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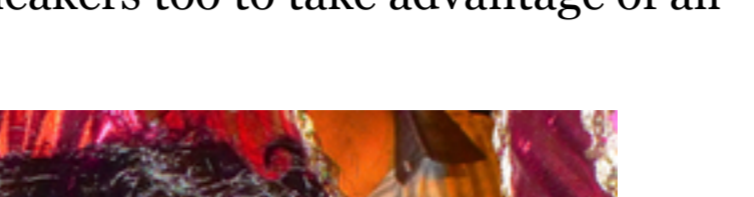
Ocho Rios, Jamaica: Sun and Adventure

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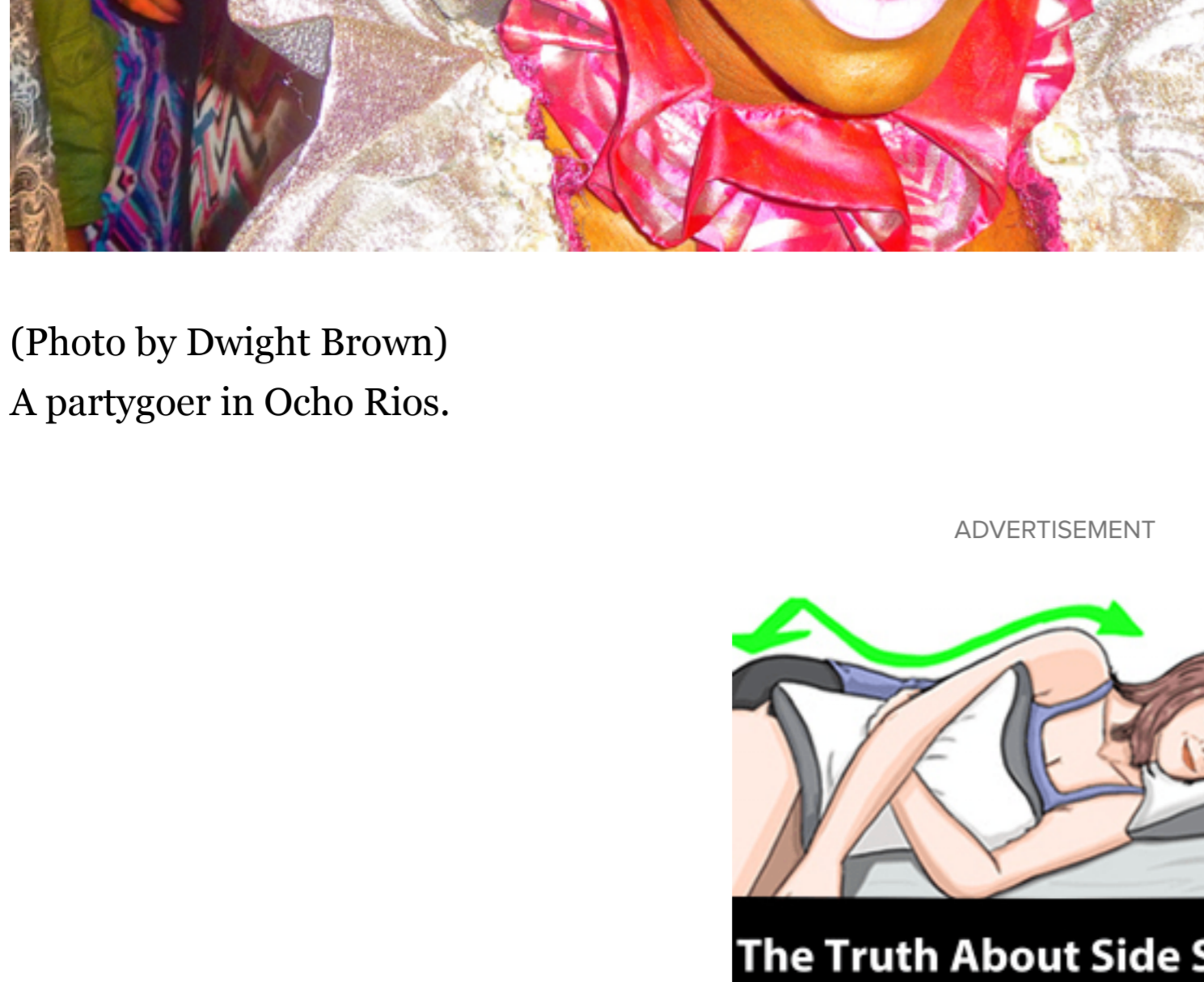
By **Dwight Brown, Contributor**
 Film critic, entertainment journalist and travel writer

