

## Lonely? Rent A Puss, Rabbit Or Beetle

Lonely Japanese are forking out US\$10 per hour to spend time with a puss, rabbit, ferret or beetle. As Jamaicans would say "Now ah put it to yuh";

These pets are regarded as "professional"; I guess they get paid for what they do. But between yuh and me, an old doorpost, yuh nuh tink say di Jamaican pets dem very professional? For when a puss can tie out Miss Jane fish weh she put fi thaw pon di windowsill, without disturbing the cover of the basin; and when three foot Bruno can scale fence and run in between 10 cars going at 90 kilometres per hour and doan get one scratch... dat to me is professional. Well in Japan, the economic situation has taken a sharp turn for the worse but Japanese still like to use their money to have fun, as Duncan Bartlett has been finding out. Lola - or Rora - to give her a slightly more Japanese pronunciation - is a beauty and she knows it. Customers pay by the hour for her company. Usually they just want to stroke her, but as a special treat for favoured clients, she will lie back in a chair, close her eyes and pose for photographs. Lola is a Persian cat who works at the Ja La La Cafe in Tokyo's bustling Akihabara district. It is one of a growing number of Cat Cafes in the city which provide visitors with short but intimate encounters with professional pets.

When I called, there were 12 felines and seven customers, mostly single men. One man, in his early 30s, was attempting to bond with an Oriental Longhair by means of a rubber mouse. Yutsuke, who speaks with a lisp, is normally rather shy with people. He longs for a cat of his own but frequent business trips make that difficult. Besides, he lives alone, so the Ja La La is his solution to the problem. The right pet. It costs about £8 (\$10) an hour to spend time in a Cat Cafe. If felines do not appeal, other establishments will rent you a rabbit, a ferret or even a beetle. There are more than 150 companies in Tokyo which are licensed to hire out animals of various kinds and although beetles may be cheap, dogs are much more popular. First you pay a deposit and a hire fee. Then you are issued with a leash, some tissues and a plastic bag and given some advice on how to handle your new friend. Kaori is a pretty waitress who regularly spends her Sunday afternoons with a Labrador. They go for a walk in the park if the weather is fine, or if it is wet they just snuggle up in front of the TV in her apartment. "When I look into his eyes, I think he's my dog," Kaori told me. "But when I take him back to the shop, he runs away from me and starts wagging his tail when he sees the next customer. That's when I know he's only a rental dog." Every need considered. Of course, it is not only animals whose loyalties can be decided by money, as people who work in Japan's vast entertainment business will testify. The industry offers an enormous variety of opportunities to exchange money for company. Very popular at the moment is the Campus Cafe, where men go to socialise with female university students. It is cheaper than the upscale hostess clubs in which businessmen and politicians drink whisky with women in kimonos, although that is a business which is in crisis because of the recession.

Only a small proportion of the trade involves sex. Most hostesses are flatterers not prostitutes and customers come to find comfort in their words, not in their arms. One specialist agency is known as Hagemashi Tai, which translates as I Want To Cheer Up Limited. It rents relatives. Actors are despatched to play the part of distant relations at weddings and funerals. For an extra fee, they will even give a speech. But the firm's services do not stop there. It can also provide temporary husbands to single mothers who want them. The website says the "dad" will help the children with their homework. He will sort out problems with the neighbours. He will take the kids to a barbeque or to a park. He could also appear at the daunting interview with a nursery school head teacher which parents are required to endure in order to persuade the principle to give their child a good start in life. Cry for help. There is a service for women who are about to wed too. Apparently, they can practice for married life with a hired husband, although whether this involves seduction or sock washing is not exactly clear. And if things are not working out with a real husband, a woman considering a divorce may choose to hire a "mother" in order to discuss her marital anxieties. Mr M.O. from Shizuoka near Mount Fuji called upon the services of I Want To Cheer Up Ltd because he needed a father. Mr M.O. has been blind since birth and had a number of concerns that he felt he could not speak to others about. "I kept it all inside and couldn't deal with the criticisms that had been directed at me by my parents and teachers," he testified. After some discussion, the company sent an older man to have dinner with him. "Usually I can't open up when I meet someone for the first time but on that occasion, I felt I was really talking with a normal father. I'll use the service again," he said. Loneliness is a problem faced by many people on these crowded islands. But the Japanese are prone to believe that, in the right circumstances, money can turn a stranger into a friend... at least for a couple of hours. source : bbc.com