

Lifestyle | Features



People inspect palm wicker products on display, made by Halima Mohamad.



Halima Mohamad sits making palm wicker products at a home in Tawergha.



A man inspects palm wicker products on display, made by Halima Mohamad.

PEACE IN TROUBLED LIBYA BRINGS BACK TRADITIONAL WEAVERS

In front of a bundle of palm fronds, Halima Mohamad squats down to weave in an abandoned school in Tawergha, a town once a flashpoint in Libya's decade-long war. Mohamad makes baskets from date palm leaves, using traditional skills handed down over the generations and reconnecting her to a way of life nearly destroyed by the chaos of conflict. "We must preserve this heritage inherited from our ancestors," said 55-year-old Mohamad. "It's our identity." The mother of two spends an average of 16 hours a day in the room that serves as her workshop, plaiting the fronds into baskets, trays, floor mats and wall decorations.

The town has suffered; when Libyan dictator Moamer Kadhafi was toppled in 2011 in a NATO-backed uprising, people took revenge on those seen as his supporters—including the entire town of Tawergha. Its 40,000 residents, many the descendants of slaves, were forced to flee, with militia forces torching homes and destroying buildings.

Scars of war

Residents like Mohamad ran for their



A man and boy pose for a picture next to palm wicker products on display, made by Halima Mohamad.

lives—barely surviving for seven years in hard-scrabble dusty camps scattered across the country, and forbidden to return home. The oil-rich North African nation has been riven by civil war ever

since the fall of Kadhafi, but rival sides finally agreed a fragile ceasefire last October. Under a separate deal struck in June 2018 with the backing of the UN-recognized Government of National

Accord (GNA), residents of Tawergha began to slowly come back. Around a third of the original population of the town have returned, though the scars of war remain, with houses riddled with bullet holes and craters left by artillery fire.

For some, the town's ancient tradition of weaving offers a way to earn an income—as well as resuming a way of life that the war had stopped. For Mohamad, her primary motivation is money. "I work long hours because the income is decent," she said. As she sits knotting the long thin leaves together, the fresh scent brings back memories of her childhood.

Keeping traditions alive

She follows the repetitive handwork in moves learnt from her elders, and colors the strands with three traditional dyes—blue, green and purple—to add splashes of design. "We use special dyes," she said. "We fill large barrels in which we boil the palm leaves until they soak up the colors." As her fingers twist and tie the thin stems, she explained how her relatives had taught her to

select supple strands and to then "dry them in the sun for several days."

Then the leaves are "soaked in water to soften them" before the weaving work can even begin, she added. "My father and my sisters have been working in basketry for almost 50 years, and I started doing it 20 years ago," she said. A workshop run by a local group and supported by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) brought in experts to help perfect the weaving techniques. There is no shortage of raw material, with thousands of date trees dotted all around.

"In the past there was a famous Monday market, where artisans traded handicrafts, crockery and woven textiles," said Faraj Abdallah, head of a handicrafts association in Tawergha. But the weavers still struggle, competing against modern goods and cheaper imports from neighboring Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia, while weavers say there is no export strategy. "The authorities must allow exports to allow this craft to prosper," said Mahmud Khairi, owner of a basket shop in Tawergha. — AFP



Scottish electronic pop producer Sophie.

GRAMMY-NOMINATED SCOTTISH POP PRODUCER SOPHIE DIES AGED 34

Scottish electronic pop producer Sophie has died at the age of 34 in a "terrible accident", the artist's record label said in a statement on Saturday. The Glasgow-born producer was nominated for a Grammy for her debut studio album in 2019 and collaborated with Madonna and the British singer Charli XCX. "Tragically our beautiful Sophie passed away this morning after a terrible accident," the statement from UK music label Transgressive read. "True to her spirituality she had climbed up to watch the full moon and accidentally slipped and fell.

"She will always be here with us. The family thank everyone for their love and support and request privacy at this devastating time," the statement on Twitter added. The producer, also known as Sophie Xeon, released her debut single, Nothing More to Say in 2013. Her debut Album Oil of Every Pearly's Un-Insides, released in 2018, was met with widespread critical success and nominated for a Grammy for best dance/electronic album. The transgender artist spoke about gender identity in a 2018 interview with the US magazine Paper. "For me, transness is taking control to bring your body more in line with your soul and spirit so the two aren't fighting against each other and struggling to survive," she said. Sophie co-wrote Madonna's 2015 single B*ch I'm Madonna and worked Charli XCX on the EP Vroom Vroom and the single After The Afterparty. The French singer and songwriter Christine and the Queens paid tribute to the Sophie on Twitter calling her a "visionary". "She rebelled against the narrow, normative society by being an absolute triumph, both as an artist and as a woman," the singer said. "I can't believe she is gone. We need to honor and respect her memory and legacy. Cherish the pioneers." — AFP

The Animals guitarist Hilton Valentine dies at 77

Hilton Valentine, a founding member and original guitarist for the British 60s pop group The Animals, has died at the age of 77, the band's record label said. "Our deepest sympathies go out to @HiltonValentine's family and friends on his passing ... at the age of 77," the label ABKCO Music, posted on Twitter. "Valentine was a pioneering guitar player influencing the sound of rock and roll for decades to come," it added in a statement Friday.

