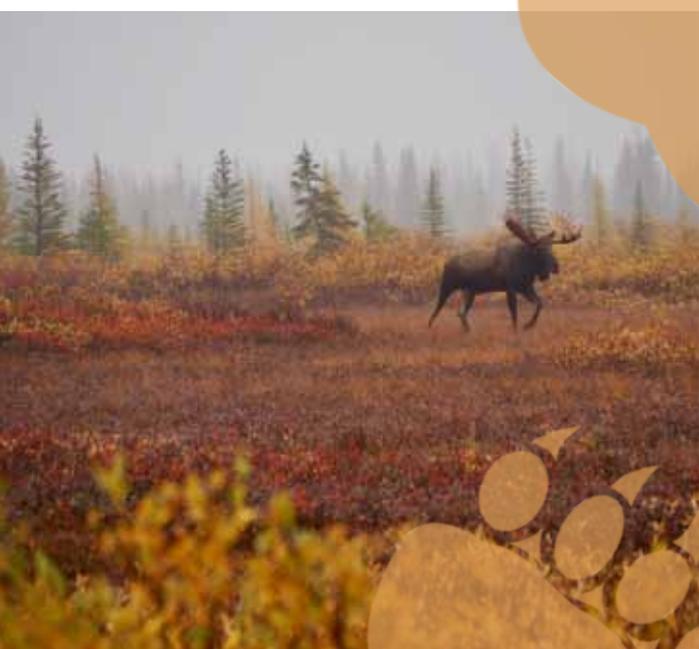


WALKING WITH POLAR BEARS



By Amanda Woods

“YOU'RE doing what?! You know they're the biggest carnivore on land and kill people, don't you?”

When I told people I was going on a polar bear walking safari in Canada I sparked a range of reactions, the most common being jealousy from those who would love to do the same and alarm from those who thought I was insane.

In the weeks leading up to the trip I felt a mix of fear and excitement, but within hours of arriving at Churchill Wild's remote Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge the fear had disappeared and the excitement had only increased.

A member of National Geographic's Unique Lodges of the World, the lodge is 250km southeast of the polar bear capital of the world, Churchill, Manitoba, and more than 150km from any other signs of human life. The lodge itself is cozy and comfortable with eight ensuite rooms for up to 16 guests at a time, a large lounge with a crackling fireplace and a perimeter fence that is close enough to let us look into the eyes of curious wildlife while still feeling at a safe distance.

As we gathered for a safety talk from the lodge's head eco-guide, Andy MacPherson, a talk that was briefly interrupted by a black bear and then a grey wolf walking by the fence mere metres away, we learned that while we would go out in all terrain vehicles when we saw a polar bear we would get out and slowly walk single file towards it.

While most polar bear excursions involve looking on from large bear proof vehicles or ships, we would be on the ground with nothing between us, and I took comfort in hearing that while there are three guides with loaded shot guns on each walk, in 23 years of operating tours they have never had to fire one at a bear.

As Andy explained, polar bears are not vocal animals, so simply talking to them or banging two rocks together is usually enough to make them stop or turn around. If needed they also have noise deterrents called bangers and screamers that are fired from a starter's pistol and chemical deterrents including pepper spray.

I may understand it in theory but it is not until I see a polar bear spin on the spot and jog away at the sound of a rock tapped against our vehicle that I truly believe it.

For days we had seen the bear known as Sleeping Beauty because she was rarely seen standing or moving, and had taken

hundreds of photos of her in various polar bear poses. On our last day we came across her slowly moving through a berry patch.

Despite often being described as carnivores, polar bears are really omnivores and Sleeping Beauty's long purplish black tongue was busy picking gooseberries. After acknowledging us with a look she went back to happily munching berries in the sun.

As time went on she moved closer and closer, and then she stopped eating, focused on us with a look of mild curiosity and walked slowly towards us.

Other bears we had encountered had simply stopped coming towards us when Andy spoke to them but when Sleeping Beauty decided to keep walking after he started talking he tapped a rock against the steel of our vehicle and she jumped and spun around, jogging a short distance away before deciding she was safe enough to sit back down in the berries and resume her morning snack.

Nanuk means white bear and while polar bears are the stars of the Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge they are far from the only memorable animal encounter.

Watching a bull moose emerge from a patch of misty trees, his huge head swaying to display his massive antlers immediately became one of the most magical moments of my life. And while our black bear visitor moved on after the first day, we were regularly visited by a pack of wolves that felt comfortable enough to sleep on the other side of the lodge fence.

While watching wolf cubs playing and listening to them practice their wobbly baby howls was so adorable by day, at night the sounds of the adult wolf howls was something else.

When I was in the lounge or tucked up in bed in my room the howls sounded wildly romantic. When I walked across the outside decking where we watched the Northern Lights glow in the sky and heard a howl in the open air every hair on my body stood up.

It didn't matter that I knew there was a high fence between us. That sound as I stood outside in the darkness sparked something primal that had me scurrying back into shelter.

We may have been in the safety of the lodge but I could feel just how vast the wilderness was around us, and just how far away we were from other human life. And it felt magnificent.

All images courtesy of Amanda Woods