

Washington panda cub to be shipped via FedEx to China

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Tai Shan checks out his 4th birthday "cake" at the Smithsonian's National Zoo, last July, in Washington, DC. US-born Tai Shan will next week leave the National Zoo in Washington and head in grand style for a new life in China -- on board a Federal Express cargo plane, according to officials.

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On the morning of February 4, Tai Shan will have a police escort to

Dulles international airport where he will board a FedEx jet specially decked out for the occasion with a 40 foot by 40 foot (12 x 12 meter) emblem of a panda painted on either side of the cockpit.

"We're going to use our new 777 freighter, the fastest, most efficient aircraft to get to Asia and Tai Shan will be the special passenger on that aircraft," FedEx vice president of operations John Dunavant told reporters.

"We're going to call this aircraft the FedEx Panda Express," said Dunavant.

With Tai Shan on board the Panda Express -- which normally transports 2,000 pounds (around 1,000 kilograms) of freight -- will be one of his handlers, a veterinarian, and a two-year-old female panda and her entourage who will be picked up in Atlanta.

Tai Shan and his panda travel partner, whose name is Mei Lan, will not have the run of the plane but will travel in comfort, without being anesthetized, in crates crafted out of tubular steel.

"We're confident he'll travel well. He's a very adaptable, laid-back bear," said handler Nicole Meese, who will accompany Tai Shan on the journey and stay with him for a few days to help him make the transition to life in China.

FedEx has years of experience transporting all sorts of [wild animals](#), from lions to tigers to Tai Shan's parents, which the global air freight company flew to the United States in 2000, long before Tai Shan was a twinkle in panda conservationists' eyes.

After his 14-and-a-half-hour flight to Chengdu, Tai Shan will travel 2.5 hours by road to Wolong's Beifengxia nature reserve in Sichuan

province, where after spending 30-days in quarantine he will join the breeding program.

Tai Shan's departure for China has been on the cards since the day he was born in 2005, and in fact, under an agreement between the National Zoo and China, he was supposed to have been sent to the fatherland when he turned two.

The Chinese granted Washington an extension, partly because Tai Shan would have been too young, at age two, to enter the panda breeding program in China, but also because of the "huge emotional attachment the American public has for him," said Don Moore, associate director of animal care at the National Zoo.

But now at age four-and-a-half, the young panda is showing signs that he would welcome being part of a breeding program, not to mention the chance to nibble at more than the four varieties of bamboo that are available to him at his home in Washington.

But that won't make waving goodbye to him any easier for visitors and staff of the National Zoo.

"It's like sending your kindergartner off to kindergarten, but this kindergartner isn't coming back. He's going to stay in China," said Moore.

"I'm going to miss him terribly but I always knew this day was coming and we were lucky to have him an extra two-and-a-half years," said Meese, who has spent almost every day with Tai Shan since his birth in the early hours of July 9, 2005.

"But I'm looking at the more important, big picture and that is that Tai Shan is going to be part of the breeding program, which will help to

make sure future generations can enjoy giant pandas," she said.

"And also, by him moving, it will free up some space in case his parents have a little brother or sister," she added hopefully.

Zoo officials are carefully monitoring Tai Shan's mother Mei Xiang after artificially inseminating her earlier this month.

If Mei Xiang does become pregnant, the National Zoo could welcome a new [panda cub](#) to the world anytime from three to six months from now.

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