

## 5D18\_Wong Audrey\_An Afternoon at Cat Heaven

*Topic: A blog entry about a visit to a pet café*

### **An Afternoon at Cat Heaven**

Animal cafés – this kind of coffee shops may not have been on your list of places to eat several years ago, but thanks to Japan, they are starting to gain popularity in Europe and other countries in Asia. Hong Kong, of course, has also delved into this fledging business and many animal cafés have popped up across this small city since then.

As you all know, I'm a devoted animal lover, so given the opportunity I'll never miss a second in my life to interact with these captivating creatures. That's why when I finally had the time to rest and relax last week, the first thing I did was head straight to the newly-opened animal café on Nathan Road – Neko Café – to have lunch.

'Neko' is 'cat' in Japanese, so the café I was going to literally means 'Cat Café'. I guess it's a way of giving credit to the country which promoted these restaurants. Anyway, I was driven there merely by my craving to play with some cats, but my experience turned out to be more than just a trip to cat heaven.

Upon pushing open the glass door, I was immediately greeted by the refreshing scent of coffee, the clatter of tableware and plates, and a beaming waitress in a black apron with the words 'Neko Café' elegantly embroidered across. She led me to a table not far away from the 'Animal Hut', the exhilarating place where I could meet and greet the felines after my lunch – my entry fee.

I ordered omurice – which is basically fried rice wrapped in an omelette, and topped with sauces like ketchup or curry. It is also one of my favourite Japanese cuisines, as mentioned in my previous blogs.

If you're not sure about the things you should pay attention to while you handle the animals, don't worry – the café will provide a guidebook listing out the rules and regulations when interacting with animals, so make sure you go through them while you wait for your order and while you eat. It was also the same guidebook that let me know this café had OWLS on top of cats! Turned out they were introduced into the Hut only a few days before my visit, so I was lucky to be one of the first batch of patrons to meet the owls.

After the savoury meal, I was given half an hour to go into the Animal Hut – the moment I had been waiting for! The second I stepped in, my heart melted with sheer joy and delight at the sight of the balls of fur resting on pillows and shelves, and petted by other customers – cats! I found a sofa at the corner of the room with a tabby cat lying on idly. I sat down beside it, and gingerly caressed it on its furry head. It seemed to enjoy the stroke, and

soon the cat – Tiger, according to the collar around its neck – was curled up on my lap and purring under my gentle touch.

You won't believe just how relaxing it is to pet a cat until you do it! It is the BEST feeling in the world! As I fondled Tiger, I felt all my stress and worries retreat back into the dark corner in my head, where they should have stayed. The pressure from my work and hectic life drifted away like wisp of mist. I was once again reminded that if my apartment allowed animals, I probably would've turned it into an animal sanctuary, with cats and dogs that welcome me when I get home, and an aquarium I could watch at while I had my supper.

Soothing my nerves wasn't the only thing Tiger had done to me – I also became friends with another animal-lover thanks to this striped cat! Kate, a patron who had been visiting this café almost every day since it had hung up the 'Open' sign, had developed a special bond with none other than Tiger, so Tiger somehow became the bridge that linked us up. We opened our hearts and shared our love for animals, and it was from her I learnt about the adoption programme organised by this café.

From what I could gather, Neko Café is the first ever animal café in Hong Kong to collaborate with the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) so that animals, mainly cats, from SPCA can be adopted more easily. Apparently the programme had just been initiated, as the guidebook I read had yet to mention it. Too bad neither Kate nor I could be one of the adopters due to the restrictions of our housing estates. There is still good news to all the people out there who can't keep a pet, though – Neko Café donates 5% of its revenue to SPCA and charities helping stray animals, so you can all be part of the community that cares about the welfare of animals.

