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(page checked June 2026)

Mishka, the Kosovo Cat (2007)

Mishka was a tortoiseshell cat living in the city of Pristina, in Kosovo in the former Yugoslavia, with architect Bashkim and his wife Olsa. She had turned up outside their apartment building one day some six years earlier, cold, wet and hungry, and they had taken her in; she seemed quite content to be an indoor cat and to watch the world go by from the window.

In the closing years of the twentieth century war came to the Balkans, and to Pristina, which suffered severe damage from bombing. Life became ever more difficult for Bashkim and Olsa, who were ethnic Albanians; but worse was to come. One night came the knock on the door from the Serbian police, telling them they had one hour to leave before being thrown out of their home. 'Ethnic cleansing' was under way.

Mishka's adventure begins

They decided the only thing they could do was to make the journey of 500 miles (800 km) or so over the mountains to Macedonia, where there was an Albanian refugee camp, and there might be the chance of resettlement to another country. They hastily gathered a few precious possessions they could carry — and Mishka, whom Olsa would not hear of leaving behind, despite Bashkim's protests. The cat went into a small canvas bag with a zip, leaving just enough room for her head to poke out. Amazingly, one of their Serbian neighbours, who'd heard what had happened, volunteered to drive them in his small car to the main road on the outskirts of town to start their journey; in spite of great risk to himself if his actions were found out. He said he didn't want them to leave thinking all Serbs were bad people.

The journey to the camp was long and arduous, taking fifteen days altogether, although thousands of other Albanians were also on the same road and they were able to get occasional lifts. After a day or two it became clear Mishka was not going to run off, and so they were able to let her walk alongside them until she became tired. She seemed to think it was quite an adventure, and would run off into the grass to catch mice and insects to eat, so they didn't have to worry too much about feeding her from their scarce rations.

A flight to Canada

The refugee camp was crowded and unsanitary. Mishka spent most of the time in her canvas bag, venturing out only when she had to and it was safe to do so. But there were immigration agents there from different countries that had agreed to take Albanian refugees; after a week at the camp Bashkim and Olsa had decided they would like to get to Canada. They were accepted, and a flight was to leave the following day — but a cat would certainly not be allowed, and they had to find a way to get her through the various checks.

The first hurdle came on the bus to the airport, when she was almost discovered by the driver who would have thrown them off the bus; but, with the help of a young boy, disaster was averted. Of course, before boarding the plane bags had to go through an X-ray machine; and a rather surprised security operative saw the body of a cat among the couple's personal possessions inside. Fortunately he must have been a cat lover, and when he heard they were from Pristina he handed them the bag and wished them luck. They boarded their flight, which carried a total of 246 refugees.

The immigrant cat

Exhausted, Mishka slept for most of the thirteen-hour flight and hardly moved, safe in her canvas sanctuary. The plane landed at Greenwood, Nova Scotia, where a former military base had been adapted to become a receiving depot and hospital for the nearly 5000 Albanians that Canada had agreed to take in. Hundreds of personnel and volunteers were waiting to welcome the people from the flight and to attend to their diverse needs. A medical check-up was required, and during this the canvas bag began to move about and wriggle — and out popped Mishka's head! She was impatient, hungry and needed a litter tray. The secret could be kept no longer.

An immigration officer was called, who didn't quite know how to deal with this unprecedented situation; meanwhile word spread that someone had brought a cat from Kosovo, and people gathered round to stroke and pet her. Eventually it was agreed that 'refugee #247' could stay, subject to health checks and immunisation. A collection was made to pay for her vet's fees — and so Mishka became the first, and only, cat to receive a Canadian immigration card! She became quite celebrated as 'the cat from Kosovo'.

The story of Mishka is based on a real-life one and is charmingly told in the book The Cat from Kosovo*, by Mary Jane Hampton, with delightful illustrations by Tamara Heikalo. It's published by Nimbus Publishing of Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada.*

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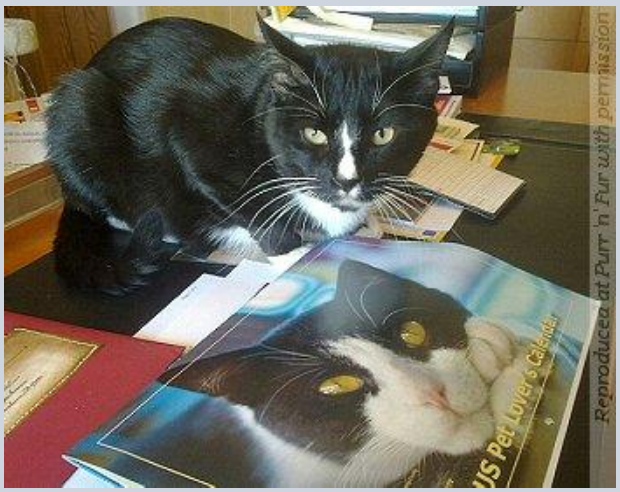
(page checked June 2026)

Gauguin,
rescued from the South Pacific
(2009)



