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BY DOUG LONG AND MORRI MOSTOW

WE ARE BOUNCING ACROSS THE TUNDRA, IN AN OVERSIZE BUS WITH GIANT OFF-ROAD TIRES, IN A FUTILE SEARCH FOR POLAR BEARS. FOR THE PAST THREE HOURS, WE HAVE BEEN STARING OUT FOGGY WINDOWS AT THE BLEAK, BOULDER-STREWN LANDSCAPE LIGHTLY DUSTED WITH SNOW, WATCHING HUDSON BAY TURN TO ICE PORRIDGE. SO FAR, ONLY AN ARCTIC HARE, A QUICK FLASH OF FOX, A FEW PTARMIGAN AND SNOW BUNTINGS HAVE BROKEN THE MONOTONY. UNLESS THEY MOVE, MOST ARCTIC CREATURES ARE ALL BUT INVISIBLE IN THEIR WINTER WHITES. THIS IS OUR INTRODUCTION TO A PREVAILING TUNDRA THEME: **WHITE ON WHITE.**

By 11 a.m., our driver/guide is getting anxious. "Shall we stop for coffee?" he asks. Or, do we want to adhere to number three in what will be a Decalogue of Golden Rules by day's end? - "No coffee until we see a polar bear." Golden Rules number one and two were unequivocal: "Don't feed the bears. Don't bait the bears." Or else... you'll be whisked away by helicopter at your expense! All 38 of us, including a dozen gung-ho Dutch tourists fresh from a tundra hike the day before, agree to push on.

Fording streams and cracking across freshly frozen ponds, our Tundra Buggy® lurches onward. A half-hour later, a sharp-eyed Dutch woman shouts, "Stop the bus. Polar bear at 10 o'clock!" We excitedly grab binoculars. Others run to the open observation deck. And there it is - finally! - a tiny dot ambling on the far horizon, several kilometres away.

It is mid-October, the start of the Polar Bear Season in Churchill, Manitoba. Until the end of November, this sub-Arctic town of about 1,000 residents will welcome thousands of polar-bear-crazy tourists from all over the world. They'll fly in or, like us, take VIA Rail Canada's thrice-weekly Northern Spirit train. (There are no roads to Churchill.)

The train, slowed by a rail bed built on fragile muskeg and permafrost, takes two nights and a day to journey 1,697 rail kilometres from Winnipeg in the south. From the comfort of our rail car, we watch the flat prairie grasslands give way to boreal forests of spruce and tamarack punctuated by countless wilderness lakes and bogs.



AS WE NEAR CHURCHILL,
THE FOREST PETERS OUT AS WE
CROSS THE TREELINE AND ENTER
THE BARREN TUNDRA OF
THE HUDSON BAY LOWLANDS.

In late fall, about 600 polar bears gather near Churchill to wait for Hudson Bay to freeze so they can move onto the ice for the winter to hunt for seals, their main food source. While no match for seals in open water, polar bears can catch them on the ice; they wait patiently for seals to come up for air, or break into dens under the ice. Adult bears, who have been fasting on land since mid-June, now are in a state of "walking hibernation." Lethargic, they spend much of their time sleeping, as our next two bear sightings confirm. We spot a large adult curled up in the willows, some 500 metres from our buggy. He shifts position from time to time to get more comfortable, finally crossing one paw over his nose to cut the glare from the low sun. Buoyed by this success, our driver breaks out a soup-and-sandwich lunch. We eat. The bear sleeps. After lunch, our overly enthusiastic travelling companions spot two polar bears and a snowy owl – all of which binoculars reveal to be snow-covered rocks. Finally, we spot another bear! This one is asleep amid willow brush on a tiny island. As if on cue, he awakens, yawns and plods toward shore. He walks, in characteristic pigeon-toed fashion, yawning and stopping for naps along the way.

It takes him about two hours to cover the 1,500 metres to shore and disappear in the tundra brush.

Churchill is on Hudson Bay at the mouth of the Churchill River. Here, fresh water mixes with salt to speed the freezing process in the Bay. Early freeze-up attracts the bears and allows tour operators to almost guarantee that tourists will see these awesome creatures in their natural habitat during the six-week bear season. Although we see only three, other watchers were luckier a few days earlier. Eight bears approached their vehicle, one even sat up begging.

The best way to get safely up close is to take a full-day guided wildlife tour with Tundra Buggy® Tours or Great White Bear Tours. These two operators ply the Churchill Wildlife Management Area (about 20 minutes east of town) in four-wheel-drive vans and roomy

tundra vehicles. More adventurous visitors can sleep with the bears and be dazzled by the aurora borealis at the Tundra Buggy® Lodge, a dozen specialized vehicles equipped with bunks, showers and dining facilities, strung together and parked on the tundra. For a completely different perspective, take a dogsled ride or a helicopter tour.