As I wandered around the Hut with Kate, making most of our time by stoking cats, I noticed a man teasing a Persian cat by pulling its tail and hiding its tray of food away. Angered by his selfish actions, we both approached him – along with an animal keeper working here, who also saw his actions – and told him to stop irritating the cat. The man was eventually driven away because of his disobedience, but it had certainly ruined the afternoon of some of the customers – and the poor cat – here.

We decided to head to the Owl Section to change our mood. We went down a short corridor into another smaller, dimly-lit room. The owner of this coffee shop had probably taken into account the fact that owls are nocturnal animals and need to rest in a dark environment during the day, but that didn't stop some customers from poking the napping owls, interested in their reactions. Although we tried to be as quiet as possible as we approached the owls, they still opened their shiny, orange eyes and looked at us almost accusingly. I felt even more heart-wrenched when I discovered the shackles chaining them to their perches. It was a measure to prevent them from flying away and possibly getting hurt from a frantic escape, but that didn't mean my heart would ache less at the sight.

Our 30-minute trip was eventually over. I would say I had a great time at the café, but that didn't mean it hadn't left me with a lot of things in mind.

Personally, I think animal cafés are amazing places for you to interact with animals. I've even heard of cafés providing hedgehogs and *sheep* for customers to play with. Animals can definitely add some spice to the stressing life of Hong Kong people in the way of helping them relax, just like what Tiger did to me. These cafés also bring joy to people who aren't allowed to keep pets, or are too busy to keep one, thus they won't need to bear the burdens of pet ownership. Apart from that, it's also a very good place for you to meet like-minded people, and even make friends with those who have the same passion. Kate opened me up to a group of people that will try their best to make sure every animal can live peacefully and happily with humans, and I feel connected to her in terms of our shared hobby. We even scheduled to meet again next Saturday, just to talk about animals.

Of course, animals also get their fair share of advantages from this kind of cafés. With the promotions of the animals and arrangements of meet-and-greets by animal cafés, stray cats and dogs can be adopted by people who can provide the best to them easier, hence sparing them from being put down by euthanasia as a last resort. It's a good cause, and the cafés, the customers, and, mostly, the animals can all reap benefits from it. Cafés can become reputable for their efforts on animal welfare, and this can help increase their income. Customers can have an animal confidant, and maybe even ownership of the animal they like. Animals can get the love, meticulous care, and attention they desire and deserve. More animals can receive better treatment because people's awareness of their welfare has been raised. You can say it's a win-win-win situation.

However, this business raises numerous concerns too. As I've mentioned, animals like owls are often restrained and put on display for the sake of entertaining us. Dogs, some cats and other animals with bundles of energy cannot fully stretch their legs in the tiny space given. They are disturbed by customers non-stop until the shop closes, and there is no guarantee that there won't be unthoughtful people around to frustrate and harass them. Wild animals like monkeys, snakes and raccoons especially cannot thrive in these limited spaces available in animal cafés. While some say these cafés can improve their features to make the animals feel more comfortable in claustrophobic rooms, metal cages, touchy hands and prying eyes, I still think it's cruel to animals, on some level, to deprive their freedom and make them be in the limelight.

Some customers may also learn to see animals as toys and things made to entertain instead of actual living, breathing creatures, as contrary to the original purpose of some animal cafés. They may exploit their chance of interacting with animals by using them as tools to alleviate stress. The animals might be able to make them feel less pressurized, but probably at the expense of their health, both physically and mentally. Maybe the man I saw at the Animal Hut thought teasing the cat was his own twisted way to relax. There is the possibility that animal cafés can sow seeds of feelings of being the superior in the minds of some customers.

Well, this may be a long tirade to some of you, but to be honest, I am pretty torn between deciding whether animal cafés are good to both the animals and their customers. Nonetheless, from my trip to Neko Café, I can tell the people there do do their best to protect the animals, from having animal keepers to look over the cats, to dimming the lights in the

Owl Section for the owls. If you want to start your venture into animal cafés, Neko Café is definitely a good place to start. Whether they have done enough, and whether this business can continue, though, will be something you have to chew on.