

Tai Shan, star of the global pandacams

November 29 2005

For weeks he has been the hottest ticket in town. Much has been made in the media of the difficulty of procuring tickets to see Tai Shan, the baby giant panda cub and "Peaceful Mountain" of Washington D.C.'s National Zoo.

When 13,000 free tickets were released on the Zoo's Web site, the deluge was such that neither the National Zoo's nor the Smithsonian's Web sites could be accessed.

All 13,000 tickets had gone within two hours, and some were quickly offered for sale on eBay, receiving offers as high as \$500 a piece. Also, standing only groups of journalists were let in Tuesday morning from more than 50 news organizations -- ranging from the CNN to the Washington Post -- for the media debut of the little bear.

But although Tai Shan (which means "Peaceful Mountain" in Chinese) does not make his official public debut until Dec. 8, he is already a familiar sight to many round the world, a star of his own Web-cam. In the five months since his birth on July 9, Tai Shan has been visited on pandacam by more than 7 million viewers around the world.

Pandas are endangered in the wild and there are estimated to be only 1,600 at large, all in China.

Officially viewable through both the National Zoo Web site and Animal Planet's Web site, the Tai Shan pandacam is also linked to by blogs from Washington to Baghdad, only increasing his popularity.

Not only are locals without the golden tickets relying on pandacam to get their panda fix, but he is increasingly becoming the subject of international attention.

Cathy, from Balad in Iraq, wrote on the Zoo Web site: "To say that Mei Xiang and her cub have brightened our days tremendously would be such an understatement. Every morning, we eagerly wait for your Web page to come up so we can check on Mei and her cub (Tai Shan). People stop by the office all day asking for a ... report. ... I will never be able to put it into words how much Mei has changed our lives here and what she has come to mean to us. We are all so crazy in love with Mei, her cub, and Tian."

Alex, from Cheltenham, England commented on a panda blog, "that bear is so cute it looks CGI (like it is computer graphic imaging)."

One of the most popular of the panda's perambulations is his famous "panda belly flops."

Gareth, from Brighton, England wrote on the same entry: "Pandacam is strangely addictive... I actually saw that happen (falling off a rock). I laughed so hard. It was just the expression on his face: 'Oh no, I'm stuck on the top of this really tall rock, what should I do? Ah ha! I'll fall over, god I'm a genius!'"

The Washington-based political/gossip Wonkette blog has its own Tai Shan section, searchable under the name "Butterstick." When Tai Shan was born he was the size of a stick of butter, and the epithet has stuck online.

Wonkette writes: "WARNING: The 'Stick Pic is a highly addictive substance. Symptoms include frequent reloading, IMing with friends about the degree to which the 'Stick twitches in his sleep, and debating

whether he is, in fact, smiling."

Pandacamming is a dual-coast operation, with California's San Diego Zoo home to a second baby panda, called Su Lin.

Su Lin's online presence has led to competition amongst panda bloggers, with Wonkette throwing down the gauntlet.

"So the San Diego Zoo has named their baby panda Su Lin: 'a little bit of something very cute.' Overcompensate much, San Diego? You want a baby panda throw down? Bring it, but you can't touch the Stick. We don't have put 'cute' in his name, because it's all over his face."

Thanks to the scarcity of Tai Shan tickets, and despite the official announcement of a West Coast vs. East Coast baby panda showdown, global panda-monium looks set to increase, with pandacam at the heart of the furor.

PandaCam can be found at: nationalzoo.si.edu/Animals/GiantPandas/

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