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HIT MANGA SERIES 'ONE PIECE' CELEBRATES 25TH BIRTHDAY

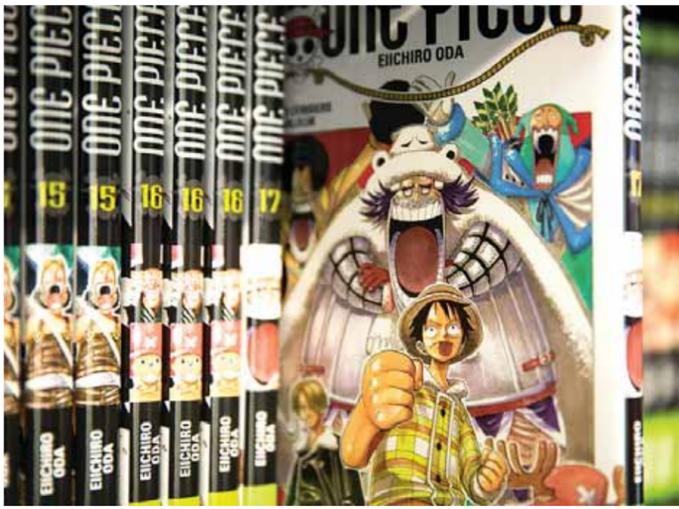
A manga series about a treasure-hunting pirate that has captivated millions of fans worldwide celebrates its 25th birthday as the final chapter of the best-selling saga reveals its secrets. The last instalment of "One Piece" begins from July 25 in Japanese weekly manga magazine Shonen Jump, published by Shueisha, following a one-month pause.

The series has racked up more than 100 volumes and smashed sales records since the first instalment appeared in 1997. The story revolves around hero Luffy, who hunts for the coveted "One Piece" treasure alongside other pirates.

Author Eiichiro Oda, 47, landed a Guinness World Record for having the most copies published for the same comic book series by a single author-with 490 million produced. His success has made his creation's 25th birthday a global event, from the United States to France, the second-largest market for manga and Japanese animation.

The 100th volume of the series came out in France last year with 250,000 copies, a number rivalling works that have won the prestigious Prix Goncourt literature prize. "I'm going to start showing all the secrets of this world that I've kept hidden," Oda said in a handwritten message posted on Twitter.

"It will be fun. Please fasten your seat-belt!" Chedli Ben Hassine, a content creator who specialises in pop culture, told AFP "One Piece" has become "not only



File photo shows "One Piece" comic books are displayed at the Paris Book Fair 2019 (Salon du livre) at the Parc des Expositions in Paris. — AFP

one of the greatest manga series in the world, but one of the greatest cultural works, all sectors included".

"What makes this manga so special is above all the plot," said Ryuji Kochi, president for Europe, the Middle East and Africa at Toei Animation, the Japanese company that has produced the series since 1999.

The "One Piece" universe includes cultural and geographical references that give it a universal dimension, including Ancient Egypt, Venice and medieval Japan. Engaging characters and modern themes of breakneck industrialisation, racism, slavery and geopolitical intrigues add to the appeal of the series.

"By proposing totally different universes, the author never bores the reader," Benoit Huot, head of manga at publishing company Glenat, told AFP. "You have a fresco, an epic, which lasts an extremely long time and where you can't say it goes round in circles."

Release on Netflix

Although the finale of "One Piece" promises plenty of twists and turns, the series has not reached a wider audience beyond Japanese comic fans like the global hits "Star Wars" and "Harry Potter".

Japanese culture is far from matching the influence of Western creations backed by a large market and soft power that a cultural machine like Hollywood can produce on an industrial scale, economist Julien Pillot told AFP.

Producers hope the upcoming release of a Netflix series adapted from the "One Piece" universe will help it conquer new territory, bringing the story to the global streaming platform's more than 200 million subscribers.

Pillot said Hollywood has historically struggled to adapt manga series to the big screen, including the aesthetic and commercial flop that was the adaptation of "Dragon Ball". "If Netflix managed to create a product of very high quality, which captures the unique spirit of 'One Piece', that would be a good start," he added. — AFP



Austrian conductor Stefan Soltesz.

Austrian conductor dead after collapse at German opera

Austrian conductor Stefan Soltesz has died after collapsing during a performance in Munich, the city's opera house said. The maestro of Hungarian extraction held the baton at opera houses in Vienna, Graz, Hamburg and Berlin during his long career.

"With dismay and deep sadness, the Bavarian State Opera must announce the death of Stefan Soltesz," it said late on Friday in a statement. Soltesz died late on Friday "after a collapse while conducting 'The Silent Woman' by Richard Strauss at the National Theatre" in Munich, it said. He was 73 years old.

No details on his cause of death were immediately available. The general director of the Bavarian State Opera, Serge Dorny, tweeted he was "deeply saddened" by Soltesz's death. "We lose a talented conductor," he said. "I lose a good friend. My thoughts are with his wife Michaela."

Soltesz served as musical director of the state theatre of Brunswick in central Germany from 1988 to 1993 and chief conductor of the Flemish Opera in Antwerp and Ghent from 1992 to 1997, followed by engagements in the western German city of Essen. He debuted on the Bavarian State Opera stage in 1995. — AFP



Beekeeper Luiz Lustosa shows a hive of native Brazilian bees at the Abelha Nativa Institute in Brasilia. — AFP photos

Brazil buzzing over potential of its native bees

Brazilian part-time beekeeper Luiz Lustosa lifts the lid on a wooden hive. The reaction is instant, and angry, as thousands of bees envelop him in a buzzing cloud.

