

A raccoon with black and grey fur and a white mask around its eyes is peering out from a wooden enclosure shaped like a small house. The raccoon's mouth is slightly open, showing its pink tongue. The enclosure is made of light-colored wood and has a triangular roof. The background is dark and out of focus.

COFFEE WITH A SLICE OF
CUTE

Cats may rule the internet, but when it comes to real life people-pulling abilities, they have some new competition. Petting cafés featuring more unusual animals – such as raccoons, meerkats and Merino sheep – are spreading fast across Asia, not least in the South Korean capital of Seoul

By Crystal Wilde Photography Gun Lee

A WHITE RACCOON AND A WELSH CORGI TUMBLE BETWEEN TABLE LEGS,

blending into an unruly ball of fur and stunted limbs as they wrestle with each other. All around, well-dressed patrons sip coffee and shoot the breeze, one eye trained on the next adorable skit to unfold at their feet. This is Blind Alley, a café in Seoul's Cheongpa-dong neighborhood, where three raccoons and their canine brother entertain the city's animal-curious coffee drinkers.

The concept of availing a side-serving of creature comfort with your cappuccino is nothing new. Cat Flower Garden, said to be the world's very first animal café, opened in Taipei in 1998. While current numbers for the city are hard to find, neighboring Tokyo, which has never been one to shun a kitschy trend – be it animal-, cartoon- or even toilet-related – had as many as 60 kitty cafés in 2015.

Although there are no official figures from either the government or animal groups, the South Korean capital is now giving Tokyo a serious run for its money, with animal cafés seemingly popping up on every corner of Seoul's bustling city center. But it's not just felines who have their claws planted firmly and exclusively in Asia's ever-fickle novelty seekers.

THANKS NATURE IS A CAFÉ IN SEOUL'S Mapo-gu district that opened its doors in 2015, the Chinese year of the sheep. Fittingly, the small yard outside the basement coffee shop is home to two Merino sheep, Anna and Sam, who were brought in by the café to enhance the farmyard theme. While their tiled pen

hardly compares to a grassy meadow, they have a salt lick, plenty of hay and a small tree to scratch their backs against. They also get a leave of absence from July to September each year to escape the scorching Seoul summer for their rural northeast hometown of Daegwanryeong. During this time, the café stays open without its star attractions, much to the disappointment, no doubt, of tourists who seek it out for that reason alone.

Putting her caffè latte – with foam swirled into the image of a grinning sheep – to one side, 29-year-old Hong Kong tourist Cindy Lim pets Sam's super soft wool as he surreptitiously nibbles at her sweater. "We saw this place on a blog and just thought the sheep looked so cute," she beams. "Back in Hong Kong, there are many dog and cat cafés, but something like this is more special."

The benefits for customers who frequent these animal cafés are clear. Studies by the United States' Centers for





THIS SPREAD

The residents of Blind Alley, an animal café in Seoul's Cheongpa-dong area, include three raccoons and a corgi





“
The people who come here are animal lovers. This café is not about making money – the most important thing is that I can better look after my pets when I'm with them all day
 ”

THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT
 The interior of Thanks Nature, an animal café in Seoul's Mapo-gu district that opened its doors in 2015; Merino sheep Anna and Sam of Thanks Nature

Disease Control and Prevention have shown that the company of animals can help ease anxiety and depression, and according to the Baker Institute in Australia, people who keep animals have lower blood pressure and cholesterol, and have a lower risk of heart attacks.

In a crowded metropolis like Seoul, many people live with their parents or in small apartments that either don't allow or have no space for pets, and the animal cafés provide locals and visitors alike with a unique way to unwind with a furry

friend. But what impact does such close and frequent exposure to humans have on the adorable therapists themselves?

In the case of Thanks Nature's Anna and Sam, Merino sheep are domesticated by the millions in New Zealand and Australia, and the creatures certainly don't seem to be displaying any signs of distress. Whether or not anyone would step in if they did, however, is unclear, thus opening a debate on the ethics and regulation of such establishments. In South Korea, there are currently no regulations overseeing the welfare of creatures in such establishments. Animal cafés are governed under the same laws as regular cafés, with the main restriction being that food cannot be served within the same space as pets.

