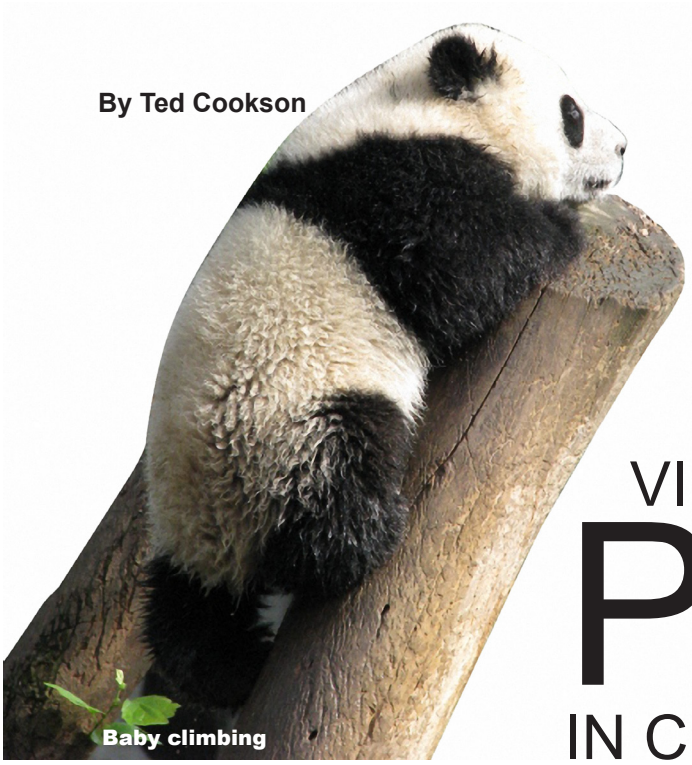
By Ted Cookson

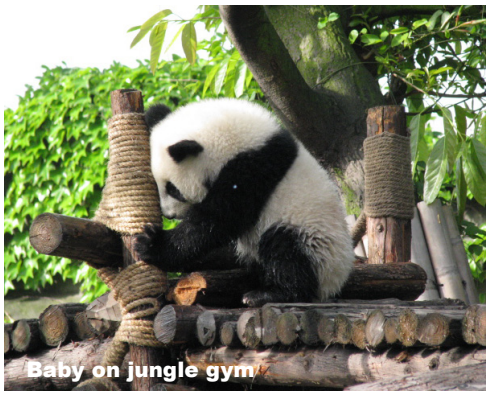

Baby climbing

Visitors viewing pandas

VIEWING PANDAS IN CHENGDU, SICHUAN, CHINA

View over Chengdu

Adult walking


Baby on jungle gym

Baby eating bamboo

3 babies playing

Baby climbing tree

Koalas used to be my favourite animal after I first cuddled a one in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia in 2001. Then I became enamoured of penguins after visiting a penguin colony near Punta Arenas in southern Chile in 2004. Later I fell in love with polar bears after viewing those majestic white creatures 'up close and personal' from a tundra buggy in Churchill, Manitoba in 2005. But it is giant pandas that have fascinated me since my fiancée Barbara and I visited two of China's three dozen or so panda reserves in April 2009.

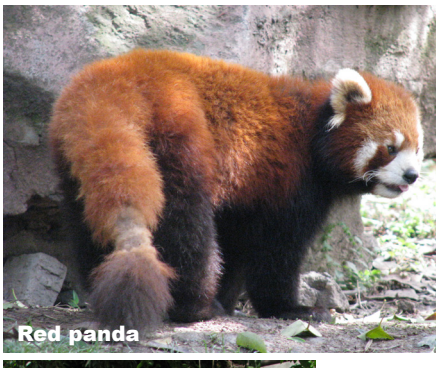
We toured both Bifengxia Giant Panda Research Station and Breeding Centre (Bifingxia Panda Base) and the Chengdu Giant Panda Research Station and Breeding Centre (Chengdu Panda Base). The former, situated at an altitude of 1,200 metres (3,936 feet), is 150 km (93 miles), or a two-hour drive, from Chengdu in the Chinese province of Sichuan while the latter lies at an altitude of 500 metres (1,640 feet) in a suburb just 10 km (6 miles), or a 40-minute drive, north of downtown Chengdu.

Bifengxia Panda Base, opened in 2003 with 28 giant pandas, received an additional 53 giant pandas from the now-defunct Wolong Panda Base after the latter was severely damaged and closed in the aftermath of Sichuan's 2008 earthquake. Nowadays Bifengxia Panda Base is perhaps the best place for viewing giant pandas in their natural habitat as the landscape of Bifengxia includes extensive forests, rivers and even waterfalls. Currently there are over 60 giant pandas in a developed area of about 71 hectares (175 acres) and a total planned area of 400 hectares (988 acres).

Chengdu Panda Base was established in 1987 with six injured giant pandas. Opened to the public in 1995, this base now contains a giant panda museum as well as over 60 giant pandas in a

developed area of some 200 hectares (494 acres).

