

Escape

POLAR TRAILBLAZER

BY PAUL RUBIO

Serengeti, check. Atacama Desert, check. Antarctica, check. Intrepid travelers looking for their next great once-in-a-lifetime adventure should head to the polar bear-rich Canadian Arctic with Churchill Wild.

CHURCHILL WILD

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SCENES FROM SEAL RIVER HERITAGE LODGE (CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT): A POLAR BEAR INVESTIGATES THE AIRSTRIP; AERIAL VIEW DURING SUMMER; A POLAR BEAR IN THE SUMMER FIREWEED; BEARS WRESTLING IN THE SNOW.

MICHAEL POLIZA



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Arctic's most iconic resident: the polar bear.

Of Earth's 19 sub-populations, the thousand-strong permanent polar bears of West Hudson Bay, north of Churchill, Canada, are quite possibly the healthiest and most photogenic. This is where *National Geographic*, BBC's *Planet Earth*, and the Discovery channel come to capture footage of bears wrestling in the fireweed-speckled surrounds and crossing frozen riverbanks with cubs in tow.

Thankfully, access to this terrain is not limited to tundra buggies. Though

in operation since 1993, Churchill Wild has intentionally maintained a low profile, reserving its exclusive permits to track Arctic wildlife on foot for true trailblazers. Coming face-to-face with one of the planet's fiercest, most glorious apex predators without man-made borders is nothing short of life-changing, even for those who've traversed the likes of Rwanda's Virunga mountains for up-close interactions with almighty gorilla troops.

Churchill Wild's trio of lodges is located in prime polar bear real estate and each is a short Cessna flight north of Churchill (population: 899), in close proximity to the natural land-water border between Manitoba and Nunavut. Immersed in nature, these properties serve as windows to the Arctic. Without a road, light, or any other human disturbance in



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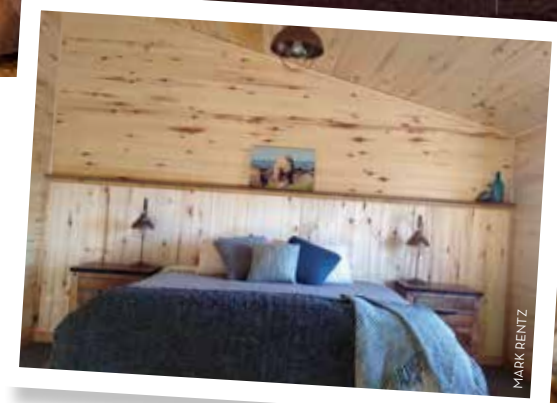
A BABY BELUGA (LEFT) ON THE "BIRDS, BEARS & BELUGAS" SAFARI OFFERED IN JULY AND AUGUST; A POLAR BEAR LAZES ALONG WEST HUDSON BAY WHILE HUMANS GAWK.



DIDRIK JOHNSON



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SLEEPING UNDER THE NORTHERN LIGHTS AT CHURCHILL WILD'S SATELLITE ARCTIC SAFARI TUNDRA CAMP. LEFT AND BELOW: THE LOUNGE AND A GUEST ROOM AT SEAL RIVER HERITAGE LODGE. BELOW RIGHT: PHYLLO EGGS AND SUNSHINE MUFFINS AT NANUK POLAR BEAR LODGE.



IAN MCCALLS

sight, the lodges overlook 360 degrees of Arctic splendor. Resident polar bears are often so curious and brazen in their natural environment, visitors don't even need to walk hours in search of them—they come directly to you.

To protect you from becoming bear bait, electric fencing encircles the lodges, effectively turning humans into the zoo attraction for the wildlife. Guides open wired gates only when escorting travelers on hikes through the surrounding tidal flats and prairies. Expect to pass through four times per day on average, coming and going from twice-daily excursions into the wilds. Similar to an African safari, an early wake-up call is followed by breakfast and a morning wildlife expedition. You'll return for lunch before heading out again in the afternoon. Seasoned guides who've trained and worked in polar bear country for decades always lead the groups and put safety as a top priority. In 24 years, there has yet to be a single injury for either human or bear.

Though polar bears are the main draw for Churchill Wild, not every outing is about getting as close as possible to these furry marvels. Depending on the season, the Arctic's other residents compete for the limelight. In July and August, some 60,000 beluga whales enter Hudson Bay, and Churchill Wild takes guests on a spectacular underwater journey to swim with them. In September, hikes may center on witnessing the fall caribou migration, when thousands of these antlered beauties drift south through crimson- and pumpkin-colored foliage. Other animals on observation may in-

clude wolves, wolverines, snowy owls, and Arctic foxes and hares, which lose their black fur for white fluff when temperatures dip in early October. In addition, the northern lights are so utterly outstanding in this region that they cast a natural glow across the night sky, even in summer.

Though the comparisons to an African safari are many, don't expect Churchill Wild's lodges to be tricked out in the fashion of a five-star safari camp. The luxury here lies in the remote location. The food is excellent and plentiful, made fresh daily by a noted chef and his or her kitchen crew. Unlimited

pours of Canadian wine are provided during the nightly pre-dinner social hour and throughout the evening meal. The architectural aesthetic recalls a cozy alpine lodge with rooms that are minimalist yet adequate, but truth be told, you'll never be there except to sleep. When not on an excursion, it's hard to keep your eyes off *Planet Earth* unfolding in real time from the lodge's living room, dining room, porches, and indoor and outdoor observation decks (including a rooftop tower at Seal River Heritage Lodge).

It seems almost ironic that after traveling the globe and reaching 125 countries over the past two decades, my eyes are now open to one of Earth's most riveting and inspiring



RAMONA BOONE

A MOTHER POLAR BEAR AND HER CUB EMBRACE AT NANUK POLAR BEAR LODGE.

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DURING THE ARCTIC SUMMER, A POLAR BEAR TRAVELS AT LOW TIDE AND SEA CHAMOMILE ACHIEVES FULL BLOOM.

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JAD DAVENPORT

REACHING POLAR BEAR COUNTRY

places right here in America's backyard. In a world that's becoming ever more homogeneous and environmentally defunct, West Hudson Bay shines as a pocket of natural beauty and stamina, a place where our biological heritage still thrives, and the ultimate bucket-list destination for adrenaline-loving and eco-minded wanderers. (churchillwild.com) ◀◀



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To begin this Arctic experience, travelers will first need to reach Winnipeg, the capital of Manitoba,

Canada, which is serviced by most American and Canadian commercial carriers. All Churchill Wild itineraries begin with a night in Winnipeg, followed by an early flight to Churchill on Calm Air, and then a short Cessna flight to the airstrip at Seal River Heritage Lodge, Nanuk Polar Bear Lodge, or Dymond Lake Eco-Lodge.