals in Sapporo, asking them about interesting places and sounds unique to the city and forming the exhibition around his findings. When he returned to KL, he was offered a sponsorship in 2018. He knew he wanted to refine the Sapporo version and apply it here but had difficulty finding the right people to work with.

As the installation largely involved projections, he needed to get the tech right. After a year of trial and error with different outfits, in addition to a workshop in Japan, he finally found collaborative chemistry with a creative group, and all that was left to do was insert the content.

Since this would be about his hometown, Yap went on guided tours and studied books on its urban history (he recommends articles by UCSI architecture lecturer Teoh Chee Keong that appeared in *Disappearing Kuala Lumpur*). He did not employ the same interviewing approach he used in Sapporo, though. "Since I'm from here, it's a little different," he says. There is already a formed viewpoint of his city, so being objective could be a tad difficult. And with Malaysia's highly diverse demographics, the sample answers would differ greatly. In the end, he decided that the best way was to draw from his personal experience and focus on a place he had memories of.

After almost two years, the installation was finally ready in March 2020. It flooded social media and promotional flyers were plastered on the walls of cafés. But of course, Covid hit the country that month. "I tried to wait it out. Towards September, the Movement Control Order was more relaxed, but I missed the time to exhibit," he says.

Last December, Yap decided to bring the installation online. "I told myself I could not stop there; I had to finish it." But that meant another round of looking for tech people to set it up on the web. It was essential that the sounds and visuals for the virtual platform were optimised. "You want to find people who have the techniques and share the same vision as you. That's the hardest." He eventually found it in digital agency 8finite Creative.

Yap's online version of *The Blind Men & the Elephant*, in Kuala Lumpur is unique, thanks to the aspect of interaction. "While nothing can beat the physical experience, I'm trying to mimic it as closely as possible."

To experience the installation, visit tbmatekl.com on your computer and you will be instructed to download an app to your mobile device. Use the app to scan the QR code on the website and your phone will connect as a torchlight. If you happen to have a projector at home, plug it in and turn off the lights for a better experience. Similar to the physical exhibition, move the light around with your torch until you trigger a sound and visual. You can do this several times and



“KL is a city that is constantly disappearing, renewing and evolving. Every person who experiences the city carries a unique but limited memory and truth of it.”

proceed to take a guess on the map on the next page. The final landing page is where Yap reveals the site, explaining its identity and what it means to him.

Without spoiling the fun, the only hint is that this place has changed drastically over the past decade. But then again, which neighbourhood in KL has not?

Yap recorded the audio files a little before the pandemic, so you will hear sounds of crowds, bustling streets and traffic — familiar sounds that may evoke memories that feel distant, given the lockdown.

Nowadays, the cacophony of the city we know all too well has dwindled to silent streets and lonesome alleys, with many doors shuttering. Even without Covid, historic sites, buildings and businesses that have been operating for years were already on the brink of disappearing, with a long line of contemporary projects waiting to take over. With the pandemic, however, many were forced to fold before the fight. "It's sad," Yap says grimly. "With Covid, they're gone even faster. What will be left after?"

At the launch of the installation, Yap said: "KL is a city that is constantly disappearing, renewing and evolving. Every person who experiences the city carries a unique but limited memory and truth of it."

His own individual perception cannot define our metropolis, but it contributes to a larger narrative that suggests the importance of conservation of our people and heritage.

It is true that change is the only constant, but that should not mean we forget our past.

"The objective of this exhibition is a little different from the one in Sapporo," he says. "This one has a deeper meaning to me. I hope people will have the interest to know more about the city and to care for it. I hope it will open up more conversations."

E

Visit tbmatekl.com to experience the installation

Match + help

Two groups of individuals are galvanising resources to connect people hard hit by the coronavirus with those who want to lend a hand

BY TAN GIM EAN

Leonard Chua's own experience of hard times enables him to empathise with those in the same boat. He does not stop there. Remembering how relatives pooled their limited resources to help his family pull through, he now wants to extend a hand to those fighting to keep afloat in the pandemic.

Early last month, Chua gathered some friends to start The Angel Project, which connects those seeking aid with those who wish to adopt or sponsor families. As the conduit, they connect both parties and customise needs and contributions, so things can move fast.

"I tell rich friends that we are looking more for individual contributions than corporate sponsors. Speed is more important than marketing and we want to keep it simple, nothing fancy," he says.

His family lost their business during the 1987 and 1997 financial crises. "Growing up with an older brother, not having enough was a daily conversation at home. I am thankful my aunts, who earned only enough for themselves, pooled their money to help us," says the 35-year-old psychology graduate.

