

Where the wild things are

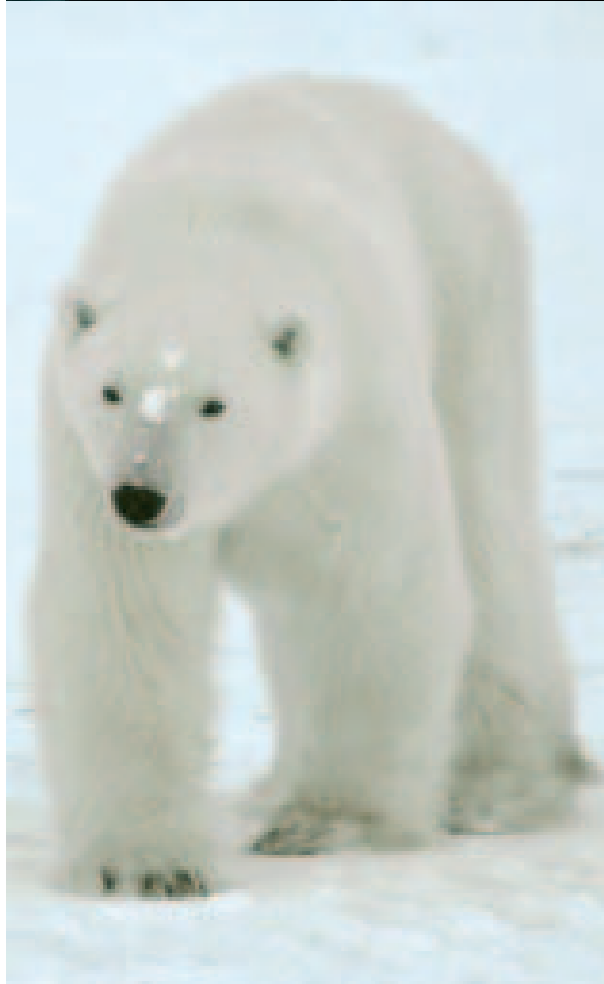
IN THE LAND OF THE MIDNIGHT SUN, THE POLAR BEAR IS KING. BUT LUXURY WILDERNESS CHARTERS ARE NOW OPENING UP CANADA'S SUB-ARCTIC REGION FOR A NEW BREED OF CASH RICH ECO-TOURIST



I have been to where the wild things are. I have been to a place where the sun seems as though it's always about to set. I have travelled through boreal forest on the back of a seven-dog husky sled. I have feasted on tender caribou steak and maple glazed salmon and curled up to dream like a king from a five star rustic Arctic lodge. I have risen at 5am to see the stars hang like stratospheric kites in the northern sky. I have stood in paw prints that were bigger than my frost-bitten shadow. I have stood beneath traditional Inuit sculptures as a film crew helicopter darted overhead like an Arctic wasp. I have felt my jaw drop to the ground as I witnessed the Hudson Bay, a mesmerising heap of silver ice, snow drifts and salt, stretch to the horizon. And I have finally understood why luxury-seeking jetsetters and adventurous tycoons travel thousands of kilometres to the ends of the earth, braving minus 20 degree temperatures, to come face to face with nature; because I, for one, will never forget the day I came nose to nose with a polar bear.

THE SUB-ARCTIC IS A PLACE WHERE RICH EXPLORERS TRADE IN THEIR SEAL PELTS AND RUSSIAN HATS FOR LUXURY FAKE FUR COATS AND A PRICELESS SENSE OF WONDER THAT CAN'T BE BOUGHT – OR REPLICATED – ANYWHERE ELSE ON EARTH

Latitude 58 degrees, 45' North; longitude 94 degrees, 09' West. It's a Thursday in early November and minus 15 degrees. All is well in the world, but the town of Churchill has a problem. Its polar bear jail is near capacity with carnivorous inmates and the local residents are – unsurprisingly – getting a little worried. It's a unique kind of problem to have, but Churchill in northern Manitoba, Canada, is a rather unique sort of place: human population 923; polar bear population, more than 1,000. 🐻



WHEN SPRING RETURNS, THE BEARS RETURN TO THE MAINLAND TO DEN DOWN FOR THE WARMER SUMMER MONTHS – BUT FOR NOW, THIS SUB-ARCTIC OUTPOST IS THE KINGDOM OF THE ICE BEAR

Russian hats for luxury fake fur coats and a priceless sense of wonder that can't be bought – or replicated – anywhere else on earth.

Every October, the local vicinity of Churchill and the surrounding Wapusk National Park – roughly the same size as Belgium – is invaded by an army of bears making its way to the Hudson Bay as it freezes over. As soon as enough sea ice has formed, they march like a funeral procession hunting for seals, which bask in the icy waters further north. When spring returns, the bears return to the mainland to den down for the warmer summer months – but for now, this sub-arctic outpost is the kingdom of the ice bear.

