

EPIC ADVENTURES
CHURCHILL, MAN.

NO AVERAGE BEAR

WALKING AMONG POLAR BEARS WITH
NANUK POLAR BEAR LODGE IS A
BOYHOOD DREAM COME TRUE

BY DOUG O'NEILL



I'm rooted to the ground, staring straight into the coal-black eyes of a 500-pound polar bear, separated by a protective buffalo fence. I'm safely inside the compound at the fly-in Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge on the shores of Hudson Bay, about 250 kilometres southeast of Churchill, Manitoba. The irony of the moment does not escape me—it's the wild creature who is on the outside looking in at me, confined inside the enclosure.

There's little sound except the sub-Arctic wind and the occasional grunting of the beautiful white *Ursus maritimus*, as she intermittently sniffs the air before turning her gaze back to me. I'm unable to budge, and it's obvious she's not going anywhere for the moment, either.

This is not so much a standoff in the wild, in which man is pitted against beast, as much as it is a grown-man-realizing-a-boyhood -dream.

I've long dreamt about bears. As a young boy, I had two recurring dreams about the world's largest land predators. In one (which elicited howls of family laughter when recounted at the breakfast table), I am snuggled up against a sleeping, big white polar bear, comfy as you please. In another, I'm being chased

across a baseball diamond by a grizzly. (For the record, I hated team sports as a child.)

A dream therapist once told me that the appearance of a hibernating or sleeping bear in your dreams is a sign that you need to do more soul searching before sharing a big idea with the world. If you dream about being chased by a bear, on the other hand, it's likely that you're avoiding a big issue in your life and it's time to face it.

My inner romantic wants to drape the fence encounter in some kind of special meaning. What does the heavy eye contact mean? What does the big white creature detect when she sniffs my scent in the Arctic breeze?

I turn to our bear guide, Albert Saunders, as he sidles up to the fence next to me. Albert, a Cree who was born at nearby York Factory First Nation, has been bear guiding for about 25 years. What does he think about my seemingly intimate moment with the bear?

"Nah, she just sees you as a potential food source," says Albert, looking me up and down. (I was a chunk lighter at the time.) "Not enough meat on your bones. She's probably not all that

interested." I turn back to the fence and am met with the backside of a disinterested bear ambling away in the opposite direction.

The ego-bruising moment does not, of course, detract from the dreamy nature of my four-day polar bear experience at Nanuk Lodge, operated by Churchill Wild. After all, while I may not have spooned with a polar bear during an afternoon nap, I did something even more amazing after my fence encounter: I got to go polar bear trekking on foot, with no protective barrier between human and beast.

Exploring the North on foot

Ground-level Arctic safaris have been the wilderness trump card for Churchill Wild for 20-plus years. (The outdoor adventure company owns Nanuk Lodge and four other luxury eco lodges in the far north.) Known as "walking safaris," these on-the-ground wildlife adventures run from July to November. For visitors planning on a summer experience, there are various options at Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge during the month of August. I chose the "Hudson Bay Odyssey" because it promised the opportunity to see mama bears and cubs in the wild.





Walking with bears

On a late-summer morning, our group of six clammers into the open-air Tundra Rhino, a custom-built, 8-wheel-drive vehicle that can navigate over tundra and mud flats. Andy McPherson, a trained bear guide and environmentalist, shouts over the motor: "Because Nanuk Lodge is situated in an active denning area, where mother bears and cubs hang out in late summer, while waiting for the water to freeze and seal-hunting season to begin, sightings are plentiful."

McPherson carries a starter pistol and a supply of noisemaker shells, which are used to scare off bears if they get too close. We're also accompanied that morning by Albert, who carries a rifle, which he's only ever used to frighten off a bear. "Just using my voice, or even banging two rocks together, is usually enough to keep the bears away," he explains.

After driving 45 minutes eastward from the lodge, we stop and climb out of the Rhino. Andy and Albert take a few minutes to reinforce some of the safety tips discussed over breakfast, and then we start walking single file over the tundra, which is blanketed in mosses, lichens and sedges.