The Angel Project's volunteers bring different skills to the table. Chua, head of digital at his workplace, sets the pace and expectations as project lead. He brought in the first batches of families who needed help and the bulk of initial funding by sponsors. A social influencer helps to raise awareness of the initiative while members from advertising agencies chart strategy.

Stay-at-home mothers who used to run businesses help with back-end operations, keeping track of funds coming in and channelling them to B40 (bottom 40% income group) families who have lost their household income and have children aged 20 and below. Issues on planning and managing operations are handled by someone who works in sales while a volunteer who is a compliance analyst makes sure every transaction is recorded and the receipts are in order and available for whoever wishes to check.

Unlike professionals, many of whom can bounce back when things pick up, B40 families have limited education or knowledge, no network and are unlikely to get back on their feet quickly, says Chua, explaining why the project focuses on this group. Instead of the usual practice of handing over food supplies, the team links applicants to those willing to adopt them for three to six months.

Generous souls have asked if they can still reach out after that time frame. "Of course. We are just doing the 'matchmaking'. At the end of the day, it's up to them and the families," he says.

Chua is surprised that many of those who seek aid do not require food. Instead, they need money — which can make some sceptical. "People say they don't believe in giving money. Honestly, having gone through what I did, sometimes we do need a bit of money to make things happen. That's why we undertake to bank in money from donors for the families, in small amounts."

It heartens Chua that people who like to help will always find ways to do so. And the unwilling ones will ask a lot of questions to justify their inaction. "Anyone can be an angel. It is inspiring to see the people who have come forward," he says.



Members behind The Angel Project bring different talents and experiences to the initiative, says Chua (centre)

A twenty-something guy who runs a household appliance shop chose to support a family living in Kampung Baru, Kuala Lumpur, for six months. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) had given them dry goods, the family say, but they needed someone to fix a water pipe in their home. For years, they had been getting water from a neighbour's tap and paying an estimated sum for it. With their own supply and meter, they could pay for what they use.

In another case, a widow had taken on 24-hour shifts in a nursing home, which paid freelance nurses RM10 to RM12 hourly, to feed her three children. "We have started sending her organic vegetables weekly and fresh fish every alternate week, besides settling her rent for three months so she can spend more time with the kids," says Chua.

Another family of 10 has enough food but the daughter is sitting for her SPM this year and there is no internet at home. A sponsor has agreed to get them a laptop and install internet service.

"Things like this can really change people's lives. We're doing something to help people get by. At the same time, we want to make a difference," notes Chua.

Covid-19 prevents the team from meeting physically, but that has not stopped them from helping without being physically present. The Angel Project works with partners where necessary. For example, Studio20 helped it develop a website where people can fill up a simple form to apply for help, while aquaponic farm Aquaville sends fresh greens directly to various families.

Chua is confident that people want to give; it is just a matter of connecting the needs with the funds. "I'm very happy doing this because I've met really amazing people. Where we cannot help, we channel the cases to other groups doing the same thing. It's like, let's do it together."

Connecting white flaggers with willing hands

As Covid-19 infections went up and in tandem with that, white flags and suicide cases, Tiffany Chew took a drive around her neighbourhood in Bukit Jalil, Kuala Lumpur. Friends living elsewhere had spotted white flags, but she could not see any. It made her even more concerned: What if there are flaggers who cannot get help because they are stuck on the higher floors of their apartments?

The product designer then consulted two friends and they came up with Save the White Flag, a website that connects flaggers with donors or acts on behalf of those willing to render aid but cannot or do not wish to be in direct contact with recipients. Matching is done on a case-by-case basis, following STWF's core values: survivability, sustainability and sanity.

The aim is to use the platform to connect people in urgent need with those living nearby and or encourage netizens to raise the alert for flaggers.

Chew and two of three other core members are mothers holding full-time jobs. She is a senior manager at Plus Xenergy while Nadira Bashir, her classmate in Malaysia, then New Zealand, where they studied computer graphics and design, is a lecturer at Xiamen

University Malaysia. Diana Arifin, their senior in NZ, runs a family business. Nur Munira, Nadira's sister and STWF's case director, brings her experience at Manipal International University to bear by telling them about management standard operating procedures and regulations.

"She reminds us that this is an emergency relief fund, so we cannot keep the money for too long — it needs to be distributed fast," says Nadira, the content director for STWF. Their initial reluctance to handle monetary donations quickly gave way to necessity, adds Chew, who is mindful about the money entrusted to them by many who have no time to arrange groceries or other things, and makes sure all transactions are transparent and legitimate.

Donors can make a one-off contribution in cash or kind or commit to supporting flaggers for 3 to 12 months, as sustainability is key. They can choose to deal directly with flaggers or have the group, which has 10 volunteers on board, be the middle person.