The band was best known for its 1964 hit House of the Rising Sun, which rose to the top of the charts in both Britain and the United States. Born in

North Shields, northeast England, Valentine formed The Animals with singer Eric Burdon, bass player Chas Chandler, organist Alan Price and drummer John Steel in 1963. The band went on to have a number of other hits including Don't Let Me Be Misunderstood and We Gotta Get Out Of This Place.

The original members drifted apart towards the end of the 1960s and Valentine later produced the solo album All In Your Head. Burdon paid tribute to the guitarist who wrote the iconic opening riff of House of the Rising Sun. "The opening opus of Rising Sun will never sound the same," Burdon wrote on Instagram. "You didn't just play it, you lived it! Heartbroken by the sudden news of Hilton's passing. "We had great times together, Georgie lad. From the North Shields to the entire world...Rock In Peace." — AFP



Hilton Valentine

An Art Nouveau gem unmasked in COVID-hit Brussels

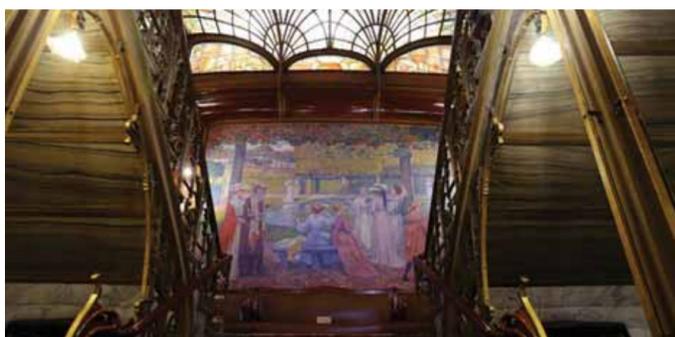
An emblematic Art Nouveau mansion designed by Belgian architect Victor Horta has opened its doors to the public in Brussels, revealing a long hidden jewel of the city's Belle Epoque glory. "It is perhaps even more important in the time of COVID to be able to spend a relaxing moment in the midst of this complete beauty," said Pascal Smet, heritage minister for the Brussels Region. Smet acted as a guide for a handful of journalists around the Hotel Solvay, a three-storey mansion with a majestic staircase where natural light shines through a multi-coloured stained glass window.

The mansion was built between 1895 and 1903 on the once glitzy Avenue Louise for the son of Belgian industrialist Ernest Solvay, and its architecture is

impressively preserved. Horta paid attention in his work to the whole interior, from the design of the building's exposed structure, to the living room furniture, right down to the door handles. "It gives the feeling of the perfect building, everything has been thought out, down to the smallest detail," said Smet, gazing at a decor of yellow, orange and beige, where the armchairs match the woodwork.

UNESCO included the Hotel Solvay on its World Heritage List in the early 2000s. According to the UN agency, it is "the most ambitious and spectacular

work by Horta to have come down to us from the Art Nouveau period". At the end of the 19th century, the style revolutionized architecture with its aesthetic of curves applied to glass and steel, materials that were new at the time. The private mansion went on to have an eventful history after the death of its first owner in 1930. Damaged by a German bomb during World War II—the main stained glass window had to be rebuilt—it was saved from a wrecking ball at the end of the 1950s, when a couple, running a fashion house, decided to make it their workshop.



The show, with its outlandish costumes and racy sex scenes, has been lauded for casting Black actors in period drama roles that are traditionally played by white actors.

Bridgerton sets new Netflix record with 82 million viewers

Bridgerton has become Netflix's most popular new series, with more than 82 million households tuning in to watch the period drama, the streaming service has announced. The show reached number one in 83 countries including the United States, Britain, Brazil, France, India and South Africa, Netflix said in a statement Wednesday. "I'm SO proud of the incredible team behind this show! And thank you guys for loving it," 25-year-old actor, Phoebe Dynevor, who plays Daphne Bridgerton, wrote on Instagram. Netflix said a record 82 million households watched the show in its first 28 days online, describing it as its "biggest series ever."

The previous record was 76 million views over a four-week period for "The Witcher." The figures are not subject to third party verification, unlike audience measurements for broadcast television. Bridgerton has made the top 10 in every country except Japan, the company added. The drama, set in early 1800s London, centers on the well-to-do Bridgerton family as it tries to navigate Regency-era high society in England.



"It's designed to be more lavish, sexier and funnier than the standard period drama—and that's what so surprised and delighted our members," said Netflix vice president of original series, Jinny Howe. Bridgerton is produced by acclaimed American producer Shonda Rhimes and is based on a series of romance novels by Julia Quinn. It has been commissioned for a second series. — AFP

Saved from demolition

At the time, real-estate developers had free rein in Brussels and the Avenue Louise was engulfed by large office buildings. Even the most awe-inspiring Art Nouveau edifices were threatened by developers, according to the current owner, Alexandre Wittamer, grandson of the fashion house couple. "It's hard to imagine, but in the 1950s and 1960s in Brussels everything was allowed, and it happened that Art Nouveau buildings were demolished, whether they were by Horta or other architects," said the 43-year-old finance executive, who now organizes visits with the help of his wife.

For the time being, the architectural gem will only be accessible on Thursdays and Saturdays, provided that a time slot has been reserved in advance online. That rule applies to all Belgian museums, which have remained open despite the pandemic unlike in Paris or London. Since the 1980s, after the end of the fashion business, the mansion had been used for private events and was only visited on rare occasions and city heritage days. — AFP

The Hotel Solvay, an Art Nouveau gem in Brussels, is now open for public visits.