

Crazy about Maine Coon cats

By Stephanie Wood



Maine Coon breeder Rose-Anne Burgunder with one of her cats

Anyone arriving at Rose-Anne Burgunder's villa would quickly realise she is mad about cats. Stepping into the Porches property that she and husband Andreas have called home for the past two years, I am met by feline figures everywhere; depicted in the artworks on the walls, stitched into cushions on chairs - and then the real-life versions appear.

But these are not your regular domestic cats. For one, the bushy figures that appear at my feet are at least double the size of any cat I've seen before. No, these are Maine Coons, a gentle giant of a cat (adult males typically weigh between 12 and 18 pounds) that Rose-Anne has been breeding for 20 years.

She first came across the distinctive breed shortly after her 40th birthday when, having never been allowed a pet cat as a child, she was given a red-haired European house cat that she called Roucky. Sadly he passed away not long after, and so Rose-Anne set about replacing him with another red-

haired cat. After much searching, the one she discovered just happened to be a Maine Coon, which she also named Roucky - and from thereon in she describes her love of the breed as "like a virus".

"I got one Maine Coon, another Maine Coon, and it just went from there," she reveals. But what was it about this specific cat - other than its impressive size - that so captured her heart? It was their character, she tells me, which differs from a typical house cat. "A Maine Coon is more like a dog," she explains. "They love people and need a lot of affection. It really is a nice cat."

Taking their name from the northeastern US state of Maine (of which they are the official state cat), the breed's distinguishing features include a silky, shaggy coat which comes in a variety of colours (Rose-Anne's vary from black and brown, soft red and a striking deep grey), as well as a long, bushy tail that can be wrapped around its head to combat cold conditions.

As Rose-Anne's collection of Maine Coon cats grew she established herself as a breeder, naming her cattery Roucky's Spirit in tribute to her first feline friend. Back then she and Andreas were living in Luxembourg (she originally hails from France whilst he is German), and they soon found themselves with a house full of cats, including a couple of prizewinners. One - Mona, a lovely female with a coat of silver-grey - is now an old lady and has sadly gone blind, but Rose-Anne proudly tells me that she was Grand European Champion in 2014.

Whilst Rose-Anne's love for her cats is clear, I wonder if Andreas has always shared this passion. "Not until I met my wife!" he jokes. "No, I was a cat person but with other people's cats; whenever I visited people that had them, I would sit down and find one on my knee. Cats can feel when you are a calm person, I think." He adds that when he first moved in with Rose-Anne she had a total of 18 cats. "That was a bit too much!" he chuckles.

Nowadays the couple have a slightly more manageable number in their charge: 11. In addition to Mona, the others are Do Menica, Faja, Faro, Froucky, Kiss Me Kate, Kesia, Money Penny, Cura Ba and Wally Wakka, as well as their European house cat Cameo. I spot the Portuguese connection in Faro's name and ask how he got his moniker. "He was born in 2014, just before we moved to the Algarve, and that year all the names of newborn cats had to begin with 'F'," Rose-Anne explains. "It's a rule of FIFe (the International Feline Federation) for pedigree cats - each year it's a new letter. For cats born in 2014, it was 'F', in 2015 it was 'G', and so on. So my husband had the idea for the name because we would be landing in Faro."

Their move to Portugal was prompted by a 2008 visit to a friend's holiday home in Armação de Pêra. They loved it so much that they returned in 2010, and then again in 2012. With retirement just a couple of





Rose-Anne and Andreas

years away at that point (Rose-Anne worked in electrical grids, whilst Andreas was the manager of a building technics company) the couple set their hearts on swapping chilly Luxembourg for the sun-drenched Algarve, and they made the move in April 2015.

With Maine Coons an uncommon sight in the Algarve (Rose-Anne believes she is the only breeder in the region) their arrival in the area prompted a lot of local interest. "The first time I visited my vet in Alcantarilha, there was a procession of people coming in to see how big and pleasant a Maine Coon cat is," she tells me. "Even now when my vet comes to our villa she is rarely alone - our cats are a real attraction!"

Despite the harsh winter climate that the breed is adapted to withstand, Rose-Anne says that - like her and her husband - the cats are happily settled in Portugal. "We had a special fence constructed to secure the garden so they can go outside and lie in the sun," she says, adding: "It's another life than the one they had in Luxembourg."

Rose-Anne is clearly pleased to be introducing Maine Coons to the Algarve, and even gave one of her latest kittens to her local doctor. Yet, despite the time and effort that goes into caring for her cats, she reveals she has never yet sold one. "It is a hobby," she says. "I've always given the babies to friends or to people that I know will send me regular updates and photos."

She adds that there are strict stipulations for anyone who takes one of her cats. "They have to sign a contract, and there are rules to respect. For example, if a couple gets divorced and they can't decide who will take the cat, it is not allowed to go elsewhere - it has to come back to me."

So what sort of person makes an ideal Maine Coon owner? "There's one thing you must be and that's a person who loves cats, because they need a lot of attention" says Andreas. "Also, a Maine Coon must not

be alone, so someone who is more or less home all day or has at least one more cat in the house is ideal."

Rose-Anne adds: "They are especially good for elderly people. Some care homes in Germany have introduced cats because it's proven that having a purring cat on your knee reduces blood pressure."

