

Expedition to the white giants

In Canada's northeast, along Hudson Bay, you can still find it: untamed nature. In the evenings, Northern lights illuminate the sky, during daytime polar bears roam through the high grass of the tundra, beluga whales dive off the shore. freundin writer Bettina Kelm and her camera travelled into the wilderness and discovered a world full of adventures.

Story and all photos by Bettina Kelm

"It weighs an estimated 500 kilograms. A neat male." Whispers our nature guide Andy to me and signifies to our nine-headed tour group by hand signal to take a few steps back. We are around 90 metres away from the gigantic polar bear, which has stretched out in the grass in the middle of some berry bushes. My heart beats wildly and I'm glad to have immobilized my camera on a tripod. Suddenly, the white giant lifts his head and gazes directly at us. Curiously, he turns his nose towards the wind to absorb our scent. He is able to smell across distances of up to 50 kilometres and can easily detect seals through metre-thick ice. It is with interest that he approaches us with slow and powerful steps. His shoulder height is 160 cm. If he stood up, his height would be more than three metres. His paws: as huge as pizza plates. The colossus approaches further. Slowly, Andy lowers his hand. "Stand still – don't move by no means! "

SAFARI AT CANADA'S SHORELINE

We are in the middle of the wilderness along Hudson Bay, a bay in the North of the Canadian

province of Manitoba. Summer has painted the otherwise barren tundra in green: Wild flowers are blooming between blueberry bushes, the high Foxtail grass is swaying in rose pink in the wind. There are no roads at this remote and isolated piece of earth, we have arrived by propeller plane a couple of days ago. Through the small window of the aircraft, I already detected more than 50 white spots in the wilderness, polar bears in search of food. Around 900 animals live here; it is the most Southern polar bear population of the world. In summer, they persevere at the shoreline just to return on the ice to hunt seal at ice holes in fall when the Bay freezes again. Until then, they have to be content with berries, whale carcasses or wild geese. They share the area with black bears, wolves, moose and Arctic fox – if we are lucky, we will also see these species. In total, our group will go on an Arctic safari at Hudson Bay for nine days. For four of these days, we will stay at Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge whose operators have specialized in polar bear encounters on foot rather than in huge and secure vehicles. Andy MacPherson is one of their guides – and our life insurance.

FACE TO FACE WITH THE KING OF THE TUNDRA

As the polar bear is only 50 metres away, Andy starts talking to him calmly but firmly: "How are you, buddy? That's close enough! ". The guide has two stones ready on hand and now bangs them together. Due to their silent, natural environment – wind, surging billows, and birdcalls, nothing else - polar bears are sensitive to noise. The banging of the



In fall, there is about one polar bear per person of Churchill's 900 inhabitants. Then, the motto is: Give way to the white giants.

stones halts the bear. Just 30 metres left. Andy throws a stone in front of its paws. That was clearly enough for him: In bewilderment, the giant takes a few steps back and looks back at us over his shoulder. Then, to our surprise, he lies down into the grass again, puts his head down and closes the eyes. Andy has achieved what he wanted. The bear doesn't consider our group as prey but as bland background. In this encounter, not just our safety is in focus, but also the respectful approach towards the bear. We don't want to disturb nor to fuss him. In case the stones shouldn't be sufficient as deterrent, i.e. just for an extreme emergency situation, Andy also carries so-called bangers with him, similar to New Year's firecrackers. And a rifle for warning shots. In more than 20 years of his job, he has never used it.

DINNER WITH BEARS

We leave the polar bear and walk back to our amphibian vehicle, lovingly called Rhino. Over sand tracks and through rivers, it takes us back to the lodge, where dinner is waiting for us by an open fireplace. The cozy building accommodates up to 16 guests and offers a panoramic view of the coastline from the dining area. From here, you can search for polar bears and other wildlife with spotting scopes (a mix of binoculars and telescope). Often, the animals come as close as the fence of the lodge, even now. Just as dessert is served, a black bear appears and looks around curiously. It feels like our accommodation is rather a zoo. With the difference that humans are fenced in, not the animals. After dinner, Andy offers to talk a little about his polar bears and we have many questions. For instance, the future prospects of the polar bears, which have become a kind of symbol for the climate change. But Andy reassures: "It is not as dramatic as reported in some media." There are 19 polar bear populations around the world with a total of 25,000 animals. Different to other countries, the population in Canada and the US is stable and even recovering in some areas. An all-clear signal when it comes to the consequences of global

warming? "No, those have long been evident at Hudson Bay", says Andy. "The Bay is free of ice for up to four weeks longer now compared to the situation as it was 10 years ago. Still, in spring, being the important season for polar bears when the Mums leave the maternity dens with their young, the Bay is still covered with ice." A further threat is the planned oil transport to the Hudson Bay via train. With the thawing permafrost soil this would be highly risky. Nature tourism still has a high impact to resist the huge transportation companies. The question is: how much longer?

