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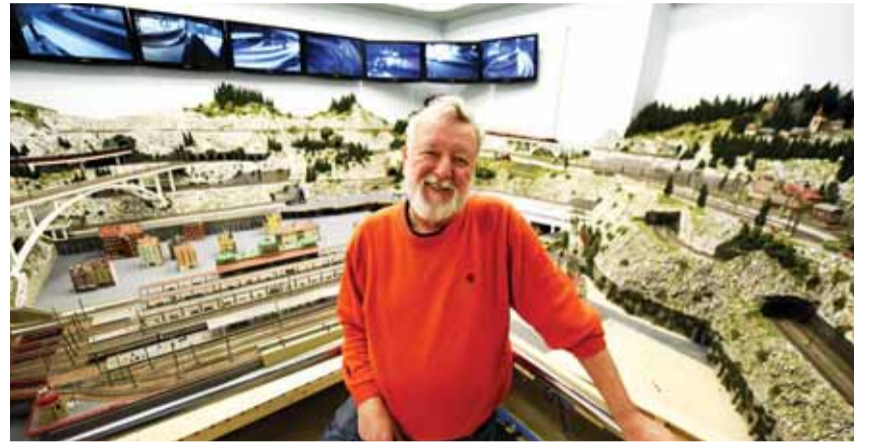
Picture taken in Zagreb, Croatia, shows a mini train deposit at the Mini Train museum.—AFP photos



Picture shows model trains layout, as part of the collections at the Backo Mini Train museum in Zagreb.



Visitors look at a model trains layout, as part of the collections at the Backo Mini Train museum in Zagreb.



Picture shows Antun Urbic, known as Backo, as he poses on his mini train museum in Zagreb.

Little engines that can: Zagreb's model train museum

Soaring over mountain gorges, past snowy ski slopes and into bustling stations, the trains in Antun Urbic's minuscule landscape enthrall visitors to his model rail museum in Zagreb. The Backo Mini Express Museum, the largest of its kind in southeastern Europe, boasts more than a kilometre (half a mile) of tiny tracks traversing picturesque rural villages and city squares wrought in extraordinary detail. More than 2,500 figurines including mountaineers, wedding guests, police, construction workers and commuters populate the scenes. Urbic, who opened the museum in 2015, fell in love with trains 60 years ago when his father gave him a model set. "It was the only toy that moved by itself," said the 66-year-old who goes by the nickname Backo.

He started building sets in the attic of his Zagreb home before moving to a bigger space where he invited friends over to

model with him. "It began as a hobby," he told AFP. After spending four years piecing together a large-scale model, he opened the museum to the public.

Since then, the site has attracted 25,000 people a year, including model train enthusiasts from the United States, Australia and India. The museum reopened in May after closing for nearly three months under Croatia's coronavirus lockdown. "We could hardly wait to come here again," said Davorin Bozic, a regular accompanied by his three enthusiastic children. Eight-year-old Jan Zelic's favourite detail is in a cemetery where a hand sticks out from a grave. "It's really fun," he said.

His father Sasa, a 38-year-old economist, praised the "precise mechanics and imagination needed to construct all this. I was particularly impressed with the ski slope." The scene features miniature skiers

zig-zagging down a slalom run inspired by the one on nearby Medvednica, which hosts the men's and women's World Cup. It is the only model museum in Europe with skiers actually descending a mountainside instead of being glued to the slopes, according to Urbic. Among them are two figurines of Croatian skiing stars—siblings Ivica and Janica Kostelic—now retired.

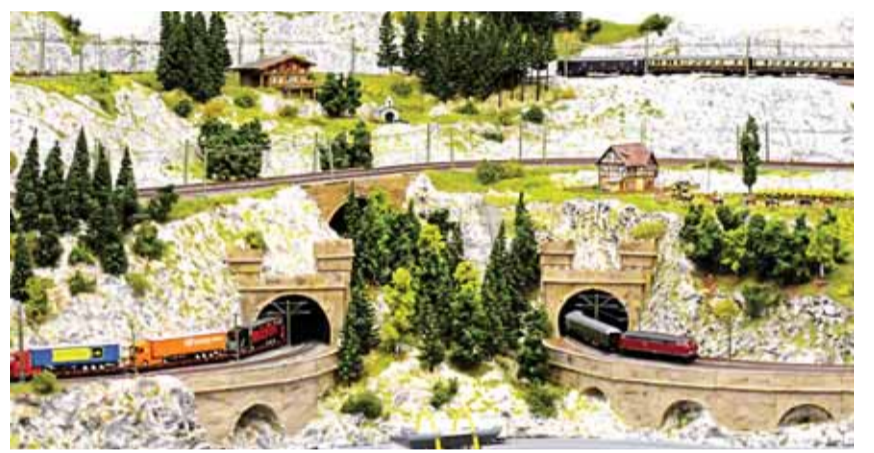
The latter is depicted skiing with only one pole as she famously did after dropping the other during a 2006 World Cup race when she won bronze. "Everyone perceives this as a children's game but it is far from that," said Urbic's associate Zvonko Cebalo. "There is a concentration of knowledge—electronic, electric, IT, robotic."—AFP



Picture shows model trains layout, as part of the collections at the Backo Mini Train museum.