The sanity aspect is crucial too; STWF is recruiting counsellors for those in need of mental support and hopes to gather the resources to help them. With families of their own, the team is concerned about flaggers with young children or elderly dependents and the effects of loss of income on vulnerable groups.

Matching donors with flaggers is not a simple matter of connecting both sides. And every case has its story, as Chew learnt after contacting a landlord to whom a flagger owed two months' rent.

"I assumed the landlord would be okay [financially] but found out she had just delivered a premature baby and her husband had no income. She only had a motorbike and would use Grab to take the baby for check-ups.

"It was stressful negotiating with her, but we didn't want to be unfair to one party. We managed to quickly send over the rent, and that helped both sides. That made our work really worth it."

STWF will continue to reach out to flaggers, depending on how the Covid situation goes. But the team, which draws comfort from knowing they play a part in helping struggling Malaysians and others, hopes the pandemic will not drag on.

Keeping the site up beyond six months will not augur well for the country, they say. The hope is to turn the platform into something else and offer other services eventually. "We have people who are willing to become tuition teachers. We'll see how things evolve," says Chew.



Three of the four friends who started Save the White Flag (from left): Diana, Nadira and Tiffany

SAMANTHA TAN

The founder of Penang-based artisan butter company ButterBae on steering her fledgling business through the pandemic, food inspirations and what keeps her going

Options: Tell us the story behind ButterBae.

Samantha Tan: Like many people, the first lockdown rekindled my inner chef and I began experimenting with all sorts of comfort food, from bread to cakes, to keep busy. One day, it struck me that there was an emergence of talented home bakers, offering glorious staples such as sourdough bread. It meant there would be complementary demand for artisanal accompaniments. I chose to focus on butter versus dips, as I wanted a certain lifespan for my products.

Butter is an irresistible staple for me and I use it in many different ways. Good-quality butter makes all the difference! I remember dining at Jaan in Singapore and the memory of how smooth the butter was. It had the scent of maple without the sweetness; or the luxurious cultured butter at Claude Bosi's Bibendum. Both times, butter paved the way to a memorable dining experience.

For ButterBae, I began with our simple, humble Original Kombu Butter, made using just the goodness of kelp and its natural umami content and smooth luscious butter. From there, we have grown our menu to what it is today.

What have been some of the main highlights and challenges you have experienced in setting up your own business?

I would say being among the first movers when I started in early August last year. Our very first jars went out on Aug 9. Friends and peers supported us from the very beginning and it grew slowly through word of mouth. We began only on a pre-order basis, as I wanted to minimise food waste and ensure all jars were made as close to collection date as possible. We do not use preservatives and we recommend finishing our butters within 1½ months.

And it was just this year that we found a suitable logistics provider to transport our goods, as the butter always needs to be chilled. So, I am glad we can now officially serve more cities and states throughout the peninsula, including Ipoh, Selangor, Kuala Lumpur, Klang, Melaka and Johor. It also means a lot to be able to survive and thrive in our home base of Penang, which, as everyone knows, is a foodie island, where quality, flavour and good value are musts.

It has been hard since the pandemic struck. How do you stay calm and focused and what advice can you share with other entrepreneurs in these tough times?

Focus on the good. When the going gets tough, I



London is one of Tan's favourite destinations



Japan and its cuisine are a great source of inspiration



always remind myself of my clients' kind, comforting words and I also remind myself to find joy in whatever I do. Know that every struggle, every challenge improves you! I like to run my worries away — it clears my mind and helps me soldier on another day. If I need to, I speak to a friend or family member. To other entrepreneurs, I can't stress enough the importance of supporting each other. I practise this genuinely among my peers, as I believe working together with like-minded people brings us all collectively to greater heights. A friendly eco-system brings joy and a sense of community.

What inspires ButterBae's offerings?

Our flavours are inspired by our personal food journeys. We are on an eternal quest to find flavours that are exciting yet acceptable. We want ButterBae products to be pantry staples, and not a fad or passing trend. The vegan community is growing, so they have inspired our small range of vegan-friendly kombu spreads. Our Signature Golden Sugee Cake, meanwhile, is a tribute to my late papa. We added our own twist to the traditional treat and, of late, we have been painting vibrant grazing platters upon request.

Our menu is listed on our Instagram account, @butterbae.co. We are a home-

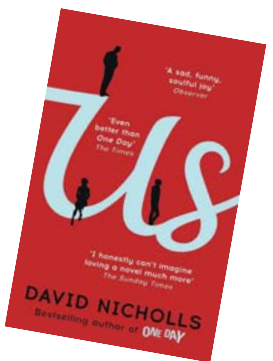
based operation and we strive to keep the business as lean as possible during these uncertain times. ButterBae is still very much a one-woman show with some help, now and then, from my mum and my kind husband.

