

The Seal River Heritage Lodge

Pancake Breakfast

Churchill and the Hudson Bay Lowlands

The final episode.

Klaus and I have finally made it. We are greeted to the lodge by hosts Mike and Jennie Reimer. August is the prime of their season and they are busy guiding the guests to the various sites. The lodge is perfectly placed on a spit of sub-arctic tundra surrounded on three sides by the Arctic waters of the Hudson Bay. As we sat down in the dining room we could view the ocean waters from any of the three large picture windows. Mike has spotting scopes and binoculars handy to help spot the numerous water and shore birds of the area, and to scout for the whales off shore as they break the surface to spout.

The main attraction is the beluga whales which you can see by the thousands as they swim in and out of the North and South mouths of the fabulous Seal River. They come in with the rising tide and leave with the ebbing tide. Mostly they congregate in the mouth of the river where you can visit them in the clear waters using the rubber rafts and small outboard motors. Liking shooting fish in a barrel, except you do the shooting with a camera. Mike arranges the rubber rafts for us to leave on a guided tour early the next morning.

At day break I stand on the watch tower over the lodge scanning the bay for water spouts. The rising sun saturates the backdrop sky a gumdrop orange. As the whales blow the saltwater, back-lit by the sun, into a sparkling diamond spray we set off across the open water. Within 20 minutes we spot whales. These are large with huge black backs and a fan spray blow as they surface. We try to get near them, but they continue to swim off. They are definitely not beluga whales. My best guess is that they are the huge majestic bow whales. Bow whales were hunted commercially until only about 20 years ago and are still considered a rare sighting in this part of the Hudson Bay. We consider ourselves very lucky to have spotted them. We quit the chase and head to the mouth of the Seal River.



Long before we ever reach the Seal, however, we can see the blow from a distance. With a sea-spray that reaches up to 90cm the blow is very visible. We are already in the midst of beluga. They are heading in the same direction and swimming with a purpose. We are sailing with a purpose. They are after the shallow river protein such as worms, crustaceans, shrimp, clams, snails, crabs, and small fish. Fish such as capelin, char, sand lance, smelt, flounder, herring, and cod, are usually taken in deeper water but can be caught much easier in the restricted river mouth. The total take of 25 kgs per day is not much by whale standards, but still a lot of lunch that eventually adds up to 1500 kgs of adult male whale.

The beluga can stay submerged for 15-20 minutes and travel up to 2-3 kms under water on one dive. That is one of the reasons the river mouth is such a great place to get close and see the whales. The space is restricted and the whales surface more often to spy hop their way around the smaller areas. In the estuaries they usually only stay submerged for only about 2 minutes, and make 1 or 2 surfacings before the longer 1-2 minutes dive.

Before long we are surrounded by whales pods cruising by. These pods are mostly small family groups, but the larger pods can reach up to 10,000 individuals. We can see them clearly, but somehow they are still cautious and do not come to close. Some of the mothers are followed closely, almost as if they are lashed to their backs, by awkward gray calves. Breeding in May means our calves were 3-4 months old. Occasionally we can hear their squawk-like calls. Like other whales the beluga use echolocation to find their way around and to find food.

After an exhilarating several hours of watching the whales, we decide to stop for our own lunch. Mike and Quentin, his friend and acting guide, tied the two rubber rafts together so we can all share our meal and our experiences. As we drifted along in this peaceful inner sea and quietly chatted with our fellow rafters, we noticed that the whales were finally starting to show some interest in us. I felt that when the two rubber rafts rubbed together they produced a squeak that the whale's natural curiosity could not resist.

As an experiment, I tried to make the rafts squeak more frequently, but it took a special combination that could not be duplicated easily. I tried rubbing my Gortex pants on the rubber raft but that was too soft a squeak. Finally, Mike caught on to what I was doing and rubbed his own rubber rain slicker pants on the rubber of the raft. That was the magic we needed.



The squeak he produced drove the whales crazy with curiosity and within minutes we were surrounded by over 50 whales in different pods jostling us for a closer look at what was making that peculiar noise. We pulled out our cameras and were snapping incessantly as they spy hopped closer and closer. Mike put his hand under water and the friendly beluga were swimming so close he could feel the flow of their wake.

One particular mother and calf would not leave us alone. She came by time and time again with the little one close on her back. The little gray beluga seemed to love these frequent visits as he hopped up higher each time to look see. When we finally left hours later we had several pods follow us almost all the way home. They could not leave us alone. Nor did we want to leave them, but the day was coming to a close and we had to return to base. Spending the day with these fellow creatures of curiosity was one the most incredible one on one, or animal family to human family, experiences I have ever had in the wild. And at Seal River there is so much more nature to go one on one with.



From the lodge you can take guided interpretive nature and culture walks where you can see caribou, bald eagles, Canada and Snow geese, ptarmigan, sik siks, and possibly even polar bear. Not that you want to go one on one with a polar bear, but they are there. We did see one on our walk, and we gave her a wide berth to avoid any trouble. Mike does carry a shotgun loaded with cracker shells and real load to make sure.

Along the interpretive walks you get to visit ancient Dene and Inuit camping sites, outlined by either the weathered tent poles the Dene used, or the tent circle of stones that the Inuit used to anchor their skin tents. The sites have been investigated by archeologist Virginia Petch and the walks have been mapped by GPS to make sure you can see the most with the least trouble. The walks are tough but worth it.

That evening Jennie, Mike's partner and wife, prepares us an incredible dinner of arctic char, garden peas, and homemade red river cereal bread. Dessert is a locally picked cranberry crumble and coffee. After dinner the sun sets in a glorious blaze of orange to end a perfect day. I am to take an evening stroll on the runway's high point of ground where the evening breeze will keep the bugs swept away. The night is perfectly clear and I can see the planets of Jupiter followed by Venus and a host of northern stars. The night air is cool and I fall asleep deep into the dead of the night. The next morning the sky is blue blazon with the gold of sunrise and Jennie serves

us the most fantastic sight we have seen since leaving Nigeria 3 weeks ago. Canadian pancakes topped with butter, maple syrup, and as a special treat, blueberry compote made with fresh picked local blueberries. The ending to our trip could not have been any more special. We have flown over 10,000 miles to have breakfast in Canada. Perhaps next time you can join us.



Article and Images by John S Goulet