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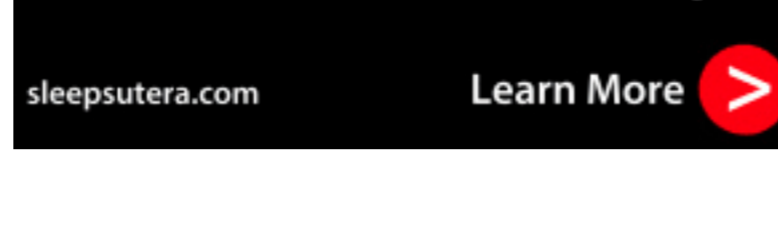
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The hilly town of Ocho Rios sits on the north coast of Jamaica, at the base of the St. Ann Mountains. The former fishing village, now a tourist destination, is as noted for its resorts and beaches as its mountainous terrain and natural wonders. A trip here offers vacationers heaps of adventure and festivities with their sun and sand. Bring your flip-flops and your sneakers too to take advantage of all "Ochi" has to offer.



(Photo by Dwight Brown)
 A partygoer in Ocho Rios.



A Laidback Town

Planes fly tourists into the north central city of Montego Bay from all over the world. A two-hour bus ride going west takes you to the seven-mile beach town of Negril. If you stay in Montego Bay, the island's second largest city, you're central to restaurants, shops and resorts. Head east, on a one hour forty-five minute journey, pass farmland, grazing goats and horses, and the road to Ocho Rios eventually takes you pass huge industrial vats that once held bauxite, sugar and limestone that were picked up by freighters and shipped internationally.

Downtown Ocho Rios (population 9,450), the setting of the James Bond movie Dr. No, is pretty sublime and by all visible clues, it doesn't look anything like a tourist trap. There are no strings of souvenir shops, no tall buildings, just small stores, strip malls and locals walking around, heading to work, running errands, shopping in outdoor markets and socializing. The residents speak a blend of English and Patois: What'appen? = What's up? Bashment = party. Rhaatid! = Wow! If you hear all three in a sentence, grab your party shoes and go.

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Natural Wonders

Though the name Ocho Rios literally means "Eight Rivers," and there are a number of rivers running through it, there are not eight. In fact, aside from the sea, the water source that is most famous in the environs is Dunns River Falls. Looking like gigantic steps constantly flooded by a stream of crystal clear water laden with travertine, this natural wonder measures 600 feet long and 180 feet high. The falls cascade down to a small V-shaped beach where the Battle of Las Chorreras (The Falls) was fought in 1657 when the English overpowered the Spanish/Cuban forces.

Years ago, if you couldn't climb Dunns River Falls, all you could do was look. Now, stairs and viewing stations parallel the falls, so anyone can ogle them from the top to the bottom, or easily step into one of its soothing whirlpools. Guides from Dunns River Park can take those who are adventurous up the falls, in about an hour and half, barefoot or wearing water shoes.

The tall Mystic Mountain crowns the hilly terrain in Ocho Rios. A state-of-the-art chairlift, dubbed the Rainforest SkyExplorer, helps guests ascend over treetops up to the 700-foot crest. Views of downtown Ocho Rios, the Caribbean Sea and the surrounding rainforest are visually arresting. Once you get to the top there are tourist shops and choices to make.

You can pick from two distinct adventures: 1.) The Rainforest Bobsled Jamaica is a fun ride that features a 1000-meter long gravity-drive through the rainforest on custom-designed, high-tech sleds fitted on rails that weave, pitch, turn and drop. You get in and a metal hood covers your legs. You control the speed of your sled by pushing (fast) or pulling (slow) on levers as you race down the mountainside through dense foliage. 2.) The Zip Line attraction whisks you through the rainforest, from platform to platform. Some dexterity, skills and arm strength are required to control the ride and stop. At the end you have the choice of taking the SkyExplorer back down the mountain from the halfway mark. Both attractions, and the chair lift, are a perfect family outing.

There are other adventures of note: Swimming with dolphins at Dolphin Cove, and Chukka Caribbean Adventures which offers White River tubing, horseback riding in the sea and ATV safaris.