How do you like to enjoy your products?

I love our butters on crackers or on a medium-rare piece of steak. It's also good on grilled seafood or for making Hollandaise sauce.

What are you reading and listening to right now?

I haven't gone book shopping for a while now, so I am currently reading a book a friend passed to me. It's called *Us* by David Nicholls. My Spotify list is filled with lounge beats, which I listen to while churning butter or working on our newly launched grazing platters. At night, my playlist is the sound of my husband snoring!

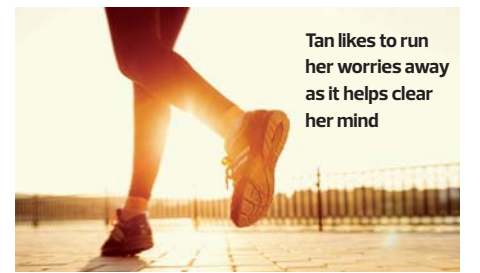


Where are some of your favourite food destinations?

Bangkok, Japan and London! Bangkok for its abundance of notable and affordable culinary experiences. The local Thai fare excites my tastebuds. Japan because I grew up eating a lot of Japanese food. It was my dad's favourite and has since become one of mine. I love how Japanese cuisine always focuses on using the freshest ingredients, which has taught me how to appreciate food in its simplest, purest forms. And, lastly, London. I always wish I could visit it more often. There is no language barrier and my last visit there was filled with very memorable dining experiences, namely Core by Clare Smyth and Bibendum.



Core by Clare Smyth



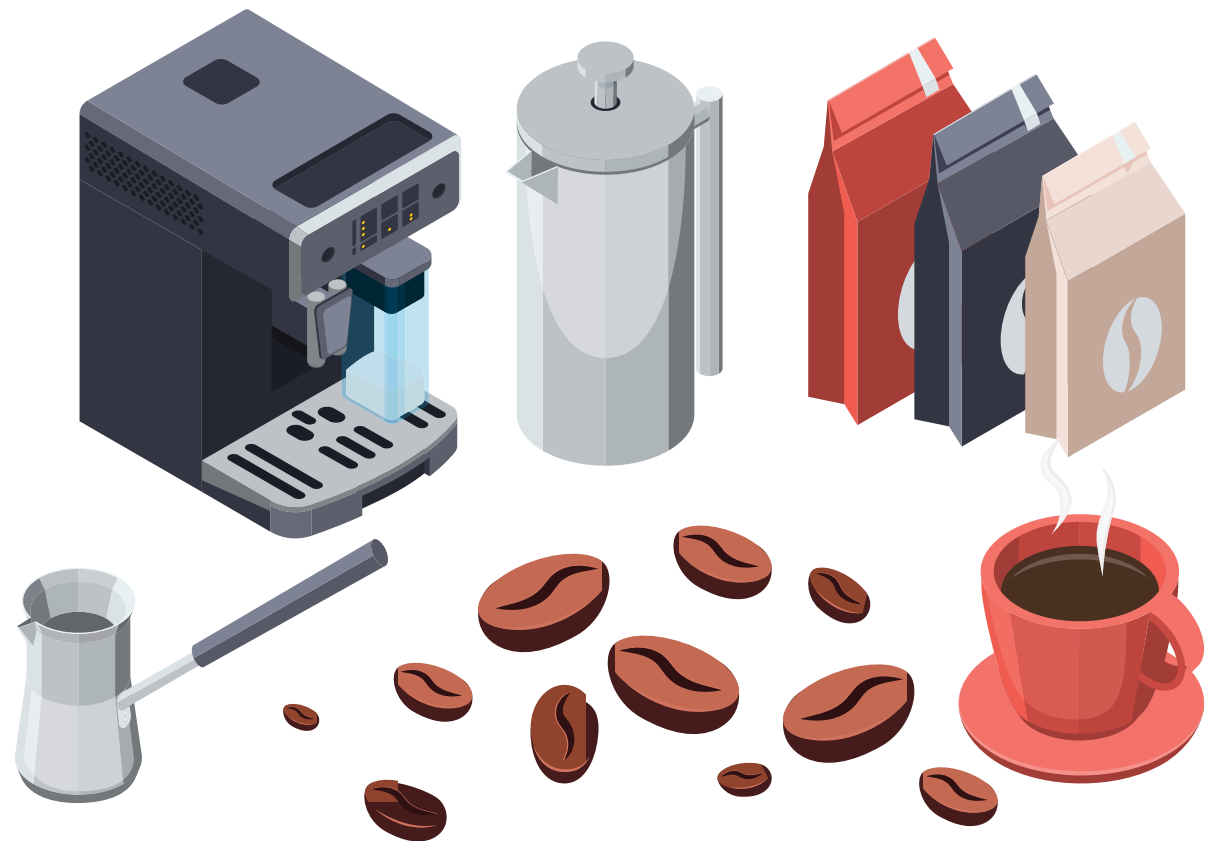
Tan likes to run her worries away as it helps clear her mind

Where are you looking forward to exploring once the borders reopen?