Of course, for all the benefits of owning cats, there are challenges too. It's especially hard, Rose-Anne tells me, when one of her brood passes away, and when I visit she is mourning the loss of her cat Yin-Yin just days earlier. "We discovered her cancer in June last year," she tells me with palpable sadness. "We said no to surgery because it would have been a major operation and we did not know whether the cancer had already spread. She had anti-inflammatory medication and pain relief, and she was happy. But you know that the time will come when you have to make that decision."

She continues: "It's a good thing that you can take the decision - it's not the same for a human - but you still feel guilty. We had her six or seven months longer, but eventually the vet told us the moment had come. These are difficult times."

Now retired, Rose-Anne and Andreas have found plenty to fill their time here in the Algarve. Care of their cats alone takes up two hours a day (not to mention the uncountable time spent playing with them) and once a fortnight they spend a couple of hours grooming them.



Unsurprisingly, cats play a central role in their lives outside of their home too. They are actively involved with Carvoeiro Cat Charity, where they have recently taken on administrative duties. In addition, once a week Rose-Anne goes to the charity's quinta in Ferragudo to help with the cleaning and feeding of the 350 street cats it houses. And, as if that wasn't enough cat

>> Continues on page 6

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>> Continued from page 5

time, the couple also drive into Armação de Pêra every evening where they feed a colony of four cats. "When they see the car they run to us - they know we have food!" says Andreas. "We can even cuddle two of them now."

Just before I leave, I compliment Rose-Anne on the necklace she is wearing, a beautiful gold Maine Coon silhouette

hanging from a hoop. It turns out to be a Christmas gift from Andreas, who had it specially made by a jeweller in Germany. Thinking of the lovingly wrapped toys and treats my family's dog received on December 25th, I ask if their cats also receive Christmas gifts. "No, they have presents from us every day," Rose-Anne smiles, before Andreas adds: "We are crazy about cats, but we are not crazy!"

As I make my way home, I feel a little bit crazy about these gentle giants too. ■

For more information, visit Rose-Anne's website (in French, but readable with Google Translate) or get in touch.

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Maine Coon cats: a history



Maine Coons have inhabited North America for centuries, but there is very little knowledge of how they first came to the continent. There are many tales relating to their origin, though the authenticity of these is doubtful.

One far-fetched story claims that the Maine Coon's ancestor was a raccoon - an interesting idea, but biologically impossible! Others say the breed was produced by the crossing of the indigenous bobcat with a domestic cat.

Another fanciful tale traces their ancestry to the long-haired cats belonging to Marie Antoinette. According to this story, an American captain named Clough brought the French queen's cats to America after her execution, where they bred with other short-haired breeds.

Yet another narrative is that they were brought to the United States in the 1700s by an American captain named Coon, who hailed from the northeast coast of America.

This last tale may contain some grains of truth. Naval captains often brought cats from foreign lands on board to counter the problem of mice, which thrived on the ships. On their arrival in the US they may have made their home on the northeast coast in Maine. The climate was terrible and only the bravest and toughest cats could survive.

However they came to be, the Maine Coon was one of the first breeds to be officially recognised in the early 19th century, and gained rapid popularity. Mr. F. R. Pierce, who owned Maine Coons as early as 1861, mentioned in 1903's *The Book of the Cat* that a Maine Coon named Leo was awarded Best Cat in the 1895 New York City cat show, and was a consistent winner in Boston in 1897, 1898, and 1899.

The breed's popularity plummeted in the early 1900s when more exotic cats arrived and became instant favourites. By 1950, the breed had dwindled alarmingly and very few numbers were left.

However, a few breeders displayed an active interest in the cat, throwing it a life line by holding Maine Coon-only shows, and in 1968 the Maine Coon Breeders and Fanciers Association was founded to "preserve, protect and promote" the breed. ■

Thank you from Castelo de Sonhos

Christmas 2016 was particularly heartwarming for the Castelo de Sonhos charity as so many people and organisations helped the underprivileged families of Silves over the festive period.

On behalf of the charity, a non-profit organisation that provides support to struggling families and underprivileged children in the area, president Liliana Rodrigues would like to thank the following individuals and groups:

- Silves Town Hall & Parish for loaning the venue for the kids' Christmas party, including all the entertainment & decoration, and Dave Sheldrake of Dave

Sheldrake Photography for taking the photos of the party.

- Iceland supermarket in Albufeira and their very generous customers for supplying children's presents and over 200 boxes of chocolates, which meant that families registered with the charity received a decorative box of chocolates together with their basic food bank supplies this Christmas. A total of €483 was also donated by the supermarket's customers.

- Silves Rotary Club for their generous donations of toys, warm clothing, basic food supplies and many Christmas shoe

boxes for the elderly.

- Julia Bardill, Eve Wood & Colin Robinson of Balaia Golf Village for collecting & delivering 44 Christmas shoeboxes.

- All the members of the public who responded to the 12th Annual Shoebox Campaign for the Elderly.

- And last but not least, the fantastic face painters Lara & Annette and all the charity volunteers, especially Marianne, Jacqueline and Olivia, from the Silves charity shop. ■

📄 www.castelodesonhos.pt