



A PTARMIGAN IN FLIGHT



A CURIOUS POLAR BEAR CUB



POLAR BEARS PRACTISING THEIR FIGHTING SKILLS ON THE FROZEN HUDSON BAY



GEETIKA JAIN, TARA LAL AND ANJALI SINGH



TOUR COMPANY CHURCHILL WILD'S GRAPHIC SIGN

THE GREAT ESCAPE

NATURE CONSERVATIONIST TARA LAL SET OUT TO PHOTOGRAPH THE CANADIAN ARCTIC ON THE ULTIMATE GIRLS TRIP, AND CAME BACK IN AWE OF THE ENDLESS WHITE AND ITS THRIVING WILDLIFE



AN ARCTIC FOX PAUSES IN FRONT OF SEAL RIVER HERITAGE LODGE

Photographs: Tara Lal; Ian Johnson (Geetika Jain, Tara Lal and Anjali Singh)

“Sorry to interrupt breakfast, but there is a polar bear outside the window.” Welcome to Hudson Bay, Canada, where wildlife roams free, and humans are few and far between. Months earlier, when the plan to take a girls trip to the Canadian Arctic had come up, none of us could have imagined the reality. The three of us, Geetika Jain, an inspirational travel writer, Anjali Singh, who runs wildlife lodges in India, and I, a nature conservationist, have a shared passion for wildlife. The thrill of seeing animals in their natural habitat, and exploring remote regions of the world with the knowledge that they may not exist tomorrow, makes going on safari a wonderful addiction. I find that reading books and watching nature documentaries, although illuminating, can never replace the magic and personal connection of experiencing a polar bear 20 metres from my nose.

We flew in from different parts of the world to Churchill, Manitoba—a town of 900 residents on Hudson Bay, where polar bears roam the streets. Parked cars are even left unlocked, to act as safe havens to those who may chance upon these carnivorous creatures while wandering around. From Churchill, we took a tiny Twin Otter plane over to Nanuk Lodge, flying over magical snow and ice sculptures, floating over the tundra and spotting wildlife from the windows. The freezing temperature was a challenge that was both exasperating and wondrous. At minus 36 degrees Celsius without wind chill, our twice-daily layering up took on a ritualistic tone. Over multiple garments of merino and fleece, we were advised to rent a mammoth parka, snow pants and a set of enormous boots. It took a full 30 minutes to get all the gear on, and left us with mobility just shy of a straightjacket. However, even with the ignominy ▶



HUSKIES READY FOR A RUNAROUND



A DRAMATIC ARCTIC SUNSET



AN ARCTIC HARE FRAMED BY A FLURRY OF POWDERY SNOW

THIS ARCTIC FOX DIDN'T SEEM VERY IMPRESSED BY THE CAMERA



THE NORTHERN LIGHTS ABOVE NANUK LODGE



SUMO RELAXING ON THE SNOW BANK

On one occasion, we came across a polar bear that had hunkered down in a snow swamp not far from the lodge. We walked over in single file so as to not disturb it, taking slow and deliberate steps over the calf-high powdery snow

of occasionally falling sideways into the snow with the sheer weight of the jacket, I was thankful for its thickness, as we often had to lie stretched out on frozen lakes and rivers, waiting patiently for an Arctic fox or polar bear to saunter past in the evening light.

This year, the Arctic foxes were abundant. The wonderful canids, whose coats turn white in the winter, are light on their feet, and often come up close to people, or occasionally take a cheeky nip at a sleeping polar bear, while looking for Arctic lemmings (local mice) for dinner. Watching a polar bear from the window is special, but actually walking with one is spiritual. On one occasion, we came across a polar bear that had hunkered down in a snow swamp not far from the lodge. We walked over in single file so as to not disturb it, taking slow and deliberate steps over the calf-high powdery snow. On top of the bulky gear, I was carrying a

tripod over one arm and a camera slung across my body. Just then, my furry cap slipped down over my eyes, making it almost impossible to see where I was going. All I was aware of was the blurry form of the person ahead of me. Then we stopped, and I looked up to see the rotund, pristine white shape of the bear we later nicknamed Sumo, sitting right in front of me. (It was 40 metres away, but we are talking about standing near the largest land carnivore here). Sumo decided to walk towards us, which sent our extremely vigilant guides into a series of protocols—first, they distract the bear by talking, next they use a stern voice (yes, this really does work) and if that's not enough, they bang stones together to make a loud sound. Finally, if all else fails, they let off an airgun with flares to confuse the bear. They've not had to do that often, and although they carry a shotgun, it's never been used on an animal. Sumo responded to the stern

voices of our guides, Derek and Josh, and sat down looking forlorn. He tried to slide closer, but he was told off again; so, he lay down and started rolling around in the snow like a puppy. But, guides always place safety before all else, and Sumo's fluffy, white marshmallow-like sweetness did not fool them into forgetting that he is an efficient predator—one that could possibly weigh over 600kg and run at 30kmph. So, we retreated.

On our third night—after a howling white-out snowstorm the day before—the sky cleared, increasing our chances of seeing the elusive aurora borealis. Honestly, I had never quite understood the excitement surrounding the Northern Lights. A few hours after I fell into a deep sleep, I was shaken awake and taken to the window to see the most magnificent sight: a display of colour formed by the reaction of solar winds with the earth's magnetic field; the aurora. Sparks of red

and swirls of luminescent green formed fantastical shapes in the night sky. My scepticism melted as I watched this incredible light show. I couldn't have asked for more. But, I did have one last wish—a chance to look into the eyes of a wild wolf. I have a fascination with canids, and I had been largely motivated to take this journey because I had heard that there was a pack of 26 wolves that comes around to the lodge quite often. I waited each day in the hope of spotting their tracks. Just when I had given up hope, they arrived in our final hour at Nanuk Lodge. The image of this large pack trotting towards us, over the sea ice, is forever burnt in my mind. I never got close enough to look into their eyes, but I hear September is a good time to get a chance to see wolves and polar bears in the fall foliage. I'm already planning a return trip. Canada isn't that far, is it? ●

Tara Lei