

Beat the heat with a walrus retreat



Visitors look at a walrus from their hotel room at the Pairi Daiza animal park in Brugelette.—AFP photos

Much of western Europe was sweltering in a heatwave, but visitors to one Belgian safari park could at least seek shelter in an igloo with a cool view. Six Arctic-themed rooms at the Pairi Daiza resort have been given underwater windows onto the world of the walrus, and the giant sea mammals can swim up to say hello. “The first customers who came were like, ‘Wow, that’s beautiful,’” the zoo’s technical director, Jeremy Lannoy told AFP. “They leave with stars in their eyes, because experiences like this, there aren’t that many elsewhere in the world.”

Rooms come with a 10 centimeter (four-inch) thick window that can withstand huge

water pressure or the charge of a tusked beast that can eventually grow up to two tons. The two younger walrus at the park don’t seem aggressive, however. If anything, they are intrigued by their human neighbors. “There is no chance you’re disturbing the animal because its territory is so big anyway, and it has access to the inside and outside,” said park spokeswoman Claire Glissen. “Sometimes the walrus goes up to the window and is interested in who is in the room. But it also happens that he’s not interested. It depends on his state of mind. “But it’s true that in this interaction between animals and humans, sometimes we don’t know who is the attraction.” —AFP



A walrus looks at a camera placed in a hotel room at the Pairi Daiza animal park in Brugelette.



A walrus is pictured at the Pairi Daiza animal park in Brugelette.



England’s first wild beavers for 400 years can stay

The first beavers to be introduced into the wild in England for 400 years were yesterday given permission to stay, in what campaigners hailed as a landmark move. The animals, prized for their fur, meat and scent glands, had been hunted out of extinction, but mysteriously reappeared in Devon, south-west England, in 2013 — likely illegally released into the wild. The government initially said it would capture and re-home them amid fears they might be carrying disease, but wildlife activists successfully campaigned for them to remain under observation.

After a five-year trial examining their impact, environment minister Rebecca Pow said they had improved biodiversity and water quality in the area, and were “making the local landscape more resilient to climate change”. The Devon Wildlife Trust, the charity that ran the trial, hailed the

“landmark” decision. “It signals the first legally sanctioned reintroduction of an extinct native mammal to England,” it said in a statement.

“It means that the beaver population, which lives on the River Otter and is estimated to consist of up to 15 family groups, now has a secure future.” Beavers have been described as “nature’s engineers”, whose work can help create wetland habitats to support a range of species from insects to wildfowl.

Critics say they damage farmland and can cause flooding, as well as disrupting fish populations with their dams. But supporters argue that in fact their dams limit flooding by holding more water upstream. European beavers were successfully re-introduced into the wild in Scotland more than a decade ago, and in 2016 were given legal permission to remain by the devolved government in Edinburgh. —AFP