



POLAR BEAR Expedition

By Jennifer Bain

Churchill, Manitoba is the Canadian epicentre for polar bear experiences, but you can find these captivating marine mammals across the territories and northern provinces, writes Jennifer Bain.

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When you land in Churchill and drive to Hudson Bay to dip your toes in the Arctic Ocean, you will spot “polar bear alert” signs that warn “Stop. Don’t walk in this area. Report bear sightings.” It’s much easier on the nerves to pop into the Canada Post office with your passport or a piece of paper and ask for the town’s custom “cancel mark” featuring a polar bear under the slogan “Polar bear capital of the world.”

This isolated Manitoba town has made itself synonymous with polar bear tourism and draws in visitors from around the world. It’s famously home to all-terrain vehicles that allow people to safely view, study and photograph the biggest carnivores on land. But when I flew up, I took a bush plane another 60 kilometres north of the town to an ecolodge for a walking polar bear safari.

At the lodge, which is surrounded by an electrified bear fence, I went out twice a day with other guests and armed polar bear guards to safely search the coast and tundra. I didn’t have to walk far to see my first polar bear – a gorgeous creature nicknamed SWF (Single White Female) lying close to the rocky shoreline, conserving energy while waiting for the ice to freeze and the seal hunt to begin.

She looked like a supersized white version of the sweet black Labrador that I grew up with – until she stopped licking her paw, lifted her head, sniffed the fall air, stood up and started walking while yawning. Yawning is a sign of stress and part of the protocol here is to move on if we upset a bear. Polar bears may be at the top of the food chain, but they choose their battles wisely, so this one ambled down to the ocean, staring wistfully at the open water almost willing it to freeze.

Over the next few days that October, I saw male and female bears on every outing, got up close and personal with polar bear scat, but stayed at least 50 to 100 metres from actual bears. I saw one dig a daybed in piles of ocean kelp and a female just outside the dining room window who caught wind of a dangerous approaching male and fled.



A TRADITIONAL STONE INUKSHUK WITH AURORA BOREALIS IN BACKGROUND



BIG BEAR JUST CHILLING



SUNDOG AT SUNSET ON THE TUNDRA

I vowed to come back one March to see newborn cubs emerge from their dens, or maybe one summer when the cubs are a little older and the beluga whales are out.

On my way home from the ecolodge, I admired a young polar bear in a glass case in the Itsanitaq Museum (formerly the Eskimo Museum) and learned that while northerners take great care to avoid polar bear encounters, some bears come to town desperate for easy food. Churchill's Polar Bear Holding Facility has become an iconic, if odd, landmark where you can learn how wayward bears are humanely caught with culvert traps, sedated and transported a safe distance from town.



AN UNLIKELY PAIR TO SEE IN CHURCHILL

Two-thirds of the world's remaining 22,000 - 30,000 polar bears live in Canada's North, and those unforgettable Manitoba bears may have been my first, but they were not my last. I've seen more live bears and signs of bears, plus bears immortalized in art.

In the Northwest Territories, I adore the ferocious taxidermied polar bears in the Yellowknife and Inuvik airports. In Iqaluit, the capital of Nunavut, a tour guide showed me where an Inuit teen was proudly drying his first polar bear hide on a rack outside his home. I admired a stunning polar bear-themed mural outside the hospital and while flightseeing in search of polar bears, I was thrilled to just see seals sunning themselves on the ice.



BABY BEARS AT PLAY

On an expedition cruise that took me through Labrador, I scoured the coastline looking for polar bears and safely explored Torngat Mountains National Park after our polar bear guards swept it and established a perimeter. In the Inuit village of Kangiqsualujjuaq in the northern Quebec area known as Nunavik, I bought a polar bear head necklace that an Inuit man had

carved from antler, while in Nain, Labrador, I bought a tiny soapstone polar bear directly from the artist plus two polar bear teeth necklaces from another man.

It was near Arctic Bay, Nunavut, that I saw more actual polar bears. As we spent our days stationed on the sea

ice at the edge of the open Arctic Ocean, watching for narwhal, marine mammals and migrating birds, we spotted a few polar bears watching us. We used high-powered zooms to photograph those bears, kayaked with Inuit guards in case they swam over, and wished the bears well when they moved away.