



Churchill Wild...

Founded 25 years ago, Churchill Wild offers fly-in tours to four remote luxury properties near Churchill, Manitoba. Founders **Mike** and **Jeanne Reimer** explain all about the family-run operation

Q What is Churchill Wild?

A: We are the premium wilderness polar bear product on the planet! If you want to see polar bears in the wild and stay at a high-end resort, you're going to have to do it with Churchill Wild. We are the only people that do walking safaris with polar bears.

Q Describe the guest experience

A: Our efforts are directed at giving guests a once-in-a-lifetime, close encounter with Arctic wildlife. Primarily that's polar bears, beluga whales and wildlife local to the Hudson Bay.

Q Tell us about your lodges

A: Seal River is a true tundra lodge. It's on the coast, north of the treeline. We access beluga whales there in the summertime, which we can't at the other lodges.

It has a strong marine-based programme. Nanuk, the newest lodge, has polar bears and Arctic wildlife and a large moose and wolf population, due to the proximity of the treeline. From mid-August to September there's phenomenal shorebird and waterfowl migrations — we see deer falcons and snowy owls. Dymond Lake is an arboreal forest lodge, on the edge of the tundra.



It has some trees, some coastal vantages. You get similar wildlife to the other lodges but we don't do any marine-based tourism there. We only use it in October and November, and see polar bears, wolverines and wolves.

Q Which lodge would you suggest for first-time visitors?

A: I would suggest Seal River because in July and August you can experience such a wide variety of flora and fauna.

The days are long. Towards the end of July you're getting into a bit of Norther Lights at night.

You'll see bears, swim with whales and see wildflowers. It's a real broad mix of encounters and things to do.

Q What can guests experience in summer?

A: The chief difference is what we call birds, bears and belugas. You get bird species, incredible wildflowers and opportunities to swim with beluga whales.

The marine programme in July and August at Seal River really sets it apart from October and November, which is your winter freeze-up and bears on snow and ice.

Q Are polar bear sightings guaranteed?

A: Some experiences are more dramatic than others. But to go on one of our trips and not see a bear, I don't recall that happening.

Q How close do you get to Arctic animals?

A: Our marine tours get clients as close to a large mammal as is possible. The belugas are within less than a metre. Polar bears are easy to see as you can get quite close in a boat: inside of 25 metres is not unusual.

Q What's new for 2018?

A: We are testing a new trip in September at Nanuk. It combines wildlife viewing with fly fishing for speckled trout. We do a combo now, a dual lodge safari that starts at Seal River and ends at Nanuk.

Q How far in advance should I book?

A: Clients need to book a year in advance. We're already pretty much fully booked for 2018 — and availability is already limited for 2019.

Q What tips can you offer agents looking to sell Churchill Wild?

A: If you want a unique safari experience that's on a par with the finest game lodges of Africa, South America or tiger lodges in India we rank right up there with the best. If you want an Arctic experience where you can stay in a remote, luxury lodge, experience fabulous food and wines and the best guides then this is the place to do it.

churchillwild.com

Polar extremes

Stuart Forster enjoys a guided walk on the tundra, in subarctic Manitoba, photographing wildlife such as Arctic hares, willow ptarmigan and – the big one – polar bears

October and November are prime months for viewing polar bears in northern Manitoba. The bears are waiting for the Hudson Bay to freeze over, so that they can head out onto the ice to hunt seals. It's also when Churchill Wild operates Polar Bear Photo Safaris, which are popular with photographers of all levels as well as wildlife enthusiasts.

The idea of joining a guided walking tour in a treeless landscape where hungry polar bears outnumber humans may seem foolhardy. As we sat by the fireside in Seal River Heritage Lodge Derek, one of Churchill Wild's expert guides, explained that the region's bears had not eaten for months and were capable of running at speeds of up to 25 miles per hour. He emphasized the importance of following his instructions when out on the tundra and that, for safety, our dozen strong group must stay together.

We'd already spotted moose and several polar bears along the shoreline during the 40-mile flight by light aircraft from Churchill – the only way of reaching the remote property. Our initial briefing in the lodge was interrupted by a bear outside, prompting people to grab phones and cameras to record the scene from the window.

DRESSED FOR THE OCCASION

Walking outdoors in windy, sub-zero temperatures requires specialist clothing. Along with most of the other guests, rather than buying kit I'd rarely use again I rented a heavy parka, windproof trousers and insulated boots from Churchill Wild.

We had fittings at the airport hotel in Winnipeg, which is a two-hour flight south of Churchill. I was *very* glad to have the warm clothing, as the wind chill factor meant temperatures dipped to -16°C out on the tundra by Seal River.

We went on two walking tours each day. During one we visited a centuries-old campsite used by the Thule people, the



On the prowl



BOOK IT!

windowsonthewild.com

A seven-night Birds, Bears and Belugas tour is priced from £7,673pp including five nights at Seal River Lodge with full-board, activities and excursions, two nights in Winnipeg, flights to and within Canada. An excursion in a tundra vehicle and three nights at Dymond Lake Lodge, with guided activities and meals



The dancing Northern Lights



Bear necessities

ancestors of modern Inuit. Remarkably, circles of stones that once held shelters and the campfire were still clearly visible.

We spotted an arctic hare dashing between the stones and wandered to within just a few feet of a flock of willow ptarmigan, which are grouse-like birds.

SEEING THE LIGHTS

Mealtimes proved a highlight of staying at the lodge. The hearty, homestyle cooking was served for us to share at tables in the dining room. Beers and a fine selection of Canadian wines were available. After dinners we had the option of attending lectures and slideshows presented by the lodge's guides. I found them a fascinating way of learning about bear behaviour and nature in the Hudson Bay. The lecture on our final night ended abruptly due to Northern Lights activity. We flung on our coats and headed outside to watch green aurora dancing in the sky.

WALK ON THE WILD SIDE

The walks provided opportunities to observe polar bears resting on the shoreline of the bay. At one point we huddled together as an 800lb male bear sauntered in our direction. The thrilling, close encounter provided some outstanding photos and plenty for us to talk about back in the comfort of the lodge. •