



Locking eyes with
a mama polar bear
at Nanuk Lodge on
Canada's Hudson Bay.



Close encounters: polar bears

They say the eyes are the window to the soul, and for that type of connection with the Lord of the Arctic, Canada's world-first polar bear walking safaris will pique your interest.

Words & photography JOCELYN PRIDE

Beady eyes penetrate mine and for a split second my whole life flashes by like the blur of a snow flurry. Behind the eyes stands 450 kilograms of bulk. Bold. Beautiful. Her buttery popcorn-coloured fur is streaked with caked-on mud. It would only take a few bounds and the apex predator of the Arctic could satisfy her hunger. But she doesn't. Instead, she stands and stares at me.

Beside her, a mini version of herself takes a couple of steps closer. Playful, inquisitive and stretching the boundaries of a cub, his fur is more like that of his brown cousin than a polar bear.

"Hey, beautiful," says Andy, our quietly spoken guide who is known as the Polar Bear Whisperer. "Your cub looks healthy. You're doing a great job."

Andy's calm words are firm but almost therapeutic. There's complete silence except for the banging of my heart, which feels like it's keeping the rhythm of a symphonic finale. No one in our small group moves a centimetre as an invisible line is drawn between us and the mama and cub. The watchers and the watched.

Andy continues to speak "polar bear" in a monotone voice as if he's chatting with an old friend. In some ways he is. Together with our other guides, Butch and Josh, all with the important just-in-case-but-have-never-been-needed loaded shotguns slung over their shoulders at the ready, they form

a team to assess the body language of the bears as well as manage our group. Everything Andy mentioned in our briefing is playing out. Don't move or speak, listen for instructions and, above all, savour the moment.

Curiosity satisfied, the bears lumber away slowly, leaving us mesmerised. Puzzled, I ask why the mama seemed to be only looking at me. "That's simple," Andy chuckles. "You're the smallest, the easiest prey. She was sizing you up."

Life in the wilderness

Encounters like this are the reason people come to one of the Churchill Wild lodges in northern Manitoba, Canada. Owned and operated by Mike and Jeanne Reimer and their family with a team of long-term employees, Churchill Wild is a collection of four remote lodges that run the planet's only polar bear walking safaris. Starting with just one guest in their first year 25 years ago, the lodges now welcome more than 600 visitors each year.

"Our whole family loves polar bears," says Mike and Jeanne's daughter, Allison, a vibrant young woman who simply can't bear to be away from the lodges for too long. "I've grown up with bears in my life. It's all about mutual respect." This is the foundation of Mike's dream; he was the recipient of the 2017 prestigious international PURE Life Experiences award for his contribution to experiential travel in addition to the 2017 Canadian Sustainable Tourism award.

Nanuk Lodge is nestled behind a polar bear-proof fence surrounded by a scattering of fir and birch trees. It's a cocoon within the wilderness. Like all the Churchill Wild properties, the lodge was built by locals using recycled materials and locally sourced, sustainably harvested timber. Each of the eight polar bear-themed rooms and cosy central lounge with a blazing fire looks out onto tundra as curious passersby — polar bears, black bears, moose, wolves and myriad birds — look in. It's like a reverse zoo where we're the exhibits.

Earlier in the week when we flew into the lodge via a light plane from Churchill, we spotted 57 bears lazing around on the vast shores of Hudson Bay as if they were on a summer holiday. However, the reality is quite different.

"The polar bears are here waiting for the ice to form to go out to hunt for seals," explains Andy. "They try to conserve as much energy as possible because they lose up to two pounds [nearly 1kg] each day they spend on land." And the longer it takes for the freeze, the hungrier the bears become and sometimes they get themselves into trouble.

Before heading to Nanuk we'd seen the polar bear prison in Churchill, the polar bear capital of the world, where during the summer months the number of bears in the area outnumbers the population of 800. Troublesome bears are put in the prison for a month before being tranquillised and relocated via



chopper far away from the town. With a decreasing population of only around 20,000–25,000 polar bears left in the wild, mostly in Canada, protecting the species is paramount.

"We're trying to educate the bears to keep them out of the prison," says Andy. "Humans may not be on a polar bear's menu but we can never forget they are an apex predator." Conditioning the bears to the presence of people is the reason why all Churchill Wild guides use the same approach. "By observing a bear's behaviour, we make decisions to give people the opportunity to be at ground level. It's always on the bear's terms." The experience is spine-tingling.

A walk on the wild side

Each day, we head out in custom-built open-air eight-wheel-drive tundra buggies, the Arctic equivalent of an African safari vehicle. The landscape stretches to the horizon, a mix of larch and willow undergrowth burnished with autumnal hues of gold, red and orange, with glens of trees dotted along the muddy tracks. At times Andy and Josh expertly slalom the vehicles through water crossings and Butch, in a separate vehicle, is always scanning the area for wildlife. As an indigenous Cree, Butch's knowledge and love of the land is etched into each of the lines on his face and humility resonates from every spoken word.

When Butch spots a polar bear, we quietly high five and prepare to walk. Our orders: single file, watch for Andy's hand signals, zig-zag pattern, don't look at the bear until told safe to do so and try not to get stuck in the mud. "Bears live in a fairly silent world," says Andy. "There are no roaring or other sounds, only body language." As we approach the designated 100-metre visual boundary, Andy, Josh and Butch look for signs of anxiety or aggression. "A bear will circle something that's bothering them. Repetitive yawning is a sign we're having an effect on the bear and it's time to back off."

