

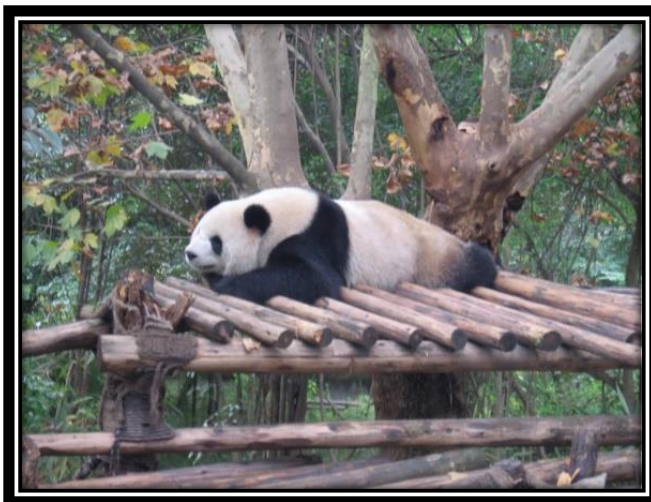
01 PANDA PARADISE

Now everybody loves a panda, right? How could I go wrong becoming a panda in my next life? When I told Myrtle, she thought a minute and then asked me if I would come back as a male or a female panda. I told her I would be a female so that I would get to hold and cuddle those adorable little panda babies. Then she said, “Well, you probably won’t get too much action in the bedroom, you know, at least if you are on a reserve, which is where you have the best chance of staying alive. Panda daddies are not exactly known for being Lotharios. In fact, I heard that in the panda reserves the daddies are shown panda porn movies to try to get them in the mood. When that doesn’t work, scientists often do artificial insemination to keep panda populations from plummeting.”

PANDA PORN?! Definitely too much information for me! I told her with a sniff, “Surely you are mistaken, Myrtle. You heard it wrong.” I didn’t tell her I loved her alliteration, all those popping “ps” in “panda populations plummeting.” Wonderful, don’t you think! But I didn’t tell her that because I didn’t want her to get a swelled head. She is good at that.

But guess what, dear reader? When we got to the panda reserve and were listening to the lecture about these adorable animals, I learned that Myrtle was indeed right: they do show videos of mating pandas to the males when the females come into estrus! The male panda’s sex drive is so sluggish that he needs a little help to get excited. Hmmm. Just how hard would those male pandas be trying to please their mates, I thought. And the females have such a short estrus period! Then, to make matters worse, the guide said with a shrug, “Pandas are just too lazy to mate.” So now we have LAZY pandas?!

It is a fact, it seems, that pandas are quite lazy. The guide said with a smile, “They sleep 14 hours a day and eat the rest of the time. They consider eating to be their exercise. They consume about 50 pounds of bamboo daily. Their digestive processes seem to be as lazy as their sex drives, because they use only about 20% of what they consume.”



And they are picky eaters! Out of all the varieties of bamboo, they will eat only arrow bamboo. This is grown elsewhere and must be trucked into the reserve daily. The workers wet it and stick it between bamboo logs to simulate trees. It costs about \$50 a day to feed one animal. In the 1990s when arrow bamboo developed a disease, about 200 pandas died of starvation.



Well, my goodness! I wondered if I needed to rethink my reincarnation. Then I was gob smacked with the further information that on the reserve, mamas do not usually get to keep their babies! The babies are removed immediately after birth to increase the odds of their survival. “The keepers do bring the babies to mama to nurse if mama cries out,” said the guide. But where is all that wonderful cuddle time, I thought?

Then there are some other unpalatable facts I must face. Babies are born the size of a mouse! I thought that was very unfair! If I were reincarnated as a panda baby, my mother would be a great lumbering bear of maybe 350 pounds and the best she could do is bring me forth as a mouse creature that is 1/1000th of her size? On top of that, I would not have eye sockets for several weeks and my first several months would require extreme care and caution or I could become blind or (Gasp) die!

And then my chance of making it after I was born would not be too stellar either, I tell you. When twins are born, the mother panda rejects one of them. I might be the rejected twin purposefully left to die! And I might die even if I was the chosen one. Out of 181 births last year on the reserve, there were 162 live cubs and only 107 of them survived. With my luck, I might not even be in the first 162!

If I do survive, I will gain weight rapidly. At four to five months, I will weigh around 20 pounds and will weigh about 60-80 pounds by my first birthday. That is impressive! Soon after that I will start eating bamboo; and, by the time I am 18 months old, I will weigh about 100 pounds and be ready to live on my own. My mother will abandon me if she mates and becomes pregnant again, but some cubs have been known to live with their mothers for up to two years.

