

CANADA

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE POLAR BEAR KIND



Scientists predict that as the Arctic continues to warm, two-thirds of the world's polar bears could disappear within this century. Our writer comes face-to-face with these titans of the tundra and prays that it's not too late for them to navigate global warming's dangerous waters

*Words by
Mark Sissons*



Polar bear cubs remain with their mothers for at least 20 months.

“I GOT VERY CLOSE TO A POLAR BEAR TODAY”

I GOT VERY CLOSE TO A POLAR bear today,” says Paul Jenkins, a family physician from Queensland, Australia. He’s recounting how the Arctic’s most iconic predator had reared up on its hind legs against the side of his Tundra Buggy while he was photographing it from an open window. “I was so near its face I could feel its breath.”

Nothing can prepare you for going nose-to-nose with the mighty *Ursus Maritimus*, or *Nanuq*, as the Inuit call the great white ice bear, which is now believed to number less than 25,000 in the wild.

For millennia the hero of Aboriginal myths, the polar bear has over the past two decades become a powerful symbol of global warming, threatened by reduced access to its primary prey due to melting Arctic sea ice. And if you want to safely get up close and personal with them before they vanish, there is no better place on earth to be than Churchill, which is nestled between the shore of Hudson Bay and the Churchill

River in Northern Manitoba, some 110 kilometres south of Nunavut.

Canada is home to roughly 60 percent of the world’s remaining polar bears, and as the Arctic’s sea ice advances and retreats each season, individual bears may travel thousands of miles per year to find food. Each fall thousands of them congregate near Churchill, a former fur trading post, waiting for the water of Hudson Bay to freeze solid enough for them to break their long summer fast and venture out onto it to hunt for ring seals.

“The complex relationship of the bears with sea ice is sometimes hard for visitors to understand,” explains biologist Doug Ross, an interpretive guide for Frontiers North’s Tundra Buggy Lodge Adventure. “The bears need the sea ice to get their main source of food, which are seals, and if the period of ice on Hudson Bay is reduced, then they will have less to eat,” he adds.

For wildlife-lovers and Canadian frontier history buffs, visiting Churchill at this time of year is a once in a lifetime opportunity to view these magnificent creatures in their natural habitat as they amble along the bay’s coastal marshes and salt bogs.



AT A GLANCE

Scientists estimate that there are only between 22,000 and 27,000 polar bears remaining in the Arctic. Frontiers North’s Tundra Buggy Lodge is located in the Churchill Wildlife Management area. There travellers enjoy viewing around the clock as these mighty creatures go about their everyday lives.

THE JOURNEY TO CHURCHILL

No roads reach Manitoba’s northern outpost, which is located along the 58th parallel. To reach Churchill you either have to ride the VIA rails for two days from Winnipeg or fly in. During the fall polar bear viewing season, Frontiers North charts flights, which makes the journey an easy two-hour hop. >

Mark Sissons



Adult bears initiate play—which is actually ritualized fighting or mock battling—by standing on their hind legs.





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Curious polar bears often approach Tundra Buggies without fear.



The Frontiers North Tundra Buggy Lodge sleeps up to 40 guests in comfort.

Upon arrival, I board a bus tour of local and historical points of interest, including the Port of Churchill and Cape Merry, site of the Hudson Bay Company's Fort Churchill, which for nearly 200 years was the fur trading empire's most northerly outpost.

I also stop at Manitoba Conservation's polar bear holding facility, which holds 'problem' bears who wander too close to town and are captured during the fall bear alert season. While I'm there, one accidental ursine intruder is being transferred to make room for more. I watch from a safe distance as conservation officers load the enormous tranquilized bear onto a nylon net attached to a helicopter that will transport it about 50 kilometres out of town. Applause from the crowd of onlookers breaks out as the world's largest flying fur ball soars overhead, bound for a rude awakening far out on the tundra.

Another Churchill highlight is the world-renowned Eskimo Museum, which contains hundreds of intricate Inuit carvings that are among the world's oldest examples of indigenous craftsmanship. For anyone interested in history, art and archaeology, this museum is a must-see. So too is the National Parks Visitors Centre's interactive exhibit about the history of the fur trade and park sites in the area, including Prince of Wales

Fort National Historic Site, York Factory National Historic Site and Wapusk National Park of Canada. I emerge from both amazed by the fortitude and ingenuity of the North's original and early European inhabitants.

INTO THE WILD

Churchill's museums and historic sites offer an engrossing preparation for three days and nights in the heart of bear country far from the lights of town. My base of exploration is Frontier North's mobile Tundra Buggy Lodge, which is located in the 850,000-hectare Churchill Wildlife Management Area that protects the polar bear's summer resting areas and maternity denning grounds.

To reach it I board a Tundra Buggy along with fellow polar bear-lovers from Europe, Australia, the US and Canada for the bumpy two-hour ride over muskeg.

Invented and built from spare parts by Churchill resident Leonard D Smith in 1979, this Macgyvered all-terrain vehicle has been used ever since to view, photograph and study polar bears and other northern wildlife like Arctic hare, Arctic fox, Willow Ptarmigan, Snowy Owl and Snow Geese out on the tundra.

Resembling an extra-wide school bus welded onto the chassis of a monster truck, our Tundra Buggy rumbles and lurches its way into the twilight of a late

sub-Arctic afternoon like an ungainly lunar exploration vehicle, bound for one of the most unusual hotels I've ever seen.

