

At home with the pandas

Contributed by Evan
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By Keith Crane (Shenzhen Daily)

Within weeks, two young panda cubs will make their public debut at Hong Kong's Ocean Park resort, a gift from the mainland to celebrate the city's return to the motherland. Crowds of admirers will greet them and they themselves can be forgiven if they look a little startled by all the attention they receive.

Le Le and Ying Ying have come a fairly long way from their native Sichuan, especially so after several months in quarantine.

But they will have at least been a little prepared for their reception as the province's capital, Chengdu, has been gearing up its tourism market for people who want to see the cute, apparently cuddly creatures close-up.

Giant pandas have indeed made headlines recently, not least because of their high-profile endangered species status. But with a tourist in Germany deciding, drunkenly he would like to cuddle one at a zoo and finding they can also bite and claw, and sadly more recently, the death of Xiang Xiang, the first captive-bred animal to be released into the wild, their plight has received even more attention.

Such attention is now putting Chengdu firmly on people's "must-visit" cities in China ;^a unlike five years ago on my first visit to the country when the pre-dammed Three Gorges was the "highlight."

And the city and its star attractions do not let you down-if local tourism services have yet to completely fit the bill.