



EXPLORE

TALES FROM THE TUNDRA

Be it picture-perfect landscapes, spellbinding views of the Northern Lights, or intimate encounters with the wild, Northern Canada is host to many incredible experiences.

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A safari evokes images of lions, wildebeest, leopards and often the tiger. Even wild imagination doesn't conjure the picture of frozen seas, iced lakes, treeless expanses and gigantic polar bears.

WILD ENCOUNTERS

Our recent family vacation was as surreal as it was exhilarating. From Port of Churchill located on the Hudson Bay in Canada, we flew by a single-engine plane to Seal River Heritage Lodge (a part of Churchill Wild). Our pilot a young bearded redhead looked more like a jolly lumberjack and invited my son Vilas to climb into his co-pilot seat.

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Clockwise from left: Take in the landscapes with a husky dog-sled ride; An Arctic wolf makes an appearance; A polar bear puts on a show.



We flew beyond the treeline into the tundra and a white veiled landscape with frozen lakes and rivers was visible. Half an hour later, in the distance, a mustard-coloured lodge, nestled between the sea and a pebbled landing strip came into view. The plane landed practically on a dime and we stepped out with our duffel bags onto the strip. As we glanced over our shoulders at our plane, one last time, we saw a buff white figure lumbering behind it looking curiously at us... It was our first introduction to a magnificent beast – the polar bear, one of the apex predators on earth – one that can weigh up to 550 kg, an animal we would get better acquainted with over the next four days.

With temperatures of -20°C , wardrobe issues centred on layering (about 5-6 layers!) and our shoes were designed to deal with temperatures of -100°C ! The price of staying warm was proportional to the weight we walked around with and I felt like my friend, the bear, as I trudged through the powdery snow or skid clumsily over the frozen lake and sea.

Our lodge, in contrast, was a haven for the cold, weary and hungry. Rich gourmet meals – moose meat spaghetti, berry pies, steaming soups and succulent salads, not to forget the coffees and trail mix – warmed our insides as we returned from each adventure. A blazing fireplace soothed frozen faces and tired muscles. Our hosts at Churchill Wild, Jeanne and Mike, greeted us at the doorstep. They were warm, indulgent, and made us feel like their home was as much ours.

The remote location was rewarding in so many ways. Sitting in the spacious dining room one occasionally heard an excited exclamation, “Look” which was followed by a sight of an animal foraging within several feet of the large glass windows. Our first sighting of the lone wolf was from the dining room. “A young male

DID YOU KNOW?

Churchill is known as the Polar Bear Capital of the World! These magnificent creatures can be spotted from July to November, though the heart of the polar bear season is October and November, where you can see them in snowy environs. Additionally, the best months to see beluga whales here are July and August. For birdwatching, go from May to June; 250 species of Arctic birds and ducks nest or pass over the Churchill River estuary on the coast of Hudson Bay on their annual spring migration.



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thrown out of his pack,” said our guide, as we stood rooted to the sight of this hungry predator. I could feel the hair on my neck rise from excitement at the thought of what could happen if that pane of glass had not separated us.

On our very first tundra walk we encountered Bob, certainly the largest bear in the neighbourhood and the calmest. He was stretched on the ice, chin resting on his forearm; his small, black button eyes scanned the group without concern. Though there were gasps of excitement and whirring cameras, he turned a deaf ear to the awkward line of bright red-jacketed creatures capped on the ends by our two naturalist guides dressed in apple green. A few minutes later, my daughter Aneesha’s breathless voice was heard, “turn around!”. We swiveled to see the wolf approaching our flank, his gait alert. “No sounds or sudden moves” we had been briefed earlier. We stood our ground (our backs now to Bob who seemed like the safer bet!), hearts thumping yet cameras shooting away. Large and furry he walked towards us,

his eyes piercing and cold. Suddenly at 20 ft from us he hesitated, turned right and skirted the group giving Bob a wide berth as well. But for a collective exhale nobody moved a muscle! By evening we were in front of the fireplace, exchanging experiences over drinks and later, sinful pecan pie.

SPECTACULAR SIGHTINGS

The days ahead were no less eventful. An Arctic fox made frantic head-first leaps into the snow hunting for his prey – a small lemming. A young curious male bear circled us and at each quadrant attempted to move in closer. Each time he made a beeline for us, Andy – our guide – clanked two stones, which he removed from a pouch strapped to his waist, and in an even tone coaxed the truant bear into backing away. Also strapped around his and Derrick’s waists were varying levels of deterrents from pepper spray, noise maker to a shot gun! Thanks to their knowledge and keen intuition neither guns have been fired till date.

Below: A gyrfalcon takes flight.



Gerard Lacz / age fotostock / Dinodia

Right: The mesmerising Northern Lights.
Below: Excited tourists ready their cameras for the perfect shot.



Finally, from a safe distance the bear decided to treat us to a 'wild bear circus'. Everything from a gigantic paw wave, rollover, jumps from one block of ice to another to the pièce de résistance – a precarious all fours pose on a sharp ice peak. Had it not been for our double-gloved hands he might have heard the hearty applause!

The dark nights held other treats in store, anytime there was a soft midnight knock we would, in semi-zombie state, get into our layers of clothing and rush into the yard, the sharp sting of cold air bringing us instantly into a fully aware state. A glance skyward revealed surreal sky, smoky white curtains tinged in green and pink, hanging, moving, morphing a sight nature has restricted to the pole only on a cloudless night – the spectacular Northern Lights!

Winter birdlife, though sparse was also a source of intermittent delight especially to my avid birder husband, Prashant. Flocks of white ptarmigans with their feathered feet pecked in the snow. We saw one flock stir in panic as a gyrfalcon swooped down on them in search of prey. Red Polls flitted and large ravens provided sharp contrast to the snowy landscape.

Finally, it was time to bid the bears a reluctant goodbye. But before that we made a pit stop at the more-frequented Port of Churchill. Populated by only 700 residents, it probably boasts of the only airport in North America where there is no security check whatsoever. Here we saw red foxes in the wilderness and experienced a dog-sledge ride. The dogs were an eclectic mix of husky, malamute, grey hound and Arctic wolf.

The people of the Arctic are hardy, fit and friendly. With them we soaked in the primordial life and learnt about the delicate balance that



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sustains their ecosystem. With armchair access to the wilderness and thanks to many TV shows, we are a jaded lot, but nothing compares to the thrills and chills of a visit to the Arctic wilderness, an absolute must-do, at least once in a lifetime! ■

QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

From Toronto, fly to Winnipeg, and then to Churchill, from where Seal River Heritage Lodge is located 60 km north of Churchill, another short flight away.

ACCOMMODATION

Churchill Wild, a chain of lodges treats you with up-close encounters with the Arctic tundra. You can choose from Seal River Heritage Lodge and Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge, located on the Hudson Bay.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Log on to in-keepexploring.canada.travel or www.churchillwild.com