Resorts to remember

Ocho Rios has a wide variety of resorts. Small lush inns, mid-sized hotels, all-inclusives. Something to keep in mind is that the island is changing rapidly. Chain hotels from foreign countries now dot the shores, many looking like a string of windowed boxes on the beach. They have little charm, almost no vegetation and very little connection to Jamaican culture.

The Sandals Ochi Beach Resort, formerly Sandals Grande Riviera Beach & Villa Golf Resort, has had a \$60 million makeover that added a modern, hip, South Beachish vibe to the premises, yet it has retained its link to old world Jamaica.

Ocho Rios' main road divides the resort into two separate sections. On a hill, there's the All-Butler Village & Great House. Its ultimate lovers refuge is the Village Honeymoon Romeo & Juliet Sanctuary: One Bedroom Villa Suites, which feature a private courtyard with a plunge pool, Jacuzzi and a separate kitchen/living room. You could walk around indoors and outdoors completely nude and no one would be the wiser. No one can see in. Butlers provide private candlelight dinners, and the works. There are also four-suite cottages, which have their own pools, and rooms in the Great House, which overlook an expansive, beautifully designed 14,000 sq ft. pool that looks like it belongs in Beverly Hills.

Sandals' Caribbean Riviera Section, across the street, sits on the beach and also features cottage- types suites, surrounded by plush lawns, bougainvillea and palm trees; rooms in the main house give you a panoramic view of the Caribbean Sea. There are two distinct sections on the beach: one resembles a lively Miami Beach club with curated music; the other side is more serene, protected by a reef and has a U-shaped pier that juts out into the sea. You can get on an air mattress and float up and down the shore, in waist-high water that is as placid and calm as a shallow pond.

Staying Active and Pampered

The Sandals Golf & Country Club's hilly Par 71 course overlooks the sea and offers guests unlimited play and no green fees. It's all free. Knocking that little white ball into 18 holes is a nice challenge for novices and invigorating for dedicated golfers. There are clinics, private lessons, free clubs and golf balls. If you've always wanted to play, but were intimidated by the costs, this is where you start, with teaching pros like Bill Williams who will coddle you.

Chris is Sandals' resident tennis pro. Beginners clinics start at 8a.m., Intermediate at 9a.m. and Advanced at 10a.m. There are no charges for classes, private lessons or to play against Chris, who is friendly and competitive as he whips a forehand by you.

The evening catamaran ride aboard Island Routes Dunn's River Catamaran Cruise includes snorkeling, a buffet dinner and an opportunity to dance to DJ music. As the catamaran host will remind you constantly, you will never see these people again. So dance, drink, sing and act out to the blaring reggae and house music. An air of euphoria reigns for about three hours.

After a day lying in the sun, or horsing around, the Red Lane Spa offers sore bodies, dry faces and needy skin traditional massages, facials, scrubs and body wraps with local flair and ingredients. One of its signature treatments is the Night Blooming Jasmine Massage, which is performed at twilight, in a location of a couple's choosing, featuring an aromatic massage with hints of Chinese Jasmine.

