

Swimming with Whales, Hudson Bay, Manitoba

From Seal River Lodge, we headed out in two zodiacs to look for polar bears and beluga whales. Ice had left the Bay only 2 weeks earlier and the water was far from balmy. Ian, our guide, spotted the white of a beluga and asked, "Who first?" Having no clue what really was going to happen, I volunteered. The first step was to put me into a dry suit. A large black rubber unit, zippered along the back at the shoulders and tight around the wrists and neck. I opted against gloves and a head covering which could restrict movement. Armed with a mask and snorkel, I got out of the zodiac and entered the frigid water. If I had any thought that this would be like snorkeling in the waters of Belize, that idea was frozen right out of my mind. With the extra air in my dry suit, I looked like a small humpback whale. Ian worked to release the extra air so my size shrunk to a large sea lion. (At which point, I started wondering if the rare orca in the bay or a wandering polar bear might find me a tad too interesting.) A very long looped rope was attached to my foot and the zodiac started moving away from me at a leisurely pace. The idea was to drag me backwards behind the boat. What happened next was unbelievable. Belugas from everywhere swam to me. They swam under me, beside me, one rolled on her belly below me and revealed her calf. At times I would be surrounded by a dozen whales. (Ian later joked I was the most popular girl in the ocean.) Groups of 5 - 7 kept pace with me, would stay for a little while and then swim away to be replaced by more which swam in to join me. I would catch white out of the corner of my eye, and before I knew it, there was a whale swimming right beside me. One swam right up to me, less than 18 inches from my face and looked at me. I nodded my head, it nodded its head. I moved my head side to side, it moved its head side to side. What a magical moment.

After more than 30 minutes, I was hauled out of the water (my hands were like rubber.) Never in my wildest dreams did I expect to have such a thrilling encounter. The belugas sought me out. Wild animals curious about the black rubbery creature which had entered their realm. I had a couple more chances to spend time with the whales, but that first encounter, when there were so many belugas, was the most special.

If you are interested in your own beluga encounter, see www.churchillwild.com/birds-bears-belugas.