

DESTINATIONS INTERNATIONAL ✦ China Giant pandas brought back from the brink of extinction in Chengdu
✦ Argentina Channelling Eva Perón in Buenos Aires ✦ England Sleuthing in the footsteps of Sherlock Holmes in London W1

ANIMAL CONSERVATION CHINA

Destinations INTERNATIONAL

Bamboozled:
giant panda cub
on the munch at
Chengdu, 2007

Bear

NECESSITY

WORDS CHRIS WRIGHT

Chengdu giant panda sanctuary is a vital ingredient in China's bid to save its most emblematic creature from extinction.

IS THERE ANY ANIMAL so obstinately intent on its own demise as the giant panda? They are magnificent creatures, but they don't exactly help themselves to thrive. They eat mostly one thing – bamboo, often 30kg a day of the stuff – and even then prefer specific varieties, and sometimes different varieties at different times of year. They then consume it with a digestive system designed for carnivores, not vegetarians; the process of digestion so exhausting that they spend about 20 hours a day either eating or sleeping it off, leaving them vulnerable. Notoriously reluctant to mate in captivity, if they do conceive, the disparity in size between mother and cub – one 1000 times larger than the other – is potentially lethal for the infant.

It is remarkable that pandas have proven such robust creatures: they've been around for eight million years. But today, there are estimated to be only about 1600 left in the wild, almost all of them inhabiting one Chinese province, Sichuan, and within that, in just five relatively small mountain ranges.

A relief, then, that help is at hand for this threatened species. China is not known for its conservation; a 2010 report by Animals Asia Foundation found widespread abuse of animals at Chinese zoos, and the killing of endangered species for "medicinal" or superstitious purposes is well documented, but within the city limits of Chengdu, in China's south-west, is one of the most successful government-funded breeding programs to be found anywhere in the world: the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding. ➤

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Effortlessly, outrageously *cute*... like a black-and- white Winnie the Pooh

About six giant panda
cubs are successfully bred
each year at Chengdu

This 106ha site, founded in 1987 with just six pandas in recognition that something had to be done to protect them from the steady erosion of their natural habitat, is an unquestionable success story. Few places in the world have ever bred pandas in captivity; by the end of 2009, the Chengdu centre had achieved 92 successful panda births with 132 cubs, and typically welcomes five to seven new cubs each year (2008, with 17, was a record). Sixty-three pandas live there today and many more, on loan or donated to zoos around the world, remain under the centre's advice. All told, there are about 300 pandas in captivity; at least one-third are either in Chengdu or started out there.

The research base is part zoo, part education centre, part research institute and part breeding program – functions it blends very well. It has already become the single biggest tourist draw in Chengdu. Viewed purely as a zoo, it has a lot to recommend it.

The site itself is well-planned, with an artificial lake teeming with birds and separate spaces for the much smaller, fox-like red pandas, another vulnerable species native to south-west China. But it is the

giant pandas that people come to see, and they are on show in a sequence of enclosures, divided by age.

Some critics, such as BBC wildlife presenter Chris Packham, claim the amount of money spent on panda conservation is wildly lopsided compared to other species, but just a few minutes observing these creatures makes it clear why everyone wants to save them from extinction. In the first enclosure, four cubs of about six months, so young that they would still be with their mother for another year in the wild, are climbing trees.

You can't avoid the obvious adjective: giant pandas are effortlessly, outrageously *cute*. One attempts to climb slowly down from the top of a tree, not looking where it is going; it steps on its brother's head. The brother, pawing at the trunk with an expression of defeated resignation, slides slowly out of the tree, ending baffled on the ground. Meanwhile, a third has fallen asleep with two paws either side of a branch and is suspended 10 feet up in the air; it resembles nothing more than a black-and-white Winnie the Pooh.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES

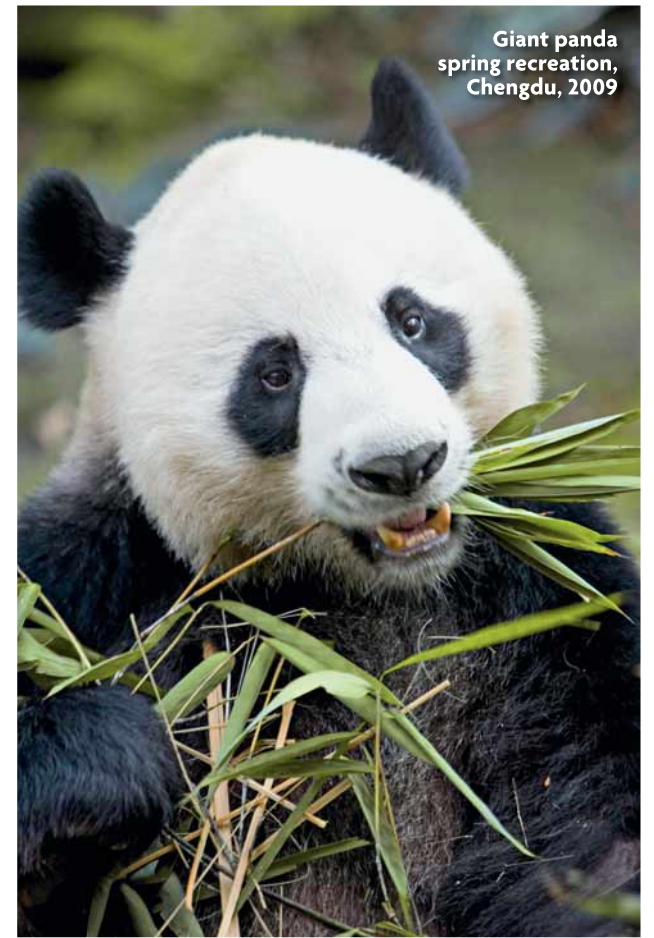
IN ANOTHER ENCLOSURE an older mother, aged 13 – pandas have lived up to 34 years in captivity – sits alone, ploughing through bamboo. While a panda such as this might normally get through 20-30kg a day, in the centre, they are given about 50kg, “because they are picky,” a guide explains. They are woefully badly designed for their diet: their gut is just too short to digest it properly, so when it comes out the other end – which happens about 40 times a day – it looks much the same as when it went in. They absorb only a fraction of the nutrition from their meals, another reason they are constantly either eating or sleeping. On top of everything else, in the wild they have the problem that every 25 years or so, bamboo bursts into flower and then dies. The pandas then have to look elsewhere for food, and in endlessly urbanising China, there's not so much “elsewhere” left.

A third enclosure has several older pandas, aged about three-and-a-half. There could be no greater photo opportunity: they sit and loll, chomp and fumble, staring into the middle distance. It is, apparently, possible to be photographed holding a young panda if you give

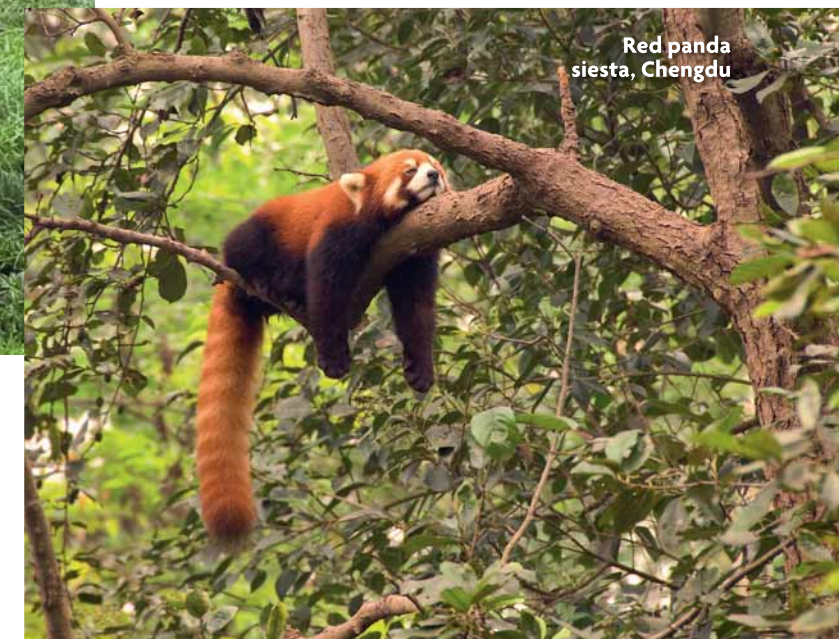
sufficient notice and a decent donation (apparently the going rate is currently about RMB1000 (\$157).