Bangkok or Japan, of course, and Taiwan. Once all this is over, these countries are probably the best places to visit without having to break one's piggy bank. **E**

— As told to Diana Khoo

Possible storms in coffee cups



BY PETRINA FERNANDEZ

Coffee drinkers know that a good black or white does more than provide a necessary java jolt. In those dark depths or milky galaxies lie everything from hope or strength of will to peace or even sanity. When under duress, five minutes spent savouring that symphony of acidity, aroma, flavour, body and bitterness can be positively restorative.

However, tough times might be brewing ahead for the chronically caffeinated as logistical challenges, damaged crops and a surge in green coffee bean prices could translate to a more expensive cuppa. These issues have been percolating in regions around the world but some of the impact is shelved for now thanks in part to forward contracts between suppliers and buyers. These allow for prices to be locked in in advance, shielding buyers from volatility.

But as life returns to pre-pandemic normalcy and the next cycle of contracts kicks in, consumers could find their frequent habit redesignated as a luxury.

Brazil, which produces between 20% and 40% of the world's coffee supply, has been hit by its worst drought in almost a century. *Financial Times* names this as the first supply shortfall in the coffee market in four years, which pushed the markets up further when combined with halted exports from Colombia earlier this year due to anti-government protests.

It came as little surprise then that the New York futures benchmark in July saw the premium arabica bean hit a four-and-a-half-year high. It skyrocketed up 70% from 2020 to strike the US\$1.70 per pound mark, around which it has hovered since.

Local roasters have not been immune to relevant snags. A global shortage of cargo containers and ships has sparked a logistics crisis across commodities and the coffee industry is among those impacted.

"We've faced supply chain disruptions, with delayed shipments causing us to run out of stock for certain coffees," says Thomas Ooi, who founded micro-roaster Ghostbird Coffee Company. "Coffee varieties are seasonal and we're receiving them significantly later than scheduled. The beans themselves aren't impacted much — if stored well, they're okay for about a year — but we've had to adjust our planned offerings. Last year, our supplies from Colombia and Brazil were heavily affected, while this year we're seeing delays from Indonesia."

The Roast Things co-founder Chiam Tow Jin admits to similar hurdles. "We deal with two different types of suppliers: direct-from-farm for our Honduras purchases and merchants based in Europe and the US for the rest," says the licensed Q-grader, which qualifies him to grade coffee. "Logistical issues are currently our biggest challenge. The frequency of sea freights has decreased, with delays spanning weeks to a

couple of months. Even though you may book a vessel, you are still subject to cancellations depending on availability."

And shipping costs have risen in tandem.

"Container shortages from Africa and Latin America have pushed sea freight costs up a lot for us — I'd say around 30%," says Nicholas Tay, founder of specialist roaster The Hub. "Our inventories are running low but — I don't know if this is lucky or unlucky — the lockdowns these past few months have let us slowly ride out our low supplies as sales are down too. That said, we had to fly some beans in from Ethiopia and Colombia to stay ahead, which cost 80% more than sea freight."

Ghostbird had locked in coffee prices with suppliers earlier this year while The Hub's deals are tied to the New York market. "Parts of Latin America, such as Colombia and Panama, are seeing price rises. We buy 80% to 90% of coffee directly from farms and import it ourselves," says Tay. "We have been absorbing the price increases so far and while our wholesale deals with local businesses have been halved, roasted coffee sales to overseas markets such as China and the Middle East have been helping to sustain us."

Chiam shares that The Roast Things is unaffected by green coffee bean market prices as it has its own purchasing practices. "We don't benchmark ourselves against the market. Our prices are pegged to quality, which means we easily pay twice or thrice listed commodity prices anyway. In that sense, sourcing costs for us are quite established," he says. It has not escaped unscathed, however, with the combined blows of higher shipping and operation costs as well as lower wholesale and retail sales.

"Please drink more coffee," jokes Ooi as he shares how an expansion into consumer sales assisted Ghostbird in weathering the sharp drop in demand for beans by local cafés.

While these micro-roasters have succeeded in holding the fort so far, they can only absorb so many costs before these have to be transferred to customers. And if analysts are to be believed, that reckoning is imminent once exporters clear their warehouses of stockpiled inventory that has been moving sluggishly during the pandemic.

