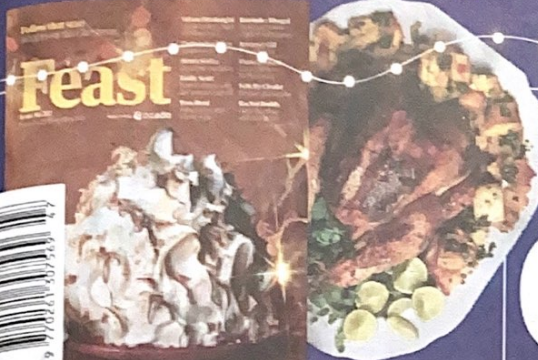


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Alarm as new Covid variant Omicron spreads to Europe

Ministers facing calls to urgently speed up vaccination programme

Rowena Mason
Hannah Devlin
Nicola Davis

An alarming new Covid variant spread to Europe yesterday, with scientists warning it would inevitably reach Britain, while ministers were urged to speed up vaccinations.

Thousands of travellers were left stranded or with their plans in disarray amid flight bans targeting countries across southern Africa, where the variant was discovered. Hotel quarantine and enhanced testing will be brought in across the UK, the health secretary, Sajid Javid, said.

B.1.1.529 was designated a variant of concern by the World Health Organization last night because of its "concerning" mutations and because "preliminary evidence suggests an increased risk of reinfection". It was assigned the name Omicron. It is

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feared to have an R (reproduction) value of 2 with the potential to evade vaccines. Javid said it "may pose substantial risk to public health".

Belgium reported a case in a traveller who had been in Egypt and Turkey rather than southern Africa, suggesting community transmission, while cases were detected in Israel and Hong Kong. Experts say it is only a matter of time before it reaches Britain.

No 10 is still debating further steps to prevent or delay its arrival. But Labour

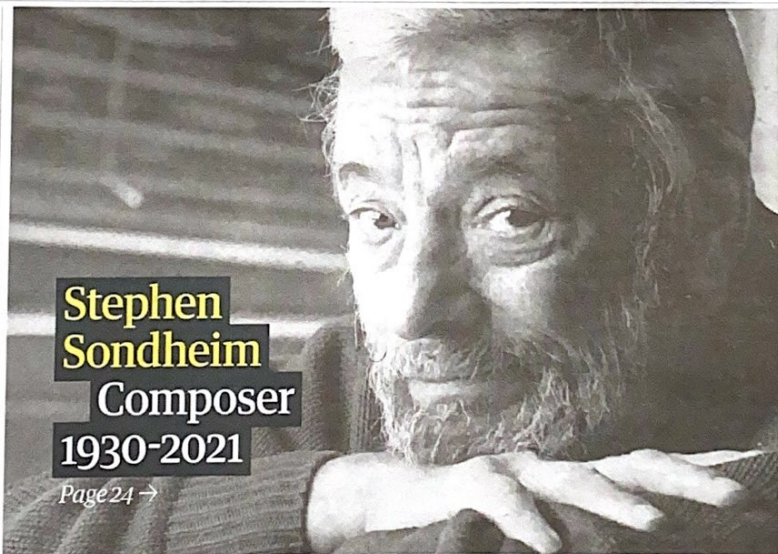
The secret to great sex

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“I don’t know if he made it. He didn’t come back. I only knew he came from Kurdistan, like me”

Inside the refugee camps around Dunkirk
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Stephen Sondheim
Composer
1930-2021

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Cosy cottages to rent



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Best tech gift guide

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SATURDAY

The Guardian



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NOW YOU SEE US

The stars with Down's syndrome leading a revolution in representation

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From 17th-century Cornish hideaways to Cumbrian stone barns, we pick gorgeous places to snuggle up this season - all set in equally lovely countryside

Top 10 cottages for a cosy winter break

Words: Rachel Dixon

1 | High Park, Hay-on-Wye, Powys

This traditional stone cottage has been beautifully restored in a modern-meets-rustic style. The open-plan ground floor has wooden floors, beams and an inglenook fireplace with a woodburner. Upstairs are two bedrooms with vaulted ceilings and a bathroom with a walk-in shower. There are deep windowsills with sheepskin rugs and cushions, and lots of artworks and houseplants. Guests can defy the winter and head outside to cook in the pizza oven, sit around the firepit or soak in the hot tub. There is a horse-riding centre nearby and plenty of walking and cycling routes. *From £595 a week, sleeps four, coolstays.com*

2 | Lemons Cottage, north Devon

This lovely thatched cottage in the village of Atherington has been renovated to add mod cons but preserve period features. So there are

original oak doors, panelled walls, beams and brick fireplaces, but also underfloor heating, rain showers and a contemporary kitchen. Best of all on cold winter nights is the cinema room, with sofas, a 75-inch TV and surround sound. There are separate living and dining rooms downstairs, and a master bedroom with an en suite rolltop bath and two other bedrooms. *From £235 a night, sleeps six, sandandstoneescapes.com*

3 | Slackbrae, Clackmannanshire

Slackbrae cottage opened to guests for the first time this autumn - the property was built in the 1700s as the gatehouse to the Brucefield Estate. It has been renovated with sustainable materials and is a low-energy house. Vaulted ceilings with skylights keep it bright even in winter, and warmth is provided by underfloor heating, a woodburner and sheepskin rugs. There is an open-plan living area, plus two bedrooms (one en suite). The



