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TRAVEL

SUNDAY, AUGUST 23, 2009 • LATIMES.COM/TRAVEL

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GERMANY

HALLS OF FAME



CHEERS: Cologne, one of Germany's oldest cities, has a charming Old Town brimming with brew pub restaurants. Its best-known brew is Kölsch.

Historic brew pubs across the country show off their variety year-round, but especially during Oktoberfest.

ROSEMARY MCCLURE
REPORTING FROM MUNICH, GERMANY

The last thing I expected as I slid my fingers through the handle of my first tankard of beer in Munich was 10,000 voices erupting in a ragged rendition of ... "Hang On Sloopy." There was no mistaking it, even when sung with a German accent.

I was in a cavernous beer tent at Oktoberfest, Munich's salute to its favorite liquid, and like everyone around me, I was determined to squeeze the last drop of fun from the world's biggest kegfest.

But "Hang On Sloopy"? Why not "Danke Schoen"? Why not "Beer Barrel Polka"?

That wasn't the half of it, though. They followed "Sloopy" with "New York, New York" and then did a foot-stomping, hand-clapping rendition of "We Will Rock You." With each English-language pop song, I felt more at home. Of course, drinking all that beer didn't hurt.

I had come here to raise a toast to Germany's beer halls, national treasures that don't get nearly the publicity (maybe "buzz" is the more appropriate word) they deserve. Scenic wonders are crammed into every corner of Western Europe's most populous nation: snowcapped Bavarian Alps, wind-swept North Sea islands, lush Black Forest and castle-dotted Rhine. But if you haven't explored the country's cavernous beer halls, you haven't lived.

My mission was clear: Chart a trail that others could follow; develop a beer hall crawl through the heart of Germany.

Like most travelers, I had limited time and funds — only a week to see [See Beer, Page L6]

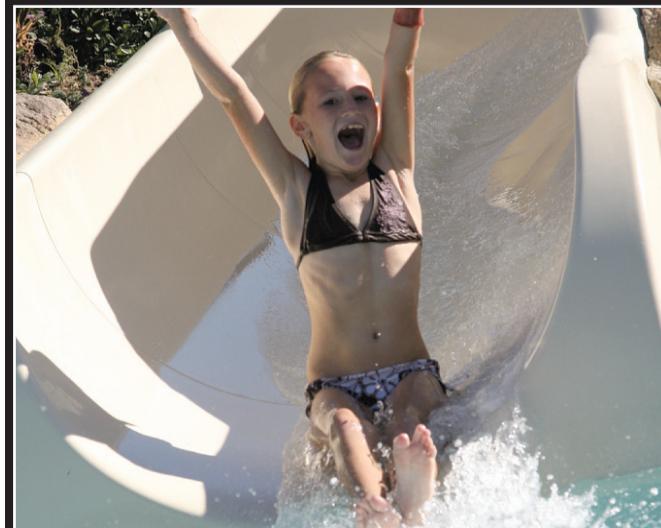
Inside



Seal River Lodge
SOUNDING OFF: Belugas are known as "canaries of the seas."

SNORKELING WITH THE BIG KIDS

The "kids," in this case, are beluga whales. You can take a swim with them in the waters off Churchill, Canada — if you dare. **PAGE 4**