"It's the next set of deliveries that's going to start being more expensive. The wholesale and retail prices will start to react between now till the end of the year," London-based coffee trader Stephen Hurst told *Financial Times*.

Many coffee connoisseurs have invested in better home equipment and bean or blend subscriptions to keep caffeinated while working from home, but future behaviour hinges on what habits we carry into or return to in the post-pandemic world. Although market forces might dictate that takeaway coffee is a luxury for most in the near future, there will be those who will hold steadfastly onto their relationships with their favourite baristas.

Peace and pleasure, after all, can be priceless.

E

To brew in between

While waiting to once again lounge in your favourite cafés, enjoy the taste and restorative properties of these single-origin beans, blends or drip bags in the comfort of your own home



Ethiopia Yirgacheffe G1 Washed, The Hub

This fruity and floral variety from the Yirgacheffe region of Ethiopia is directly traded from local partner, Ardent Coffee Export Ethiopia by Ashenafi. While The Hub carries some particularly exclusive beans, the filter coffee is a terrific option for the novice with its approachable flavours — think jasmine, blueberry, citrus and honey — and great value for money at RM60 per bag. thehuboug.com



Milkyway Espresso Blend, Ghostbird Coffee Company

A full-bodied medium dark roast with a chocolate-forward aroma and sweetness, the best-selling Milkyway Espresso Blend comprises 80% Brazil Royale beans and 20% Indonesian Sumatra Gayo beans. As its name suggests, the espresso was crafted with milk in mind. Choose your preferred coffee preparation method — everything from Moka Pot to Aeropress — to get the right grind size. Prices start from RM55 per 300g. ghostbirdcoffee.co



Milk Killer, The Roast Things

While the award-winning Cream blend is a sure-fire bet (the roastery is associated with Cream Café in Dataran Prima, Petaling Jaya), consider trying flagship blend Milk Killer for your first foray into the brand's offerings. This killer espresso pairs perfectly with milk, with notes of dark chocolate, pink grapefruit and sunflower seeds. Opt for the single-serve Immersion bag for a quick coffee fix, priced at RM7 per pack. theroastthings.com



Mixed-flavour drip bags, My Liberica

If you are keen to expand your palate and sample a local product, check out My Liberica, named after Malaysia's dominant liberica coffee beans. A great introductory point would be the trio of flavours in its mixed pack — the roasted nutty and caramelly Classic; Jackfruit with additional notes of lychee, blackberry and dried longan; and full-bodied Chocolate roasted French style. A 15-sachet set will set you back by RM90. myliberica.my

JAVA JOLT

These reliable accents and accessories are the perfect additions to a coffee aficionado's arsenal

BY EMILY YAP



You have probably seen Purple Ling's handmade ceramic cups on many of your past café jaunts, so adding them to your home is the sensible thing to do (RM50, shopee.com.my/purplelingstudio)

The **Breville** Barista Pro Coffee Machine has an intuitive interface that makes it simple to use and customise. The built-in grinder delivers the right amount of ground coffee on demand and with the three-second heat-up time, you can go from bean to cup faster than ever before. (RM4,499, harveynorman.com.my)



If you enjoy grinding your coffee manually, **Timemore's** Chestnut C2 hand grinder does the job with ease.

The sleek chequered pattern design also makes it skid-proof and offers a comfortable grip. (RM250, bunamarket.com)

While its rich copper sheen, brass handle and walnut lid-lift add to the charm of this desirable pourer by **Hario**, the V60 Bueno Copper Kettle also provides exceptional flow control — meeting the expectations of even the most demanding of baristas (RM720, perkcoffee.co/my)



If you are missing café-style coffee, get a bag of beans from **Dou Dou Bake** and recreate your favourite beverage at home. The current seasonal Colombia, Costa Rica and Ethiopia blend makes for a balanced cuppa with strawberry, butterscotch and jujube flavour notes. (RM50 for 200g, doudoubake.com)



Grown on the rain-rich volcanic soil of Lake Kivu in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, **Nespresso's** Kahawa ya Congo coffee reveals an alluring sweet cereal and nutty aroma on its own. With milk, these aromas transform into light biscuity notes with a hint of walnut. (RM34 for a sleeve of 10 capsules)



Prepare your morning cup of joe the Italian way with **Bialetti's** Moka Express Oceana, a stove-top pot that does not require detergent to clean. Just rinse it with water after use and it is as good as new. (RM239, Lazada.com.my/Bialetti)

Picking one's passengers

Some safari operators are turning the classic business model on its head in the hope of increasing profit margins and better funding their conservation efforts. But is doing so a risky move all on its own?