For me, my luxury wilderness adventure begins with a two-hour journey north by twin-prop plane. As I fly in, the polar bears are still awaiting the freeze. But soon, within a matter of weeks – when the temperatures plummet to around minus 30 degrees – they will depart for their great hunting expedition and even the jail will be empty. And no one could be happier for them than resident of Churchill Paul Ratson. From under his ice frozen beard and whiskers, which bristle as he huffs and puffs through the

Today, luxury tourism is going to the ends of the earth for its latest high octane adventure: wild polar bear tracking. Terrains more accustomed to the likes of Sir Ernest Shackleton, and Roald Amundsen are opening up for eco-tourism ventures, and the sub-arctic is now a place where rich explorers trade in their seal pelts and

cold, polar bear security expert Paul looks like a frost-bitten walrus. “The polar bear jail came into being to control the number of nuisance bears wandering through town,” he tells me. He is wrapped up like a human igloo, a walking wardrobe of polar fleeces and parka jackets. “There are only 29 cells but in jail right now there are 22 or 23 bears. It's getting kind of busy.”

As the largest carnivore on land, it is an almighty Yogi Bear-sized problem: the males can weigh up to 700 kilos, can jab faster than Mohammed Ali and run up to 50kmph; the same speed as a Ferrari deep in the arctic snows. It costs US\$2,000 every time a bear needs to be sedated and flown out of town by helicopter. “It's much more cost effective, keeping them under lock and key, because it's not Disneyland out there,” grins Paul. “They are dangerous creatures that do not differentiate between people and young cubs for food. It's an unforgiving environment – but these are the bear necessities of the tundra.” I'm sure he has used this line before.

Yet in the company of blonde polar bear expert Hayley Shephard, who works for Frontiers North – champion of Manitoba's arctic playground and priceless natural heritage – I know I am safe from any renegade bears. Not only does she work for Canada's premier eco-tour guiding outfit, but Hayley, a pioneer of wildlife trips to Greenland, Norway and the Antarctic, has studied the maps and star charts and planned out an indulgent three-day eco-tracking mission. Of course, once in a lifetime adventures like this bring out only the finest in society; and onboard with me is Seattle's richest real estate director, a record company executive from Los Angeles, a London barrister and a misguided philanthropist who will keep asking where the penguins are. Above me, Hudson Bay Helicopters fly over the tundra at 250 feet, capturing the polar bear's northern migration in all its serene beauty. We, however, have chosen to track them on land.

Colossal to the extreme, Canada's sub-arctic tundra is a landscape purpose built for Gods, let alone men. Cloven by the hands of mythical Viking kings and Eskimo deities, and fantasised by otherworldly authors such as C S Lewis, JRR Tolkien and Philip Pullman, it is a place where every tread feels like a step closer to the entrance of Valhalla.

Historically, nomadic tribes of the Arctic have lived and hunted in Northern Manitoba for more than 4,000 years. Around 1000 AD, the Thule arrived from the west, later evolving



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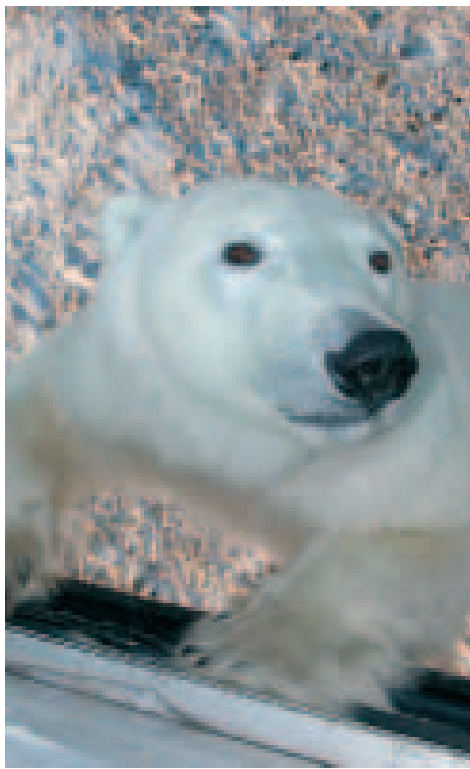
into the present-day Inuit culture. The Dene arrived 500 years earlier from farther north and before that the Paleo-Eskimo and the Dorset got used to having cold toes. “Churchill is an ecologically and culturally transient area,” explains Parks Canada's Duane Collins from the Wapusk National Park Headquarters. “This is the most hostile environment that people have lived in for centuries – every aspect of society has been geared towards survival.” Hostile is perhaps an understatement. In 1619, the first Europeans to arrive found to their cost when a Danish expedition led by Jens Munk winter camped where Churchill

would later stand. Only three of the 64 expedition members survived.

