

① What are Cat Cafes?

A Cat Café is a coffee shop where we can mingle freely with cats who are living in the same space.

It is a business serving food and drink, but also offers a relaxed, homely atmosphere where we can enjoy ourselves in the company of cats, which of course means that it is at the same time a business which handles animals.

In some cases, the cat space and café space are separate, with the division usually being glass, so that we can enjoy tea, etc., while looking over at the other side.

The world's first Cat Café, "Cat Flower Garden" started in 1998 in Taipei, Taiwan.

2004 saw Japan's first Cat Café, "Cat Time" in Osaka.

Before that, in fact, somewhat similar businesses had existed, but they were lacking in consideration for the cats, which were treated as mere display objects.

Now there are reputable Cat Cafes in virtually every part of Japan, particularly in cities.

Newer types have also appeared recently, adding such functions as managing cat adoption (some of these run by animal hospitals) or animal-assisted therapy and pet counselling.

A Cat Café provides an ambience where the cats are superstars.

Among them are some who take almost no interest in the customers, though many customers actually find this an attractive, cat-like quality.

There are nicknames and catchphrases associated with each cat.

Illustrated information on the daily lives of cats, or news of birthday parties, special events, etc., can be found on home pages, blogs and video sites.

- Note: Dog Cafes (where customers can bring their own dog), Rabbit Cafes, Bird Cafes, etc., where customers can interact with animals, are on the increase.

② The cat is number 1

Naturally, the happiness of the cats is the top priority.

Proper medical care, with periodic checkups is provided to keep the cats in good condition.

If they need recuperative treatment, they will be taken home by the owner or a staff

member.

Usually a cat will be allowed to get used to the atmosphere of the café as a kitten, and will only formally debut if judged to be temperamentally suited.

Even after this, a certain number will suffer stress from such causes as relationships with other cats or fear of strangers, and will be withdrawn.

In that case, a new owner will be found or a staff member will take the cat in.

When withdrawn for aging or other reasons, a cat may sometimes be passed on to a trusted regular customer who requests it.

When the owner or staff member picks up a stray, they may take over its care, based on a contract of responsibility.

In this way, each cat is looked after responsibly to the end.

- Although businesses with crossbreeds only, or purebreds only, exist, most have a mixture of types.

Most are affiliated to animal welfare NPOs, etc., and carry out adoption work. They have also helped animals in need resulting from the big earthquake in NE Japan this year by donating part of their takings.

Among the purebred businesses are those concentrating on Munchkin and Scottish Fold kittens, and a Norwegian Forest Cat specialist for which customers must make an appointment.

③ Typical business systems

A fairly standard charge is 1000 yen (about 9 Euro) for 1 hour.

Recently, short trial periods (maybe 15 minutes for 250 yen) have become increasingly available.

On the other hand, some have a longer time (maybe 90 minutes., 1500 yen) as their mainstay.

Some include a drink in the price, but it is usually separate.

About half will provide only soft drinks, but some also supply cake or cookies, light meals, or alcohol.

Some offer high-quality coffee or a full menu, and some permit customers to bring their own food and drink for consumption there (on the strict condition that nothing is fed to the cats).

The scale ranges from small, with 5 or 6 cats, to large, with 20-30.

Medium-size (15 or so) is common.

For opening hours, 10 AM to 11 PM is usual.

Cats have nocturnal leanings, and tend to be livelier at later hours.

First-time customers must receive an explanation of the system from the staff.

- ♦ Holding in the arms may be forbidden, or allowed only with cats who don't mind it, in which case you should call a staff member first.
- ♦ Primary school children or younger are not allowed, or only under adult supervision. (There is one business which allows them after a short training lecture)
- ♦ Don't monopolize a particular cat. Other people may want to stroke it too.
- ♦ Don't wake sleeping cats.
- ♦ Only new cat toys are allowed.
- ♦ No flash photography.

etc.

Disinfection of hands is required before entry.

Some have lockers where you can leave things safely.

- Note: Popular types

Brown tabby, white orange tabby, tortoiseshell, black... mixed breeds retain strong popularity.

Some recently popular breeds among the purebreds include Ragdoll, Munchkin, Scottish Fold, Maine Coon, Norwegian Forest, and Bengal.

④ Glossary of terms used in Japanese Cat Cafes

“Ohizagetta”: A cat curled up asleep in the lap of a favourite customer

“Snack”: Chiefly, crunchy dry food. Can be fed to the cats at an extra charge. No matter how fast asleep, they soon come running for this.

“Special Snack”: Dried fish (lake smelt, bonito), wet food, etc.: Extremely popular – must take care to avoid injury to your hand.

“Birthday Party”: They are really superstars! Can be held individually, or for a group whose birthdays are close. For a stray whose birthday is unclear, the day it was taken in becomes the substitute birthday.

“Little Present” A present, such as a toy, cushion, hot carpet, plate, or silver vine (Japanese catnip), given by a customer to their idol cat.

Incidentally, I gave flowers to the brown tabby called Yuzuhachi of the Nyanny Cat Café in Kobe on his birthday (see photo).

“Pads”: a cat’s soft paw pads – irresistibly charming to a cat lover.

“Human Staff”: The owner and other staff members.

“Cat Staff”: The leading players, the cats.

- Note: Recommended Cat Cafes
 - ◆ “Nyanny” in Kobe City, Hyogo Prefecture
 - ◆ “Nekobiyaka” in Himeji City, Hyogo Prefecture
 - ◆ “Neko En” (“Cat Garden”) in Taito Ward, Tokyo
 - ◆ “Nyanka CoCo Tsuiteru!” in Sakado City, Saitama Prefecture

If you come to Japan, be sure to drop in to a nice Cat Café. You are bound to meet a cat that will take your fancy. Miaoww...

Reina Ito / September 2011