DANCING LIGHTS IN THE NIGHT SKY

During the days following our encounter with the white colossus, the wilderness of Hudson Bay doesn't stop to fascinate our small group: A moose shows up between high bushes during a hike, we encounter a family of wolves and can still hear their howling concert for miles. We watch black bears as they nibble berries as well as a polar bear Mum with her two young – from a distance, as even with the Rhino we cannot get closer. This is how nature is. Nothing

has to, but everything can happen. In the evening, there is another spectacle: Above the lodge, there are shimmering, greenish Northern lights dancing in the night sky.

ADVENTURE UNDER WATER

After our expedition in the Arctic tundra, we return to Churchill on board of a propeller aircraft. Churchill is a small town with less than 900 inhabitants – and about 5,000 beluga whales. The white whales can measure up to three to six metres in length. In the estuary of the Churchill River, being rich in nutrients, they hunt for fish and give birth to their calves. You can watch them from zodiacs and kayaks or even go swimming with them in the cold water measuring only five degrees Celsius. For a final adventure, I squeeze myself in a seven millimeters wet-suit with head hood, and tied to a zodiac with a rope, get pulled through the water. "This makes the whales curious", assures skipper Alex. And indeed, five animals approach me at head level, even a whale Mum with her calf. Another encounter with white giants that I will remember for the rest of my life.

TRAVEL INFORMATION:

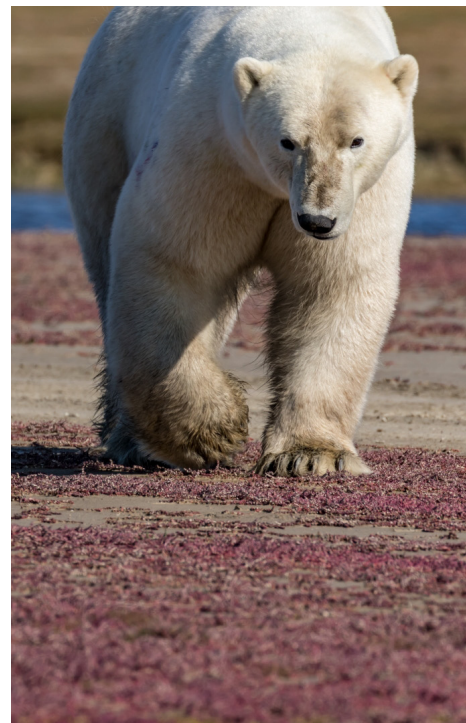
Best travel time: In July and August, it is most likely to encounter polar bears and beluga whales. If you want to see polar bears only, you can also visit the Hudson Bay in fall.

Arrival: Round trip, e.g. with Air Canada (Frankfurt- Winnipeg via Toronto) from 1,400 Euro.

Safaris: Trips from/to Winnipeg to Churchill Wild's Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge (churchillwild.com) can be booked through SK Touristik (from 5,894 Euro, sktouristik.de), the Seal River Heritage Lodge can be booked through CRD International (crd.de) or also through SK Touristik.

Food: Delicious veggie burgers are served at the Tundra Inn Restaurant. Sweet teeth should go to Gypsy's Bakery or to the Lazy Bear Cafe with a rustic log cabin atmosphere. Information at everythingchurchill.com and travelmanitoba.com.





Clockwise from top left: snorkeling with beluga whales in the Churchill River; on-the-ground with polar bears at Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge; warming up after my snorkeling experience; searching for wildlife along the Hudson Bay coastline on Nanuk's custom-designed Tundra Rhino; my guide at Nanuk, Andy MacPherson, affectionately known as The Polar Bear Whisperer.

All photos by Bettina Kelm