HANG SONGHUI, THE CEO OF BLIND Alley, maintains that she brought her three raccoons, Creamer, Bean and Shot – whose names are indeed coffee-themed – to the café for their own good. Having rescued the trio from the fur trade as babies, Han started taking them to work with her in order to give them the constant care they needed as pups.

**THIS PAGE**

A cat greeting the visitors to Meerkat Café

The raccoons are also right at home with their corgi brother, Cookie, as they clamber down from their lofty perches to groom him and play with him whenever he waddles through. "I got Cookie after the raccoons, so as soon as he met them I think he decided he was a raccoon, too," giggles Han, as she stains Cookie's white, fluffy cheek with a perfect kiss mark.

However, one obvious worry is that the nocturnal ring-tailed bandits have their sleep patterns disturbed by the venue's daylight business hours. Blind Alley opens its doors from 9.30am to 10pm each day and gets most of its customers from nearby Sookmyung Women's University, whose students flood in for a double hit of caffeine and cuteness between classes.

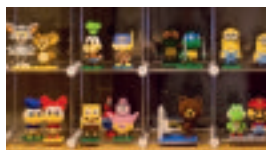
Now fully grown, Creamer, Bean and Shot live in a spacious glass-fronted enclosure at the back of the café. Throughout the day, the mammals might receive up to 100 guests who are all eager to interact with them. Any effects of sleep deprivation are hard to spot, though, as they use their highly dexterous paws to climb the wood-planked walls, swing on ropes and snatch treats from those clamoring to win their affection.

"The raccoons usually have around 16 hours of sleep, but when customers come

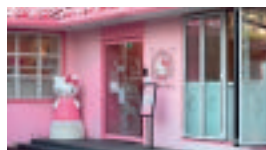


NOVELTY CAFÉS IN SEOUL

If animals aren't quite your thing, there are still plenty of other weird and wonderful coffee shops to explore

**Lego**

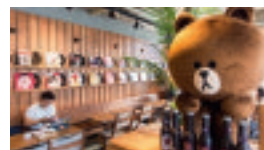
Relive your childhood at Hongdae's Get & Show café, where you can rent Lego kits by the half-hour and sample Lego-themed chocolates.
Mapo-gu, Dokmak-ro 3-gil 27

**Hello Kitty**

With four branches across the city, this pink explosion of cuteness offers an overload of Japan's most famous cartoon cat, sans any real felines.
hellokittycafe.co.kr/en

**Sherlock Holmes**

Filled with Sherlock goodies, 221B café in Seoul's famed Gangnam district serves up a slice of British mystery alongside its caffeinated drinks. **fb.com/221binseoul**

**Line Friends**

At Line Friends flagship stores, you can top your drink off with macarons shaped like famous Line stickers Brown the bear or Sally the duckling.
linefriends.com

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Scenes from Meerkat Café in Seoul's Hongdae neighborhood

sized members of the mongoose family spend most of their time digging in the sand for food or scurrying between a large network of underground tunnels and dens. Excellent hunters, they are also sometimes specially trained by local tribes to catch rodents.

Even in the café, when not standing alert in their famed two-legged posture, on the lookout for danger and prey, they fruitlessly try to dig into the floor. The meerkats seem unfazed by their human guests, choosing either to crawl all over them or ignore them completely as they playfully interact with each other or, conversely, sleep in a silky pile.

The bright interior of Meerkat Café is plastered with signs spelling out the rules, such as no shoes or jewelry in the enclosures and no rough handling. They also point out that meerkats are playful but easily scared by sudden movements and loud noises (in the wild they are known to dive underground when noisy

they tend to wake up," says the 55-year-old Han, a vision of new Korean glamour with her on-trend Champagne blonde bob, mirrored sunglasses and bright flamingo-pink lipstick. "They are just tired and a bit boring. [When the customers leave] then they fall asleep again."

Found in most urban settings the world over, raccoons are renowned for being great adapters and, according to *National Geographic*, cope better or as well in cities as they do in the wilderness. Indeed, perhaps it's this flexibility that has allowed these impish nighttime foragers to reinvent themselves as daylight opportunists.