One afternoon, we spend several enlightening hours at the Parks Canada Visitor Reception Centre in the train station. This jewel of an interpretive centre features realistic dioramas, models of historic forts and dozens of videos. At one remarkable display, we spy a mother bear and two cubs huddled deep in their cozy winter den. We stay to watch some excellent videos on polar bears, the Northern Lights and the fur trade.



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The next day, we leave our friendly hosts, their hopelessly spoiled house cat and the comforts of their snug B&B to explore Churchill on foot. The town is only two streets deep and 12 wide, so, fortunately, nothing is more than a few blocks away. Howling winds sandpaper our exposed faces with a fine mix of snow and grit as we sprint for the shelter of the **Town Centre Complex**. Here, a maintenance man proudly shows us around as we shed layers of winter clothing. The length of three football fields, this modern complex houses a



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library, hospital, high school, recreation centre (with a theatre, gymnasium, bowling alley, swimming pool, hockey arena and curling rink), an indoor playground, cafeteria and the town's administrative offices – facilities that make living bearable in such a harsh climate.

A few streets east, at the **Eskimo Museum**, we admire early Inuit carvings and artifacts and take the measure – impressive! – of the stuffed muskox, polar bear and walrus. A large Inuit inukshuk – stones piled in a human form to provide directions or other information – holds silent court on the museum's front lawn.

After taking once-in-a-lifetime snapshots of ourselves on the shore of Hudson Bay, we check out every gift shop on Kelsey Boulevard, the main commercial strip.



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Along the way, we warm up at Gypsy Bakery over Greek salad, coffee and apple fritters. Across the street, the aptly named Wapusk General Store – *wapusk* is Cree for white bear – is jammed with polar-bear-motif souvenirs: glass globes, t-shirts, caps, jewellery and more. At **Northern Images**, an Inuit and Dene co-op gallery, a *pangnirtung* grabs our attention. The \$800 price tag on this exquisitely embroidered, woven wool jacket forces us, reluctantly, to leave it behind. We wander westward to the **Arctic Trading Company**, which sells beaded moccasins and mukluks, fur parkas and pelts, caribou-hair tufting and fish-scale art. We return to this authentic-looking trading post every day to pet the five adorable husky puppies left outside to become socialized and hardened to the cold. When we pick them up, they snuggle blissfully into our warm parkas.

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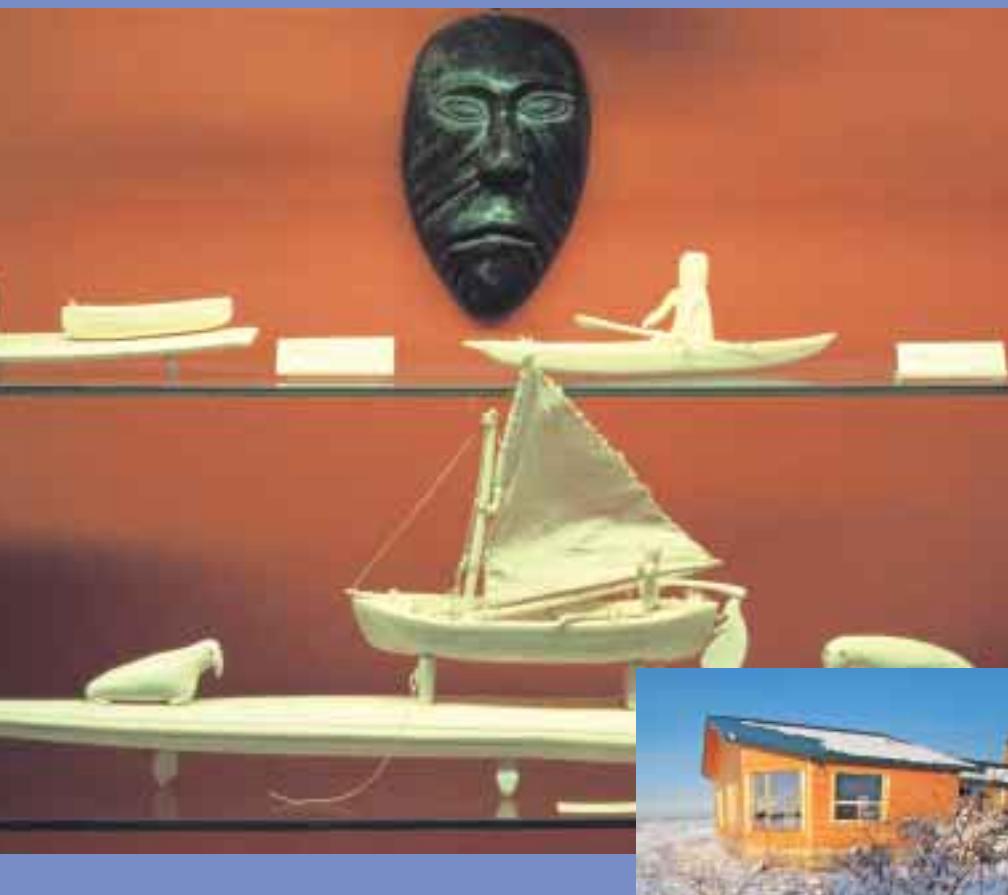