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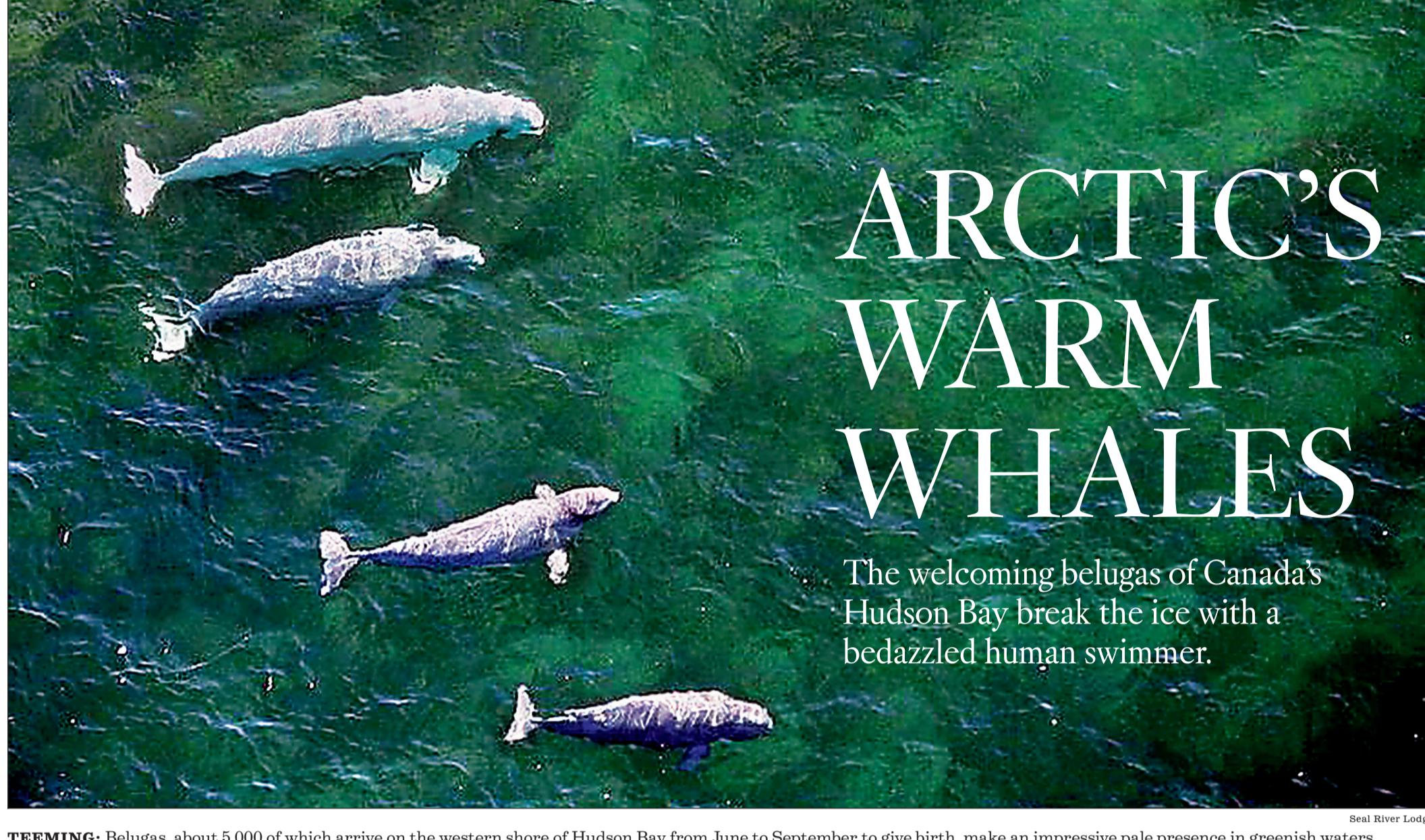
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CANADA



TEEMING: Belugas, about 5,000 of which arrive on the western shore of Hudson Bay from June to September to give birth, make an impressive pale presence in greenish waters.

ARCTIC'S WARM WHALES

The welcoming belugas of Canada's Hudson Bay break the ice with a bedazzled human swimmer.

MARGO PFEIFF REPORTING FROM CHURCHILL, CANADA » I am beluga bait. Bobbing at the end of a rope tied around my feet, I am being slowly towed in the wake of a Zodiac, a small, inflatable boat, through the icy waters of Hudson Bay. Clad in a partly inflated rubber dry suit, I look like a Michelin Tire Man who has sprouted a snorkel as I peer into the murky brown, tannin-stained cocktail of salt and freshwater. ¶ I have come all the way to far northern Manitoba, Canada, to snorkel with beluga whales that, if they do appear out of the gloom, will likely scare the daylights out of me. As my heart races, I remember my guide suggesting I sing to attract these most vocal of whales, known as "canaries of the sea" for their high-pitched songs and rhythmic clicks. The words to the kids' song "Baby Beluga" elude me, so I chum the waters vaudeville-style, warbling "Frosty the Snowman" through my snorkel. It's not working.

After 15 minutes, it's clear the belugas we had seen in the distance are not interested in me, so I am unceremoniously reeled in to flail on the Zodiac floor like a hapless seal. Over the years I've snorkled with whale sharks, swum with manta rays, paddled with narwhal and scuba-dived with reef sharks. Have I gone too far this time?

The small community of Churchill is a two-hour flight or an adventurous two-day train trip across the permafrost-buckled tundra north of Winnipeg, where the trip began. For a brief six weeks in October and November this small town of 1,000 on the western shore of Hudson Bay is the site of a unique polar bear love-fest: as thousands of the white *ursi* come ashore to await the freezing of the sea ice.

They are greeted by an annual migration of tourists firing gigabytes of adoration at them from the secure confines of monster-wheeled tundra buggies.