Imagine a zoo where you are in the enclosure and the animals roam free. That's what it feels like at the Tundra Buggy Lodge, where I fall asleep and wake up with polar bears right outside my window.

Consisting of several trailers on giant tires connected by outdoor walkways that are perfect for round the clock wildlife-viewing, this ingenious inn features two accommodation units that sleep up to 40 guests on comfortable bunks, a lounge area, a dining car and staff quarters. Exterior field lights enable guests to continue watching bears long after the sun sets.

"What makes this lodge experience so unique is being so remote on the actual shore of Hudson Bay and being 'caged', so to speak, while the polar bears and other animals are free to wander at will," says Doug Ross, my group's interpretive guide. Trained as a biologist, this former Parks Canada employee was recently in charge of the popular Journey to Churchill exhibit at Winnipeg's Assiniboine Zoo.

Ross adds that he often hears from lodge guests how surprised they are to be able to get so close to the bears without disturbing them: "Most of the bears have no fear of the guests and >



Inside Frontiers North's Tundra Buggy Lodge.



WHEN YOU GO

- Select Tundra Buggy Lodge departures are available with both rail and air transportation. Packages include two nights in Winnipeg, one night in Churchill and three nights at the Tundra Buggy Lodge. For more information, visit frontiersnorth.com/content/tundra-buggy-lodge.
- Several layers of clothing, including an insulated parka or waterproof jacket, insulated boots, thick mitts or gloves, toque and long underwear are recommended. Frontiers North guests can rent Canada Goose parkas and snow pants, plus Baffin boots at their departure hotel prior to flying to Churchill.
- Cold weather photography can be very demanding on today's cameras. Keeping enough power running from the batteries to the camera body can be a problem. Keep fully charged spare batteries with you at all times, preferably in a warm place close to your body. When heading back indoors, place a plastic bag over your lenses to prevent moisture caused by condensation from forming on the lens and inside the camera. Also, take plenty of digital media cards and keep them somewhere warm on your body when you're out shooting.

the buggies," he says. "Many guests are also surprised at how curious some bears are."

WHERE THE BEARS ROAM

The next morning we set off in our roving photographic base station in search of the magnificent carnivore that Inuit hunters considered to be wise, powerful—and almost human. In some parts of the Arctic, indigenous people still follow long-held traditions by hunting polar bears, consuming their meat and making traditional clothing like *kamiks* (soft boots) from the fur. The only part of the bear that is traditionally discarded is the liver due to its toxic levels of vitamin A. Banned in Manitoba, sport hunting is now regulated in other parts of the Canadian Arctic by a strict quota system designed to keep the kill within the bounds that the bear populations can support.

It doesn't take long to spot our first polar bears as they wander across the tundra or curl up in the snow to conserve their energy for the impending seal hunting season. As curious about us as we are awed by them, individual bears occasionally approach our buggy, sniffing the air and in some cases rising up to lean against the buggy's side.

"To actually see that huge bear and learn how it sustains itself for a period of time," marvels Bonnie Jean Fenton, a retired nurse from Highgate, Ontario, "You think you're prepared and you know what's coming—but you don't."

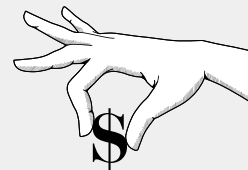
Many in our group say they have come here at considerable expense to realize a lifelong dream—the chance to see polar bears in the wild before this vulnerable species vanishes. "It's an emotional experience, connecting with these animals," says Paul Jenkins' wife, Sandra. "I'm gaining a real understanding of

what their lives are like and what they're facing. And I'm hopeful that they will carry on; that there will be enough interest and good will to really try to ensure that they are sustained."

Polar bears were listed as a threatened species in the US under the Endangered Species Act in May 2008 due to the ongoing loss of their sea ice habitat resulting from climate change. Canada's Western Hudson Bay bear population has suffered more than a 20 percent decline since the early 1980s. According to Polar Bears International, the conservation organization that works closely with Frontiers North, the survival and protection of the polar bear habitat are urgent issues.

The next morning we pull the Tundra Buggy over to watch a pair of young male bears half-heartedly shadow boxing, too weakened by their summer-long fast to make the fur really fly. Later, we track a mother and her cub as they gingerly traverse a dangerously thin expanse of early season ice. When we come across a bear feeding on the skeletal remains of an unlucky ring seal, I'm relieved that the seal's sacrifice might provide this bear with enough strength to hang on until that sea ice finally freezes, despite the ghastly spectacle.

Snugly tucked under my stripy Hudson's Bay blanket in my bunk that night, I spot a ghostly white form in the distance hunched motionless in the moonlight. It's another male polar bear staring out over the still unstable ice flow, a solitary hunter contemplating his odds of surviving what we've done to his once predictable and pristine world. Inuit hunters worshipped *Nanug* because they believed that he decided if their hunt would be successful. Now it is up to us to decide if the titan of the tundra will successfully navigate global warming's dangerous waters. ❶



HOW YOU CAN HELP

Polar Bears International (PBI) is the only international organization solely dedicated to conserving polar bears and the sea ice they depend on. Through media, science, and advocacy, it works to inspire people to care about the Arctic, the threats to its future, and the connection between this remote region and our global climate. Donations support critical polar bear conservation research and fund ongoing education and outreach efforts, including PBI's work to address climate change.

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