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Truncated will: India landowner bequeaths land to elephants

An Indian landowner has willed most of his land to two elephants he said saved his life from gun-toting criminals, a decision that has upset his wife and children. Akhtar Imam, from a village in the eastern state of Bihar, said he changed his will to bequeath 2.5 hectares (6.2 acres) to gentle giants Moti (pearl) and Rani (queen). "I simply don't want hardship for my Moti and Rani, who are no less

raised Moti, aged 20, and Rani, aged 15, from when they were born to another domesticated jumbo that has since died. Each elephant has two staff looking after them day and night, and roam his property freely.

He said his love for the pair grew even more when they saved him from "gun-carrying criminals" who he said tried to kill him last year while he slept. "When I opened my door to see why the elephants were trumpeting, I saw they were chasing criminals nearby," he said. "I am alive due to my elephants who had worked like bodyguards to me." Imam said he would also bequeath a smaller amount of land and his house to his wife and children, but they weren't entirely happy. "They don't understand that the elephants are not a showpiece for me... My relationship with elephants is life-long. We love each other."

He added: "Human greed is endless, even if you give them the whole world it's not enough." His wife and children declined to speak to AFP. Imam's gesture came as controversy raged in India over the recent death of a pregnant elephant after eating fruit laced with explosives in the southern state of Kerala. Asian elephants—*Elephas maximus*—used to roam across most of Asia, but are today restricted to 15 percent of their original range. The species is listed as endangered on the International Union for the Conservation of Nature Red List. Of the 45,000 remaining, about a third live in captivity. Some Asian elephants live well into their 70s.—AFP



This picture shows Indian landowner Akhtar Imam with one of his elephants at Murgia Chai village, in Janipur near Patna.—AFP

my family," Imam, 50, told AFP as his bathed the pachyderms on a swelteringly hot day. "I don't want my elephants to face the fate of orphaned or abandoned captive elephants who die on the streets or in deserted fields due to lack of proper care." Imam, who runs a wildlife trust,

Doge's Palace reopens as tourists flock back to Venice

After three months of empty squares and alleys and gondoliers stranded on dry land, Venice sprang back to life on Saturday as tourists flocked back to the city for the reopening of the Doge's Palace. Hundreds of Italians and foreigners lined up for more than 300 metres (yards) in Saint Mark's Square, in front of the Ducal Palace. A local news agency said a thousand internet bookings had been recorded for the reopening day. "There were people queuing at 8:00 am this morning and, to be honest, it's just what we were hoping for," Maria Cristina Griabaudi, president of the Venice Civic Museums Foundation, told AFP. "It's a very strong emotion, like the first day of school," she explained.

Inside the palace, masks are compulsory, numerous signs encourage people to "keep their distance" and all the rooms are controlled to avoid overcrowding. After months without tourists Saturday marked a clear change, with Venice bustling much as it would do on any ordinary spring weekend. Souvenir shops have reappeared in Saint Mark's Square and almost all of the shops and restaurants—including the historic Cafe Florian—have reopened. Around the Rialto Canal, visitors pushed their way through the tight alleys, and the famous gondolas and vaporetti, the city's water buses, were again loaded with passengers and going about their business on the canals. "If the most spoken language is Italian, there are many Germans and, surprisingly, French," Ansa reported. "We hope to have slow tourism in the future," said Gabriella Belli, director of the Foundation for the civic museums of Venice. "This does not mean less tourism, it means better organised tourism."

The COVID-19 epidemic has killed more than 34,000 in Italy but as the number of new cases steadily falls so the country continues the process of deconfinement which began last month. The country's many monuments, famous buildings, museums and emblematic places have almost all reopened, including St Peter's Basilica in Rome, the site of Pompeii, the leaning Tower of Pisa, and the cathedrals of Florence and Milan. In a bid to retrieve the summer tourist season, Italy reopened its borders on June 3.—AFP

'Baby dragons' go on display in Slovenia

Slithering through their subterranean aquarium, three "baby dragons" have gone on display in a Slovenian cave, where they hatched in 2016 in a rare successful breeding, officials said Thursday. Only 30 visitors per day will be allowed to visit the so-called baby dragons—ancient underwater predators that can live up to 100 years and only breed once in a decade. "We are proud to present three out of the 21 baby olms, the world-famous 'dragon's offspring', which we have kept a close eye on since 2016," the Postojna cave said in a statement.

The three are among 21 offspring that hatched in 2016 when one of the olms at the cave lay around 60 eggs in one of the observation tanks. To ensure their survival and gather more information about the creatures, cave authorities kept them far from visitors in a cave laboratory as their "best kept and most carefully guarded secret"—until now. Reaching a maximum length of 35 cen-

timetres (13.5 inches), the blind animal with its four tiny limbs is a far cry from the scary monsters conjured up in national folklore. Sometimes also referred to as "human fish", the slim vertebrate sports three feathery gills on each side of its elongated snout. The body's sheer pink skin makes it easy to spot the internal organs.

The protected eel-like species can go without food for up to a decade. Found primarily in Balkan cave rivers, the olms have been living in the world-famous Postojna cave, 50 kilometres (30 miles) southwest of the capital Ljubljana, for what researchers say is millions of years. The baby dragons' presentation comes only days after the cave—one of Europe's largest that usually draws 700,000 visitors a year—reopened its doors following three months of closure due to the coronavirus epidemic.—AFP



This photo in Postojna Cave shows an olm, an ancient underwater predator, which can live up to 100 years and only breed once in a decade.—AFP