Churchill is clearly proud of its "Polar Bear Capital of the World" moniker: Dine alongside a giant bear pelt on the wall of the Lazy Bear Café, sleep at the Bear's Den B&B and stock up on "bear bum" boxer shorts and paw-shaped salad tongs at Great White Bear Gifts.

Less well known is the area's other wave of visitors. From late June through early September about 5,000 beluga whales arrive to give birth in the shallows and molt by rubbing their skins on the sandy bottoms of river estuaries. When I heard it was possible to don a snorkel and commune with these curious, friendly critters, I couldn't stay away.

Although it's possible to see and snorkel with belugas out of Churchill, I head for the family-run Seal River Heritage Lodge to the north, hopping a Turbo-Beaver bush floatplane for the 40-minute flight to the wilderness outpost at the edge of the tundra near the mouth of the Seal River.

As we fly, I can see dozens of belugas littering the estuary waters like kernels of white rice, some with gray babies at their sides.

The lodge is operated by veteran fishing, hunting and nature guide Mike Reimer and his wife, Jeanne. The couple's kids — the fourth generation of a pioneering northern family — help out during the brief summer season when they're on school vacation. The camp holds 16 guests; generally, about half are Americans, with Germans, Brits and Aussies making up most of the balance.

The lodge is on the site of an old government beluga research camp on a point overlooking the bay. In summer, folks come for the Birds, Bears and Belugas package. The water teems with whales, and a steady stream of polar bears meanders past. In fall, it's a bear traffic jam, and with longer nights, it's a great time to see shimmering sheets of red and green northern lights. Here on the tundra, it's people who live in an enclosure, and when bears peer into the picture windows you really do feel as if you're in the zoo. There also is a high fence surrounding an outdoor compound with four viewing towers.

Weather that can quickly become dangerous dictates activities, and during an unseasonably cool mid-



MARGO PFEIFF For The Times

WELL SUITED: A swimmer prepares for a chilly dip into the belugas' element. The whales have been known to rub bellies with their visitors.



MARGO PFEIFF For The Times

CULTURE: A couple strolls past an Inuit marker on a beach at Churchill. A guide calls the climate in the area "easy Arctic."

July, a persistent offshore wind keeps us from the belugas. But there's plenty to do.

We trek across spongy tundra hummocks that feel as if we're hiking over down pillows. The bonsai vegetation includes ankle-high willows and magenta rhododendrons. We pick sweet Arctic cranberries and watch hyperactive Arctic ground squirrels darting among the rocks.

The birders on our trip — from Britain and Switzerland — spot eider ducks, a snowy owl and tall sandhill cranes emitting a strange musical rattle as they strut near the stone remains of an ancient Inuit campsite.

In this corner of the world, you don't walk outside without a weapon. Zodiacs left bobbing on the bay become chewable squeaky toys for rubber-loving polar bears, and every night plywood shutters bristling with 6-inch nails are battened down on the windows.

One guest was recently awakened by heavy breathing. When he pulled up the blinds, he was face to face with a standing bear whose nose print remains on the window — 8 feet off the ground.

Our guides wear holsters to stash bear repellents. On our first tundra walk, Andy MacPherson shows off, in order of escalating threats, noisemak-

ers called Bangers and Screamers, pepper spray and a 12-gauge shotgun ready with birdshot.

"In winter, bears really freak out when you throw a snowball at them. They can't see them coming," he says with a chuckle. "It's important to show them immediately who's the alpha beast, and then they usually back off."

After the wind dies down, a dense fog moves in, and we trade parkas and gloves for net-hooded "bug burkas" to fend off a surreal onslaught of mosquitoes. We set off across boulder-strewn, muddy tidal flats that suck at our boots and at the tires of six-wheelers that tow passenger trailers.

The flats are a crisscross maze of tracks, the fur and sharp claws of wolves and dinner plate-sized polar bear paws clearly imprinted in the mud. Caribou graze in the distance and move in close for a look when Andy instructs us to wave our arms above our heads like antlers.

Normally, for this concentration of diverse wildlife, you must travel to the high Arctic. But, in the Churchill region, where there are several flights daily to Winnipeg, there is less chance of being stranded by inclement weather. Says Reimer: "It's easy Arctic here, a forgotten part of the North that people don't think of except for polar bears in the fall."

