

# Buying, Training & Caring for Bengals

By C. Esmond Gay – Sarez Bengals - 2004

*Choosing which type of pedigree cat to share one's life with can be a daunting task; they're all so different, and each beautiful and amazing in their own right... some are energetic and vivacious, whilst others are calm and quiet. But if a person decides upon a Bengal, then they get many wondrous traits in that animal. These cats are special, and it's guaranteed that their owners will quickly grow to adore them! Bengals are entertaining, funny and charming... and they'll forever bestow undying love and devotion upon their human family – and in return, these cats should be looked after in the very special way they deserve...*

## Characteristics of the Bengal Cat

Extremely intelligent, Bengals are alert to anything new in their environment and are always curious to learn - they will get into everything; boxes, cupboards, draws and even groceries aren't safe – they'll insist on exploring inside the bag and rummaging through its contents! And if something moves, then it's even fairer game to these inquisitive little cats



– amongst other things, their owners will find it's impossible to write a letter without first letting them check out the pen! They're very affectionate too; well socialised Bengals will follow their human companions from room to room to be near, and then sit upon the awaited lap - *but* before settling down for a snooze, they will first rub on the attached face, hair and neck, while purring loudly. And if introduced at a young age, Bengals readily accept other cats – but it takes a little longer if they're older. And they are gentle with children too.

Some individuals can be headstrong as to their likes and dislikes, for example, most love being cuddled, whilst others have a preference for shoulders - *but all like heights*. So their owners should treat their Bengal to a tall carpeted tree with lots of platforms and a soft perch on top, which along with a soft knee, will become his lifetime favourite spot. And watching him leap from pillar to post as he replicates what *Asian Leopard Cats* do in the jungles of Asia, will brighten up the dreariest of days and have their owners in hysterics!

Bengals are a talkative breed and like to chatter away to members of their human family, especially if the listener is equally as vocal and expressive as they! And these cats have other idiosyncrasies that set them apart from other breeds - most enjoy water and will play for long periods in a bathroom sink with the tap slightly running. Some of ours will even get into the bath with us – then unashamedly shake themselves dry all over the bathroom!

## **Finding a Bengal Kitten**

Once the prospective new owners have decided upon this breed, they must remember that the chosen kitten will be a part of their family for many years – therefore, effort must be put into the search because if a mistake is made, it will be hard to rectify later! Interested parties should look in cat magazines and on the internet, and then draw up a short list of *good* breeders – but they should beware of those who think that breeding Bengals is “easy money”, and that they can replicate what good breeders do, but on the cheap. *They can't!*

The next thing for prospective new owners to do is to phone that selection, chat to them and ask lots of questions. *Do they have good pedigree lines? What are their kitten's personalities like? Are they born and reared indoors? Are the kittens vaccinated? Do the breeders talk as if they genuinely love their cats? And which ones make the enquirer feel most comfortable as the breeder describes what they do? These are just some of the many questions the enquirer should be asking.*

The prospective new owners then need to decide what type of Bengal appeals to them the most - there are a number of different generations, some closer to their wild forebears than others. There are also a variety of colours, and again, this is down to personal preference. Looking at photos in books and magazines will help. *And if the interested party is still unsure, they should visit a number of breeders who sounded most pleasant on the phone, and who have a variety of colours and generations.*



When there, those interested in a kitten must ask if they can look around the catteries; they should check the hygiene and also look at the adults, *including the parents of the kittens* - they will give an idea of the quality of the babies, their future appearance and characters. And if the visitors are not invited to do these things, then they should make an excuse to leave as there's *a reason* why the breeder won't allow guests to browse around – maybe dirty pens, poorly adults or other issues that are too abhorrent to allow others to see!

When invited inside, the prospective new owners should inspect the pedigrees and look out for inbreeding, which some call *line breeding* - but which I call *incest* and am wholly against. Visitors should walk away from close matings such as Brother to Sister because even though the *good traits* of each parent can be magnified in their offspring, *so are all the bad traits, including deformities, genetic abnormalities and also diseases.*