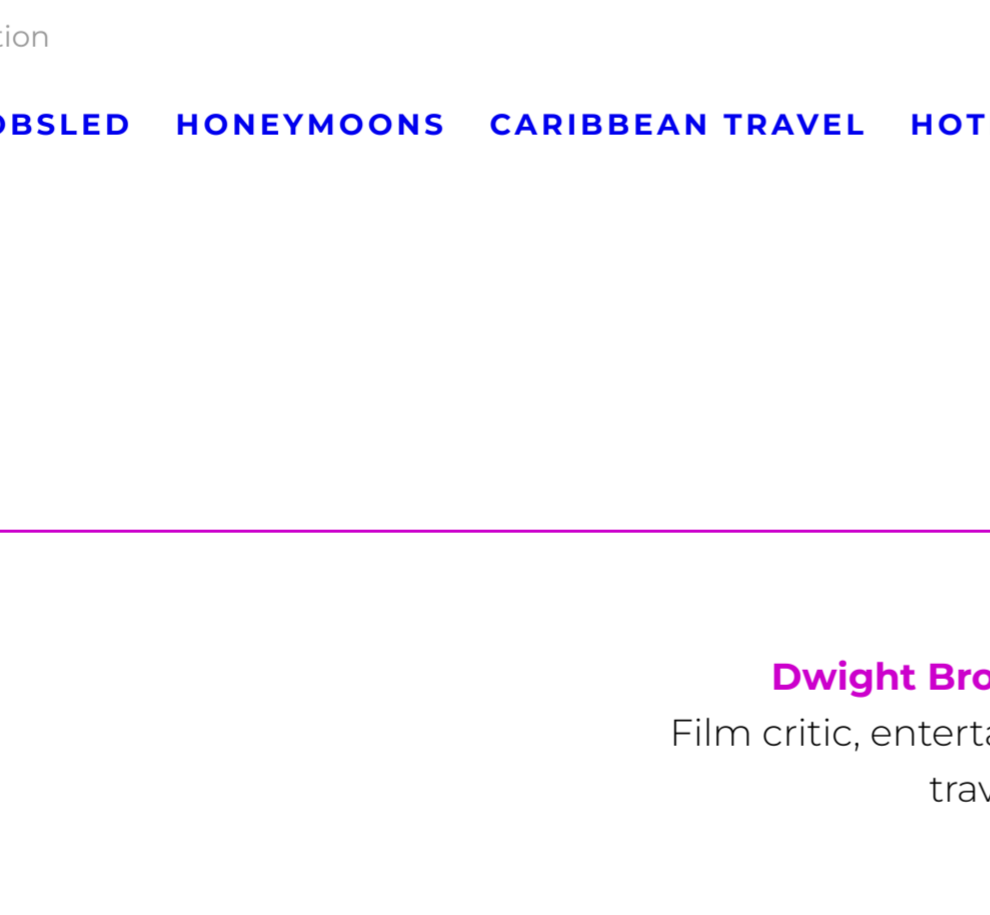
Eating, Drinking and Being Seen

Sandals' The Southern Table restaurant features American comfort food: start with the Apple Pumpkin soup, move on to the signature dish of Free Range Fried Chicken with red beans, steamed rice and corn kernels and top it off with bread pudding. The new Jerk Shack has jerk chicken, pork, sausage, and steamed fish and tasty donut-like bread called Festival. Le Gourmet appeals to those looking for French cuisine with entrees like Souris d'Agneau au Romarin (braised lamb shank, haricots verts, caramelized pearl onions, roasted pumpkin, Cabernet jus). Perhaps the most romantic location for dinner, of the resorts 16 eateries, is Kelly's Dockside Seaside Bar & Grill, a fine dining experience on the Riviera's open-air pier with the waves gently flowing underneath you as you munch on Tiger Shrimp and sip Caribbean Muse (Appleton Genesis, vodka, cantaloupe juice, lime juice, crème de banana and simple syrup).

Watching the sunset from Sundowner, the chic rooftop lounge also on the Rivera side, with its outdoor fireplace, is fun. Hoist a Red Stripe beer and watch the sun turn orange and pink. Even more special, once the sun goes down, is heading over to the Rabbit Hole, on the Manor side. It's a Speakeasy bar, you have to say a code word to enter, and once you do you're treated to a two-story nightclub that feels like it was set in Harlem during prohibition. There's a DJ and a chanteuse named Phylia Carley who is clad in an old, red flapper dress and belts out the blues. Other evening activities include steel bands and concerts, like Shaggy playing to a crowd of high-spirited fans.

A visit to Ocho Rios, Jamaica gives you a great beach experience, a romantic interlude, great festivities and a sense of adventure you won't find readily elsewhere.

Visit entertainment/travel writer Dwight Brown at www.DwightBrownInk.com.