Each day, we can smell lunch and dinner wafting across the tundra as we finish our treks. Caribou bourguignon. Piping hot fish chowder. Cranberry cake with warm butter sauce. Jeanne's mum, Helen, is in the kitchen. Cooking at the family's three northern lodges for decades, she has been asked so often for recipes that she wrote four successful cookbooks, starting with "Blueberries and Polar Bears."

I'm flipping through the dessert section when Colin, an Australian vacationing from his job in a Russian gold mine, shouts, "Bear!" Cameramen sprout, and everyone empties into the compound to gawk at a big bear, black to its knees with tidal mud. It is nicknamed "Boots." As it settles into a patch of grass to munch the remains of a dead goose we, by coincidence, head back inside for a goose pie dinner.

When the weather gods finally give us a break, we charge at high tide in Zodiacs across the waves, holding on as if we are riding bucking broncos. There are belugas all around, arching white out of the water. Guide Terry Elliott stops and drops a hydrophone over the side. We can hear the chirping, whistling and clicking that belugas use to echolocate and find food as deep as 1,800 feet beneath the ice.

I'm back in the water, this time choosing the deeper-toned "House of the Rising Sun," but there's no need. Within moments a spooky white shape appears out of the gloom. I chomp down on the snorkel mouthpiece until I recognize the bulbous forehead and trademark impish grin that make belugas resemble Casper the Friendly Ghost. I smile back.

Two more whales swim into my view. At first it's unnerving. Belugas may be among the smaller cetaceans, but it still takes your breath away when 3,000 pounds of whale glides so near that you can see scars from polar bear claws on its white hide.

"Hello there," I repeat over and over, praying I don't pass out from excitement. I can hear whistling and clicking. The water is cold, but not uncomfortably so, and I begin to relax as the whales, curious about this high-pitched creature resembling a floating garbage bag, crane their heads for a closer look. Only belugas and narwhal can do this because they lack fused neck vertebrae.

One fellow slowly drifts at arm's length from my face. I see his little flipper, his long body and then his tail. A baby beluga torpedoes past, leaving a trail of bubbles. "You're so cute!" I find myself telling them.

Another approaches from below, rolling over to watch me from beneath; holding the gaze of that intelligent eye is surreal and strangely calming. Slowly, I reach out. They pirouette closer, keeping just out of reach. I laugh and swallow a mouthful of Hudson Bay.

During the eight years Reimer has been running his beluga program, he has seen these toothed whales, who eat fish and bivalves, harmlessly suck on snorkelers' fingers and dry suits and even come for a friendly belly-to-belly rub.

Through trial and error he devised



MATT MOODY Los Angeles Times

If you go

THE BEST WAY

From LAX, connecting service (change of plane) to Winnipeg is offered on United, WestJet, Air Canada and Northwest. Fares begin at \$383 round trip. There are two flights daily from Winnipeg to Churchill on Calm Air. Fares begin at \$904 round trip; www.calmair.com.

Via Rail runs the 1,100-mile rail service from Winnipeg to Churchill three times a week; (888) 842-7245, www.viarail.ca. Published round-trip fare \$553.

WHERE TO STAY

Seal River Heritage Lodge accepts up to 16 guests. From mid-July until late August, it offers a six-night Birds, Bears and Belugas program on the Seal River estuary for \$5,800. Transportation from Winnipeg, accommodations, including one night in Churchill, all lodge meals, guided trips, kayaking and snorkeling expeditions with belugas are included. In October and November, the lodge offers a four-night polar bear package, also for \$5,800. (866) 846-9453, www.churchillwild.com.

WHERE TO EAT

In Churchill, the Lazy Bear Lodge, which has a fireplace-warmed living room, is open daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Dinner for two \$60. (866) 687-2327, www.lazybearlodge.com.

Gypsy's Bakery is a local food and coffee mecca. Opens at 6 a.m. Dinner specials from \$15 each. www.gypsypbakery.ca.

TO LEARN MORE

www.destinationchurchill.com and www.travelmanitoba.com.

latimes.com

/beluga

Arctic scenes

See photographs from Margo Pfeiff's visit to the whale- and polar bear-populated Churchill area.

the offbeat but effective backward-towing method to allow anyone — even kids and non-swimmers — to commune with belugas.

"Splashing frightens them off," he says. Towing creates a distance from the noisy Zodiac engine and leaves hands free for holding cameras. "You can relax and enjoy a Zen moment. It's a rare opportunity to connect with creatures in a marine environment," says Reimer, who has seen people moved to tears when they emerge from the water.

After drifting through this interactive whale soup for 20 minutes I feel myself being reeled in. Back in the Zodiac I sit, dripping wet, with a smile as wide as a beluga's.

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