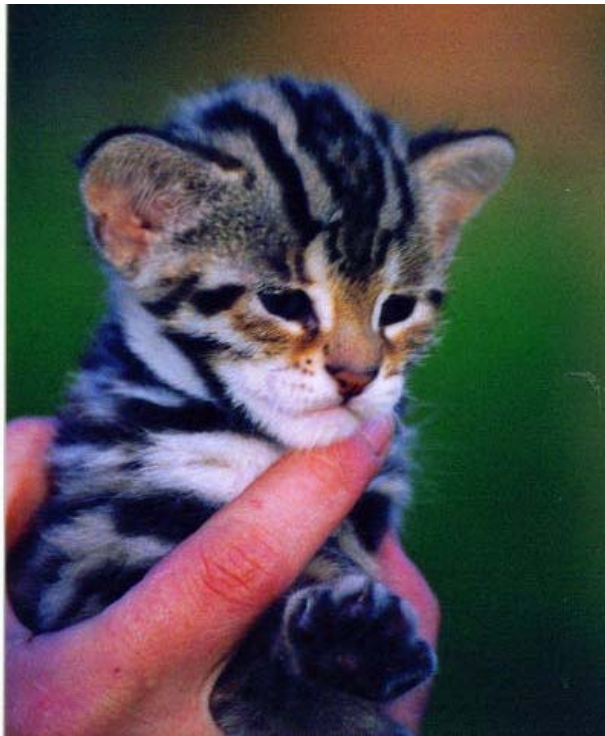
*And no one should buy the first cheap kitten they see!* A buyer gets what they pay for, and so should purchase the best available in their budget. Calculating the purchase price of the kitten over a 20 year period, helps to justify the outlay and makes it feel a little cheaper!

Finally, the prospective new owners should bear in mind that as with other occupations in life, the Bengal fancy has its share of gossipers; even breeders who are close friends can criticise one another just to procure a sale. They should also be aware that if one breeder is particularly successful, then this in itself may make some rivals irate. Only a visit to such breeders enable the buyer to see what they're truly like - *and only then judge them!*

*The following is the routine my fiancée Sarah and I follow when someone enquires about our kittens - it may provide ideas on what to expect, what to look for and what to ask;*

Normally the prospective new owners contact us having seen our cats on TV or in the press, so they already have an insight into us. We speak to them at length on the phone and then send them a *lot* of photos and written information on the Bengal. They can then digest it all in the comfort of their own home, and consider what type of kittens interests them the most. It also arms them with a great deal of knowledge on the breed prior to them even setting foot in our home, and this makes the subsequent visit easier for both them and us.

When the interested parties arrive at our estate, we give them a 1 hour tour of our property and breeding facilities; they are taken into each enclosure and they meet all of our adult Bengals, as well as the relatives of this breed, our *Asian Leopard Cats* - and we also show them our *Ocelots* and *African Leopards* and *other wild cats*, whose conservation is funded



by our kitten sales. We physically point out the *visual* and *personality* differences between early generation Bengals and later generations, and they see what the kittens will look like when they're older. The visitors also watch us interact and play with all the cats, and they can do the same should they wish.

After the tour, we invite the prospective new owners inside and show them a large album full of photos of almost all our cats, and the kittens that we've previously bred. This helps us to more accurately describe the different types and colours, as well as other physical traits of the Bengal. Then we describe the characters of the kittens we have at the time, which ones are more lap cats and which are bolder etc - *no one knows their individual personalities better than the breeder!*

We never rush the visitors and give them all the time they need – on this first day, we spend anywhere from 3 to 7 hours explaining everything that they need to know in order to make an informed decision over what type of kitten best suits them. These long discussions serve another purpose too; they enable us to get to know the prospective new owners quite well, *giving us time to determine whether or not we want them to adopt one of our kittens in the first place*. And we're not afraid to turn down a home that we feel may be unsuitable - we've even politely refused to re-home to a couple of the many celebrities who approach us. But most want and are allowed to adopt, and so our extended conversations with them, also helps to start the building of a life long bond between us and them.

Finally the interested parties see a selection of kittens – ones *we* think are perfect for them. *We try to pair the home with the **ideal kitten** rather than for the visitor to be shown a litter and then taking pot luck via a random choice* – our methods prevent them from making a wrong decision, and taking a kitten that wouldn't be suitable for them or their lifestyle.

*Some other breeders will do similar to the above and if they don't, then the prospective new owners should ask for further help and most good breeders will oblige.*

## **The First Few Days with a new Bengal Kitten**

The kitten must *not be younger* than 12-13 weeks old when he's brought home, and due to his tender age, he will feel lost for the first few days - so he should be confined to a small area such as a bedroom where he'll feel safer. And if it has an ensuite, the toilet lid must be down as it's a danger and is unhygienic, as Bengals aren't fussy where they go "fishing"!

The kitten's owners should place his food and water dish, his bed and litter tray and perhaps a small cat scratching post in this room. After a few days, the door should be left open for short periods and the Bengal kitten will start to wander further away - this will help him to gain his bearings, but his owners must ensure that he can find his way back. It's best for them to sit and watch their kitten, just to give him support and reassurance.