After ambling for about an hour, Andy stops abruptly and points. There in the distance on the shoreline, about 500 metres away, is a blurry speck of white. Andy reminds us to stay in our single-line formation as he leads us in a zig-zag walk toward the bear. "If we spread out in a wide line, the bear will be intimidated and feel she's being attacked," he says. "We only approach on an angle—never head-on."

Through my binoculars, I see the bear looking up in our direction. "She's spotted us," says one of our group. "Oh," says Albert, "She's had us on her radar long before we even saw her." The bear starts ambling in a westerly direction, but then circles back, heading right toward us. We stand mesmerized. "Could be close to 500 pounds," says Albert. Before we know it, she's about 200 metres away. Albert reminds us to stay in our single line. Minutes pass and the bear inches closer, causing my heart to pump louder and louder. "She's curious," explains Albert. "She's trying to figure out if we're something she could eat."

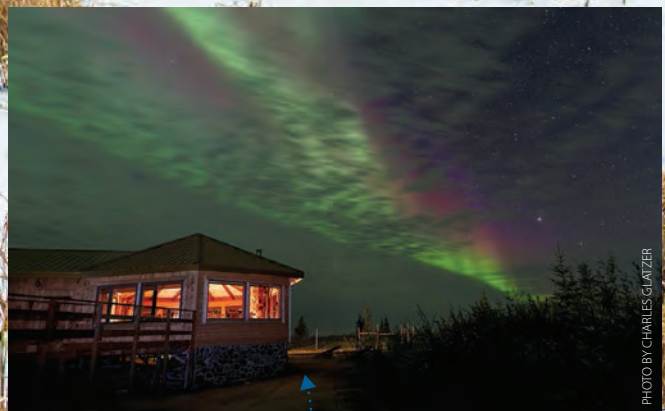
Then the bear—rather boldly, if I do say so—continues in our direction, only stopping to paw her eyes before resuming her march toward us. That's

when Albert quietly cautions us to walk slowly and quietly back toward the buggy. Once safely ensconced in the vehicle, I reach once more for my binoculars. The magnificent creature just stands there on all fours, staring, staring, staring. Beautiful and majestic.

On the afternoon of the second trekking day, we're out walking again over the mudflats of the Hudson Bay lowlands when Andy points to a polar bear, out in the open, near some shrubs. Albert, however, is staring off in another direction. Curious, I follow his sightline. "There," he points, almost 90 degrees from where Andy and most of our group are staring. From behind a shrub, 200 metres away, pops up two of the cutest cubs. Albert chuckles. "Mama bear is over there, moving about, trying to draw attention to herself so we don't see the babies she's protecting."

We linger for awhile, cameras madly snapping photos of the cubs, until the mama bear gets antsy. Not wanting to cause the bears any distress, we move on. After all, this is the land of the Nanuk, the home of the polar bear, and we're simply visitors, some of us simply chasing a childhood dream.





BEAR NECESSITIES

Getting there:

Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge (churchillwild.com) is accessible by plane only. Most packages include a flight from Winnipeg to Gillam, where passengers switch to small aircraft that lands on a dirt runway near the lodge.

The lodge:

Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge was honoured last year as one of the National Geographic

Unique Lodges of the World. There are eight shared guest rooms with ensuite bathrooms, and common rooms in the main lodge.

Make sure you pack:

Binoculars, layered thermal clothing, long-lens camera, water-resistant jacket, toque, sunglasses, rubber boots and sunscreen.

Northern Lights show:

Witnessing the phenomenon of the aurora borealis, a.k.a. the Northern Lights, is yet another bucket-list reason to go north. At Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge, it's possible for the middle-of-the-night light display to happen anytime between July and November. Don't worry about falling asleep and missing the awesome event. When the multi-coloured lights start dancing across the night sky, staff will come banging on your door at any hour, provided you've given them permission in advance. You'll want to.