

Sichuan special

Panda lovers take Silk Road to Sichuan

FANS FROM EUROPE ON DRIVING TOUR TO SEE RARE ANIMALS

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Giant panda fans from six European countries that house the rare animal in their zoos are en route to the bear's best-known home of Sichuan province in Southwest China. They were chosen late last year by the Sichuan tourism bureau, which promotes the province's tourism and culture, from thousands of applicants.

The team is driving 10 sports utility vehicles made in Chengdu on a 21,000-kilometer journey across 14 countries. The trip started on June 12 from zoos in Madrid and Edinburgh and will finish in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, within two months.

The team, which began with two pairs of panda fans from Britain and Spain and more than 20 panda experts and reporters, arrived in Paris on June 15, Brussels on June 17, Berlin on June 19, and Austria and Italy in late June. Along the way, they picked up another four pairs of panda lovers.

In Paris, the "panda motorcade" passed the Eiffel Tower and the Arc de Triomphe, and, in Berlin, the Charlottenburg Palace.

Second President of the Austrian National Council Karlheinz Koepf and Chinese Ambassador to Austria Zhao Bin attended a Sichuan tourism promotion at Schonbrunn Zoo in Vienna on June 22. Zhao said the trip along the Southern Silk Road to Sichuan is a "magical tour".

The animal-lovers left Europe through Greece and entered Asia via Turkey in early July. They plan to drive across Iran and transit to Southwest China through ancient international trade channel the Southern Silk Road, which functioned for thousands of years till the mid-20th century, traveling through Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar.

Silk Road and pandas

There are 14 introduction and marketing events being held for Sichuan tourism along the route. This is the first time for Chinese tourism authorities to combine pandas and the Silk Road in promotional activities.

When they arrive in Sichuan in August, the 12 European panda fans will visit China's largest conservation



The giant panda fans' route from Europe to Sichuan province in China. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

and breeding center of pandas in Sichuan, and travel around the province, which is renowned for its 4,000 years of civilized history, picturesque landscapes, diversified ethnic culture, leisurely lifestyle and tasty food.

"That about 90 percent of the grand pandas in the world live in Sichuan indicates the good environmental quality of the place, as the animal is very picky in the ecological and climate conditions of its habitat," said Huang Yan, assistant chief engineer of the China Research and Reservation Center for the Giant Panda. "I hope more friends from around the world could visit these pandas in Sichuan."

Sichuan stretches from the east of the Qinghai Tibet Plateau to the middle reach of the Yangtze River and boasts a host of natural and cultural heritage items. In addition to the giant pandas' habitat, there are nationally famous natural reserves and tourist spots such as Jiuzhaigou, Huanglong, Emei Mountain, Dujiangyan Dam and Qingcheng Mountain.

The west of Sichuan is an important Tibetan region with several major Tibetan tribes, and has become a focus for the European travelers in the promotional activities. Both its land types and culture transit through the region from the Han people's upland agriculture to the Tibetan people's plateau nomadic lifestyle.

These places are easily accessible now by road and are ideal destinations for driving tours.

It is also the first chance for Europeans who love pandas to communicate with each other and deepen their understanding of the animal, the ecology of its habitat and the human culture of its hometown province.

A couple from Belgium, Andre Cornet and Joceline Peugeot, said they regretted being unable to take part in the trip because of their age. The pair was invited to attend the launch ceremony in Sichuan late last year.

The 65-year-old husband, who started collecting items related to pandas in 1978, said: "The panda is just like a family member at our home. And we are very excited to come to the hometown of the lovely animal. The launch ceremony will be a good memory for us, like our wedding ceremony."

The Sichuan dramatic art performance of face-changing, in which performers change their masks from one to another almost instantaneously with the swipe of a fan, a movement of the head, or a wave of the hand, in Madrid last month impressed local audiences very much.

Relations between pandas and France date back to 1869 when a French missionary encountered giant pandas in Ya'an, Sichuan province, and took one back to France. The animal died during the ship voyage and the missionary made it into a specimen named Yabao (meaning treasure from Ya'an), which was the first of its kind in the world and is still exhibited in the national natural history museum in France today.

Francois Van Lissum, a musician from Belgium who is taking part in the event, attended the Shanghai World Expo in 2010 as a representative of the artists of his country. He said the prosperity of Shanghai is impressive and has intrigued his interest about China. He looks forward to seeing the hometown of the pandas, tasting Sichuan hotpot and appreciating the culture and landscape of the land.



Panda admirers from Europe take part in a two-month driving tour from Europe to Sichuan province. They are seen here driving through the Arc de Triomphe in Paris.



The Sichuan dramatic art performance of face-changing is well received in Madrid last month.



As the natural habitat of the giant panda, a visit to Sichuan offers the chance to get up close and personal with these cute animals.



Super panda fans, Andre Cornet and Joceline Peugeot, from Belgium, with their collection of more than 2,200 panda toys at their home.