And expecting a tiny kitten to locate a litter box in a large home is like putting a 2 year old child down in a museum and saying, "*find the bathroom*". *Their owners should try to think of all things in his life like this – it will help them to understand him and what he requires.*

When the kitten does need to use his litter tray, his owners will probably notice him start to cry and wander around – caring owners should learn to recognise these signals and help the kitten to find it by repeatedly placing him in it until he gets the idea. Whilst he is still quite small, it is best to use the simple cat litter trays, as he will not be able to climb into the bigger ones. Depending on the size of the room, two of these trays should be given and then when he is a little older, his owners should buy some of the larger trays with covered hoods. Sarah and I use a compressed wood litter as it doesn't get too messy nor smell that badly when used.



After a few excursions into the rest of the house, the Bengal will be comfortable in his new surroundings and so his owners should then move the food, water and litter trays to the main areas where they're to live permanently. The kitten should have the freedom of the whole house and if his owners let him, then for safety, a litter tray should be on each floor.

## **Training a Bengal Kitten**

Eager for human companionship and approval, the Bengal is a breed that can be taught many things and with the minimum of training; a firm but gentle voice should be used, *but never in an angry tone*. If a kitten is shown the rules of the house whilst young, no scolding will be necessary when he's adult. For example, a firm: "*No!*" and a brush off the table, makes that rule clear. But due to the intelligence of the breed, their owners will find kittens respond to kindness, and quickly observe what annoys them, and then avoid that action.

With a little patience and some tempting treats, a Bengal kitten can easily be taught some dog-like tricks such as sitting up, rolling over, or jumping over a fly swatter or stick that's held horizontally. And their owners will find they're natural retrievers of balls, rolled up newspaper, or cat toys - ours get excited just at the sound of paper being crumpled; eyes

start to dart around, their bodies tense and their ears prick up, knowing that a game of *throw and retrieve* is about to begin.

The kitten should be enticed to lie upside down in his owner's hands for very brief periods. Few will want to do this as it exposes their vulnerable tummies, thus if persuaded while he is still very tiny, the kitten learns that nothing dire happens and that he can trust his human parent even when he is most helpless. This is almost impossible to do with an untrained adult cat - but once this trust is established in a young kitten, he will be easier to handle and train all his life. Even challenging, frightened kittens can be calmed with this method.

Many people think it is fine to let pedigree cats or moggies roam outside on their own. Such beliefs astonish and outrage me; surely no one would ever let a 2 year old child *run free* outside - *and so why allow a cat?* It is pure ignorance! If a kitten has only ever been reared in a house, then that's all they know. In their minds, they're not missing anything else! *Cats do **not** need to go outside on their own.* I have seen too many die on the roads, or



be stolen and too many contract deadly illnesses and diseases like FIP or Feline Aids. Yes, in an *ideal world* a cat would prefer to run free, *but this isn't a perfect world and cars are a lot bigger than they are!* Sarah and I turn down any potential new homes who say they want to let the cat outside alone - *because we know it may only be a matter of time before he **dies** due to that supposed "kindness".*

*I compromise;* I take some of ours for walks and have been doing this successfully since the 1980s. If one puts a harness and flexi lead on a *young* kitten and take him out once a day, he quickly learns that it's fun to trot beside his owner and *safely* see the wonders of nature. But the training is slow and must be done at his pace, and so patience is imperative.

However, once trained, a cat will behave as well as any dog; one of ours goes for 2-3 hour walks every day and when we reach the fields and countryside, I take the lead off him and he trots beside me or runs ahead a little bit, then he stops and waits for me to catch up. It took time to train him this well, to build up the trust required to ensure he'd never run off and to teach him my voice and whistle commands - but the results are worthwhile. *I may look a little eccentric walking along with an unleashed cat galloping behind me, but I don't care; he gets fresh air and has a nibble on the grass...and I'm **safely** knowing he's safe.*

### **Continued Care of a Bengal Cat**

The safest food and water dishes to use for adults are heavy stainless steel ones so that they don't get knocked over if the Bengal plays in it. Plastic dishes may release chemicals into the water if it has been kept in the dish for a long time. The water must be changed daily.

Bengals require little special care or grooming; a brush and comb will take out loose fur and prevent fur balls and shedding, whilst his claws should be clipped regularly as they can play rough, but no worse than any other cat. All this should be started during kitten-hood.

Sarah and I do not feed our cats on tinned food as it is mostly water, it smells and it can upset their tummies. All our cats are fed on a dry food called “*Technical*”, but “*IAMS*” or “*Hills*” are also very good. This should be left down at all times, as they only eat small amounts at a sitting as it contains very little water and so expands in their stomachs.

