



# Northern magic

Cool glimpses of one of the coldest regions of the world may just help you beat the summer heat. We bring you an exclusive report by an Indian photographer-journalist just back from the Arctic. [Text and photos by D K Bhaskar](#)

**T**he Earth's Arctic region, north of the Arctic Circle, includes the Arctic Ocean, Greenland, Baffin Island, other smaller northern islands, and the far northern parts of Europe, Russia (Siberia), Alaska and Canada. Forget Indians, not many people travel to this perennially frozen part of the world. Writer-photographer D K Bhaskar, a Bengaluru boy, is that rare shutterbug who has come back with some stunning photos of the area.

In the mid winter months, the sun never rises in the Arctic and temperatures can easily reach lows of -45 degrees Celsius in the higher latitudes. In the summer months (further

south), 24 hours of sunlight a day melts the seas and topsoil. This development is the main cause of icebergs breaking off from the frozen north and floating south.

The primary residents of the Arctic include the Eskimos (Inuits), Saami and Russians. Residents of the area for more than 9,000 years, many of the indigenous Eskimos have now given up much of their traditional hunting and fishing to work in the oil fields and support industries.

Among animals, fox, hare, wolf, caribou (a type of deer), walrus, wolverines and polar bears have adapted themselves very well to the harsh climate of the region. Here, Bhaskar, who holds a degree in Mechanical Engineering and is the author of the book *The Fragile Forest: Inside Brazilian Amazonia*, describes his close

encounters with polar bears, along with the other adventures he had in the Arctic recently.

In my travels to the ends of the planet, I have had the opportunity to see some of the most amazing landscapes, which are not only indomitable but amazingly beautiful. One of them is the Arctic Tundra, which I visited a couple of months ago. It started off as a dull morning with grey skies, chilling cold and stark landscape filled with snow. And as if a magician had waved a wand, the sun appeared dramatically.

We were on our way back from the tundra (meaning the treeless plain), with the last two hours remaining in our week long adventure in the region which included many up close and personal encounters with the lord of the Arctic, the Polar Bear. The landscape kept changing at



Sunlight at all hours cause icebergs to break and float away



Brilliant landscapes greet your eyes all around

every bend. Spectacular is an understated word in this astounding landscape. I was hoping to sight an Arctic Fox.

Rick, our driver, gave the travellers an opportunity to drive the buggy on the frozen tundra. I was at the wheel when somebody suddenly exclaimed "Arctic Fox!" There it was, one of the cutest species that can mesmerise yet freeze any one. The low evening light created hallos around the beautiful little face as it hurried restlessly around the ice sheets and the tundra vegetation. For over 30 minutes, I spent some engaging moments with the little animal in the sub-zero temperatures, clicking away like there was no tomorrow.

The sub-arctic climate in Northern Canada is a mix of tundra, boreal forest and pack ice. Unique fauna like the Ptarmigan, Red Fox, Arctic Fox, Harper Seals and Arctic Hare

**AS THE NIGHT GREW, SO DID THE HYPER COLD CONDITIONS WITH THE CHILLY TEMPERATURE DROPPING TO -12 DEGREES. TWO LAYERS OF HAND GLOVES DIDN'T HELP IN ANY WAY.**

thrive in this habitat. Polar bears are the key species and the largest predators, resiliently fighting to survive in the ever-changing Arctic climatic conditions. I was in the Arctic with scientists from PBI (Polar Bear International) and Frontiers North, privileged to experience and live one of my lifetime ambitions, watching wild polar bears at close quarters.

"Wind speed is 35 miles per hour and the weather forecast is snow blizzard. Early morning flight under the first snowstorm of the region is a difficult situation. Get all your warm clothes out and pack yourself in layers," warned Chris Hendrickson, who has been visiting the region for nearly a decade. No amount of coffee would either warm me up or wake me up from my cold slumber.

Looking like an Eskimo, my warm clothing weighed half my body weight as I hopped later into the jet for a two-hour flight to Churchill, a remote town with a population of only about 800. Wind and snow blew mercilessly as we landed at Churchill. The season's first snowstorm had dumped more than 24 inches of snow in a short span of time. My Canadian parka jacket was just not enough to withstand the wind chill. The temperature outside showed 7 degrees below zero.

As I wondered who would love to live in this inhospitable terrain that accumulates about 200 inches of snow, one of our local contacts said, "I came here 32 years ago and haven't returned. It seduces you in full". Later I was to discover that this was the case with more than 50 per cent of Churchill's population.

Visiting the Eskimo Museum is the best introduction to the people living in the Arctic. From the weapons used by the Inuit people to some of the extraordinary carvings of the ethnic people, it was all there. Plus, it certainly was a welcome break to be inside the heated room. Another attraction is the Wapusk (meaning White Bear) National Park established in 1996 and located in the Hudson plain surrounded by three eco-regions - the Boreal Forest, the Arctic Tundra and the Hudson Bay. In the months of October and November, when the Western Hudson Bay freezes, polar bears congregate around to feed on their favorite meals, the Ringed Seal and the Harper Seals. This is their last big meal before their long hiatus until April when they resurface in the bay.