Rather similar to the story of Junior, rescued from New Orleans following hurricane Katrina and given a new home in Canada, this tale is about **Gauguin**, who was spared a miserable life on the South Pacific island of Bora Bora, in French Polynesia, and went to a loving home in California. As his pictures show, he turned into a very fine cat. His story is told by one of his humans, Arthur 'Nipper' von Wiesenberger, at the time co-publisher of the *Santa Barbara News-Press* newspaper, to whom many thanks. The events described took place in 2002, when Gauguin was probably 3 or 4 months old.
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Bora Bora may be the ultimate human paradise; with balmy South Pacific breezes caressing the palm trees, powdery white sand beaches and the crystal-clear waters of the lagoon, paradise doesn't get much better — but not for Bora Bora's animal population. Wandering along the roadside are packs of homeless, abandoned animals. Many are former pets that belonged to departed island residents and visitors; others are their offspring, which multiply without any hope of shelter, food or care. There are no animal shelters and the island's one veterinarian charges astronomical fees. Nipper takes up the story:

'At the Hotel Bora Bora we were quickly aware of the abandoned-animal problem by watching a family of cats that searched the area for scraps of food in order to survive. These were not the type of "hotel cats" looked after by the staff that one finds from time to time in other parts of the world; they were more likely to be shooed away, but had nowhere else to go. They had fear in their eyes and were extremely skittish around people — a sad indication that they had probably been abused.

'Each evening we took dinner in the hotel's open-air dining room and watched as one tiny “tuxedo” cat, no more than a few months old, went from table to table tapping on the legs of diners, begging for food. The evening routine eventually brought the kitten to our table, where he would linger as we offered him morsels *(below left*). He became so friendly that he would sit in our laps and even sipped on a coffee.

'Sadly, our vacation was coming to an end. We couldn’t imagine the fate that might be facing our new friend, whom we named — for his artful ways — Gauguin. We had seen his mother, who was a rough-and-tumble type and had knocked him around. She was far wilder and reflected what a few years of island life did to a cat in Bora Bora and how Gauguin would become. It was a fate from which we decided we wanted to protect him. Speaking with the hotel's manager and his wife, they encouraged us to take Gauguin back with us. "He will not have much of a life, if any, here in Bora Bora," she said.

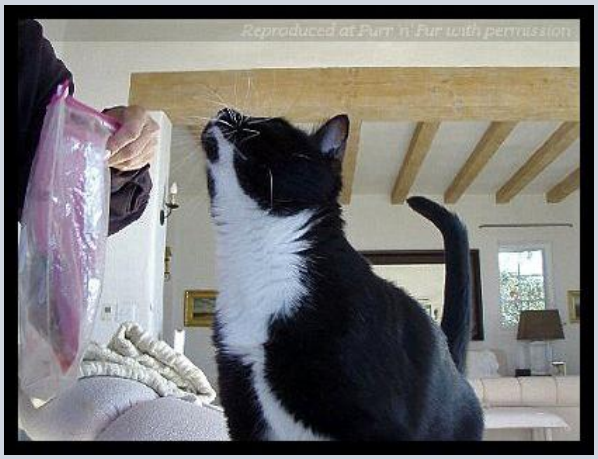
'The first challenge was to place Gauguin in a pet carrier, so that he could get the necessary travel documents from the veterinarian. Using a trail of food, we lured him into the carrier, but the moment the door was shut he began howling with horror. The next step was off to the veterinarian to get his identification chip and passport. Back in our room after his ordeal, we could tell that the poor little fellow was terrified. In an attempt to give him a bit of freedom on his last night on Bora Bora we put his carrier in the bathroom and opened the door of the carrier, thereby giving him some room to stretch. The next morning we discovered just how much he had stretched. The carrier was empty, the bathtub empty, and the floor showed no sign of Gauguin. Where had he gone, we wondered? Eight feet up, huddled in a corner of a small bathroom window, was Gauguin.

'It took a lot of tenacity to recapture the kitten but finally he was back in the cage, as terrified as ever and occasionally emitting a deep, mournful howl. We flew from Tahiti to Kona, Hawaii, where the kind Hawaiians allowed Gauguin to remain on the aircraft during refuelling, because at that time cats and dogs were subject to isolation for six months if brought to Hawaii. Having come from Tahiti, where there is no rabies, made this part of the trip easier. From Hawaii we continued our journey home to Santa Barbara, California.

'According to the hotel manager, Gauguin was a descendant of a Californian cat! The story goes that, years earlier, actor Peter Fonda had sailed his boat from California to Bora Bora. When Fonda finally put ashore on the island, his female cat jumped ship, never to return to the boat. She stayed at the Bora Bora hotel, eventually giving birth to a litter that included Gauguin's mother. But his California heritage did little to appease Gauguin. The moment he was allowed out of his carrier to explore he disappeared under a bed, where he stayed for several weeks, coming out to eat only when we were not in the room.

'It took lots of patience and enticement with treats to build Gauguin's confidence in us. Even years later he is still really a one-person cat, who sometimes hides under beds when strangers, especially men, enter the room. At night he sleeps on the bed under the arm of his mistress. He has a sweet and affectionate nature.

'Gauguin became an indoor cat, but he had an outside "room", double-screened and shake-roofed to keep him safe from predators. He was most vociferous, with a wide range of meows that could often sound like some garbled English words. He got especially talkative when toilets were flushed, perhaps impressed by Western plumbing! But in the end he was a unique cat, saved from a dismal fate, who brought constant joy to his family. We think he knew he had a good life.'



Gauguin died in early 2018, aged 16, and was 'very much missed'. After his rescue from a miserable existence in Bora Bora, he had a wonderful long and happy life in California.

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