BY MARY HOLLAND

“We don’t have a lot of time,” says Beks Ndlovu, founder of African Bush Camps, of the scramble to preserve Africa’s wilderness areas, which are increasingly threatened by environmental factors such as climate change, human-wildlife conflict and a lack of funding. With 15 lodges across Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia, Ndlovu is on the front line of a battle that he says “is closing in on us”.

Ndlovu is among the safari operators who have realised over the past year that the current tourism model needs a rethink, despite decades of insistence that visitor revenues would sustain wilderness areas, surrounding villages and the animals. That’s in part because of Covid-19, which halted visitor revenues entirely and left tourism-funded reserves across Africa unable to pay their rangers and anti-poaching units. And it is partially because of long-accepted industry norms, which include hefty travel agent commissions that chip away at profits that can be directed towards conservation.

After months of scrutinising their balance sheets, a radical band of change makers is rethinking the business model of

the safari industry — questioning the travel agency fees, requesting that more money be redirected to conservation and creating transparency about where travellers’ money is actually going.

Their hope is to tip the scales into balance so tourism dollars are not leaking out to middlemen but rather fortifying the communities and conservancies that travellers are paying to visit. Big ambitions translate to big risks (such as limiting the client base) that could imperil business overall. Still, those involved see no other way of securing these wilderness areas for generations to come.

HOW IT WORKS NOW

Most travellers heading on safari in Africa use travel agents to help untangle the complicated logistics that can be hard to understand from afar. The amount of work agents do can vary greatly. While some weave together complicated one-of-a-kind itineraries, others just copy and paste the same trip package over and over.

Usually, safari companies pay for these services through commissions; without the agents, operators would have a harder time generating leads through marketing, and

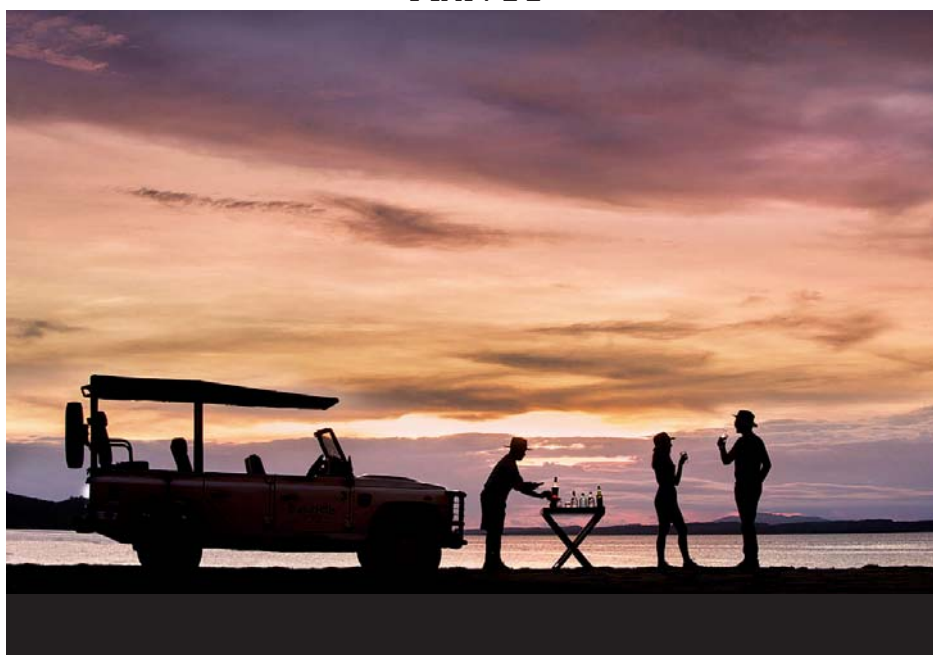




Linyati Ebony, in Botswana, is one of Ndlovu's 15 lodges



Gomoti Plains in Botswana, a camp that travellers can book via Niarra



Sundowners on the banks of Lake Kariba in Zimbabwe, with African Bush Camps



Somalisa Camp in Hwange National Park, Zimbabwe, is run by Ndlovu as part of the African Bush Camps collection

an agent's referral can warrant as much as 40% of the total trip cost. That could mean US\$20,000 off a US\$50,000 booking, leaving the remainder to cover such costs as labour, operations, administration, food and upkeep.

Each safari company works differently. For African Bush Camps, more than 50% of the gross turnover goes back to the staff, who are hired from local communities. Just 2.5% of the turnover is left for conservation and community initiatives, which are run through an in-house foundation.

"It's the greatest Robin Hood industry in the world," says Giles Davies of the high-end safari industry. As founder of Conservation Capital, he develops financial and business-driven solutions to support conservation areas. He says few other industries funnel dollars from the West to "remote frontier environments" as well and as efficiently as this does.

Still, Davies argues that the industry stands to do far better.