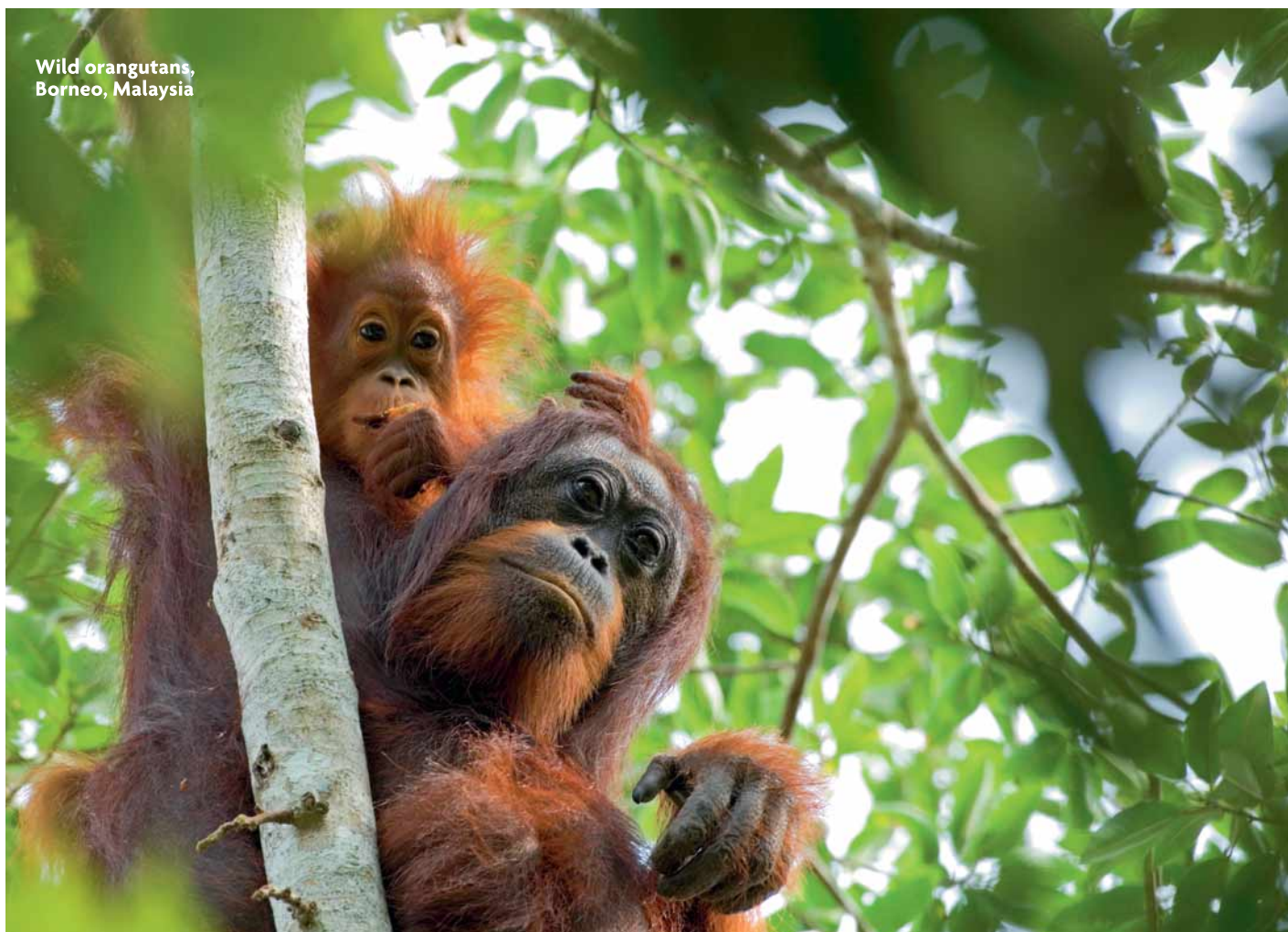
The educational side of the centre focuses on the breeding, which brings a confronting level of information; you might not want to combine your education (“a new semen collection model combines massage with electric stimulation”) with your breakfast. If you can't see a newborn at the centre's nursery house – and you'd be lucky if you did – a video brings home how incredibly delicate pandas are ►