I feel that giving one’s cats some treats is a nice thing to do for them, and adds variety – imagine eating the same food every single day for 20 years? So we buy some plain fish or chicken fillets from the supermarket, cut off a small amount, microwave it for a few seconds, and give them this tit bit once a day - *akin to humans enjoying a tiny bit of chocolate!* It makes the cats happy and gives them something to look forward to. However such foods should never be their full diet; too much raw fish will cause vitamin E deficiency, and products like canned tuna will not be good for their stomachs.

Milk is dangerous to feed, even in small quantities. Adult cats are usually deficient in lactase, the enzyme that digests the lactose sugar in milk. The composition of cow’s milk is different from cat’s milk and when fed to kittens or adult cats, it will frequently cause diarrhoea, resulting in dehydration, reduced activity, malnourishment and depression.

### **Healthcare of a Bengal Cat**

Bengals are hardy cats, but being living creatures, health care is still very important as accidents do happen, even in the most careful of homes. If their owners do not already have a professional relationship with a local veterinarian, one should be established immediately. Any new

kitten must have his full course of *flu and enteritis vaccinations*, which the breeder should already have given him, and then he will need a yearly booster. And even if a kitten is not going to be mixing with other outdoor cats, he should still be given the *leukaemia vaccination*. *Micro chipping* is also a superb idea and we strongly recommend it.



Indoor Bengals rarely become ill, but diseases can occur, so their owners should be aware of indications of trouble so that he can be taken to a vet if one’s concerned. When healthy, a Bengal will be active and alert, with bright eyes and a soft lustrous coat. He will be a hearty eater, so a lack of appetite can be a sign he’s ill, as can vomiting and loose stools.

Persistent sneezing, watery eyes, and a runny nose are also indications of ill health and must be tended to, and since a sick animal won’t eat, any illness is a threat. If he is listless and the third eyelid (haw) appears in the corner of his eye, and remains there, something is wrong. If his coat becomes rough, with excessive shedding, this too is a sign of illness.

Some say that due to their ancestry, Bengals are inherently *more* prone to parasites than other breeds; however we haven’t noticed this in ours. But any kitten must be *wormed* regularly for both *tapeworms* and *roundworms* – their owners should speak to their vet if they’re unsure what to use. We find “*Drontal*” tablets or “*Spot-on*” neck liquid, good.

The best *flea products* are the *injection, Stronghold or Frontline*. The latter are both liquids that are applied to the neck. A kitten must also be *neutered* unless one wishes to breed - the males should be done at 5 months or they may spray, and females at 6 months.

We also strongly advise *insuring* all Bengals. Vets bills can be huge if a problem occurs!

As well as one's vet, the breeder should also always be there for owners of one of their kittens; this is one of the reasons why I stressed finding one who's friendly, kind and caring - *adopting their kitten should be the beginning of a good friendship between the new owners and them*. Our kittens have been bred in a superb environment and from some of the world's best cats – we are perfectionists at what we do, so problems with ours are virtually non-existent. *But not all breeders meet our same high standards*.

*Bengal cats make loyal and fun companions. But it is the environment in which the breeder rears them, and then the one that their new owners provide for the kitten, that determines their adult character – just as a child's upbringing creates their adult personality. So the prospective owners should choose well - and then treat their new kitten in the same way one would a child – because these animals live, feel and love in a similar way to them.*

*Adding a Bengal to one's family, is a life changing experience – and those who embark upon this adventure, should cherish every precious moment of it...*

**C. Esmond Gay**

**Sarez Bengals**

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*Dedicated to all our kittens*

**Photos from top to bottom;** (1) F2 "Sarez Pharaoh", (2) 75% w/b F1 Sarez kitten, (3) 75% w/b F1 Sarez kitten, (3) SBT Sarez Litter, (5) F2 Sarez kitten, (6) F1 Sarez Kitten.

**Addition 2008;** Due to the extreme stress of our work with the Bengal and wild cat conservation, Sarah and I retired in 2004. We had achieved many of our goals, and so our larger felines went to wildlife parks, and our unique Bengals and Leopard Cats went to Pauline and Frank Turnock of Gayzette Bengals - they now continue with our cats and are expanding the breeding programme that we worked so hard to create.

**I stay in regular contact with Pauline and Frank and offer them my full support and advice on the Bengal and wild cats. I closely follow their achievements, and behind the scenes, I am there for them and for the beautiful felines I once so proudly owned.**

*Being so involved with their work lessens my feelings of loss over my beloved cats...*

**C. Esmond Gay**

**Sarez Bengals**