Most bears we see are sprawled out or curled up tightly, sleeping like pet dogs. Amid the expanse of isolation, they look lonely, vulnerable. Sometimes a bear

wakes, gives us a sideways glance and rolls back into a deep slumber. Other times, curiosity aroused, it comes closer. Andy always controls the situation. "We give the animal the chance to decide what it wants to do. The animal sets the distance rather than the other way around. We get the best response observing from a 100-metre radius."

Moose and wolves

In addition to the polar bears, we have other wildlife encounters. One morning with the Arctic world enveloped in mist, Butch and Josh "call" a moose. "My father taught me how to call animals when I was a boy," says Butch as he creates a simple instrument made

of a piece of string and an old can — reminiscent of childhood games of making telephones. I'm intrigued. As Butch pulls the string through the can, Josh rakes a shed moose antler across the bushes.

"This is the sound a bull moose wants to hear. It tells them there are females in the area." After around half an hour, there's a rustle in the willows and into the clearing steps a magnificent specimen, the edges of his massive perfectly symmetrical antlers catching the soft light. If he's disappointed to find a group of camera-clicking humans instead of the love of his life, he doesn't show it. Instead, he stands majestically as if it's his cue on a movie set.



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Clockwise from top: Waking up to an ethereal, multi-coloured sunrise at the lodge; wild autumn berries dripping with dew; making friends with a majestic moose in the mist.



From top: A wolf sighting at the lodge offers a close-up of those piercing yellow eyes; taking in the Arctic scenery at Nanuk Lodge.



Wolves are another species that has everyone excited. "Wolves here are quite unusual," says Andy. "We've had this pack around the lodge for about a week." Unfortunately, the presence of the pack of 17 wolves means the polar bears have moved away from the immediate vicinity of the lodge. "Although polar bears are at the top of the food chain, a pack of wolves will take one on. They're cunning and clever." Andy goes on to explain how he'd witnessed the pack trying to get at a mama polar bear's two cubs a couple of days earlier. "The wolves ended up coming out second best. The mama protected her cubs and at one stage had three wolves hanging off her."

We see the wolves each day. They pad around the lodge boundary, their intense yellow eyes scanning for hunting opportunities. Sometimes they bed down among the willows; other times they play out on the track that doubles as the

The bear essentials

Getting there

- From Australia, the gateway to Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge is through Vancouver or Los Angeles, on to Winnipeg and into Churchill. There you will pick up a Churchill Wild charter flight (one hour flying time) directly to the lodge.
- Winnipeg is also a fascinating city to explore. Head to the Assiniboine Park Zoo, home of the International Polar Bear Conservation Centre and the Journey to Churchill exhibition, where you can get an underwater perspective of polar bears swimming.

When to go

- Polar bear viewing season is between July and November, with each month offering a different type of experience. Early in the season, there's a chance to see females emerging from their dens with cubs, right through to late season when the polar bears are gathering on the shores of the Hudson.
- In summer, thousands of Beluga whales migrate to Hudson Bay, combining polar bear viewing with whale watching. Churchill Wild offers a range of experiences across its four lodges that involve varying degrees of physical and mental challenges. churchillwild.com

Staying at a Churchill Wild Lodge

- All packages are inclusive of meals, charter flights, transfers, accommodation, guides and activities. Accommodation is wilderness five-star with Nanuk Lodge and Seal River Lodge earning National Geographic Unique Lodges of the World status.

Good to know

- Due to the charter flight, your luggage will be restricted to 22kg and needs to be in a soft duffel-type bag. Depending on your arrangements, extra luggage can be left at your hotel in Churchill or Winnipeg. Churchill Wild supplies a what-to-bring list for all guests specific to each month and itinerary. The key is to dress in layers. Outer waterproof jackets, over-pants and gumboots can be rented. Living without WiFi is a chance to disconnect from the world, though you'll be able to pick up a signal in some parts of the lodge and a satellite phone is available for emergencies.
- Depending on the itinerary you choose, a varying degree of fitness is required and children need to be aged over eight. For safety reasons, all activities outside the lodges are closely guided; there's no wandering off on your own.

Fun to know

- *Nanuk* means polar bear in Inuktitut.
- Polar bears have an incredible sense of smell with a range of around 30km.
- Although polar bears are considered carnivores, they're actually omnivores because in lean times they'll turn to eating things like berries.
- Polar bears have black skin and their fur is transparent, not white.
- An adult seal meal provides around eight days of stored energy for a polar bear.
- Polar bears can run at up to 40km/h and swim at 10km/h.
- When cubs are born they are only around 30cm long and weigh 0.5kg.

airstrip. Their thick, lush coats range from jet black to silver grey and, when the blanket of darkness covers the lodge, they howl.

One night the howling is extreme, piercing the night air, with a range of sounds from high-pitched to guttural-low. We scramble to the deck to find the Northern Lights dancing across the sky. Greens, purples and pinks swirl in folds with the wolves' soundtrack adding to the electric atmosphere. Are they watching, too? Are they as excited as we are?

On the last morning we experience a beautiful sighting of a female polar bear. We've seen her on several occasions and nicknamed her Sleeping Beauty. This time we come upon her by accident amid a gooseberry patch. With her face framed by layers of bush tinged with yellow, her long purplish tongue flicks in and out as she daintily picks the berries one at a time. Her dexterity defies belief.

Spotting us in the vehicle, she ambles towards us. At the 15m mark, in addition to speaking to the bear, Andy needs to go to stage two of deterrents. With a sharp blow he bangs the side of the vehicle with a rock, startling her. It does the trick and she bounds into the bushes. We leave her to munch on berries and hope the freeze comes soon so she and the thousands of other polar bears can head back to their hunting grounds. The survival of these majestic, heart-capturing creatures depends on it. 🐾

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