

The Polar Bear Capital of the World

The small community of Churchill is a town on the shore of Hudson Bay in Manitoba, Canada. Located along the treeline or the northern edge of the Boreal Forest, Churchill attracts arctic and boreal species of wildlife, birds and plants. Commonly seen species include Arctic and Red Foxes, Arctic Hare, Caribou, Gyrfalcons, Snowy Owls, Ptarmigan and even the occasional Lemming!



However, internationally known as the 'Polar Bear Capital of the World', Churchill is most famous for the many polar bears that move toward the shore of Hudson Bay from inland in the autumn.

Polar bears swim ashore in mid-July and can be seen in the summer but it is not until October that they begin to gather in numbers along the coast. Churchill's 'bear season' begins in early October and numbers build until in early November when sometimes 40 or more polar bears can be seen on a given day. Hundreds of them then wait on the vast peninsula until the water freezes on Hudson Bay so that they can return to hunt their primary food source, Ringed Seals. This is Churchill's prime tourist season with 12,000 or more visitors passing through in six weeks.

The easiest way to see polar bears in their natural habitat is from Tundra Buggies. These curious vehicles started out as buses that were then modified by adding (when needed on smaller models) an indoor toilet-cubicle and viewing platform. They were then re-mounted on giant under-inflated tractor tires. The huge, soft tires provide needed elevation to put passengers out of reach of bears. The very soft tires also lessen damage to the very delicate tundra environment.



The top speed of a Tundra Buggy is approximately 45 km/h (28 mph) on a smooth trail, but usually travels much slower. The Buggies are relatively self sufficient with onboard air compressors, tool kits, extra fluids and oils, lavatories and propane heaters which are independent of the engine. As well Tundra Buggies include comfortable seats, windows that open and a large observation deck.

The two main tundra vehicle companies are Great White Bear Tours (primarily booked by Natural Habitat and Churchill Nature Tours) and Tundra Buggy Adventure/Frontiers North. The vast majority of tours during this time period are group tours although some 'day trips' are still available for independent travellers. It is best to book these tours early, up to a year in advance.

Polar bear jail

Local authorities maintain a so-called "polar bear jail" where bears (mostly adolescents) who persistently loiter in or close to town, are held after being tranquillised, pending release back into the wild when the bay freezes over. Polar bears were once thought to be solitary animals that would avoid contact with other bears except for mating. In the Churchill region, however, many alliances between bears are made in the fall. These friendships last only until the ice forms, then it is every bear for himself to hunt ring seals. Wikipedia.org

Polar bears are fearless and very curious

My favorite moment came when our driver opened the inner door of the tundra buggy, leaving only the steel-bar outer gate in place. A curious bear who had come up to the vehicle, took advantage of

an opportunity to see what was inside by sticking his head and paws in through the openings, much to our delight. Although their demeanor reminds one of large, sloppy friendly dogs -- huge white-furred black-eyed mutts-- their charm disguises their power and the potential danger they represent. While we were all awwwwww-ing and oooooo-ing, the bear was probably looking at us as potential food. No matter who we are, how profound our thoughts, how saintly our deeds, we are only meat to a polar bear. Although fortunately not their first choice. Chem.ucla.edu

Photos: TR, Flickr

Date: 2009-08-31

Article link:

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