

# UNCOMMON KNOWLEDGE

*The Economist Explains*

EXTRAORDINARY THINGS  
THAT FEW PEOPLE KNOW

*Edited by*

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The  
Economist

BOOKS

# Introduction: The joy of uncommon knowledge

“EVERYTHING THAT IS NEW or uncommon raises a pleasure in the imagination,” wrote Joseph Addison, an English essayist and poet, “because it fills the soul with an agreeable surprise, gratifies its curiosity, and gives it an idea of which it was not before possessed.” He was writing in 1712, but today, more than three centuries later, his remark neatly summarises the objective of this book.

This is a compendium of explanations, and what they all have in common is that they are uncommon: a word that has two meanings. On the one hand, it refers to things that are rare or infrequently encountered. In the realm of knowledge, that means things that not many people are aware of or know about. But these unusual explanations also have the power to stretch your mind and subtly change how you see the world. In other words, they are uncommon in the second sense of the word, which means exceptional and extraordinary. As Addison observed, uncommon knowledge is enjoyable to encounter because it is unexpected and surprising; because a neat explanation is mentally satisfying; and because encountering a previously unfamiliar idea, and storing it away for future reference, expands the intellect.

Many people would be surprised to hear that the global suicide rate is falling; that most refugees do not live in camps; that carrots were not originally orange; or that the far side of the Moon isn't always dark. They probably couldn't explain why donkey skins are the new ivory; why Westerners are eating so much more chicken; why Americans are sleeping longer than they used to; or why

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death is getting harder to define. These aren't the sorts of things you wonder about every day. But when you learn the underlying explanations, you do not merely learn something that most people don't know – you also broaden your perspective just a little bit, as your mind makes room for a new way of looking at things. That is the joy of uncommon knowledge, in both senses of the word.

Rooting out these appetising intellectual morsels is something we love to do at *The Economist*, and this book brings together unexpected explanations and fascinating facts from our output of explainers and daily charts. We hope you will enjoy this collection of the fruits of our never-ending quest to uncover the mechanisms that explain why the world is the way it is. By the time you reach the last page, you will have learned things you did not know before – and you will also have equipped your mind to understand the world more fully. Read this book, and you will join the ranks of the uncommonly knowledgeable.

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## Why Swaziland's king renamed his country

The King of Swaziland, Mswati III, has a problem. "Whenever we go abroad", he says, "people refer to us as Switzerland." So on April 18th 2018, at a celebration marking the 50th anniversary of the country's independence from Britain, the king announced that he was changing Swaziland's name to eSwatini. (As an absolute monarch he can make such decisions.) With its lower-case "e", this new name might seem at first glance to be an attempt to rebrand one of the world's last remaining absolute monarchies as something a little more modern for the internet age. But the new name in fact simply means "Land of the Swazis".

Whether many people did in fact confuse Swaziland with Switzerland is unclear. Both are gorgeous mountainous countries with small populations. Both are landlocked and surrounded by bigger neighbours. But the differences are perhaps more striking. As well as being ruled by a man with 15 wives, Swaziland is a poor country with the highest rate of HIV infection in the world. Some 26% of the adult population is infected. That in turn contributes to a life expectancy at birth of 58 years, the 12th-worst in the world. Changing the name from Swaziland to eSwatini strikes some people as a distraction from bigger issues.

Nonetheless, the king's decision did have a logic to it. Many other former British colonies in Africa took new names on becoming independent. The Gold Coast became Ghana; Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia became Zambia and Zimbabwe respectively. Basutoland, a tiny enclave surrounded by South Africa, became Lesotho. Swaziland's transformation into eSwatini was much the same story, serving to distance the country from its colonial past, albeit 50 years after the separation. The king had in fact long used the new name in addresses to the United Nations and at the opening of his country's parliament.

But it is likely to take some time to get Swaziland accepted as eSwatini. The Czech Republic is still rarely referred to as "Czechia" in English, despite the best efforts of its government over the past few years to promote the name. In the case of eSwatini, maps and

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globes will obviously have to be updated, and so will their modern replacements: Google Maps is still using the old name. Within the country, many institutions will have to be renamed. The Royal Swaziland Police, the Swaziland Defence Force, and the University of Swaziland all come to mind. Indeed, the constitution may even have to be rewritten to make sure that the new name sticks.

## **Why the Mediterranean will eventually disappear**

If you happen to find yourself on the Mediterranean Sea, take a minute to observe the shore. Watch closely for a while (for a year, to be precise), and you might notice it move slightly (by about 2cm, or a little less than an inch). Africa and Europe are slowly colliding in a process that has been going on for 40m years, pushing up the Alps and Pyrenees along the way. This continental drift will continue long into the future, until 50m years from now when the two continents meet and become one mega-continent: Eurafica. The Mediterranean will disappear altogether, to be replaced by a mountain range as big as the Himalayas. It will be an unrecognisable world.

Continental drift is a relatively recent addition to the geological canon, and was only widely accepted in the 1960s. The tectonic plates that underpin the Earth's surface are constantly moving, dragged around by convection currents in the planet's mantle. In recent years, scientists have gained a good understanding of how continents used to move: they now theorise that multiple super-continents have been created in cycles over the course of Earth's history. The most recent such landmass, Pangea, broke up approximately 200m years ago, which means the Earth is currently in the middle of a cycle. Extrapolating from historical data allows researchers to forecast what might be in store.

The next 50m years are relatively easy to predict, and most geologists agree that the Mediterranean will close up. The fate of other seas and oceans is very much up for debate, though. The best-known prediction comes from Christopher Scotese, a geologist at the University of Texas. His "introversion" theory suggests that the Atlantic, which is currently widening, will eventually start to shrink. Over the next 200m years it will slowly close, he suggests, and the Americas will collide with Eurafica to form Pangea Proxima. Others think the exact opposite could happen: the Atlantic will continue to widen while the Pacific closes, with California eventually colliding

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with far-east Asia. A frostier forecast holds that all the continents will move north, closing up the Arctic Ocean and forming “Amasia” around the North Pole. A rather different prediction has been proposed by João Duarte at the University of Lisbon. His team think the evidence indicates that both the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans could close. To resolve the spatial conflict that would create, they suggest Asia will cleave in two, being ripped apart along the India/Pakistan border. A new Pan-Asian ocean would form in the space, becoming the world’s largest ocean, while “Aurica” (an assemblage of all the world’s existing land masses) would be created in the middle of what was once the Pacific.

Forecasting geological events 200m years ahead is clearly not an exact science. These scientists are in the enviable position of being able to say things that will never be disproved, as it is unlikely that humanity will be around to see the next super-continent form. Nevertheless, such contemplations of the future are rather sobering: a reminder that the land beneath our feet is ultimately little more permanent – on a geological scale – than the borders we draw on its surface.