Giant panda
spring recreation,
Chengdu, 2009



Red panda
siesta, Chengdu





Wild orangutans,
Borneo, Malaysia

when they first appear: pink and hairless, as small as 50g in size, blind, and utterly helpless. There's nothing giant about a giant panda when it enters the world: they are, inherently, born premature. The mother, so comparatively vast, playfully knocks her child around like a football, apparently unaware of the damage she might cause. For the centre, raising a panda in captivity is as much a matter of considered intervention as anything else.

As well as the centre, Sichuan hosts a leading sanctuary for pandas at Wolong Nature Reserve, 140km north-west of Chengdu, but the area was devastated by the Sichuan earthquake of 2008. Several of the animals were killed, and those that were not have been transferred to another base called Bifengxia. It is hoped that Wolong will reopen this year.

There is one awkward question, though. For all its breeding successes, not one panda has ever been released back into the wild. That is not the case at other celebrated wildlife protection centres such as, for example, the orangutan sanctuary in Sepilok, Borneo. So what is the breeding really for? To rejuvenate a species or just to sustain a zoo for tourist purposes?

The guides say they do hope to return pandas to the wild one day, and they can surely be forgiven their reticence to start: the species is imperilled. In China, a decision to pamper an endangered species is to be celebrated over the alternatives. And pamper them they do. The generous treatment pandas receive from their keepers in the base may help explain why Chinese mothers sometimes say about an indulged child: "You're acting like a giant panda!"

Get with the program

What makes for a good conservation program? Most obviously, the ability to preserve an endangered species – better still, success in breeding new members of that species. Finally, it should engage the public in a way that educates them on threats to particular animals. Below, five examples of successful conservation programs.

Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, Sabah, Malaysia

Sepilok is perhaps the world's most famous conservation facility, partly due to the immense charisma of the animals themselves: so expressive, so apparently wise, so – there's no avoiding it – human.

Rehabilitation is more of a focus than breeding; Sepilok was founded in 1964 to return

orphaned apes into the wild, in recognition of the devastation logging and plantation industries were causing to jungle habitat. Many of the apes had been kept illegally as pets. It can take as long as a decade for an ape to be ready to return to the jungle, but – unlike the pandas in Chengdu – at Sepilok more than 100 have been returned to the wild.

Watching the devotion of the staff, their love for the animals ➤

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Golden langur monkey, Manas National Park, Assam, India



Sepilok orangutan; rhino in Chitwan National Park, Nepal (above)



and grief at saying goodbye when the time comes, is heartbreaking and inspirational.

Sepilok is not the only orangutan centre: Bukit Lawang in Sumatra, Indonesia, though less well-known, hosts more of the apes (estimated at more than 5000 in 2009) and has recovered from a destructive flash flood in 2003. It is about 80km from the city of Medan, in easy reach of Jakarta and Singapore.

www.sabah.edu.my/srm012.wcdd/BM/menu1.html

Chitwan National Park, Nepal

Unlike other conservation parks in Nepal, Chitwan is not exclusive to one animal. It is probably best-known for its rhinos, poached to near extinction before the formal foundation of the park in the early 1970s. But it is also a sanctuary for Bengal tigers (there are thought to be about 100 in the park) and

vultures. There is also a breeding program for turtles.

