

## Catch them while you can

We fly over immense nothingness to reach Canada's 'polar bear capital of the world'. Potholes and craters puncture the land, and it feels like we're circling the moon. The Inuit woman sitting across the aisle carries her newborn in the hood of her coat. With two flights further north into the Arctic, theirs is a much longer journey home.

Scrambling between vacant seats, I test the equilibrium of this *Calm Air* 9-seater, eager to see my first polar bear. Once a symbol of extreme cold, this iconic creature now conveys a different story, as 2007 - the International Polar Year - heats up.

On a whim, I applied to be a volunteer at the Churchill Northern Studies Centre (CNSC), a non-profit science research and education facility, located in Canada's sub-arctic. During my phone interview I confessed that my credentials were mostly in the arts. Fortunately the Centre recruits volunteers who are adaptable and able to live with strangers in close quarters, regardless of their background.

The CNSC offers year-round adventure eco-tours. Guests interact with scientists, indigenous people, international researchers, and wildlife experts, in keeping with the Centre's vision: to understand and sustain the North.

I signed up for a three-week placement from early October, as the itinerant polar bears outnumber the locals and 15,000 tourists descend for 'bear season'. Catch phrases like 'largest predator on Earth', 'runs as fast as a horse', and 'rip your face off with its paw', rang alarm bells in my ears.

Within seconds of landing I am won over by an infinite blue sky, and the flat, bald landscape crunching beneath my feet. Expecting to be met with snow and a blistering wind chill, Churchill sparkles defiantly beneath a blazing sun. We joke about the tropical weather. Seven-degree days seem like a heat-wave when compared with October's one degree average.

There are no roads into Churchill - not one. You either fly in or take the two-night train trip north from Winnipeg. The train crawls across the ever-shifting permafrost and flights can cost up to \$1000 one-way. Those rich in air miles and poor in time can arrive with the least effort and cost.

Whichever route you choose, this is the only place below the Arctic Circle where polar bears are forced to come ashore when the ice shelves melt. It makes Churchill the most accessible polar bear destination in the world.

Situated on the edge of Hudson Bay, Churchill is Canada's only Arctic seaport and also the 'beluga whale capital of the world'. A world-class bird-watching destination in summer, and on 300 nights of the year the northern lights or *aurora borealis* dance across the sky.

To top it off, Churchill uniquely joins three very different ecosystems: arctic tundra, boreal forest and maritime, making it prime real estate for scientific research in the North. It's not bad for a town with only 13 roads - heading nowhere.

We board a battered bus and follow the signs to the Rocket Range. Crunching into a lower gear, we pass a 20 foot-tall model rocket. It's the first sign that we are approaching Canada's one and only ex-NASA site, now home to the CNSC.

Built in 1957, 23km east of the township, the Churchill Rocket Range conducted research into the upper atmosphere. In 1985, NASA sold the site to the Centre, and everything on it, for \$1.

Like a scene from Dr Who, the property is littered with abandoned machinery, quietly threatening to come to life. Towering three-storey rocket launchers, tracking equipment of James Bond-like proportions, and rusted out pick-up trucks wait for guzzle-less gas pumps: all lying dormant for more than twenty years.

The site is as intricate as it is barren. The temptation to break into a corrugated iron monstrosity is tempered by the potential threat of a bear lurking inside.

Some years ago, a visitor commented on the polar bear statue on the Centre's roof as their bus approached the building. The driver replied, "What statue?"

It's the perfect setting for a thriller and an adventure playground for polar bears – if only they had the energy. During winter, polar bears live out on the ice shelves, hunting ringed seal pups and feasting for the coming months. By summer, their home dissolves and these bears drift inland, coming ashore in Hudson Bay. Here they wait, conserving energy and living off fat stores until the ice forms again in November.

From early October to mid-November, the bears begin to inspect the shore for early signs of freezing. Described as a "walking hibernation", this is the basis of Churchill's 'bear season'.

In Western Hudson Bay, the polar bear population has dropped 22% since the early 1980s. The decline has been directly linked to the break-up of the annual ice, which is now occurring 3 weeks earlier than it did 30 years ago. The rate of the Arctic's retreating ice-caps is unprecedented.

While polar bears are adaptable creatures and can swim great distances; they overheat easily, even in colder temperatures. Without ice to hunt from, they are unable to reach their prey, and without a regular feast of seal pups, these bears are unable to survive – in water or on land.

By mid-October, the temperature has dropped and the snow begins to stick. We venture out on the tundra in search of the illusive bears. With an average speed of 10km/hr, tundra vehicles can be testing. Playing I-spy, we search for white, cream or beige bumps on the horizon. The game ends when someone points out what looks like an albino elephant, lying on its belly; an enormous white mound, 200 metres away.

As we crawl closer, silence descends. Twenty tourists hold their breaths, boggle-eyed at the male bear casually approaching. With a communal out-breath, we erupt into a muted frenzy of photo taking. Careful not to make any noises that might attract the bears' attention, I wonder about the sight of a massive white bus on the otherwise empty tundra.

Within a few minutes, another bear ambles over. The two males roll about, wrestling and swinging their lethal paws. They mouth each other almost sensually, but for the massive fangs looming from their palettes. We're assured the bears are play fighting, sparring after a long rest, but these playful

swipes can leave scars, exposing their black skin. I share a watery glance with another volunteer, equally moved.

The bears seem to be wearing saggy costume suits, rather than their own skins after months without food. We're warned not to dangle camera straps, scarves or arms anywhere outside of the bus. Despite their don't-you-dare-try-to-wake-me lethargy, these bears can accelerate with frightening speed.

The shore typically remains slack until mid-November, leaving the bears restless, hungry, and tormented by their acute sense of smell. In my final week, I stumble into the kitchen to begin a 7am breakfast shift.

The walk-in freezer has been ransacked overnight and the side wall ripped clean off. Boxes of sausages, bacon, hash browns – along with a few trays of tea cake – are gone. There are claw punctures in the muffin mix containers and paw prints as big as my face on the garbage bins and trucks outside.

One elderly tourist asks why she wasn't woken up to see the bear, having missed a Kodak moment. While it didn't seem worth a fatal mauling, I can understand her fervour. That is, until I see our bacon-thieving bear sauntering back towards the Centre for lunch.

With the lure of seal oil bait, the bear is trapped in a 3 metre long cage, commonly used to relocate bears. I inch closer and the bear tears maniacally at the metal grill. His breath blasts angry hot air across my face, no doubt fuming at this lousy trick.

Polar bears once had the run of Churchill and many were killed in self-defence as the bears roamed about town. In the late 1970s, the Polar Bear Alert Program was established to protect the bears and locals alike.

Now, locals can call 1-800-BEAR if they spot a bear within the town zone. Wayward bears are trapped, tranquilised, tagged and tattooed before males are moved on to D-20, the polar bear gaol, and a helicopter swiftly returns mothers and cubs to their dens further inland.

Bear watching is serious business in Churchill, but you don't have to stay three weeks. Some tourists arrive on the morning train; spend the afternoon on the tundra; and take the same train home eight hours later. There's even a 24 hour webcam on the tundra. Fortunately the industry is carefully monitored by local and international agencies, building on more than 30 years of polar bear research in the area.

The CNSC relies on volunteers during 'bear season' and each of us promises to return. We're a crew of misfits if the truth be told, tearful in our goodbyes. After all, where else in the world can you find a vanishing bear act? One thousand of the world's largest predators disappear overnight, without warning, onto the newly formed ice of Hudson Bay. These bears don't waste any time. They can't afford to – and neither should we.

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