As history goes, the native people (Thule, Inuit, Chipewyan, Cree) have inhabited Churchill since 1000 A.D. Europeans in the early 17th century occupied the region and started the North American fur trade. They also built a fort near the mouth of the Churchill River, the Prince of Wales Fort.

On my first Arctic morning, the skies were unusually clear and there was a crispness in the air. But the temperatures were bitterly



The terrain is inhospitable and results in a sparse population in the area

cold. Slowly, a spectacular sunrise dawned over the Tundra. Tom Smith, one of the senior Polar Bear scientists working there informed me, "The sunrise is a phenomenal experience. Though the bears don't like heat, this will bring out other fauna." Fresh snowflakes added a glistening effect on the surface, as the sun made a valiant effort to break through the clouds and blaze at its brightest best. The tundra landscape came alive as the frozen sheets cracked, the biomes (low shrubs, sedges, reindeer mosses, kelp) smiled at us and we were just lost in a time lapse as the sun rose higher across the horizon, a scene that stood still through my frames.

My excitement was running high, considering I would soon be having my first view of the polar bear. "It's a big male," said Rick, looking at the far end through his binoculars as he drove carefully on the foot thick ice sheet. The buggies built specially for the tundra experience have special tyres that are 5.5 feet high and sit on 25-inch rims. They are self sufficient with on-board propane heater and air compressors independent of the engine. They are four-wheel drive all the time.

We parked. The bear slept in peace right next to my window, a few feet away, oblivious to the presence of human beings nearby. For 25 long



Eskimos have renounced their old trades

minutes, other than the occasional rolling of the eyes, it didn't make any movement and enjoyed the fresh snow on the ground. Then in one sudden rush, it got up, stretched his body like a dog out of slumber and ambled away on the frozen ice sheet.

As the night grew, so were the hyper cold conditions with the chilly temperature dropping to minus 12 degrees. Two layers of hand gloves didn't help in any way. A balaclava (headgear that covers the whole head, exposing only a part of my face) helped a bit in reducing the nose freeze. But I wasn't done yet. After a nice hot dinner, while the rest of them slept, I prepared my equipment for another memorable shoot that I had waited for a long time - the Northern Lights, also called Aurora Borealis.

It was 15 minutes to midnight, when the first glow of light appeared in the sky. Smith with his years of experience working in Alaska and the northern territories said, "Another 30 minutes and it will start to dance". Indeed, just like the curtains across a window fluttering with the wind, the Aurora Borealis danced as if in orchestrated symphony and expanded all across the horizon in a full circle. For nearly an hour the mesmerizing dance made me forget the temperature.



Clockwise from left: a top view of the beauty of the region; the Arctic Fox, one of the cutest species around and a dash of colour in the bleak exterior

As far as 200 miles above the earth, air molecules collide with electrically charged solar winds across earth's magnetic field. Depending on the type of gas that the particles excite, the lights glow and ripple in various colors. This collision causes the air to light up and it becomes intense and colourful depending on the clear sky and intense cold conditions.

Life in such indomitable landscapes often weighs against large faunal diversity. Yet, the arctic wildlife is very unique. As the days progressed, I got a little acclimatised and felt warmer, at least in spirit. In a couple of days, I had seen intriguing and often humorous bear behaviors such as sleeping with their neck resting on a rock, rolling on the snow, cubs sparring, showing their big paws to everyone, idly sleeping for hours at a stretch, and so on. As it snowed and became blistery, they loved it and became more active.

In the midst of all these bear antics, one of the charming encounters of my visit was the Red Fox. Its sheer color, beauty, special coat,

and curious eyes will win over anyone's heart instantly. Rick, who has years of experience in this region said, "You need immense patience here."

Restless as it is by nature, the fox moved around, hiding often, but peeking out with curiosity. Dodging us many times, it decided to come right next to our buggy, much to our cheerful joy. I must admit, this to me was a special part of the Arctic experience. Rick too abandoned the steering wheel to get a photo. "I have never seen them that close", he said.

In the course of my working with polar scientists, one element that is of utmost concern to everyone is the threat of changing weather patterns to the Arctic environment. The ice is melting faster than anticipated. Smith with nearly two decades experience working with bears feels the climate change is for sure playing a role. "Due to changing sea ice conditions seals have moved to different locations. This makes finding and hunting seals a mighty challenge for the bears. They are losing weight and weaker

cubs are having a tough time to survive in the harsh conditions."

Is it the stage of peril for these magnificent predators? "There is hope, we all need to work together reducing the carbon footprint as quickly as we can," says Dr. Martyn Obbard, a scientist working with the Ontario Ministry of the Environment.

There are less than 25,000 wild polar bears spread across Canada, Norway, Russia and Iceland. In the last two decades the population has reduced by 25 per cent. One look at them, more than any other bears, these lord of the Arctic, create a sense of awe. They are big, beautiful and endearing. Few can see them outside of a zoo, until one ventures out to the far North - to the Polar Bear Capital of the world, Churchill.

"It's addictive. I came here 27 years ago and haven't skipped even a year. You will return next year," said Robert Buchanan, CEO of PBI as I had a last look at a mama bear and the two cubs cuddled around her.