

# Bear country

Walking with giants – a safari in the Canadian wilderness is a bucket list adventure beyond your dreams

TEXT CHLOE CANN









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The summer months are the best time to experience a polar bear safari in Manitoba, although a handful of tours operate during other times of the year, too.



I'm standing eye to eye with 540 kilograms of apex predator, nothing between us except 45 metres of cool subarctic air. The late afternoon summer sun is glistening off its hulking, furry white haunches, its cute black button eyes and small, rounded ears belying meat hook claws and a jaw lined with 42 long, sharp teeth. The one thing keeping the planet's biggest land-based carnivore at a comfortable distance is bear whisperer Bella Waterton. "Hey there bear, lovely morning, isn't it?" she says sweetly yet firmly, as our group of 14 stands silent and still behind her. Rather than feeling exposed as the large male saunters past, trying to edge in and get a closer sniff of us, the encounter leaves me in awe.

Polar bears might be known as aggressive eating machines with indiscriminate taste, but that perception couldn't be further removed from our experiences in the far north-eastern

reaches of Manitoba, Canada. Each interaction we have with these graceful creatures is different – a few skittish young bears scamper away at dizzying speed, spooked at the mere sight of us; others laze on beds of kelp by the shoreline, totally unfazed by our appearance; while some are simply inquisitive, eyeing us and catching our scent from afar before cautiously clambering over to take a closer look.

"I've had bears come up and want to play with me," says Andy MacPherson, another of our guides, as we watch a bear intently pawing at a blueberry bush. While both he and Waterton carry an arsenal of deterrents as a matter of precaution, the most hostile treatment we witness is guides using their voices to mark out a boundary.

On Canada's Hudson Bay coast, such encounters occur daily. The region is home to the largest and most accessible polar bear

population on the planet. Local family-owned and -run operator Churchill Wild has built its entire business around these once-in-a-lifetime trips – taking visitors from far and wide into the pristine Canadian wilderness to view polar bears in their natural habitat. But the company’s seven- to 11-day Arctic safaris offer more than a fleeting interaction with the so-called ‘Lords of the Arctic’. Its three luxury eco-lodges are up to 250 kilometres from civilisation, and accessible only via chartered prop plane. Even the nearest town of Churchill (population 900) is inaccessible by road, and a two-hour flight from the province’s capital, Winnipeg. It is likely the furthest from man-made development most guests have ever ventured.

#### On the edge of the world

During Churchill Wild’s 10-night Dual Lodge Safari, I experience something far more visceral and enduring than the countless photographs I take. A chance to bathe in bleakly beautiful, Nordic noir-esque landscapes at the ends of the earth. A place where the ground, once physically depressed by glaciers up to three kilometres thick, is slowly rising and feels like marshmallow underfoot. A place where the pace of time seems to slow and nature’s rhythms come into sharp focus, daily routines defined by the ebb and flow of tides and the strength of the wind. A place where even the night sky is nature’s canvas – lime green trails of the Northern Lights trickling across it, and seemingly changing in colour and shape with each glance.

Though the landscape may look barren, plenty of life is supported here. We spy Arctic ground squirrels atop rocky outcrops; Arctic hares scampering off into the distance; wolves idling in the sun; and flocks of snow geese and Arctic terns flitting through the sky. There’s a chance to spot more elusive migratory beasts, such as black bears, moose and caribou, too. Even when local wildlife appears to evade us there is much to see. Walks are structured around identifying the swathes of wildflowers, inspecting bear tracks and scats, exploring the remains of Inuit grave sites and running our fingertips along permafrost – a shelf of ice as hard as concrete, concealed just 300 millimetres below the topsoil. We make pit stops for hot cocoa and scout for berry patches, →



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## TRAVEL



picking the tiniest, sweetest raspberries I've ever tasted.

At Seal River Heritage Lodge, last year's harvest of cloudberry is served as a sweet amber jam beside blueberry pancakes, streaky bacon and polar bear-shaped scones at breakfast. Appetites piqued by the subarctic air are sated with all manner of hearty, homemade dishes here – Armenian flatbread with avocado and mango salsa, fried golden spheres of local freshwater fish, creamy scalloped potatoes, glazed hams, curried wild rice, smoky sweet barbecued trout, rich butter tarts. The food is an unexpected, yet welcome highlight after days spent in the embrace of Manitoba's raw

elements, as are the lodges themselves. Made using recycled materials and sustainably harvested local wood, and run almost entirely on solar energy, they offer the cosiest of spots to retire. Lanterns glow in corners, caribou antlers are fashioned into door handles, bookshelves are stacked with old editions of *National Geographic*, and a large wood-burning fireplace crackles in the middle of the lounge.

From its absurdly snug lodges to the food, the landscapes and the people, the few who've ventured to subarctic Canada know the experience runs deeper than wildlife viewing. As one entry in the lodge's well-worn guestbook reads: "We came as guests and left feeling like family." ←



↑ Head wilderness guide Andy MacPherson says he's had polar bears wanting to come up and play with him.

↖ The wildlife is the key attraction at Seal River Heritage Lodge in Manitoba, Canada.

← Seal River Heritage Lodge, which is constructed from recycled and sustainably harvested local wood, blends rustic chic with touches of luxury.