There would be a few perks, I guess. A panda’s life on the reserve is extremely cushy. They have all they want to eat and drink without having to worry about predators or all that pesky looking-for-food stuff. In the heat of the summer, keepers put huge blocks of ice in the cages for the pandas to lie on, and in the winter, they have cozy caves to snuggle in. While the pandas are true bears, they cannot hibernate like other bears, you see, because, guess what – yes, they must keep eating all the time!

Another perk is that I can start breeding when I am five years old. Nevertheless, as we have already learned, I guess I won’t be too interested in that. Or more accurately, my potential mates won’t be too interested in that. Also, by the time I am 18 years old I am already an old bear! That doesn’t give me many years to have much fun, even if I were not too lazy to do so.

OK, so. On to Plan B for my reincarnation. I need to think about that.

There are 25 pandas in this sanctuary including 6 baby pandas. As we walked around the reserve watching the Giant Pandas and the Lesser Pandas, also called the Red Pandas, we were offered the opportunity to have a photo taken holding a young panda. I jumped at the chance. A photo with a Giant Panda would cost twice as much as a photo with the Red Panda. As I considered my choices, Myrtle, who said she would pass on the photo op because she didn't look her best that day (I know, dear reader, she can be excessively vain!) – anyway, she said, “The Red Panda is not really a panda, you know.” I turned on her heatedly and said, “Of course it is a panda. The signs say so. The signs all say, “Lesser Panda” or “Red Panda.”



“Nevertheless,” she continued doggedly, “Red Pandas are not pandas.” Well, that simply made me mad, so I chose to have a photo with a Red Panda, so there!

But guess what, dear reader? Yes, as you have probably guessed, once again Miss Myrtle was right. Later I found out that the Lesser Panda, or Red Panda, is not a panda after all. It is a Raccoon! So! I had my photo taken with a raccoon! Myrtle kindly refrained from saying, “I told you so.”



Then, when I could not resist stroking and lifting that oh-so-fluffy tail, guess what the little critter did? Yes, it pooped right on my lap. I almost leaped up, which would have been a huge faux pas, and I wondered briefly what advice Miss Manners would give in THAT situation! Then I remembered my lap was covered by a plastic apron. Whew! Myrtle, of course, did not stop laughing

about this all day and continued to go on about how my pretty panda pooped politely on my lazy lap. I just wanted to slap that alliteration right off her face. But then I reminded myself that she was probably just jealous she did not have such a cute photo like I did. And all was well again.

That little racoon panda on my lap was just the cutest thing, sitting politely and munching on the pieces of apple I was feeding it. The keepers had wisely given us plastic aprons and plastic gloves, which at first, I thought was overkill, until I happened to look closely at the little critter's paws and saw there was poop between the claws! Eew!



I do have a lot to share with you about the Giant Panda, though, dear reader. We were visiting the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding, largest panda reserve in the world, and even Myrtle was sufficiently cowed by their level of expertise that for once she kept her trap shut instead of trying to show me that she knew everything about everything. Part of our tour at the panda preserve was a lecture about this unique animal, and we were given lecture notes, in English, which I will liberally quote from here. If you, dear reader, already know all this fascinating stuff about pandas, feel free to skip this section.

Discovery of the Giant Panda

Some experts have concluded that pandas existed 3 million years ago in China's southern tropical and subtropical jungles. Once inhabiting the planet with ancient saber-toothed cats, the giant panda is famous as a "living fossil."

Then the lecturer grew poetic and romantic. “The panda walks alone toward us from the long-ago Pleistocene period, having miraculously survived all perils and rapid world changes.”

Now that is pretty cool! I had great visuals imagining this large beast lumbering over the Tian Shan Mountains through the mists of time to come say hello to little ole me!



The first Giant Panda ever spotted by a westerner was a dead one in a farmer’s house when a western priest visited the farmer’s family. The locals hunted them for fur and meat. The first person to take a Giant Panda out of China was an American woman in the 1930s. She took a 16-month-old female named Su Ling. Su Ling arrested the attention of the world, just like a true diva, I thought.

The word “panda” comes from the country of Nepal, which lies south in the Himalayan Mountains, and means, “bamboo eater.” Due to the inaccessibility of the habitat, pandas were relatively safe from human predators until Western expeditions began coming to the wilderness to hunt this strange animal. The first Western hunters to shoot a giant panda were the Roosevelt brothers, Theodore and Kermit, sons of President Theodore Roosevelt. The skin was sent back to the U.S. and was displayed in Chicago’s Field Museum. This started a demand for giant panda mountings that led to widespread slaughter that finally spurred the Chinese government to protective actions.