VIA Rail Canada

After sampling several restaurants, we conclude that there is no fine dining in Churchill. Happily, we are soon proven wrong. On our last day, Doug and Helen Webber invite us home for dinner. They and their family operate luxurious fly-in hunting and fishing lodges, including the five-star **Polar Bear Lodge**, 15 minutes away by helicopter. Lodge guests dine on gourmet dishes developed by Helen and her friend Marie Woolsey. In response to repeated requests, Helen and Marie eventually published a recipe book. Today, they are celebrated authors of 10 cookbooks on Northern cuisine, beginning with their best-selling first title: *Blueberries & Polar Bears*.

This evening, Helen and Marie treat us to a feast from their newest cookbook, *Icebergs & Belugas*. A warm, round loaf of shepherd's bread, as tall as a top hat, graces the table. After an appetizer of warm brie glazed with wild cranberry sauce, an entrée of pan-fried Arctic char smothered in almonds, an exotic spinach salad with wild blueberries and mango, several scrumptious vegetable dishes, and cranberry cake with butter sauce, we are convinced that Northern cuisine can be as wild and wonderful as the North itself!

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NEED TO KNOW

VIA Rail Canada's Northern Spirit Train makes the run from Winnipeg to Churchill three times a week. 1 888 VIA-RAIL, www.viarail.ca

There are only seven B&Bs, nine small motel/hotels and eight restaurants in Churchill. During Polar Bear Season, tour companies book almost everything, so reserve early.

WHERE TO EAT

\$ GYPSY BAKERY: This bustling family-run bakery and deli offers good value in home-style cooking. Kelsey, corner Thompson, (204) 675-2322

\$\$ LAZY BEAR CAFÉ: Soups, salads, chili, burgers and shakes for lunch; Arctic char and Caribou pepper steak for dinner, in a cozy, country lodge. Kelsey, (204) 675-2969

\$\$\$ REEF CAFÉ AND DINING ROOM, SEAPORT HOTEL:

Blackened Arctic char, prime rib and steak. Kelsey, corner Selkirk, (204) 675-8807

WHERE TO STAY

\$ MIKE AND MYKELEN'S BED & BREAKFAST: Fresh sandwiches on arrival, fresh fruit in room. Shared bath. Selkirk, (204) 675-2773

\$\$ LAZY BEAR LODGE: Feel like a fur trapper, but with all the mod-cons, in this new, non-smoking lodge, constructed from forest-fire-cured logs, Kelsey, (204) 675-2969, www.lazybearlodge.com

\$\$\$ POLAR INN & SUITES: Studios and one-bedroom apartments with kitchenettes. Gift shop rents complete winter garb by the day, and sells Polar Adventure™ parkas, anoraks and children's outerwear. Kelsey, 1 877 765-2733

ATTRACTIONS

PARKS CANADA VISITOR RECEPTION CENTRE: In the Churchill train station. Open daily during Polar Bear Season.

THE ESKIMO MUSEUM: Free admission. Donations welcome. La Verendrye, corner Thompson, (204) 675-2030

GREAT WHITE BEAR TOURS: Full-day guided tundra tour, including lunch: \$225 per person (plus taxes), 1 866 765-8344

HUDSON BAY HELICOPTERS: Tours from \$210 per person (taxes included), (204) 675-2576, www.hudsonbayheli.com

POLAR BEAR LODGE: 5-day, 4-night package, from \$4,350 per person (plus taxes), 1-888-326-7325, www.sealriver.com

TUNDRA BUGGY® TOURS: Full-day guided tundra tour, including lunch: \$195-\$250 per person (taxes included), 1 800 593-8881, www.wildlifeadventures.com

WAPUSK ADVENTURES: Dogsled rides with a campfire stop for bannock and tea: \$75 per person (taxes included). Kelsey, (204) 675-2887

OTHER RESOURCES

CHURCHILL NORTHERN STUDIES CENTRE: Learning vacations and non-credit courses, (204) 675-2307, www.churchillmb.net/~cncs

CHURCHILL TOURIST INFORMATION OFFICE: (204) 675-2022

MANITOBA TOURISM INFORMATION:
TRAVEL MANITOBA: 1 866 626-4862, www.travelmanitoba.com