MUCH FARTHER REMOVED FROM THEIR natural environment are the residents of Seoul's Meerkat Café, a relatively new addition to the lively student district of Hongdae. Two families of meerkats live in separate indoor pens, the smallest of which measures around 4m². In their native African desert habitat, the squirrel-



“
You can tell that the animals here are well taken care of. Cafés like this are something that you're not going to see in the United States. And when in Rome...
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airplanes fly overhead). One customer is indeed gently reprimanded for releasing a slight squeal as a curious critter burrows into her up-do.

Sipping an iced matcha outside the pen while waiting for her close encounter with the creatures is 33-year-old housewife Erin McBride. The American, who moved to Seoul with her husband three years ago, says that this is the second time she's met the meerkats. "It's something different. Something that you're not going to see in the United States. And when in Rome..." she explains, while carefully smoothing her shirt over her heavily pregnant belly.

When asked if she has any specific concerns about the animals' welfare, McBride insists that she's satisfied that the café – which is also home to a raccoon, a genet, an Arctic fox and a newly arrived wallaby – is run ethically and responsibly. "Last time when I was leaving, one of the girls who works here had all the meerkats asleep in her lap, so you can tell that they are well taken care of," she says. "If a place didn't look after their animals properly, I wouldn't go there and give them my business."

HOWEVER, CRITICS ARGUE THAT IT'S not just how the animals are kept that is a concern, but also how they are bought to South Korea in the first place. The wildlife



trade is known to thrive in Asia thanks to relatively relaxed laws compared to those in Europe and the US. Activists fear the craze of animal cafés could feed demand for the illegal breeding and smuggling of exotic creatures purely for entertainment.

Jason Baker, the Asia vice-president of international campaigns for global animal welfare group PETA, expresses concern regarding captive animals – like those that populate Seoul's animal cafés – living in what he deems to be a "perpetual state of confinement, discomfort and stress". "It's not possible to tell where the animals originated from," he stresses.

THIS PAGE
 Curious critters playing together at Meerkat Café

OPPOSITE PAGE
 A genet, one of Meerkat Café's furry residents

**NATURAL
ATTRACTIVEIONS**

Nature lovers visiting Seoul have several options when it comes to discovering the city's outdoor spots

Seoul Mountains

Ringin Seoul's city limits are several towering mountains. Accessible by subway are Gwanaksan, Ahasan and Bukhansan peaks, all offering stunning views of the city after a bit of legwork.

Seoul Forest

Easily reached on the subway, Seoul Forest is the perfect spot for a stroll or a bike ride. It's also great for families, offering hands-on experiences and insect classes for budding naturalists.

Seoul's Palaces

Seoul's last royal dynasty left behind several grand palaces with beautifully landscaped gardens. Other than Gyeongbokgung Palace, there is also Deoksugung or Changdeokgung.

Cheonggyecheon Stream

For something a little less straining, dip your feet in Cheonggyecheon Stream, which runs right through the middle of the city. Pick a shady spot under a bridge if the Seoul sun is unforgiving.



"We also don't have any concrete information on where animals go when they're no longer useful to the cafés."

Seoul's government says it's listening to these worries. Starting next March, cafés featuring "companion animals" such as dogs, cats, rabbits, hamsters, guinea pigs or parrots, more than 10 different species or a total of over 50 animals on the premises are required to register with the city authorities. Anything outside of these parameters, such as the aforementioned meerkat and raccoon cafés, are currently in a "legal blind spot" according to Seoul Metropolitan Government spokesperson Jiyoung Lee. As these animals are not listed as rare species, it's also entirely legal to import and breed them. "But there are possibilities of strengthening the rules in the future, as there are concerns from civil groups and a pressing need for regulations to be set up," Lee says.

In the meantime, it's up to the diligence of proprietors and patrons to ensure that the star attractions of these spots receive the care and attention they deserve. For Han, ensuring the safety of



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swingaround.philippineairlines.com

Creamer, Bean, Shot and Cookie is paramount. "The people who come here are animal lovers," she says. "If anyone is too loud or rough with the raccoons I'll kick them out. This café is not about making money – the most important thing is that I can better look after my pets when I'm with them all day."