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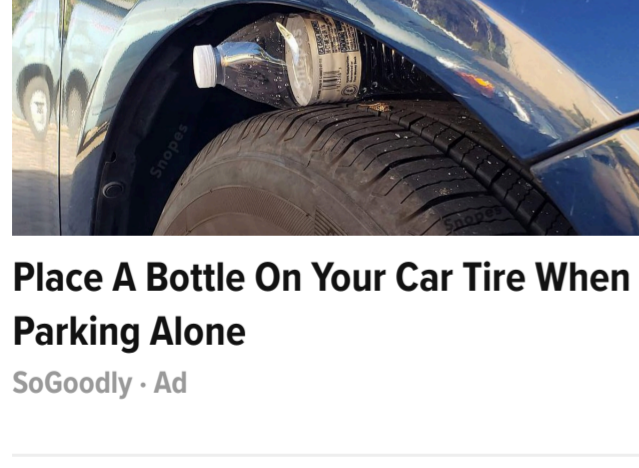
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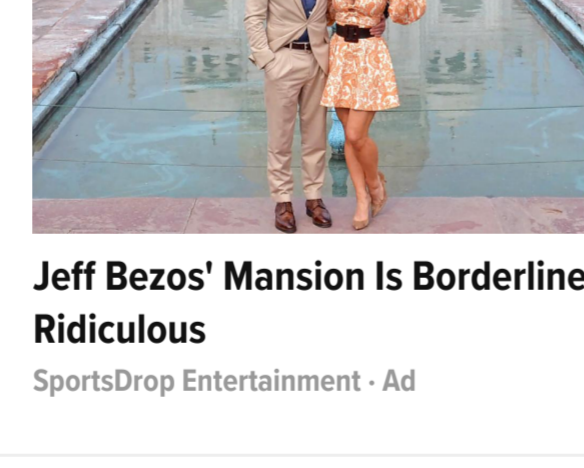
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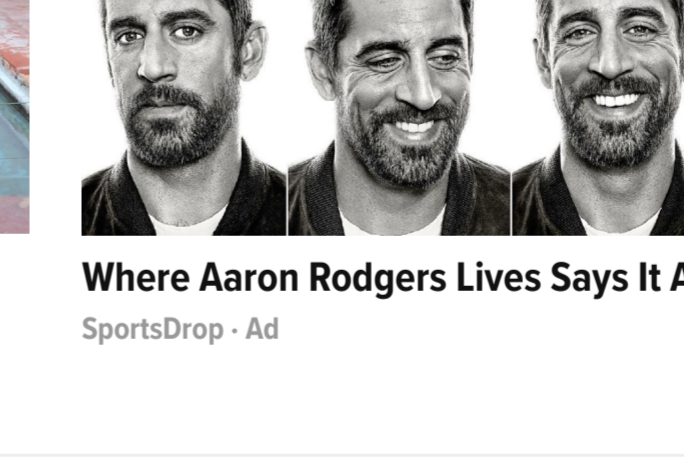
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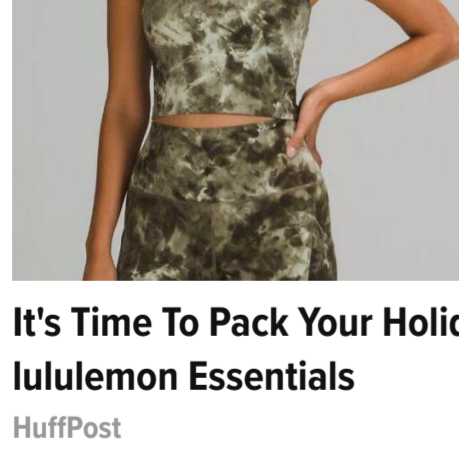
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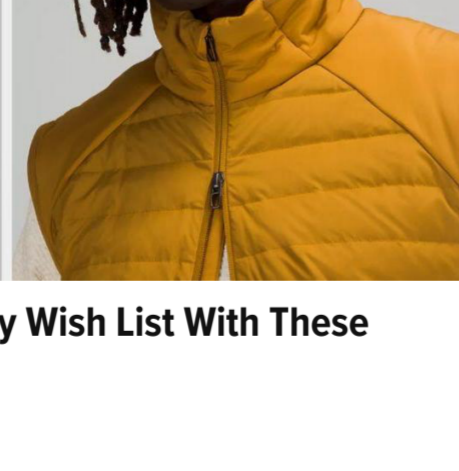
