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Arctic adventure: animal spotting, polar plunges and Inuit exploration in Canada's far north

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Concentrating on keeping my footing on the rough road in this far-flung hamlet just a whisper from the North Pole, I hear a man's voice behind me.

"Hey lady, you wanna buy some polar bear claws?" calls a gap-toothed chap, pulling up beside me on his quad bike.

Intrigued, yet also slightly repulsed, I can't help myself. I peer into the grubby rag he produces from inside his parka. There are half a dozen extraordinarily large claws, decayed flesh still attached. Coloured a dirty brown, tapering into almost black at the ends, the menacing-looking crescent shaped claws are the length of my forefinger.

"Only \$70," he tells me, misinterpreting my interest.

I decline politely and move quickly. Stretching my legs after the five-hour flight north from Montreal, it strikes me that though I'm still within Canada, I've dropped into another world. Wandering down towards the shore to board my home for the next week, the ice-strengthened MV Lyubov Orlova, polar bear bits are definitely not on my list of souvenirs to take home. I mean, c'mon, can you even imagine getting one through Aussie quarantine control at customs?!

Wildlife encounters

Lured to the Arctic by wild-life/landscapes, I've landed beyond the Arctic Circle at Resolute Bay in Canada's Nunavut Territory to join Cruise North Expeditions. An Inuit owned and operated venture, our route takes us through the fabled Northwest Passage. We anticipate up close wildlife encounters as we travel via the 'Serengeti of the Arctic' on a safari to see some of the following:

- Polar bears:** known as Nanook by Inuit, they are the largest living land-based carnivore in the world
- Arctic hare:** a fluffy white inhabitant of the tundra, they lose camouflage advantage during summer, their white coat conspicuous against the charcoal shale
- Musk ox:** surely one of the weirdest looking creatures on the planet. A musk ox appears a cross between a lumbering long haired goat and a buffalo
- Caribou:** elongated hollow hairs on their sinewy bodies trap the air; a cunning evolution to cope with extreme cold
- Birdlife:** a haven for bird watchers, birds of prey, shorebirds, seabirds and land birds flit and twitter entice twitching enthusiasts into ecstasy with rare avian sightings

Trekking the tundra

Expedition Leader Jason Annahatak welcomes us onboard with a briefing in the passenger lounge. A twenty-something university-educated Inuit, handsome Jason enthuses, "I'm really, really excited to be here," breaking into a wide grin as the ship shudders, her bow deflecting the first iceberg of the voyage.

"That's why," he laughs, as passengers nervously glance around, "we're in the Arctic." His homeland.

By day three, lively banter in the bar after dinner is dominated by passengers vying for bragging rights from the day's hiking excursion. We compare notes on rare sightings of miniature Arctic blooms, gyrfalcons and fulmars, sandpipers and seals. But polar bear sightings really get passenger pulses pumping.

Cooped up onboard, despite the ship's comforts and lavish meal serves, when conditions allow we eagerly board sleek black zodiacs for hiking expeditions across the tundra.

Landing on the beach on Prince William Island, we break off into 'fast' and 'slow' walkers, I join the fast walkers, hoping to work off several delish dinners. Keen to spot wildlife in the raw wilderness, I also hope that the fast walkers will get ahead of the main group, increasing our chances of viewing the big three — polar bears, musk ox and caribou. Rifle-toting sentries set out ahead of us, keeping a lookout for Nanook.

I recall the polar bear pamphlet I'd read earlier with its succinct advice: "Do not run. Do not play dead". Which didn't seem to leave me too many options, beyond terror-induced panic. We spot paw prints in the sand the size of a medium-sized pizza, sending a ripple of excitement, tinged with just a dash of anxiety, through our group. It's our first evidence of Nanook, indicating that we're deep into polar bear country.

Polar swim

Unfortunately it's also the same day the crew has scheduled a 'polar bear swim' for those brave enough to dive into the ice floe-dotted ocean. At latitude 73 degrees north, beneath a boundless blue sky, the air temperature is a balmy 7C. The ocean I'm about to jump into is a not-so-balmy 3C.

Stripping off layers of outer and inner thermals, in my black bathing suit I feel like polar bear bait. Too late, I realise I look like a tasty, albeit rather ungainly, ring seal. Having reservations about icy immersion, I'm way out of my comfort zone.

On my left the crew stand by with a defibrillator should hypothermia set in. On my right stands a sentry, rifle slung across his shoulders, binoculars poised, eyes scanning the ice. I take the plunge into the icy waters. Floundering in the shallows, my body moves rapidly into survival mode before I beat my retreat to shore.

Arctic wilderness

Visiting towards the end of the summer, though the ground is bereft of snow, the frozen permafrost penetrates more than 100m deep into the earth's core. From afar, the landscape looks barren and lifeless; up close the tundra is alive with delicate flora blazing vivid colours. Arctic cotton blossoms bloom startlingly white, lichen explode in burnt orange and moss flourishes iridescent lime. For a minute I think I'm being had when naturalist guide Liz Bradfield points out an aged willow tree at our feet. Looking down, I realise I've trotted unknowingly through a teeny forest of Arctic willow, limbs branching horizontal barely a few centimeters above the ground.

Such is the lot of Arctic flora, making the most of the few short months when the sun skips around the horizon. With extremes alternating between endless darkness and endless daylight, it's difficult to determine west from east from the sun's altitude. Indeed, with the North Pole almost to the west of our location, even the Northern Lights appear confused. Beyond the Arctic Circle, we look southwards to view the ethereal, undulating green shafts that glow almost iridescent above the horizon in the starlit southern sky.

Fiona travelled courtesy of the Canadian Tourism Commission. Travel to the Arctic can be booked through Cruise North Expeditions.

View all the pictures from this amazing adventure:



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Thanks Fiona. This brings back super memories of our August 2010 trip.



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