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Polar bears are in a sort of walking hibernation while waiting for winter when Hudson Bay freezes over.







# Bear with me

Once a year, the polar bears of Hudson Bay are amenable to visitors. Seize the chance to trek through the tundra in autumn and enjoy close encounters with the huge carnivore the Inuit call 'Nanook'.



WORDS AND PHOTOS **FIONA HARPER**

“**T**HAT’S FAR ENOUGH,” our guide, Terry Elliot, says sternly. The polar bear, about 40m from where we stand, stops momentarily, snout elevated, sniffing our scent. Then she ignores the command and lumbers towards us.

A couple of tidal pools dotted with suitcase-sized boulders are all that stand between me and Nanook, as the Inuit call the polar bear. The bear pauses, curious, ink-coloured eyes watching us, tiny ears pinned back. We watch through camera viewfinders, shutters clicking fast, hearts racing even faster.

Her head bobs down between powerful shoulders, she lifts a front paw the size of a dinner plate and continues her sideways advance. I later learn polar bears commonly zigzag towards their prey rather than advancing in a straight line. She is about 30m away when Terry, a Canadian veteran of many guiding seasons in the Arctic, lobs a small rock in her path. Terry and Ian, our other guide, have an arsenal of weaponry at their disposal should a bear behave aggressively. Today, though, their poppers, pistols and rifles remain holstered. Terry knows this bear well enough to judge her to be a low threat; tossing a rock is enough to discourage her. The bear withdraws a few paces and glances, almost sulkily, over her shoulder.

“Go on, off you go,” Terry calls. Affectionately known as Blue Moon

thanks to a blue butt stained from wallowing in a crowberry patch, she takes one last look at us before moving away. Lowering our cameras, we walk over to the berry patch, inspecting the scat she’s left behind. As you do on any self-respecting wildlife safari.

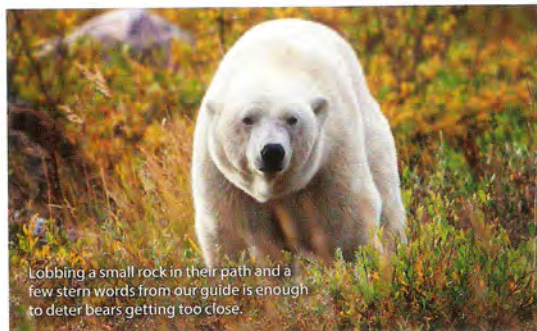
## FIRST CONTACT

It’s the first of many close encounters with these magnificent creatures. It seems incongruous to be walking the same ground, sharing the wide open landscape with one of the largest carnivores on the planet. I feel humbled and privileged.

Everything I had read warned me of the dangers of polar bears and humans meeting. This bear’s behaviour is astonishingly passive, but just a month ago, a polar bear mauled and killed a camper in Norway’s Arctic. And in Canada’s northern coastal town of Churchill, the Polar Bear Holding Facility (otherwise known as polar bear jail) is doing a roaring trade. Bears that wander into town are incarcerated here until they can be returned to the wild – this happens about 300 times a year, with 60 bears “jailed” annually.

The frozen sea is breaking up earlier than in the past, forcing the bears off the ice before they’ve fully built up their fat stores. Are they becoming accustomed to human contact, I wonder?





Lobbing a small rock in their path and a few stern words from our guide is enough to deter bears getting too close.



Guests and supplies arrive by floatplane from Churchill, about 30 minutes south of Seal River Lodge.

## POLAR BEAR CAPITAL

A former beaver-fur trading post established in the early 1700s, Churchill now styles itself as the “polar bear capital of the world”, thanks to the 1000 or so bears that inhabit Western Hudson Bay.

Churchill’s charms weren’t immediately apparent when I passed through, other than the fascinating Eskimo Museum.

At 60 degrees north, the subarctic landscape is bleak, harsh and ear-numbingly cold, particularly come winter when there are about 18 hours of darkness a day. Locals bunker down in heated homes, pick-up trucks, offices and the indoor recreation centre.

However, in September, autumn in the Northern Hemisphere, Churchill buzzes with activity. Polar bears gather on the shore, salivating in anticipation of prime seal hunting grounds opening up once the bay freezes over.

## ARCTIC SAFARI

It’s mid-autumn (or fall, as Canadians call it) when I board an eight-seater Beaver floatplane heading north from the lake just out of town.

“Hi, my name is Ursula. I’m your pilot today,” says a strikingly perky 30-something beauty. She proves to be a fearless pilot, dipping to starboard to point out bears roaming the tundra, and to port to show us pods of beluga whales, then, half an hour later, buzzing metres above Seal River Lodge to announce our arrival.

Along with a handful of other nature enthusiasts and wildlife photographers, we’re joining an Arctic Safari south of Canada’s Arctic Circle. This unique expedition is offered once a year by family-owned enterprise Churchill Wild. Base camp is their cosy, well-equipped lodge on the shore of Hudson Bay.

