Circus Lions Plan San Francisco Getaway

By KATHARINE MIESZKOWSKI

Two of the Bolivian lions jetting to San Francisco after Bolivia’s ban on animals in circus acts.

Paging four retired circus lions from Bolivia! Your new flight plan to San Francisco has been approved.

The soon-to-be-expatriate lions are the first to arrive in the United States after Bolivia’s 2009 ban on circuses using animals in their acts. Peru and Brazil are now considering similar prohibitions.

The kings of the jungle are scheduled to take a jet out of Cochabamba, Bolivia, at 6 a.m. on Thursday, refuel in Panama and arrive at San Francisco International Airport on Thursday afternoon.

The big cats will travel to the ARK2000 sanctuary in San Andreas, Calif., which is run by the Performing Animal Welfare Society, to take it easy for the rest of their days.

“Hopefully, these lions are going to have a really nice Memorial weekend — home in time for the holidays,” said Tim Phillips, the co-founder of Animal Defenders International, an animal-welfare group that arranged for the new home. The lions used to live in a rusting cage on the back of a truck.

The ban in Bolivia, which takes effect in August, raises an obvious issue: Where will all these out-of-work circus animals go? While some animals are likely to find homes in zoos in Bolivia, others are in need of new digs abroad.
“We campaigned for this ban, so we will do what it takes to find homes to care for the animals,” Mr. Phillips said. “The government has already spoken to us about eight more lions.”

The international relocation of the first four lions alone is costing about $350,000, including $100,000 to build the enclosure in Calaveras County where they will live. The bill is being footed by Bob Barker, the former host of “The Price is Right.”

“Circuses with animals are cruel and archaic,” Mr. Barker said in a statement. “I commend the Bolivian government for taking this progressive step and hope that other South American countries, and indeed the U.S.A., will follow suit.”

Getting the lions off the ground has been a logistical challenge. Originally, the majestic cats were scheduled to arrive in San Francisco on Wednesday, but President Obama’s arrival in the Bay Area had the section of the airport used for handling special flights otherwise occupied with Air Force One.

Then, the lions’ touchdown was rescheduled for Monday, but that plan was scuttled by technical difficulties. The 767 airplane was too high off the ground for the loading equipment at the Cochabamba Airport to handle, and the rescuers couldn’t get permission to use a forklift with that plane.

There was talk of an 18-hour truck ride to Santa Cruz, Bolivia, to get to a bigger airport. Instead, the lions will be forklifted into a DC-10 aircraft in Cochabama. “It’s a lower aircraft, so its hold doors can be reached,” Mr. Phillips said.