

BY STUART FORSTER

YOU never really know how you'll react to a polar bear lumbering towards you in the wild until it happens.

I found out what I'd do on the kelp-lined shoreline of the Hudson Bay, near Seal River Heritage Lodge, 60km north of Churchill in the Canadian province of Manitoba.

If you watched *Arctic Live*, the BBC Two television programme broadcast in early November, you'll know that the town of Churchill is one of the planet's few permanent settlements where people run the risk of coming into contact with polar bears.

Hundreds of them live along the western shore of the Hudson Bay.

Prior to the sea freezing over, during the second half of November each year, the bears are forced to wait around in a state that's often described as walking hibernation.

They do not eat for weeks before going out on to the ice.

Though the metabolism of the creatures slows markedly, they continue to burn a kilo of body mass each day.

So, the bears that were wandering about in my vicinity on the treeless, taiga landscape north of Churchill were hungry.

They were, I also learnt from my guide Derek, an expert in bear behaviour, impressively efficient killers.

They hunt bearded and ring seals while out on the ice each winter. Remarkably, polar bears' sensitive noses mean they can catch the scent of seals through up to three feet of solid ice.

The predators crash through the icy surface in order to get to the seals. They can then eat more than 100lbs of seal flesh in a single sitting.

I watched through my camera's 400mm lens as an 800lb male headed towards me. It was tricky to imagine the chubby, cute-looking animal as a killing machine.

Maybe that was because of his unhurried gait or the fact his long, cream-coloured coat shook with the impact of each of his steps.

He just didn't look dangerous. Or anything like a creature capable of sprinting at 25mph. On an athletics track Usain Bolt, the Olympic 100 metres champion, might be capable of outrunning a polar bear.

Weighed down in winter clothing and waterproof boots, and on a

Cute-looking killer bears that can run as fast as Usain Bolt



SPEEDY: Polar bears can run at speeds as fast as 25mph

heavy shoreline, maybe even the Lightning Bolt would not escape.

Running, though, is by no means recommended. Upon arrival at the lodge, Derek explained that we should gather together in the event of a bear approaching us.

I was part of a group of 12 people participating in the Polar Bear Photo Safari operated by Churchill Wild during October and November each year.

Needless to say, with my heart racing, I had no problem complying when he reminded us to close up with a bear just over 30ft away on the shoreline.

Viewing the seemingly nonchalant face of the bear through my camera's long lens had empha-

sised his proximity.

Churchill Wild has been operating polar bear tours at locations around northern Manitoba for a quarter of a century now. During that time, nobody has been injured or killed during an attack by a bear.

Each group, of up to 16 people, is shepherded by two guides and strict protocols exist regarding behaviour in the presence of bears.

Standing together as a unit is normally sufficient to discourage bears from advancing on humans — they don't like the idea of approaching big objects.

Nonetheless, Derek and his colleague Josh both carried shotguns. They explained that the

weapons have never been fired during walks — that would only happen in extreme circumstances.

The guides were also armed with capicum-based spray and air horns.

But to drive bears away from human visitors, the guides at Seal River Heritage Lodge normally rely on talking in a normal tone of voice or, failing that, clacking together two stones, roughly of golf ball size.

In the near silent landscape of the subarctic, very little noise is required to drive off wildlife, even if the animal in question happens to be one of the world's largest land-dwelling carnivores.

Derek, I learnt while talking to him in the comfort of the lodge, is a naturalist who spends his summers leading grizzly bear tours in British Columbia and autumn in Manitoba leading polar bear photo safaris.

The two creatures are closely related.

He was clearly passionate and knowledgeable about bears, and always willing to answer my questions relating to their behaviour.

The quality of the guides and the intimate encounters offered were among the reasons why Seal River Heritage Lodge, a luxury eco-property, was named one of National Geographic's Unique Lodges of the World in 2015.

We also saw a flock of ptarmigans, partridge like birds with white plumage when winter approaches, and an arctic hare.

Additionally, we saw marks in mud indicating the recent presence of wolves.

Just a couple of kilometres from the eco-lodge we visited a long-abandoned campsite where circles of stone, once used for weighing

down tents, were visible.

Around 500 years ago the site was inhabited by the Thule people, ancestors of the modern day Inuit.

Archaeologists have undertaken digs in recent years but the area's remoteness means few people have visited in recent centuries.

Some 15,000 people a year now visit Churchill, aiming to see polar bears.

Most do so from the back of a Tundra Buggy, high-sided vehicles that operate from the town.

Despite the remote location of Seal River Heritage Lodge, and the logistical challenge of transporting supplies north from Winnipeg, the food proved delicious.

Communal meals are served for guests, who sit at tables with the guides. Locally shot game featured on the menu, but special dietary requests can be catered for if the lodge is given warning.

After three-course evening meals the group tended to chat together on leather sofas by the fireside of the lodge's communal area.

A log-fire and wood cladding gave the spruce-scented room a cosy feel.

Little noise drives off wildlife

Lectures gave us additional insights into bears and their behaviour. As one of the lectures came to a close we were informed that Northern Lights illuminated the sky outside.

Excited, I dashed back to my room to pick up my camera, tripod and coat then headed outside.

In a landscape free from light pollution, the aurora borealis danced bright on a star-speckled night.

The province of Manitoba was named after a term from the Cree language, Manito-wapow, meaning 'where the spirit lives'. Having seen the Northern Lights dancing that seems fitting.

■ **FURTHER INFORMATION:** Churchill Wild's eight day, seven night Polar Bear Photo Safari package costs CAD\$10,695 (£6,500). That includes five nights at Seal River Heritage Lodge (www.churchillwild.com) and two nights in Winnipeg at the Grand Winnipeg Airport Hotel by Lakeview.

■ Family-style breakfasts, lunches and dinners, featuring home-style cooking, are served throughout the stay and are included in the price of the package, along with wine, beer and soft drinks. International flights are excluded.

■ Manitoba — www.travelmanitoba.com

■ Canada — www.canada.travel



BAY WATCH: An ethereal scene as the Hudson Bay freezes over