The Arctic Safari is timed to



Guide Terry Elliot scans the tundra looking for wildlife.

coincide with polar bears roaming the shoreline and tundra beyond, as well as extraordinary caribou, Arctic hare and Arctic fox viewing opportunities. With the exception of a day-long floatplane expedition further north to follow caribou on their annual migration, we’re tracking wildlife just as the Inuit have done for centuries. On foot.

Hiking expeditions ensure vehicle use is minimised, doing minimal landscape damage, and animals can approach us on their own terms rather than being pursued.

Trekking the tundra on twice-daily hiking excursions, we encounter bears basking lethargically in the sun, paddling in the shallows or roaming the land. In a kind of walking hibernation due to enforced seasonal hunger, they seem surprisingly at ease with our presence. We regularly

**Trekking the tundra on twice-daily hiking excursions, we encounter bears basking lethargically in the sun... or roaming the land.**

pause once a bear has been spotted, only to have them eventually come to investigate our presence. For this brief period each year, their passive behaviour allows wildlife enthusiasts to get up close and personal at ground level.

The bears spend much of the year on the frozen sea in Hudson Bay, hunting seals. Once the ice melts, they lose access to their main food source and are forced ashore in late summer. Berries, kelp and carrion sustain them until the bay freezes over again in about November.

Seal River Lodge is on a point jutting into the bay, a prime location, both for bears to come ashore and for whale and seal carcasses to wash up, supplementing their diet. This stretch of coast is fantastic for wildlife, something which is evident on our arrival. A bear presses her nose up to



the wire fence at the rear of the lodge, then she stretches out, hind legs splayed like the family dog, closing her eyes in contentment. We stand metres away, mesmerised, close enough to catch a whiff of exhaled breath.

Wildlife viewing is often as simple as gazing out the window over breakfast, lunch or dinner to see bears, squirrels and whales. When Mike Reimer, lodge host and owner, grills bacon on the deck, the aroma appears to pique bears' interest. It's said they can identify scents up to 100km away and, let's face it, only the most fastidious vegetarian isn't enticed by bacon on the grill. Only nail boards, otherwise known as Churchill welcome mats, and electric wires prevent the bears from pressing inquisitive noses against the lodge windows.

### LUXURY IN THE WILDERNESS

Seal River Lodge is remote; building materials were brought in by snowmobile as there are no roads in these parts. Modern, comfortable but compact guest rooms have ensembles with fluffy towels. The rooms are serviced daily while we're out hiking. The timber-lined living room and bar (with free wi-fi) is the lodge's hub, with sofas, a welcoming fire, and windows looking south over the bay. It's the perfect place to chill out while warming up. Out the back in the fenced compound, there is a viewing tower the guides ascend each morning if bears aren't visible at ground level and a couple of raised decks that are terrific spots for photographers. It's also an inspiring location to view the aurora borealis, dripping striking curtains of green across the northern sky.

One evening, I'm enjoying a nice glass of wine and reclining on a leather sofa when Mike points out some stitches in the armrest. "The bears got into the lodge one winter



Wildlife enthusiasts have ample opportunity to view bears during twice daily hikes from the lodge.



Nail boards, otherwise known as 'Churchill welcome mats' are secured against lodge windows each evening to discourage inquisitive bears.

after we had boarded it up and left for the season," he says. "They caused mayhem."

Mike had returned to the lodge with supplies for the forthcoming season, only to find polar bears had ripped out boarded-up windows and partially broken down walls. They had also shredded shower curtains in the guest bathrooms and tore into leather couches. Then they left, leaving the lodge wide open to the elements.

"This room was filled with snow almost to the ceiling," Mike recalls. Ever optimistic, the family took the opportunity to renovate and refurbish. Improvements included

extending the lodge's dining room and adding vast bay windows. The result is a sun-drenched room, where we watch wildlife while enjoying the fine meals whipped up by Mike's talented daughter, Karli.

Packing away our cameras reluctantly before Ursula flies us back to Churchill, we spot Blue Moon trudging across the tundra towards the lodge. Her blue butt has been a frequent companion during the past week. She pauses at the nail board and peers in the window – it's as if she's come to bid us farewell. Though, with bacon on the menu for breakfast again, I suspect her interest is more self-serving.

**"The bears got into the lodge one winter... They caused mayhem."**

### THE ESSENTIALS

**Getting there:** Fly Air Canada from Sydney to Winnipeg via Vancouver. Fly Calm Air from Winnipeg to Churchill. Churchill Wild's Arctic Safari includes a 30-minute floatplane flight from Churchill to Seal River Lodge on the shore of Hudson Bay.

**When to go:** September (Northern Hemisphere's autumn), when polar bears are in a sort of walking hibernation and clear skies provide good aurora borealis (northern lights) viewing.

**Why go:** Cover 20,000sq.km of wild Arctic tundra by floatplane, AWD buggy, Zodiac inflatable and foot to see polar bears, beluga whales, caribou, moose, wolves, arctic fox and hare, and abundant birdlife.

**More info:** [www.churchillwild.com.au.canada.travel](http://www.churchillwild.com.au.canada.travel)