

The New Pandas

Posted by Peter on 13 January 2012



One of the new pandas at Edinburgh Zoo, enjoying a snack of bamboo shoots.

This is a new Listen to English podcast, the first for a very long time. No, I am not dead, as some of you seem to think. Nor am I ill, nor have I run away to the Caribbean with a beautiful film star. I have simply been busy. (However, if you know any beautiful film stars who would like to run away with me, perhaps you could let me know).

This podcast is about pandas. I am sure you know what a panda looks like, even if you have never seen one. There is a picture on the website. You will see that a panda is a type of bear, with a white coat and big black [patches](#) round its eyes, that make it look like a teenage girl with too much eye make-up. Perhaps you think that pandas are sweet and cuddly. However, people who know about them say that they are in fact smelly and do not like being [cuddled](#) at all.

Pandas live in mountain areas of China, and their main food is [bamboo shoots](#). Unfortunately, there has been a lot of pressure on their [habitat](#) in recent years, and the number of pandas living in the [wild](#) has fallen to about 3,000. In addition there are about 250 pandas in [captivity](#), mainly in zoos in China. For many years, pandas were used by the government of China for diplomatic [advantage](#). If the government of China liked you, they might give you a panda to live in one of your zoos. And if they really liked you, they might give you two pandas.

In 1958, London Zoo acquired a panda called Chi Chi. Chi Chi was about a year old at the time, and in his short life he had lived in China, and in zoos in Moscow, East Berlin and Frankfurt. An American Zoo wanted him, but the American government decided that Chi Chi was a communist, so they refused to let him enter the country. So Chi Chi came to London, and for the next 14 years he was the star [attraction](#) at London Zoo. Naturally, the Zoo wanted to find him a lady panda, hoping that the two pandas would [breed](#). They borrowed a female panda called An An from a zoo in Moscow. However, Chi Chi and An An never really [hit it off](#), and there were no panda [cubs](#). The trouble is that a female panda is [fertile](#) for only about two days in a year. So if Mrs Panda has a headache on the important two days, or Mr Panda is asleep, or out playing football with his friends, there will be no baby pandas. Chi Chi died in 1972, and we were all very

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sad. If you go to the Natural History Museum in London, you can still see Chi Chi, [stuffed](#), in one of the exhibition rooms. He looks as if he wished he had stayed in China.

But now we have new pandas. The government of Scotland has been very nice indeed to the government of China, and two lovely pandas – a male and a female – arrived in Edinburgh Zoo late last year. They live in a newly-built panda house, which cost about as much as a house for humans. For the moment, the two pandas are still [settling in](#). They are living separately, but the zoo hopes to put them together in a few months time and, who knows, this time next year there may be a baby panda. Lots of people seem happy to pay and stand in a queue in the cold of winter to see the new pandas. This is good, because keeping pandas is expensive. The new pandas are not a free gift from China. Instead, Edinburgh Zoo is paying the Chinese government £645,000 a year in rent. In addition, the two pandas cost £70,000 a year to feed. They eat for 14 hours a day, and can consume 18,000 kilos of bamboo in a year. There is not a lot of bamboo in Scotland, so the Zoo needs to import bamboo from an organic farm in the Netherlands.

Is it worth the expense and trouble of bringing pandas to Scotland? Some scientists say that keeping pandas in zoos does not really help to protect pandas in the wild. They say that pandas are difficult to breed in captivity, and that the real problem is the loss of the pandas' natural habitat in China. But others say that keeping pandas in zoos helps us to understand more about these beautiful and fascinating animals. And the people queuing at Edinburgh Zoo to see the pandas have no doubt at all that it is worth it.

This is the text of the podcast at <http://www.listen-to-english.com/index.php?id=568>.