

A bit wild: Asian animal cafés go from mere cats to meerkats

By Martha Mendoza and Natnicha Chuwiruch
The Associated Press

BANGKOK — Cat cafés where customers sip lattes while petting resident kitties are just opening their doors around the U.S. and Europe. But in Asia, where the first one opened more than a decade ago, the concept has moved well beyond felines.

At Tokyo's Snake Center, visitors pay 1,100 yen (about \$11) for a cup of coffee and a slithery friend to wind around their arm; a plate of curry bread snacks or a really big snake costs extra.

At We Are The Furballs (WTF) in Singapore, Mochi and her puppy pals yap at ankles and occupy guests' laps for peaceful dognaps.

And at Little Zoo Café in Bangkok, meerkats, raccoons, and little foxes with the softest ears imaginable can be cuddled near plates of crepes and French fries.

Some sell the animals, or offer them for adoption. Others invite customers to bring their pets, or just offer encounters with creatures — from penguins to hedgehogs.

"I wanted there to be a place where people can come learn about the animals," said Wachiraporn Arampibulphol, who opened an exotic animal café in Bangkok a year ago after visiting an owl café in Tokyo.

Snuggling Jelly, a blond fox, Wachiraporn said she used to import chinchillas, meerkats, and other exotic pets, but worried owners bought them impulsively and then abused them or let them collapse and die in Thailand's heat.

She said customers at her Little Zoo Café get a reality check when they're so close to the animals; she's only sold a half dozen this year.

"When you see pictures and photos of these animals, you see their cuteness," she said. "But people don't think about what the animal would smell like or how actually raising one would be."

Indeed, a musky odor floated above two red foxes — Mocha and Cappuccino — as they boisterously wrestled and skittered around customers' legs.

Nearby, Nuttida Chaloebun, 23, from Bangkok, watched a waitress grapple with Cracker, a 25-pound raccoon, who chattered and swatted her away with little hand-like paws.

"It's fat and really adorable but it won't let me touch it," laughed Nuttida.

Shirley Chaifong came to the Little Zoo Café all the way from Malaysia after seeing photos of meerkats on Instagram. But it was the tail-wagging corgi, an uncommon breed in Asia, she fell for.

"It's a great way to see the animals," she said, her hands running through his fur.

After a cat café opened in the San Francisco Bay Area in 2014, the concept quickly spread to more than 20 American cities, from New York to Los Angeles, and many

Samsung sends fire-resistant boxes for Galaxy Note 7 returns

By Youkyung Lee
AP Technology Writer

SEOUL, South Korea — Samsung Electronics says it is sending fire-resistant packages to its customers in the U.S. as a precaution against possible fires or explosions from Galaxy Note 7s they return to retailers.

Samsung is offering prepaid shipping boxes as an option for U.S. consumers who purchased the phones on its website, Samsung.com. It said consumers who purchased their Note 7 phones from mobile carriers should visit the websites of their carriers for recall instructions.

Samsung said it was discontinuing the Note 7 phones just two months after its launch, after two recalls and many reports of fires. Samsung must now deal with receiving back more than 1.5 million Galaxy Note 7 phones, both the original ones and those issued as replacements. Most were sold in the U.S. and South Korea.

A video on YouTube shows a man it says is at the XDA Developers office in the U.S., unpacking a kit containing a static shield bag, thermally insulated boxes, gloves, and instructions for ground shipping only.

"We have just received this crazy Galaxy Note 7 return kit," the person said in the video.

According to the XDA Developers forum, Samsung's packing instructions say the Note 7 should be put in the static shield bag and then in a box labelled "OEM Replacement" to be put inside an "Inner Box" and a "Recovery Box." Shipping companies reportedly had complained they did not want to handle Note 7 returns because of fire concerns.

Samsung said the packaging kits conform with U.S. requirements for shipping lithium-ion batteries or devices containing them that are subject to a recall.



CRITTER CAFÉS. A visitor pets a fennec fox, left photo, at the Little Zoo Café in Bangkok, Thailand. In Asia, where the first cat café opened more than a decade ago, the concept has moved well beyond felines. At the Little Zoo Café, meerkats, raccoons, and little foxes with the hugest, softest ears imaginable can be cuddled near plates of crepes and French fries. In the right photo, a visitor plays with a meerkat at the Little Zoo Café. (AP Photos/Sakchai Lalit)

more are planned. They're also popular in Europe, with recent openings in the Netherlands, Finland, and Italy.

The Cat Flower Café in Taipei, Taiwan, took credit as the first-ever cat café when it opened in 1998, although some aficionados say cats meandered through a Viennese café almost a century earlier. The real boom began in 2005 in Japan, where few apartments allow pets. There are now more than 100 cat cafés listed in Japan, 50 in Tokyo alone. But new goat-, rabbit-, and bird-themed eateries now offer competition.

American and European cat cafés have stringent health and safety regulations that sometimes ban actually petting animals, or require cats to remain well separated from food. Most are affiliated with local humane societies or rescue shelters.

In many Asian countries, where there are fewer hygiene rules in restaurants and pets can be bought in street markets, animal-rights activists say the cafés are cruel.

"These animals often become despondent and develop neurotic and self-destructive behavior," said Jason Baker at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals' international campaigns office. "I don't know why anyone

would want to eat a meal surrounded by animals who are imprisoned in cages and pens that are tiny fractions of the size of their homes in the wild."

But café owners say they're trying to help the animals by allowing people to safely and compassionately interact.

Tokyo Snake Center café manager Hisamitsu Kaneko said visitors can gain new appreciation of the oft-maligned reptiles.

"People have biases, or preconceptions about snakes, that they're disgusting or scary," said Kaneko, whose customers choose from about 60 snakes. "I think there are no animals as beautiful."

At Bangkok's TrueLove@Neverland café, more than a dozen imported and bred huskies were panting — if calm — as they lounged for an hour outside on a humid 95° Fahrenheit day, chewing ice cubes and carrots while visitors marvelled at their thick fur.

At the end of a one-hour dog encounter, customers peeled off plastic foot covers, sanitized their hands, checked their husky selfies, and climbed into waiting tuk-tuk rickshaws. Barking and yipping, the dogs dashed en masse into their air-conditioned quarters to rest up and eat before their next human visitors.

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