

## UFOs debunked

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## For the record

### I would still sleep well about general relativity

**Peter Saulson**, physicist at Syracuse University in the US and a spokesperson for the LIGO gravitational wave observatory, quoted in the New York Times

Saulson thinks it is unlikely that the initial run of the \$300m LIGO experiment, due to continue for about another year, will observe any gravitational waves – ripples in space-time predicted by general relativity.

### You don't want to book a ticket to Stockholm on a $3.5\sigma$ result

**John Webb**, physicist at the University of New South Wales in Australia, quoted in Nature Webb believes that new research by scientists in the Netherlands showing that the proton-to-electron mass ratio may have changed very slightly over billions of years is impressive but needs confirmation.

### The idea of a "gap" is artificial and fails to acknowledge the dynamics of the market system

**Jim Watson**, energy analyst at the University of Sussex, UK, talking to New Scientist Watson refutes the idea that there will be a shortfall of electricity in the UK and US if we do not replace old nuclear power stations in these countries.

### Sedna is telling us something about current, albeit unexpected, solar system forces, most probably a companion star

**Walter Cruttenden**, amateur astronomer and founder of the Binary Research Institute Unusually, Cruttenden believes that the strange elliptical orbit of the recently discovered planet-like object Sedna provides evidence that the Sun is part of a binary star system.

## PICK OF THE WEB

### [lpl.arizona.edu/DISR](http://lpl.arizona.edu/DISR)

Have you ever wondered what the view must have been from the Huygens probe as it hurtled towards the surface of Titan – Saturn's largest moon – in January last year? If so, a new film of the dramatic descent, released by the European Space Agency, NASA and the University of Arizona at [lpl.arizona.edu/DISR](http://lpl.arizona.edu/DISR), will be of interest. It shows the probe's plunge through Titan's thick orange-brown atmosphere before it landed on a soft, sandy riverbed and was generated from data collected by the probe's Descent Imager/Spectral Radiometer.

## Seen and heard



### Changing times

Time is on the move, at least in the UK. No longer will the nation's time signal be transmitted from Rugby in the Midlands (above), which has been the case since 1927, but instead it will come from Cumbria in the north-west of the country. The 60 kHz radio signal contains a binary time stamp that is currently generated using a pair of atomic clocks at Rugby, ensuring the punctual operation of a whole host of services, from telecommunications and electricity distribution to the BBC pips and the working of Big Ben. But the National Physical Laboratory (NPL), which is responsible for the signal, has awarded the new contract for the service to VT Communications, which has its radio transmitters based in Cumbria. NPL's Katherine Robinson assures us that the move north, which will take place in March next year, will not affect users of the service and will not change the signal's current accuracy of one-thousandth of a second.

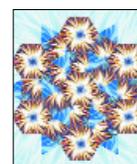
### UFOs debunked

If you happen to believe that little green men are criss-crossing our skies in flying saucers, a newly unearthed report from the UK's Ministry of Defence will make disappointing reading. The report, which was obtained by academics at Sheffield Hallam University using the Freedom of Information Act, was written by an unknown author between 1996 and 2000. It says that UFO sightings are sometimes caused by rare "plasmas" that are created by "more than one set of weather and electrically charged conditions" or perhaps

by meteors falling to Earth and "neither burning up completely nor impacting". And it adds that these sightings may be enhanced in the eyes of the viewer because "plasmas have been proven to cause responses in the temporal lobe of the human brain". Needless to say, not everyone will be convinced.

### Muslim astronauts pray for help

Spending a week in space is never a straightforward exercise, but for devout Muslims, who must pray five times a day, it could be particularly tricky. For example, how do you work out the direction of Mecca? The question is of particular interest to the Malaysian space agency, following Russia's decision to allow a Malaysian astronaut to spend between six and eight days next year aboard the International Space Station. According to *Reuters*, three of the four shortlisted candidates are Muslim. Fortunately, Zainol Abidin Abdul Rashid of the National University of Malaysia has developed a computer program that can tell an astronaut the correct prayer times and direction in which to face once they have entered their position into the computer. However, the program will not be able to solve all of the Muslims' problems. Carrying out the pre-prayer ablutions or working out how to kneel in zero gravity will still need some thought.



### Art-science stitch up

An unlikely alliance of artists, scientists and members of the Women's Institute (WI) has got together to produce visual representations of a number of diseases. The depiction of the HIV virus above is one of 30 that will make up the "Designs for Life" installation that is being produced to coincide with the opening of the Diamond synchrotron device in Oxfordshire next year. The work is being led by textile artist Anne Griffiths, and is organized by the Oxford Trust and funded by the Wellcome Trust. It will be produced using a range of quilting, stitching, textile art and embroidery techniques. "One of my personal goals is to get every scientist at Diamond and every WI lady in Oxfordshire to put at least one stitch into Designs for Life," says Griffiths. "Just like science, stitching is for everybody."

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