Lustosa wears no specialized suit or gloves, however, just a light net to cover his face. These bees are stingless. "What a wonder!" Lustosa marvels at the honey-filled wax craters in the hive as the bees attack him furiously, but impotently-his childlike amazement not diminished by six years working with the insects.

Long overlooked, Brazil's native bees are making a comeback, with people such as Lustosa, a 66-year-old public servant, getting in on the movement to boost their profile. Of 550 stingless bee species known to exist in tropical and sub-tropical areas of the world, some 250 are found in Brazil, according to Cristiano Menezes of Brazil's Embrapa Agricultural Research

Corporation.

Yet they are little known outside of rural and Indigenous communities, having been relegated to a lesser place by European and African honeybees brought to Brazil over the centuries for their more prolific honey- and wax-producing skills. Most of Brazil's honey today comes from non-native, stinging bees.

'Here to help us'

Lustosa is president of the Native Bee Institute, a non-profit organization that plants trees to expand the habitat of native bees and educates people about their important role as pollinators. "We explain to children that the bees don't sting, that they are necessary for the environment and nature, and they are here to help us," Lustosa told AFP at the institute's premises in Brasilia, where he runs workshops and sells native honey.

A study in 2016 estimated that about 1.4 million jobs and three-quarters of all crops worldwide depend on pollinators such as bees—a service rendered for free but worth tens of billions of dollars, according to scientific studies.

Bees account for 80 percent of plant pollination by insects. Unlike their immigrant counterparts, Brazil's native bees are picky, dining exclusively on the fruit and pollen of indigenous fruit and avocado trees for whose pollination they are crucial.



Detail of a hive of native Brazilian bees at the Abelha Nativa Institute in Brasilia.



Beekeeper Jeronimo Villas-Boas shows a hive of native Brazilian bees.

Beekeepers "depend on vegetation, a healthy forest" for the bees to feed on, said Jeronimo Villas-Boas, a fellow native beekeeper and ecologist. "For this reason, beekeepers are agents of conservation."

Villas-Boas is helping indigenous communities improve the quality of the native honey they produce and links them up with buyers in a bid to get them in on the "business" of the coveted sweet liquid.

"Bees enable businesses with a positive impact on society, the environment and agriculture," says Menezes. Native bees produce a honey that proponents claim is healthier for its lower sugar content. The flavor and acidity differs from species to species.

They produce about 30 times less honey than their stinging cousins, and as a result, native honey costs about \$55 per kilo in Brazil, compared to \$6 per kilo for the other.

One of Villas-Boas's clients is Brazilian chef Alex Atala, whose D.O.M. restaurant in Sao Paulo holds two Michelin stars for its locally-based cuisine. Honey from the



Brazilian beekeeper Jeronimo Villas-Boas pours honey obtained from bees of the mandacacia species (*Melipona quadrifasciata*) in Itapeverica da Serra.

tubi native bee is a key ingredient in one of Atala's award-winning dishes of cassava cooked in milk.

"We have a world as rich as that of wine to get to know," Atala told AFP. "Eating our biodiversity will generate value for products that today are forgotten, devalued." — AFP



A bee of the yellow urucu species (*Melipona mundury*) is seen in a hive.



Brazilian beekeeper Jeronimo Villas-Boas looks at his hives.

Bees can learn to roll a ball for food: Study

Entice them with a sweet reward and bumblebees can be trained to roll a ball into a goal, revealing unexpectedly complex learning abilities for an insect, researchers said. The findings in the US journal *Science* offer the first evidence that bees can learn a skill that is not directly related to their typical duties of foraging for food.

Even more, bumblebees appeared to learn best by watching the behavior of other bees, and sometimes even improved on their predecessors' techniques. Until now, the ability to learn how to solve a complex problem by reaching a goal was known to be possible in humans, primates, marine mammals and birds. But insects were not necessarily considered part of this elite group. "Our study puts the final nail in the coffin of the idea that small brains constrain insects to have limited behavioral flexibility and only simple learning abilities," said co-author Lars Chittka, a professor at Queen Mary University of London's School of Biological and Chemical Sciences.

Exploring limits

Previous studies have shown bees could learn to pull on a string to get a food reward and perform other simple tricks, but these studies were limited in scope because the "learning processes involved might be used in tasks encountered by bees naturally," said the study.

Researchers wanted to explore whether or not bees could learn to manipulate an object — in this case a small, yellow ball — unlike anything they knew in their daily lives. "We wanted to explore the cognitive limits of bumblebees by testing whether they could use a non-natural object in a task likely never encountered before by any individual in the evolutionary history of bees," said joint lead author Clint Perry, also of the QMUL School of Biological and Chemical Sciences.

The bees were trained, one at a time, to roll the ball, which was about the same size as the bees themselves. The ball had to be pushed to a specific target before a sugar solution would be awarded to the bee. Some bees were trained by observing a bee that had already learned the technique. Others were shown how by a hidden magnet beneath the platform which moved the ball. A third group received no instructions at all.

The bees learned most efficiently from watching other bees, it turned out. Sometimes, they even found better ways to get a treat, for instance by choosing one of a selection of balls that was already closer to the goal than the others, instead of picking the ball that was furthest away as the trainer bees consistently did. "The bees solved the task in a different way than what was demonstrated, suggesting that observer bees did not simply copy what they saw, but improved on it," said joint lead author Olli Loukola. — AFP