4 wider 420-hectare estate is being regenerated, with a 10-year wildlife plan to manage the semi-ancient birch, oak and Scots pine woodland and support resident bats, owls, pine martens and red squirrels.
 £2000 a night including breakfast hamper, sleeps six, brucefieldestate.scot

4 | Scargill Castle, County Durham

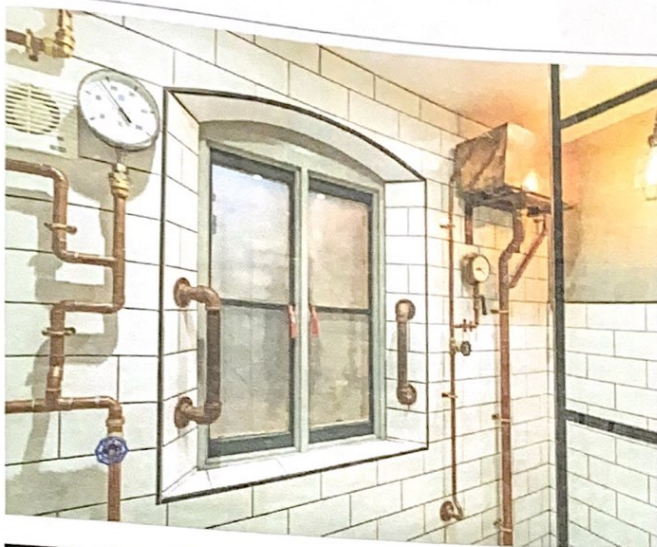
Built in 1550 on the site of a medieval castle, Scargill has been restored from a crumbling ruin to a cosy retreat for two. An arched entrance leads to the dining room, with ancient oak beams and an oak table; the kitchen, which overlooks the courtyard garden; and the bathroom, with rolltop bath. Up a stone spiral staircase is the cosy sitting room with a Tudor fireplace and woodburner (the castle also has underfloor heating), and a window seat with views over Teesdale. The beamed bedroom is on the top floor.
 From £465 for three nights, sleeps two, yorkshirehideaways.co.uk

5 | Dracup's Cottage, Shropshire

This former railway cottage in Bridgnorth was turned into a work of art by its former owner, artist Antony Dracup, and all its features have been preserved. This spring, it opened as an unusual holiday cottage: the living room has an Alice in Wonderland theme, the breakfast room resembles a railway platform, the bedroom is the "hobbit's lair" and the bathroom is modelled on a boiler room. There is also an art room, with Dracup's 360-degree mural of Bridgnorth and, most spectacular, his huge hand-carved sandstone cave, with arches and pillars. The cottage is on a steep cobbled lane off the town's main street.
 From £289 for two nights, sleeps two, dracups.cottage.co.uk

6 | Stable Lodge, central Dorset

This stylish converted Victorian stable in the hamlet of Woolland opened to



guests in August. There is a cottage-style kitchen, two bedrooms, one with a restored copper bath, and a shower room. Original features include stone floors, exposed brick walls and beams. As well as a private garden, guests can access the owners' meadows, with views across the Blackmore Vale. Perks include a welcome pack of local treats and the use of two bikes.
 From £125 a night, sleeps four, furtherafield.com

7 | Nyth Fach, Ceredigion

Inside this cute whitewashed cottage, blue doors and windows, slate floors, beams and antique oak furniture give a period feel. Nyth Fach (Little Nest in Welsh) has a big feature fireplace with a woodburner in the lounge and a second woodburner in the dining room, plus underfloor heating in the kitchen. The bedroom is a traditional crog loft - a mezzanine over half the ground floor - and the bathroom has a walk-in rain shower. The cottage is in a

cluster of farm buildings, with sheep, alpacas, goats and donkeys on site, and within walking distance of the pebbly beach at Cwmttydu on the Ceredigion coast.
 From £607 for seven nights, sleeps two, qualitycottages.co.uk

8 | The Green, Cumbria

Richard and Carly have converted this stone barn near Ravenstonedale into three lets, two sleeping four and one sleeping six, which can be booked individually or together. The Haystore and the Byre are perhaps the cosiest,



with an upside-down layout: two en suite bedrooms on the ground floor, both with whirlpool baths; a double-height, open-plan living/dining area on the first floor and a balcony with steps down to a courtyard. The space is kept toasty with a ground source heat pump. Carly's interiors are inspired by nature, with natural fabrics and eco-friendly products. Richard is a mountain leader who can take guests on guided walks over the Howgill Fells.
 From £562 for four nights, sleeps four, thegreencumbria.co.uk

9 | The Hemmel, Oxfordshire

The Hemmel combines original features including beams, exposed stone walls and a well in the courtyard garden with a contemporary colour scheme: splashes of bright orange, red and blue. There is a woodburner in the living room, a rolltop bath in the master bedroom and a games room. The cottage is in the Vale of the White Horse, on the edge of Little Coxwell village, which has a 12th-century church and a pub serving seasonal food such as gnocchi with squash, portobello mushrooms and greens.
 From £511 for seven nights, sleeps four, sykescottages.co.uk

10 | Henry's, Port Isaac, Cornwall

This building on Fore Street started life as a 17th-century net loft, became a Victorian general store and is now Henry's, a holiday home owned - and decorated - by Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen. But don't fear a flamboyant Changing Rooms aesthetic; it is a tasteful blend of glossy black floorboards, pastel walls and white beams (OK, and the odd statement chandelier). There is a logburner in the kitchen/diner, a window seat to curl up in with a book, and sash windows with sea views - guests can watch winter storms battering the harbour wall from the comfort of the bath.
 From £148 a night, sleeps six, latitude50.co.uk