

It's a hoot hanging out with owls at Tokyo café

By Linda Lombardi
The Associated Press

TOKYO — In the U.S., hanging out in a café with animals is such an exotic concept that people can't get enough of it. A pop-up cat café in New York last year had lines down the block. Online reservations for another Manhattan cat café are almost fully booked more than two months ahead.

But in Japan, cat cafés are just the start. You can hang out in rabbit cafés or have coffee in Tokyo with two goats. And you're not limited to domestic animals. You can also spend an hour at a café holding a great horned owl.

Judging by how complicated it was to get a reservation at Tokyo's Fukuro no Mise ("Shop of Owls,"), the owl cafés are just as much of a hoot as cat cafés.

To get a spot, visitors are supposed to line up an hour before Fukuro no Mise opens. But when I showed up an hour early, I was lucky to get the last seat for a session two hours later. There are no refunds on the 2,000 yen (\$17) fee. If you're late, you lose your slot.

Inside, I was given a list of detailed English instructions. For example, only touch the owls on the head or back. And while the owls are very tame, "they can't be potty trained like dogs. So please be generous when they potty on you!" The woman in charge also gave a long talk and demonstration in Japanese before allowing each guest to hold a bird.

The owls come in various sizes and species, from tiny to quite large, including a great horned owl with large sharp claws and impressive beak. Each bird has a tether around one foot, which you hold in



your hand as they perch on your arm. Sleek and clear-eyed, the owls seem calm despite the fact that the small room is crowded.

The attentive staff will place the owl on your shoulder or head if you like (I declined in light of the warning about the lack of potty training). Staff can also help if your owl starts to flap. Raising your hand in the air usually settles them down, but apparently I was holding my arm wrong, so a worker repositioned it. If you've had enough and want to just watch everyone else's owls, they'll relieve you of the bird.

Photography is forbidden in some of the oddest places in Japan, but this isn't one of them. No flash is allowed (and no video) but posting a shot of yourself on social media holding an owl is clearly a goal for many visitors.

Unlike some other animal cafés in

Japan, this place is only nominally a café. There's no food but a small drink is included (alcohol costs extra). The drink arrives covered in plastic wrap, decorated with a magic marker illustration of an owl. But no one pays attention to their beverage until the final activity, which involves distributing souvenirs. Each item is held up and guests raise their hand if they want it. If too many people raise hands, winners are chosen by playing rock-paper-scissors, which seems to be the same in Japan as it is in the U.S. Souvenirs included a photo book, cellphone charms, chopsticks, and a cloth decorated with owls.

If owls aren't enough to satisfy your longing to commune with birds of prey, there's also a Falconers Café in Mitaka, the same area of Tokyo as the Ghibli Museum. When it's not busy, the only birds there will be the owner's, four Harris

A SOARING SUCCESS. Owls are seen at Fukuro no Mise, which means "Shop of Owls," in Tokyo. The café allows visitors to hold and interact with owls. It's one of a number of cafés in Japan where visitors can spend time with animals ranging from rabbits to goats. (AP Photo/Linda Lombardi, File)

hawks and a peregrine falcon that can't be petted, only watched. But hawk owners also come to the shop with their birds, and some may allow you to touch them. This one's a proper café, with dishes on an English menu named after raptors, including Harris Curry and Eagle Ginger pork.

There are other owl cafés in Japan. All have different hours and procedures, so it's best to have a Japanese speaker help navigate websites and make calls. Fukuro no Mise also had limited and somewhat erratic hours, so you'll want to check its website — also in Japanese — for current information: <<http://profile.ameba.jp/fukuroounomise>>.

And while the café is off the beaten tourist path, it's easy to find from Tokyo Metro Tsukishima Station's exit 10 — just cross and head up the street lined with oddly pruned trees and you'll see its storefront on the right, covered with posters in Japanese and English explaining the reservation system. Once you have your reservation, if there's time, you can head up to the next cross street and stroll an old shopping street with lots of *monjayaki* restaurants. Monja is the Tokyo version of *okonomiyaki*, the meat, seafood, and vegetable pancake that's cooked on a griddle on your table.

The café suggests English speakers come on Fridays when they have English-speaking staff, but I had no difficulty on a different day.

Meet Coco: Potentially China's next Li Na

By Justin Bergman
The Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — China has begun its search for the next Li Na, and one of the juniors with the talent to replace the country's two-time Grand Slam champion may speak better English than she does Chinese.

Xu Shilin, who just turned 17 and goes by the English name Coco, was the first Chinese girl to be No. 1 in the world junior rankings and won the gold medal at the Youth Olympic Games last year. She has also told the Chinese media that her goal is to win a Grand Slam title before she's 20.

"It is a goal and a dream. Of course, I'm working toward that," she said at the Australian Open, where she was the top seed in the girl's singles draw before losing in the third round. "I think anything is possible."

Xu's rise has been unique compared with the previous generation of Chinese players because her parents decided to develop her talents outside China's state-run sports system, choosing instead to move to Florida where she could train at top private academies.

Such freedoms were only made possible due to Li Na and a few other current players, who broke free from the state system years ago and were allowed to manage their own careers and keep their own prize money. This paved



the way for the next generation of players to choose their own paths.

Xu's parents made a big decision when they saw how much talent she had at age eight. Her father, Xu Yang, sold the small tennis club he owned in Guangdong province and moved the family to Florida for nearly six years.

"Her father rolled the dice," said Xu's manager Terry Rhoads, who is managing director of Shanghai-based sports consulting firm Zou Marketing. "They didn't live well. They struggled."

Because Xu was talented, she was invited to train at

HOT COCO. China's Xu Shilin serves while playing the Czech Republic's Miriam Kolodziejova and Marketa Vondrousova during the junior girls' doubles semifinal at the Australian Open tennis championship in Melbourne, Australia. Xu, who just turned 17 and goes by the English name Coco, was the first Chinese girl to be No. 1 in the world junior rankings and won the gold medal at the Youth Olympic Games last year. (AP Photo/Shuji Kajiyama)

several different academies and began to climb the junior rankings in the U.S., attracting the interest of the United States Tennis Association, Rhoads said. Instead of having Xu play for the U.S., however, the family decided it was time to return to China.

It wasn't an easy transition at first because Xu's Mandarin had become so rusty, she was afraid to speak at times. But she's becoming more comfortable now and has already attracted a number of sponsors.

Rhoads compares her career trajectory with that of Japanese star Kei Nishikori, who also lived in and trained in the U.S. for many years.

"If you ask me, this is what China needs to do with a bunch of the boys," he said. "Coco got tough. She grew up. She saw how difficult it was for her parents."

Other top juniors are taking similar paths, choosing to train at private academies in China where they receive coaching, education, room and board, and travel expenses in exchange for a percentage of future prize money earned.

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