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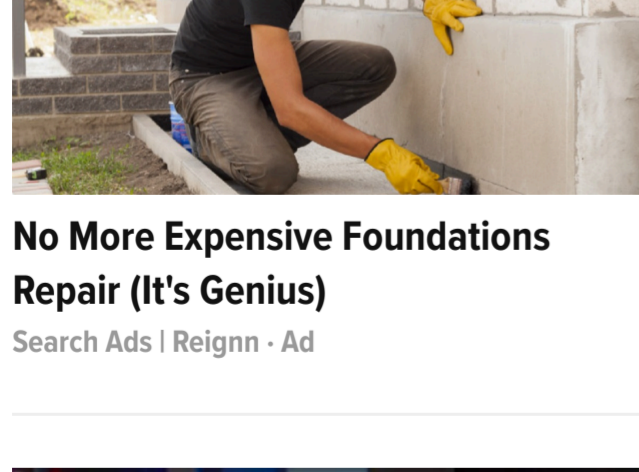
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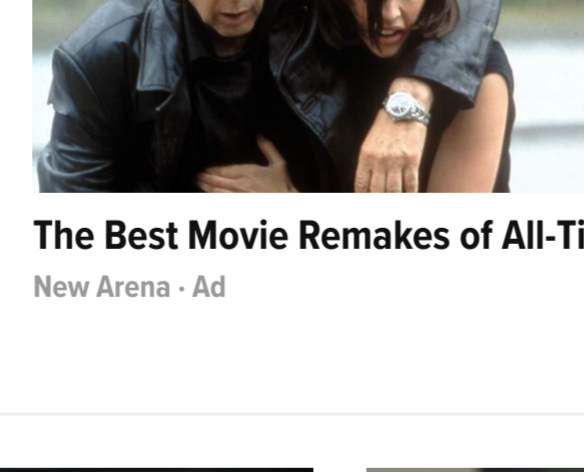
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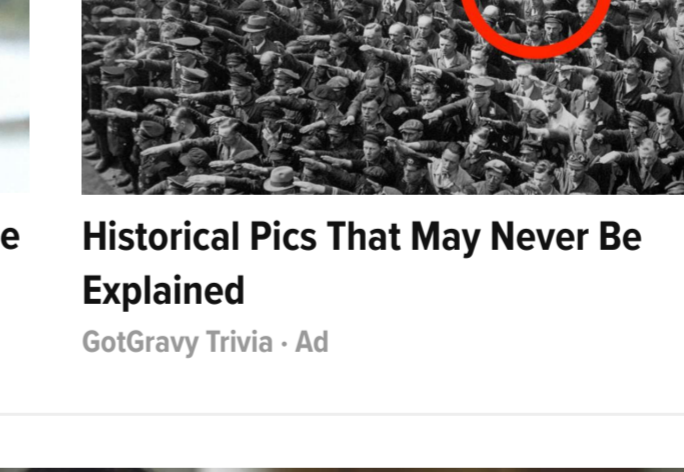
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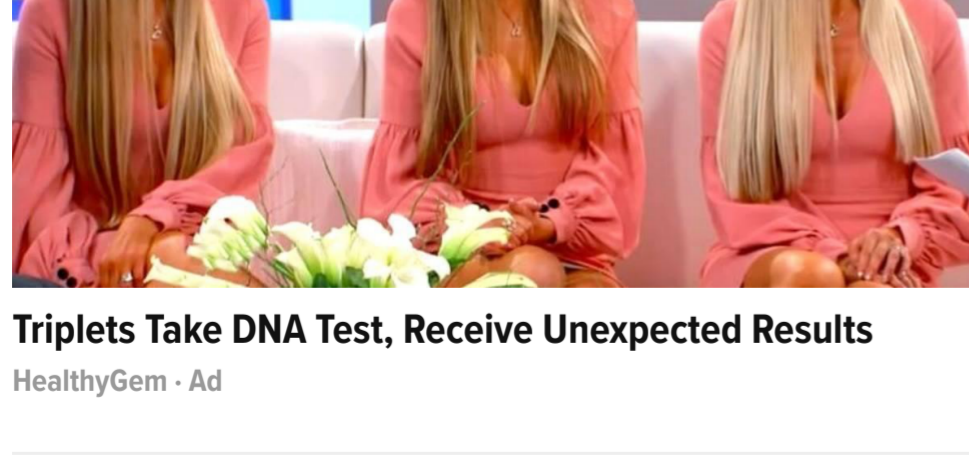
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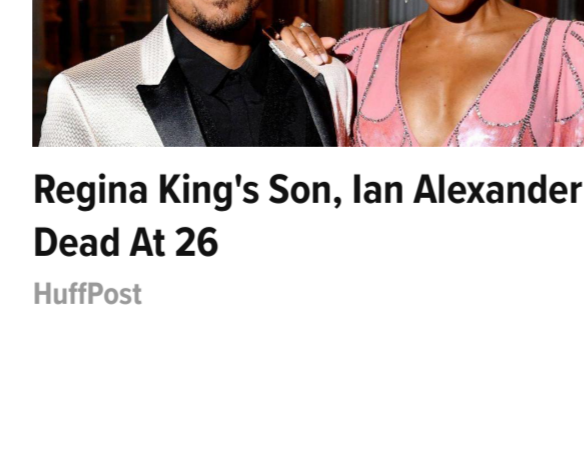
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