"It's absurd that someone could make US\$300 on a bed night, simply for booking it," he says of the large travel agent commissions. What's more, travellers simply sign on the dotted line with no understanding of how their money pays out. "If you go on safari in Kenya and pay US\$100, [you're lucky if] US\$5 goes to conservation. The whole asset is getting 5% of the value chain. That isn't right."

"We can't be handing out commissions," says Ndlovu, who says the trade has become lazy, selling whatever is easiest. He used the downtime during Covid to reset and strategise his business model, which was greatly impacted during the pandemic. Even though none of his staff was laid off, everyone took pay cuts. "I don't know any other industry that gives away so much from its bottom line," he says. That's why he has committed to working with fewer agents — those who believe in his

mission — and reducing commissions by 5% in the coming year. By 2022, African Bush Camps plans to max out commissions at 25%, as opposed to 30% and up. Bringing bookings in-house is not going to happen soon as doing so would require great investment in both technology and staff.

SAVVY GUESTS ONLY

Siphoning more conservation funds from each booking is only the first step, Ndlovu argues. A further way forward is to be more selective about his guests in order to maximise the odds that they'll be mindful travellers and hopefully, philanthropic givers. He is asking the sympathetic travel agents to have more detailed conversations with potential clients to educate them on the fragile ecosystem and its fundraising challenges before they solidify plans.

In addition, the company is now charging a US\$20 conservation fee per person per night (up from US\$10 previously), with the aim of doubling or tripling the figure by 2025.

It's not a huge sum, coming to less than US\$300 per week per couple — though it comes on top of rates that can hover around US\$1,500 a night. But every bit helps. If the new barriers turn away some business, so be it, says Ndlovu. "They have to have the same philosophy as us," he says of his clientele.

Other safari operators hold different perspectives. Nicole Robinson, chief marketing officer of 30-year-old luxury safari outfit AndBeyond, believes that screening guests may be a self-defeating mission. "There are two kinds of travellers. The kind who travel to see the world and the kind who travel to connect with it. We are for the second kind. However, travel can be a powerful catalyst for a mindset change — and by screening out guests, you lose the opportunity to convert them," she says.

A RISING TIDE

Ndlovu has found some enterprising allies in a few companies. One-year-old start-up Niarra Travel, for instance, offers the same booking services as a travel agent for just a 10% commission. "Our message to travellers is: 25% of your money is actually going to reach the destination," says founder Byron Thomas.

For Nicola Shepherd, founder of the UK-based Explorations Co, a philanthropically motivated travel planning organisation, most itineraries factor in some form of "giving back" through hands-on positive-impact initiatives such as collaring an elephant or lion so that it can be tracked by conservationists. (The cost runs from US\$5,000 to US\$15,000.) These experiences aren't positive only for the environment but offer guests truly unique experiences.

Shepherd's clients are also automatically charged a charitable fee that is matched from the company's profits. If clients aren't interested in contributing, she recommends they book their vacation elsewhere. "We are, first and foremost, a philanthropic safari and travel company," she says.

In central Kenya, Borana Lodge, an eight-cottage property in a 32,000-acre rhino sanctuary, is taking another approach entirely. Michael Dyer, its owner and managing director, is hoping to take more direct bookings and bypass agents altogether. To do so, he is building up a reservation department in-house and working with a Kenyan start-up to create software that will help manage bookings and offer dynamic pricing. Dyer is confident that younger guests will come to prefer online bookings, but it all requires a marketing rethink.

AndBeyond's Robinson says that in her company, this approach would be "commercial suicide". Exposure through travel agents to a wide variety of marketing channels was a lifesaver during the pandemic, she points out. In fact, the agents represent a large enough share of business that AndBeyond is pre-paying their commissions to help them get back on their feet. Plus, their value is at an all-time high, thanks to the complexity of Covid-19 travel requirements.

Dyer is convinced that bold changes need to be made. He has even committed to giving 24% of Borana's earnings back to conservation, no matter the rate or season. His ability to do so will depend on earnings from his other commercial enterprises, which include lodges, an equestrian safari company and agricultural businesses. He is also boosting transparency with an audited website tool that helps travellers see exactly how their dollars are allocated.

He hopes this approach will inspire others to do the same. But getting broad traction will require many stakeholders to coalesce around fixing the broken value chain, starting with national and local governments (which can impose tourism levies to fund conservation), travel agents and guests.

At the very least, Dyer has the ear of Conservation Capital's Davies, who is working with him to lobby for tax relief and create best practices around conservation fees that can be shared across the industry. In the meantime, educating consumers is half the battle. "If you can get travellers asking the right questions, they will make more informed decisions on where they go," says Dyer. — *Bloomberg*



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IT'S ALL ABOUT SECONDS