

The entrepreneurial oilwoman with a passion for cats and cake

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[ats](#) have had a good [covid](#). While [humans](#) have, on the large, had a pretty rotten time, our feline [friends](#) have been in more demand than ever.

While demand for cats is usually pretty steady year in, year out, a global [pandemic](#) forces us all to spend days on end shut indoors and every [man](#) and his [dog](#) wants one.

I know this, because I was one of those lonely human hearts.

Having spent a goodly percentage of my waking life since last April alone at my laptop on the dining room table, I started looking for some companionship of the feline kind.

First, I scoured the internet. Cats were advertised for sale everywhere, usually at outlandish prices. But try to buy them, and they'd long gone.

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As for the Battersea dogs and cats home, you could have had two NHS hip replacements by the time you'd got to the end of the waiting list.

I'd just about given up, when a daily lockdown stroll took me past a new place in the neighbourhood – La Maison du Chat. Literally one minute away from me in Pimlico, in the depths of the Covid despair, an enterprising local had opened a cat cafe.

If you managed to travel much around Asia before Covid struck, you'll be familiar with the concept. It's like a cafe, but with cats sitting among the guests.

La Maison du Chat is a cat cafe with a difference.

Not only can you sit taking tea with a tabby or two, but, if you like (subject to some checks and a fee) you can take them home with you, too.

For the stars of this place are rescue cats from the streets of Tunisia and Cyprus.

The project is the brainchild of Florence Heath, a half-British, half French former oil exec who got the bug for animal rescue while working in Colonel Gaddafi's Libya.

While she tells it all matter-of-fact, the story of how she got here could be made into a movie.

After graduating from Imperial College London as a geologist, Heath got snapped up by Shell and sent to Holland to be trained in how to hunt for oil and gas. She became an expert in the geology of the western Siberia, where she was dispatched to work on an oil rig – the only female engineer in a macho world of Russian oilmen.

"I loved it," she says. "All around you was snow and forest. Beautiful, and the most wonderful people."

Her next posting couldn't have been more different – the Libyan capital of Tripoli. From being 40 degrees below freezing in Russia, now it was 40 degrees above.

“It was a proper adventure. Tripoli was a challenging enough place, then sometimes we'd go to the rig which was way out in the desert.”

She lived in a western compound with expats from all over the world. Strong friendships were formed as the international community mucked in together. She built a life she clearly loved, making friends with locals and expats alike.

It wasn't to last.

The Arab Spring blew revolutions into Tunisia and Egypt. And although Gaddafi was known for his iron grip on the country, particularly in his stronghold of Tripoli, the fervour soon came to Libya.

As Gaddafi's enemies got closer to Tripoli, the city suddenly became lethal. Heath's compound of expats were ordered to pack what they could into a rucksack and prepare for evacuation.

She recalls: “We drank as much of our stash of alcohol as we could and ate up all the nice food, and the next morning went to our local safehouse and waited.”

Their driver sped them as fast as he could out of the city and to the airport, she recalls.

“They were shooting at cars on the way to the airport. We were getting stopped by plainclothes checkpoints. You couldn't tell who the people were who were stopping us.

“I saw them taking some Africans to one side of the road. They lined them up on their knees and were holding a gun to their heads. It was quite horrid.”

Heath was later to suffer from post traumatic stress disorder,

not helped by seeing the video of a murdered colleague when she got back to Europe.

Shell then sent her to Qatar, but it didn't have the same buzz as ancient Libya and she decided to take a sabbatical.

The war in Libya was still rumbling on, but she returned to Tripoli to see her friends who had remained. She found her old house and moved back in, with the idea of doing some social enterprise work.

She started teaching local young widows, often ostracised in the traditional society, how to make candles that they could sell at the local bazaars, but power cuts in the wartorn city soon put paid to that.

Then, a local friend told her of how a woman who'd been running a refuge for dogs and cats had been murdered, and asked if she could help foster her animals.

It was Heath's first proper taste of animal rescue. She found homes for some with expat friends locally and took one in herself. Another is now even living happily in New York State.

But after a year and a half, the security situation got too dangerous and she had to leave Libya, but not before having worked with a Tripoli vet to start running mercy missions to take cats and dogs across the border into Tunisia.

With an expat friend from Tripoli who'd fled to Tunisia, Heath set up an animal rescue system finding them homes there or bringing them across to the UK to be fostered here.

She carried on working in the oil game in London until the crude price collapsed five years ago, decimating the industry.

She decided to look for something completely new, with a social element. Having seen cat cafes on her travels in Malaysia, she loved the concept but figured she could do it better.

“Out there, you pay your \$15 to enter and the cats just ignore you. I thought: ‘we’ve got cats that are just desperate for attention. Why not do it with rescue cats who will actually interact with the customers?’”

Literally as she says this, Mavis, a long-haired black moggy with half-bitten ears from Tunisia rolls on her back on my lap as I reach for my cappuccino.

“Also,” she adds, “I became interested in pets in therapy, trauma recovery and things like that. They really help and the medical world is starting to accept how much help this lot (she says, pointing at the cat gang around us) can be.”

She started off with “golden hour” for older folks to come and meet the cats and have a natter. “They can come and meet the cats and have something in common with other people. They’re a good icebreaker.”

Next came sessions for new mums, dads and babies. A godsend with Covid locking down publicly funded community groups. With her own toddler daughter, Heath says, she knows it’s hard to find a truly family-friendly place where parents can sit and babies can safely crawl around on the floor.

She now wants to start working with local special needs groups. “Many children, particularly autistic children, they do come out of their shells so much more with animals. It helps them communicate. So I’m looking forward to doing that as soon as we can.”

Rather than charge an entry, human guests just have to buy a coffee and some delicious home-baked nosh.

“That was one of my prime motivations for doing this,” she says. “I do love cake.”

As I write this, my two new family members are sitting at my dining table demanding attention. One, Gravel (don’t ask), has

learned there's no way I can continue working if he walks up and down my laptop keyboard.

So, if you want a cat of your own, or just one to share while tucking into some earl grey and gateau, get yourself down to La Maison du Chat.