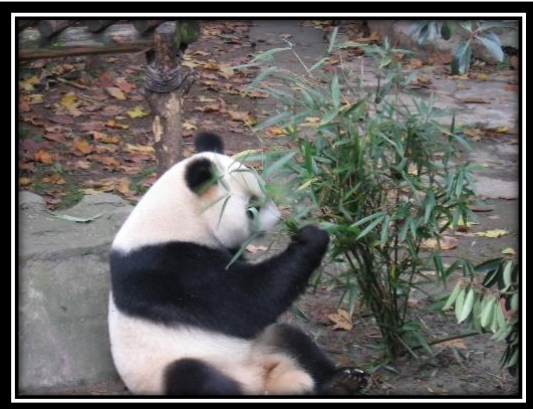
During the 1960s the Chinese government encouraged all provinces to set aside tracts of land as preserves for the Giant Panda. Research facilities were established to study this unique animal. In April 1972 the Chinese government sent two pandas, a male and female to the national Zoo in Washington, D. C., where they became perhaps the most well-known giant pandas in North America, Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing. They were a gift from the People's Republic of China to the people of the United States, presented to President Richard Nixon as a gesture of goodwill when he visited China that year.

Giant Pandas are naturally solitary animals. In the wild, they live alone in the dense bamboo and coniferous forests on the mountains, at altitudes of 5000-12,000 feet where the climate is cool and the area is cloudy most of the time. They were formerly protected because the area they chose was not ideal for most humans, so they were left alone. Unfortunately, due to China's population growth to over 1.3 billion people, the need for wood caused massive deforestation; and this drove the giant panda from its home, down into the deep valleys of the Quinhai-Tibet plateau. Their habitat has been gradually destroyed and fragmented during the last century. The Chengdu research facility, like other centers, serves as a sanctuary for these animals as well as a place to study them to determine how best to protect them.



Just about everyone is familiar with the panda, but not everyone has had the opportunity to see one in real life. On all fours, nose to backside, the adult panda is 4-6 feet long and can weigh up to 350 pounds, about the size of the American black bear. Its coat is thick and woolly, mainly white, but with black markings around the neck, legs, ears, and eyes. It has a stubby tail, and the pupils of its eyes are vertical

slits, like those of a cat. The panda has unique front paws; one of the wrist bones is enlarged and elongated and is used like a thumb, enabling the panda to grasp and strip leaves from bamboo stalks. Although the panda is quite nearsighted, its senses of smell and hearing are powerful.





The panda does not walk upright as other bears do but can stand upright against a wall or tree and it is able to sit in an upright position. The panda's walk is quite bear-like, called the "diagonal walk," with a rolling gait, usually at a leisurely pace. Pandas are rarely seen running and they are not very good at climbing trees. Although they are not good at climbing, they can do it, and the process of climbing is interesting to watch. They seem to hug the tree and inch themselves up a bit at a time, in caterpillar-like movements, later descending backward in the same manner.

The panda is a very meek, silent animal, capable of making a variety of sounds: bleating, chirping, huffing, snorting and even "barking" when unnerved. It can inflict serious wounds if highly provoked and given the chance. The Giant Panda does not hibernate because the bamboo diet does not provide enough fuel for hibernation.

The panda is occasionally thought to be of the raccoon family, but it is a true bear. The color contrasts of coat, like that of the raccoon, make people think that perhaps they are related. The Lesser Panda, also called the red or common panda, is, however, a member of the raccoon family. The Lesser Panda is only 20-24 inches long and weighs only about 7-10 pounds. It is often called a "bearcat" because of its cat-like appearance. It has a bushy, ringed tail from 11-19 inches long, has a soft coat and is mostly rust-colored with black markings on the face and ears.



The Giant Panda is an endangered species, both because of habitat loss and because of its low reproductive rate. The female panda can conceive only two or three days a year and because it takes at least 18 months to raise her baby, she will reproduce only once every two years. Also, there is an increasing failure to multiply because of close-kin mating within small groups. By 1949 the Chinese people realized that their prized animal, already rare, was near extinction. The new Chinese government put the panda at the top of its endangered list.

At this point the lecturer got a little sentimental, or, as Myrtle said later, “sappy.” “Each day,” the lecturer said with a beatific smile, “some pandas here on the reserve enjoy a long nap while others play and feast on bamboo or rest in the safety of their mother’s arms.” Myrtle made a gagging face, which I thought quite rude. But she had a point. We had just come from the panda nursery where we had to leave our cameras at the entrance and we had to look at those adorable roly-poly babies behind thick glass, while being very quiet. We saw no babies with their mothers. But I did remind Myrtle that if the Giant Panda is to survive, research facilities like Chengdu are probably critical.

In fact, as the lecturer kept reminding us, current panda protection efforts are all about prevention of extinction. If the panda can be successfully brought back from the brink of extinction, then efforts can be made to rewild them, to help them survive on their own in natural habitats as they had successfully done for about two million years.

When we left the reserve, dear friends, we were all so fired up to protect these adorable critters that many of us not only bought more panda stuff from the gift shop than our suitcases could comfortably hold, but we put donations into a donation box as well. Let us save the panda! Amen.

To be continued . . .