It wasn't until 100 years later, however, that Churchill really started to gain the world's attention. In 1717 the Hudson Bay Company built the first permanent settlement – a log fort and trading post – to capitalise on the North American fur trade and meet demand for beaver fur-lined hats that were *de rigueur* fashion on the cobbled boulevards of Paris and Moscow. The trading post and river were subsequently named after John Churchill, 1st Duke of Marlborough, and ancestor of that other more famous Churchill, Winston. Today, however, the town remains as remote an outpost as it ever was; there are still no roads in or out.

We bed down at the Tundra Inn, a rustic winter lodge stoked with a roaring fireplace and a bounty of goose-feather blankets, and I settle myself in for a three course meal worthy of even a great explorer like Shackleton himself. The roast Arctic char is fresher than I have ever tasted; more tender than a sweet lobster, more lip-smacking than any fine Beluga caviar. It's a taste that is distilled Arctic splendour with a seasoning of pure pixie dust. As Winston Churchill once said, “I am easily satisfied with the very best.” Like his namesake, Churchill doesn't compromise on taste.

Outside, the night is so silent it beats in my ears. As if on cue from a conductor, I witness an extraordinary view of an operatic Arctic sunset. The slicks of chalk-marked tundra, the violent orange of the horizon, the distant forests, the rivers in their courses, it is like being taken up a pinnacle on the top of the North Pole and shown all the kingdoms of the world. If there was a soundtrack it would be a lulling, hypnotic blend of muted trumpets, Sigur Rós and Pachelbel's Canon. Better still, I know this is only the tip of my proverbial iceberg: for tomorrow, the hunt begins, and I will rise with another salmon pink sun at my back and go polar bear tracking. 🐾



AS THE POLAR BEAR COCKS ITS HEAD TO THE SIDE,
I ACHE TO REACH OUT AND OFFER IT A WARM CUP OF
COCOA. BUT THEN I SEE IT HAS ICE PICKS FOR FINGER
NAILS AND TEETH SHARPER THAN SAMURAI SWORDS

In the frost-bitten air of the morning, I see the tundra camouflaged by mile after mile of fresh snow. With crisp fresh ice underfoot, as though a million grainy stars were sparkling beneath my feet, and with Santa Claus beard clouds and a brilliant white sky perched above me, I could be in touching distance of the celestial ether. Coloured by these thoughts, I climb aboard the Frontiers North tundra buggy – engineered from one part ex-Soviet tank to two parts NASA moon explorer – and head out into the void.

On the plateau, the willow bushes, dusted in fresh powder look like the bleached skeletons of small animals. It is harsh and wild but immensely beautiful. There is a solitary grazing caribou – either lost or anti-social – and the scuttling shadows of arctic foxes, arctic hares, arctic lemmings but devoid of arctic monkeys. We cross ice-frozen rivers, which start to crack and float like freshly minted tortilla chips; and skirt frozen lakes next to where polar bear foot prints, each somehow bigger than the last, seem to weave and lace like drunk ballet stars.

We stick to pre-established military gravel roads, which now criss-cross the tundra like healed scars. To drive across this ancient land requires a government-issued permit and

thankfully Frontiers North is only one of two companies to be given such an honour. “On the sub arctic, where the land is frozen below us, a footprint or a vehicle track will last forever,” says Hayley. She peers through her binoculars, glassy-eyed and focused, turning from side to

side. Then she gasps: “Polar bear at one o’clock.”

After an hour of searching, it is along the coastal road of the Hudson Bay shore where our quarry lies – stretched out like the king of the world, scratching its belly as though it had just eaten the world’s most lavish banquet. He gracefully turns to watch our approach; and then he raises his snout to the wind, inhales deeply, and makes a bear line straight for us.

He’s a killer. I can see it in his oil black eyes. A seal-catching, crustacean-pawing, kelp-chewing predator. He is eye-balling me; watching my every move. And I dare not breathe. He is within touching distance; perhaps not more than an arm’s length away. It may be the world’s largest land carnivore but as I stand nose to nose with a curious polar bear – it balanced on its hind legs, stretching to greet me; me from the safety of the open-top buggy – I feel a sense of purpose, calm and adolescent excitement that takes me back to being a five-year-old at the local zoo. Through my anthropomorphism of the polar bear, as it cocks its head to the side, I ache to reach out and offer it a warm cup of syrup sweet cocoa. But then I see it has ice picks for finger nails and teeth sharper than a Samurai sword. “This is the only type of guiding I ever do when my guests never ask me, can we not get a little closer?” giggles Hayley in my ear. I can feel its warm breath upon my stung exposed skin.

I am the last in the line of the great explorers. Or that’s what it feels like this morning. I have tracked polar bears across the tundra, the most hostile wilderness on Earth. I have travelled to the ends of the earth to come face to face with a polar bear. And I have been to where the wild things are.

For more information please visit www.travelmanitoba.com and www.polarbearsinternational.org ❖

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