

Churchill Offers Icy Treat

By **Merrilee MacLean**

As the winter drags on, one's mind can't help but turn to thinking of what else we might be doing, rather than lawyering away. Why not do something different and visit the "Polar Bear Capital of the World" in Churchill, Manitoba? My trip to Churchill for a "photo safari" in 2002 is one of my favorite travel experiences.

To see the polar bears, you have to be there when they are — in late October and early November — when they congregate at the southwest corner of Hudson Bay, where the bay freezes over first. Once the water freezes, the bears are gone — off hunting seals and making up for months of scrounging in the tundra for food. It is cold and windy — a true arctic experience. Still, it's worth it to see these magnificent creatures in their natural habitat — where people are the ones in the cages and the bears roam free. Also, if you are lucky, you will see the sky dance with the Northern Lights — a sight that belies description.

Churchill is about five hours north of Minneapolis by plane, by way of Winnipeg. When we arrived in the early afternoon, it was 8 degrees (Fahrenheit) and blowing snow. It is flat and the wind is so constant the trees only have limbs on one side (they claim they strap two trees together at Christmastime). Still, the town of 850 was friendly and proud of its polar bear heritage, even if it does put the bears that wander into town into a "polar bear jail."

If the bears don't come to you in town, you have to go to them. Tundra Buggies, looking like school buses with oversized tires and a platform in the back, are the main mode of transportation. Even though there are heater/stoves inside the buggies, once the bears are sighted, all the ice-covered windows open. Even on a sunny day, it was 20 degrees inside the buggy (according to the REI thermometer on my jacket) and we soon learned that if we didn't want our

drinks to freeze, we had to keep them IN the cooler.

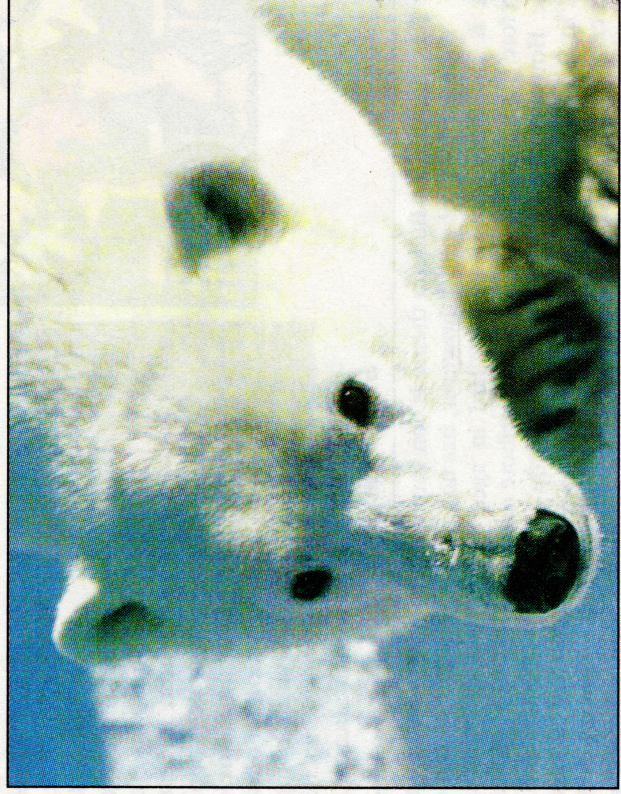
The best part, though, was watching the bears. We came upon a mother and her year-and-a-half-old cub nestled in the snow, enjoying the sun beating down. We were within 30 feet and the sound of clicking cameras was interrupted only by the occasional cries of the baby that wanted to nurse.

Other bears wandered by, but not too close. A male settled in to sunbathe in the snow about 40 yards from the mother and cub. Mom kept an eye on him and after she finished nursing, charged the male, apparently telling him he was too close. The male took the hint, and eventually wandered off into barren landscape.

Another time, we found two young males, sparring. After wrestling on the ground, they would rear up and play gladiator, using their paws to slap and their jaws to nibble. It was all quite gentle, though, and after playing for what seemed like hours, they laid down together to nap.

My tour included a three-night stay in a "tundra bunkhouse," a row of five linked trailers on wheels that are rolled out onto the tundra for the polar bear sighting season. With two sleeping cars, a dining car, storage car and lounge, the bunkhouse is a self-contained village that cleverly attracts the bears with its cooking smells.

The more curious bears would stand on their hind legs, trying to look in the windows; the others just played or slept in the nearby scrub willows that



Polar bears get up close and personal during Tundra Buggy tours out of Churchill, Manitoba.

allowed some privacy for them. We could not, of course, go outside onto the ground — the battle between two bears over a hat accidentally dropped out a window was proof that danger was just outside the door. Still, the chance to watch the bears in their natural habitat was an experience of a lifetime.

For those considering a trip to Churchill, there are a number of tour operators, emphasizing different interests and with varying prices. I used an excellent Vashon Island-based company directed to photographers, but there are many options available. ■

Merrilee MacLean, in addition to being a shareholder at Karr Tuttle Campbell, is a travel writer and photographer.