

Pandas to arrive next weekend at Edinburgh Zoo

Following months of global anticipation and excitement, the arrival date for Scotland's first pair of breeding giant pandas has been confirmed as Sunday 4 December.

Tian Tian and Yang Guang are set to arrive in Edinburgh Zoo from the Giant Panda Conservation and Research Centre in Sichuan Province, China. The announcement follows a successful visit to Scotland's capital in October by the China Wildlife Conservation Association (CWCA), an organisation dedicated to giant panda conservation since 1983, which has now given the final go-ahead for the pandas' 10-year residence in Scotland.

The CWCA confirmed the date following a rigorous assessment of the giant pandas' enclosure at Edinburgh Zoo, together with plans for the animals' care during the 10 years of the project. FedEx Express has donated its services for the transportation of the giant pandas.

The UK public will have to wait a little longer, however, to catch the first glimpse of the new arrivals. Following a two week 'settling-in' period in their new enclosure, the giant pandas will be available for public viewing. Tickets will need to be pre-booked and all details of public viewing arrangements will be published on Edinburgh Zoo's website. There will be no extra charge for viewing the pandas.

Born in 2003, Tian Tian (meaning 'sweetie') and Yang Guang ('sunshine') will be under custodianship of the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS), owners of Edinburgh Zoo and a world leader in animal conservation, research and education.

The giant pandas' arrival represents the culmination of five years of political and diplomatic negotiation at the highest level, spearheaded by the RZSS. Hugh Roberts, Chief Executive of Edinburgh Zoo, said: "We have been looking forward to this moment for five years now, since we first embarked on this epic journey to bring the giant pandas to Scotland.

"The arrival of Tian Tian and Yang Guang is an historic occasion for the Zoo, for Scotland, and for the UK as a whole. Our dedicated team at the Zoo has worked tirelessly to create a world-class enclosure to house our newest additions which will offer visitors a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to view these extraordinary animals.

"The giant pandas will be on loan to us for an initial period of 10 years, in which time we are hopeful that the female, Tian Tian, will give birth to cubs – the first to be born in Scotland."

With the arrival of the giant pandas to Edinburgh, the RZSS has cemented its role in the future research and conservation of one of the world's most endangered species. Hugh Roberts added: "This is the beginning of a long-term partnership which will drive a programme of international research which will have massive benefits for the Zoo, Scotland and the UK – both in supporting giant panda conservation and in enhancing our programmes in education, science and conservation.

"It is also a highly visible statement of the growing momentum to improve international relations between the UK and China, and a sign that we can further co-operate closely on a broad range of environmental and cultural issues, as well as commerce."

Dr Chunlin Zang, the secretary general of the CWCA added: "We

are happy to finally confirm the arrival date for the giant pandas to arrive at Edinburgh Zoo. From the very start, the CWCA has been working in partnership with the RZSS. With this historic arrival of Tian Tian and Yang Guang, our collaboration has entered a new stage. Together, we are looking forward to playing an important role in future giant panda research and conservation.”

The arrival of the giant pandas to Edinburgh Zoo has been widely greeted as a symbol of the closer partnership between China and the UK. His Excellency Mr Liu Xiaoming, Ambassador of China to the UK said: “Tian Tian and Yang Guang’s arrival in the UK is part of a 10-year joint research programme to find out how human-bred pandas can survive in the wild. At its core, the project represents the growing scientific ties between China and Britain.

“But this is about much more than conservation. It is also about science, culture, education and above all friendship and partnership. Through these themes we expect pandas to bring China and Britain even closer together. Knowing pandas also means understanding more about their home country of China. This opens the way for people across Britain to explore the Chinese traditions, people, its society and economy. More importantly, this is an excellent window into grasping China’s commitment to peaceful development, desire for cooperation and quest for harmony with the world.”

FedEx Express, a subsidiary of FedEx Corp, is donating its logistical services to transport the giant pandas from China to Scotland. The Pandas will travel onboard a FedEx Express Boeing 777 Freighter in custom Panda livery – known as the “FedEx Panda Express”. The Boeing 777F is one of the world’s most modern and fuel efficient freighter aircraft. The aircraft’s long-range capability will allow the Pandas to fly non-stop to their new home in Edinburgh, ensuring that they

will spend the minimum possible amount of time in the air.

The Giant Panda project will be funded entirely from charitable donations from the RZSS and through sponsorship, offering unparalleled opportunities in terms of international corporate, commercial and diplomatic relationships between China and the UK.

The RZSS, a registered charity, worked in close partnership with the UK, Chinese and Scottish Governments, the CWCA and the China Conservation and Research Centre for the Giant Panda in Sichuan Province – the first organisation to artificially breed giant pandas – to facilitate this project and provide mutual and ongoing support throughout its 10-year lifespan.

Photograph of Tian Tian by David Fu