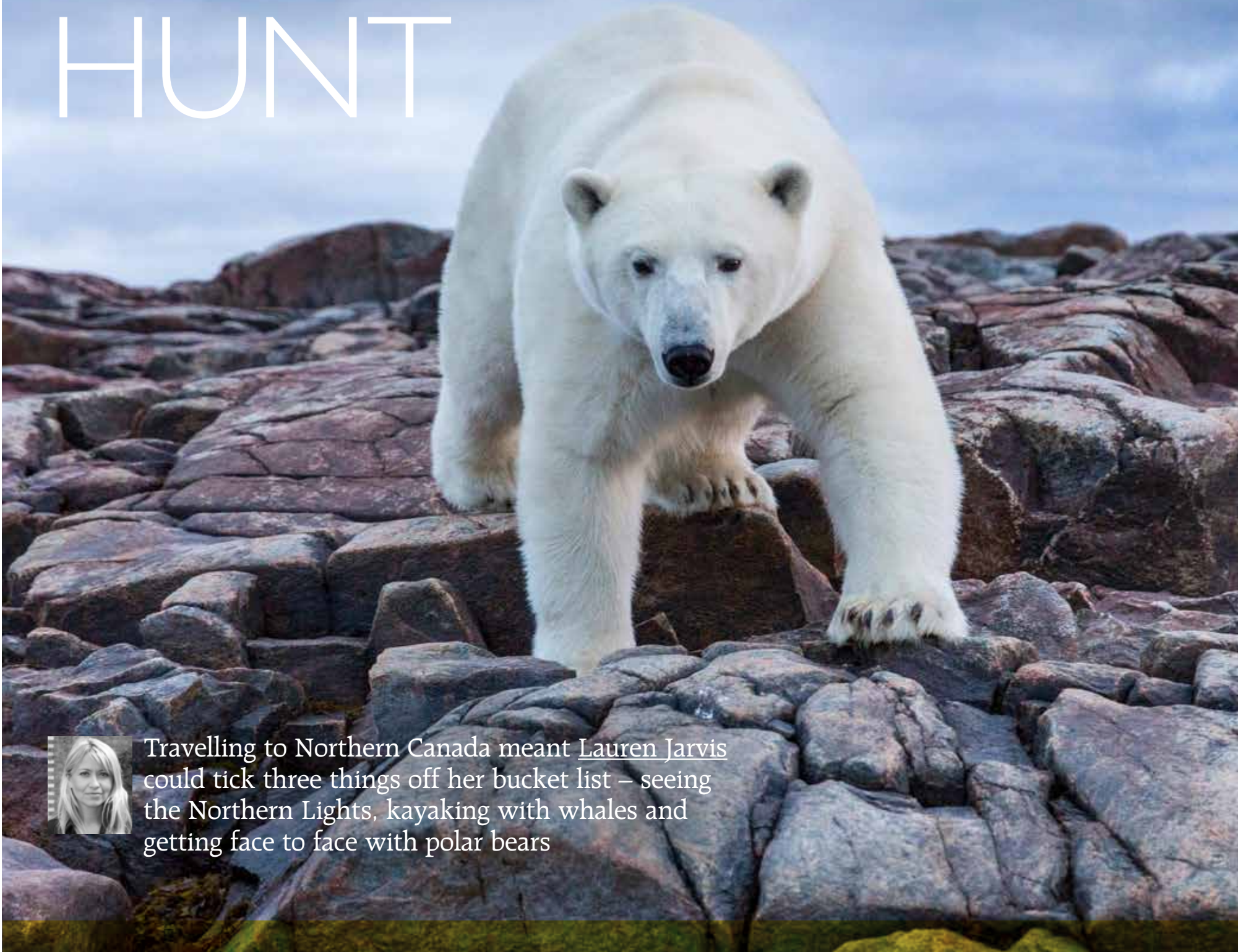


WE'RE GOING ON A BEAR HUNT



Travelling to Northern Canada meant Lauren Jarvis could tick three things off her bucket list – seeing the Northern Lights, kayaking with whales and getting face to face with polar bears

With the chance to see polar bears in their natural habitat, watch the Northern Lights and stay at Nanuk Lodge (below), the trip is out of this world



MY HEART IS THUMPING in my chest as I stand frozen, vaguely registering the silence-shattering sound of a camera click somewhere behind me. In front of me, the world's largest and deadliest land predator is looking me straight in the eye.

The bear and I are in the breathtaking sub-Arctic wilderness of western Hudson Bay, in the northern Canadian state of Manitoba. This morning, just after breakfast, I left the fenced safety of my lodge with the aim of tracking and finding polar bears on foot: a quest that in retrospect seems misguided, as one of them now seems to have me on its menu for dinner...

HOW IT ALL BEGAN

Hudson Bay is one of the best places in the world to encounter polar bears in the wild. You can see them in winter when the waters of the bay freeze over, providing a platform for the bears to hunt seals that live out on the ice, or as I have chosen to do, in the summer when they're feasting on berries among the forests, or fishing along the shore. Another plus for

summer visits is that the nights offer displays of dancing Northern Lights – dazzling, and a gorgeous way to end an evening.

Getting here takes some effort – an international flight from the UK via Toronto to Manitoba's capital, Winnipeg (13 hours), a smaller plane to the frontier town of Churchill (two hours), and finally an 80-minute hop on an even tinier aircraft, touching down on a grassy 'runway' beside the rustic Nanuk Lodge that's 130 miles from the nearest small town. Connecting flights aren't immediate so it means overnight stops at either end.