Although Nepal is a variable tourist destination depending on the political situation, Chitwan has become one of its most popular locations, and it is increasingly possible to visit there with environmental responsibility in mind. Tiger Tops, one of the first lodges in the jungle, is closely involved with conservation – from educational talks for guests to data collection and research studies – and its solar-powered lodges are considered models for conservation tourism.

Beyond the targeted conservation efforts, the park is also home to an extraordinary diversity of life, including elephant, gaur (Indian bison), sloth bears, leopards, jackals and hundreds of bird species. Chitwan National Park itself covers 932sq km, but other wildlife reserves take the total protected area to several

thousand square kilometres.

chitwannationalpark.net

Manas Wildlife Sanctuary, India

There is a major push going on in tiger conservation today: the World Wildlife Fund estimates there are 3200 in the wild and used the Chinese Year of the Tiger in 2010 to get 13 countries around a table at a tiger summit to agree on attempting to double the size of that population.

The WWF spreads its resources across 12 locations in Asia, such as Manas in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam (and some areas of Bhutan).

In June 2011, Manas was removed from UNESCO's danger list, where it had sat for two decades due to ongoing ethnic conflict in Assam. The fighting threatened the preservation and maintenance of the park. Today, relations are more peaceful and a territorial council, which

involves the government, local communities and NGOs, oversees the preservation of the park.

It's not easy to get to – in addition to a general Indian visa, you need a separate permit for the north-east – but what a place it is, with red pandas, snow leopards, Asian elephants and one-horned rhinos as well as the tigers, all running wild in the Himalayas. The people, observing a multitude of ancient traditions and ways of life, are also a major part of the attraction.

whc.unesco.org/en/list/338

Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project, Rwanda/Uganda

Africa is full of conservation initiatives, varying in scale, mission and success. At one end there are top-end lodges such as the award-winning Shamwari Game Reserve in South Africa's Eastern Cape, seven luxury lodges on a 25,000ha private reserve ➤

PHOTOGRAPHY: GETTY IMAGES



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boasting five ecosystems and hosting Africa's big five (elephant, rhino, buffalo, lion and leopard). Another approach is to get directly involved with some of the smaller, focused projects. The Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project is an example of this. It seeks to monitor and help the approximately 780 remaining mountain gorillas, 480 of them in the Virunga volcanoes massif (which covers parts of Rwanda, Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo), and the remainder in Bwindi Impenetrable National Park in Uganda.

Gorillas are under enormous threat from poaching and habitat loss, but it's less well-known that they face great challenges from human infectious diseases: a

knock-on effect of their being 98.5 per cent genetically *us*.

The doctors in this program monitor the gorillas and intervene when they get sick. In a reverse twist, USAID now also funds the program to study new infectious diseases among animals that could become a threat to humans.

Some holiday operators offer trips that include visits to the program, following in the footsteps of celebrated zoologist Dian Fossey, with whom some of their more experienced guides worked. www.gorilladoctors.org

Archie Carr National Wildlife Refuge, Florida

This refuge is proof of what can be achieved with time, focus,

ONLINE

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commitment and America's healthy approach to engagement. The Archie Carr reserve, covering a 33km stretch of beach, was established in 1989 to conserve sea turtles and is linked to Sea Turtle Conservancy, a Florida group founded in 1959. As STC points out, sea turtles are among the most important indicators of

the health of marine and coastal ecosystems. Through this program you can track sea turtles, get involved as a volunteer, study the animals and the threats they face, and, of course, donate.

It's the engagement with children that stands out: there are camps for children in the reserve, even instructions on how to throw a Sea Turtle House Party. Hardline conservation purists might mock, but the truth is that conservation has a future only if children grow up believing in its importance.

www.conserveturtles.org

- For more panda information visit www.panda.org.cn/english
- For airfares call **Qantas on 13 13 13** or visit qantas.com
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