



GRIN and BEAR it

By day, they patrol Canada’s icy tundra, taking tourists on walking safaris with polar bears. By night, these mild-mannered men perch by a lodge fire, glass of red in hand, talking about efforts to protect the Lord of the Arctic. **Christine Retschlag** meets Canada’s Polar Bear Whisperers.

IT’S A CRISP MORNING ON HUDSON BAY, JUST WEEKS BEFORE THE sea freezes for the winter, and the polar bears are poised to launch their hunt for baby seals. Churchill Wild tour guide Derek Kyostia is leading a pack of travellers on a walking safari when he spots a 400-kilogram male he calls Big Old Bear sitting near Seal River Heritage Lodge.

Big Old Bear is curious on this particular morning and begins trundling towards the group. The lodge is 150 metres away – too far for them to make it back – and the bear is moving closer and closer to the visitors. Derek instructs them to cluster together, and those on their knees taking photos to stand.

“Good morning, did we wake you up?” Derek calls to the bear, deploying the first line of defence. The bear lopes closer. Derek picks up two stones and whacks them together, escalating towards stage two. Big Old Bear continues. When the bear is within 10 metres, tail guide Josh joins Derek at the front of the human pack.

“Just keep on walking,” Josh commands the bear. Stage three works, and Big Old Bear ambles away from the group, paces for a bit, then lies down. He’s found his day bed.

“He’s moved directly downwind from us,” says Derek. “He’s getting a feel for the situation. I initiated vocal contact with him and I started a negotiation. It’s about imposing our will.

“We look big but we understand he is the boss in this situation. We are not trying to dominate him, we are in his environment,” he explains.

“There was an adrenaline rush. Had it been another bear my fear factor may have been amplified a bit, but he’s been hanging around here, so he’s become conditioned.”

That’s not to say there’s ever room for complacency. Despite the bear’s familiarity, Derek always keeps an eye on the warning signs: “When bears are angry they don’t growl, they hiss. At that stage it’s game on.”

Talking to bears is all part of a day’s work for 45-year-old Derek, who holds a degree in biology and previously spent eight years working on tundra buggies out of the frontier town of Churchill in the far north of the Manitoba province. Three seasons ago he moved to Seal River Heritage Lodge, a 60-kilometre small plane ride from Churchill, looking for what he deems a real guiding experience.

The lure was being out on the land and in the elements for a more intimate experience with all wildlife, not just bears. He decided to try it for a year. If he survived, he’d come back the next season.

“In my first year I went out early in the morning, sat by the fence and, about a metre away, a bear glanced, walked over, leaned into the fence and went to sleep beside me.

“That moved me to tears. I thought I’d disappeared through the rabbit hole. It still blows my mind when we get reactions like that.”

Despite his years on the job and countless bear sightings, spotting these incredible creatures in the wild never gets old. “I can guarantee you no one wants to see a bear more than I do,” he says. “You can be having the shittiest day and go and watch a bear for 10 minutes – it’s very humbling.”

Fear is still a factor. It’s not something you want to lose around these giant marine mammals, but it must pave the way for a more complex relationship. “We are fascinated by bears because we fear them,” Derek muses. “They are highly intelligent animals, and have a sense of self-awareness. That animal could kill you in a heartbeat.

“A lot of this [his work] is dispelling the myths about bears. We needn’t fear them – we need to respect them – and with a deeper understanding we can move past that fear.”

You’d expect a man who’s chosen this kind of career to love the cold, but Derek admits to hating the bitter weather. His polar passion, however, makes the chill a minor hurdle, and he embraces this remote location in which he lives for two months each year. So much so that after his annual Arctic stint, he heads to Antarctica where he joins a Russian research vessel as a guide for two months. Between April and October he returns to his

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native British Columbia where he escorts groups to observe the grizzly bears.

“The absence of television, radio and telephone forces you to stop and take stock of things around you,” he says. “My jobs are all in isolated places. For me, this is the norm. In an urban environment, that’s when I get nervous. People are unpredictable.

“I love watching bear-on-bear interaction and how they communicate with each other. They will never understand us because we will never understand us.”

That’s not to say the human element of his job isn’t engaging. “The beauty is you are sharing it with like-minded people,” he explains. “You are this mediator, introducing people to a world that is very foreign to them.”

It’s the sort of job that both kids and adults pine for. Derek still says it’s “beyond my wildest dreams”.

“My mum is like, ‘When are you going to grow up and get a real job?’ Who wants to grow up?

“In this role you need to be able to troubleshoot and think quickly on your feet. Even on my worst days, I think, ‘What else would I rather be doing?’”



Observing bears interacting is one of the best parts of the job.



Arctic wildlife scopes out Seal River Heritage Lodge.