But it's worth it. Surrounded by wilderness with room for 16 guests, the roomy, comfy lodge is equipped with binoculars and a viewing platform for animal watching, plus telescopes and tripods for the Northern Lights. It's also a hotspot for bears who wander casually past the panoramic windows during our lunch, or curiously inspect the sturdy perimeter wire fence behind which the lodge is protected – sometimes so close you could almost reach through and touch them (definitely not advised!). ▶





Above right: a bedroom at Nanuk Lodge. Above: tracker Butch. Below: meeting polar bears in the rhino truck

ON THE HUNT

The afternoon I arrive we set off just after lunch to see bears out in the wilderness. Although it's summer, it's still cool and I'm dressed in warm waterproofs, a woolly hat and wellies for wading across the mud flats of the bay. Our group of 16 heads out on two 'rhinos' – sturdy, open-top, all-terrain vehicles which cross the rocky rivers and sandy flats that border the bay with ease. We're accompanied by guide and naturalist Andy MacPherson and our indigenous Cree tracker Albert 'Butch' Saunders.

We're just seconds from the lodge gate when we spot 'Big Mama', a large female polar bear who's a regular visitor to the lodge; she's sleeping under a bush, soaking up the sun. We quietly climb down from the rhino and now that we're on level ground with one of the world's most ferocious predators, the safety briefing rings in my ears: be silent; walk in single file; stay behind Andy and in front of Butch; do nothing to take the bear's attention away from them.

Slowly we approach her and it's heart-pounding and humbling to enter her domain: at this distance there's no swerving her immense size and power. Her speed – polar bears can run up to 25mph – means she'd be on us in seconds if she chose, but luckily this bear's more interested in snoozing.

Big Mama is just the first of many incredible bear encounters that fill the four days we're there. Each day we trundle over the rugged tundra, through crystal clear streams and along the Hudson's silty shores, all the time spotting bears and descending from the rhino to take a closer look. There are mothers walking with cubs and countless lone males wandering the banks of the bay. Some ignore us, some are inquisitive, others keep their distance. While constantly aware of the potential for danger, I feel safe with Andy and Butch who are ready to repel any over-zealous bears with a stern word, stones, a cap gun firing blanks – or as an ultimate (thankfully not yet needed) last resort, a rifle.

Until, that is, a few hours into an afternoon drive on our third day, when we meet a lone male who instead of watching from a distance, starts to approach us as we stand next to the rhino. Andy talks to the bear, throwing some stones his way, but he continues to close in on us. It's an almost out-of-body experience as 800lb of animal pads closer and closer. The urge to turn and scramble back into the rhino is strong, but I know the bear would be on me before my wellies left the ground. He's just 20 metres away when Andy fires a harmless blank over the animal's head and finally it turns on its heels. Back in the vehicle, it takes a long while for the adrenalin to stop pumping.

Above: getting up close with the native wild life. Far right: comparing paw size; whale-watching in Hudson Bay



THE LOWDOWN

For this once-in-a-lifetime adventure, Churchill Wild's Hudson Bay Odyssey offers four nights at Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge and two nights in Winnipeg, Manitoba, from CAN\$9,795 per person (around £5,700), including domestic return flights from Winnipeg to Nanuk Lodge, three meals a day, drinks and polar bear safari activities (churchillwild.com). To see the belugas you need to stay an extra night at Churchill and take the kayak tour (about £95). You can also snorkel and paddleboard with the whales (seanorthtours.com). Economy return flights with Air Canada (aircanada.com) from London Heathrow to Winnipeg (via Toronto) start from £895 per person (including taxes). To find out more about Manitoba, go to travelmanitoba.com

BELUGA LOVE

As well as seeing polar bears, during the summer months visitors can snorkel or kayak with belugas – gentle, ghostly-white whales that come to Manitoba's Churchill River Estuary, to give birth and to feed. In a double kayak, I head out with a group of paddlers into the estuary, its dark, icy waters reflecting the wispy clouds as seabirds circle overhead.

Within minutes of leaving the shore we're surrounded by dozens of whales, some babies, surfacing softly around us. Some are as long as the kayaks, the gentle puffs from their blowholes directing us where to look and where to aim the underwater camera, which captures fleeting images of curious whales emerging from the yellowish depths, along with the sounds of their 'singing', as they whistle and chirp around our boats. It's a magical experience.

WHIZ AROUND WINNIPEG

Manitoba's international gateway is worth exploring for a night or two, with funky hotels, bars and restaurants, and unique attractions.

The boutique ALT Hotel in the heart of Winnipeg's Downtown has minimalist urban-chic rooms, and is perfectly placed for me to

explore the city (rooms from £94 per night; althotels.com/en/winnipeg).

The Forks, with its covered market and vintage rail carriages, is full of quirky shops and eateries. It's also the location of the world's only Museum for Human Rights (humanrights.ca). Sensitive displays feature some of history's most challenging events and rights issues, such as the Holocaust and Apartheid, all housed in a wonderful, soaring, glass work of architectural art that cleverly leads visitors from darkness up into light.

For dinner, I head to Osborne Village, named 'Canada's Greatest Neighbourhood' for its hip food joints, bars and artsy boutiques, and eat French at rustic dining room Peasant Cookery (peasantcookery.ca), set in one of the heritage buildings found in the stylish historical Exchange District. Before I leave, I spend time in Thermëa by Nordik Spa-Nature – a stylish day spa (£27, thermea.ca), just 20 minutes from Downtown (take a cab) where pristine paths lead you through icy outdoor waterfalls into steamy, sweet-smelling sanctums – from hot-water tubs to positively polar plunge pools. Later, I thaw out in my robe around the fire-pit and treat myself to a glass of red wine (well, I have been on a bear hunt after all...). ■



Photos: Michael Poliza, Rudolf Hug, Charles Glatzer, Lauren Jarvis, Churchill Wild, Alamy