The giant panda, the cute black and white-coated icon of modern China, is a bamboo-eating mammal native to mountainous areas in the provinces of Sichuan, Shaanxi and Gansu in southwestern and central-western China. An endangered species, only some 1,000 to 1,600 giant pandas now live in the wild, mostly in the mountains of Sichuan. In addition, there are about 265 giant pandas living in captivity in China and around the world. Giant pandas, which suffer from a low birth rate, are threatened by habitat encroachment and destruction spurred by the growing demand for land and natural resources from China's large and ever-increasing population. Nowadays the reduction in the giant panda's habitat has split the species into about 20 isolated groups. The major habitat of this animal, termed the Sichuan Great Panda Sanctuaries, has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Giant pandas are also poached for their pelts that can bring a high price on the black market.


Red panda

Author posing with adult

Chengdu cashier in panda outfit

The period of gestation for giant pandas ranges from three to five months, with an average pregnancy of 135 days. The two-month difference in the period of gestation exists because the fertilized panda egg often floats free in the mother's uterus before implantation occurs and development begins. Pandas are born blind and practically without any fur. Giant panda cubs weigh from 100 to 200 grams (4 to 8 ounces) and measure from 15 to 17 cm (5.9 to 6.7 inches) long. Adults, on the other hand, grow up to 1.5 meters (4.9 feet) in length and stand some 75 cm (2.5 feet) tall at the shoulder. Males, which average up to 20% larger than females, weigh up to 150 kg (330 pounds). The black fur on the head, legs and shoulders along with the remainder of the giant panda's thick white wool coat provides camouflage in its sometimes-snowy forest habitat. Giant pandas typically live about 15 years in the wild and up to 25 or even 30 years in captivity.

One special adaptation of the giant panda is its enlarged 'pseudo thumb' wrist bone. This, along with five nailed fingers, allows the giant panda to grasp bamboo shoots more effectively in order to eat. Although giant pandas spend most of their time on the ground, their toes also allow them to climb trees.

Giant pandas tend to be passive and normally do not initiate attacks on man or other animals. However, when surprised or provoked, giant pandas can become violent. Their reaction to abnormal sounds is to run or climb a tree. When trapped, giant pandas cover their faces with their paws and curl up, thus showing their fright. A giant panda will display its aggression by lowering its head and staring at an intruder or opponent. Aggression can also be shown with a paw swipe or a low bark.

The red or lesser panda, classified as a vulnerable species, is distantly related to the giant panda. Both species share a common ancestor that lived tens of millions of years ago. Named for its reddish-brown fur color, the red panda is a mammal the size of a raccoon whose habitat is similar to that of the giant panda. However, the range of the nocturnal red panda is much wider than that of the giant panda. Red pandas, which have a shaggy tail and a waddling gait and look remarkably like raccoons, are found in Myanmar, Nepal, India and Bhutan as well as in China. The omnivorous but mainly bamboo-eating red panda also eats insects, eggs, birds, and small mammals. The red panda prefers mountainous terrain with mixed deciduous and conifer forests lying at altitudes between 2,200 and 4,800 metres (7,200 and 15,750 feet). Estimates of the number of red pandas remaining in the wild range from 11,000 to 20,000, and there are some 800 red pandas in captivity in zoos and preserves around the world.

Barbara and I had read that the more distant Bifengxia Panda Base was more interesting than Chengdu Panda Base on the outskirts of the metropolis of Chengdu with its population of 11 million. But, as luck would have it, it rained the afternoon we visited the former; and the weather was magnificent the following morning when we visited the latter. Also, the timing of our visit to Chengdu Panda Base was nearly perfect as our arrival coincided with the morning release of six giant panda cubs into their large outdoor exercise area. We watched and chuckled as we photographed the cute and rambunctious cubs playing together. They climbed and wrestled with one another on their large wooden jungle gym. However, within about 20 minutes the cubs had tired and their frenetic pace slowed considerably.

Chengdu, with a subtropical monsoon climate and an average annual temperature of 16 Celsius (61 Fahrenheit), is best visited from March to June and from September to November. July and August are the warmest months. In the Sichuan Basin where Chengdu lies the humidity is normally high year-round due to an abundance of clouds and mist and consequent lack of sunshine. In this region tourists perspire from the humidity in the summer and feel cold in the winter.

Round trip airfare from Cairo to Beijing begins from approx. EGP 3,367, and round trip airfare from Beijing to Chengdu begins from approx. USD 451.

ABOUT TED COOKSON: Egypt's most widely-traveled travel agent, Ted has been to every country in the world! He has also visited 314 of the 319 destinations on the list of the Travelers' Century Club (visit www.eptours.com and refer to World Travel Club). A travel agent in Cairo since 1986, Ted manages EGYPT PANORAMA TOURS, a full-service travel agency, at 4 Road 79 (between Roads 9 and 10, near the "El Maadi" metro station) in Maadi. Contact Egypt Panorama Tours (open 7 days a week 9 AM-5 PM) at: Tels. 2359-0200, 2358-5880, 2359-1301. Fax 2359-1199. E-mail: ept@link.net. Web site: www.eptours.com. The password for residents is eptcool. Both text and PDF versions of all of Ted's travel articles published since 2002 are archived online at www.eptours.com under "Ted's International Travel Articles." Many of the archived articles also contain video clips!