

# Travel & Outdoors

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## Bear necessities

*A trip to subarctic Canada is a nature lovers' dream, even if some natives are a bit scary*

**GAVIN HINES**

The people in Churchill, Manitoba, don't lock their cars or houses. Partly because the small, subarctic town on the Hudson Bay is inhabited by trustworthy residents, but also because an unlocked door could save someone's life by providing refuge should a polar bear give chase. "They say if you get chased by one you should take off your clothes while you're running," says tour guide, Hayley Shephard, as we prepared for a polar bear safari.

"It buys you time because the bears stop to sniff them."

It wasn't a theory I was willing to test.

We left town and headed for the tun-

dras, which takes two days to reach by train).

It's quite industrial, too; a giant grain elevator dominates the town. It's operational for a few weeks during summer, when ships are able to navigate the usually frozen Hudson Strait. Then it's all hands on deck. Trains a mile long bring grain up from the prairies as workers load it onto ships bound for Europe and Asia. Out

PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY



Polar bears spar outside Churchill

## A 4x4 won't offer enough protection if you stumble upon a polar bear

dra, where we'd jump into the safari vehicle. The sky was moody and an arctic wind whistled around the car.

"It's a scorcher," joked Shephard, pointing to the 8C indicated on the dashboard thermometer.

"In winter it gets down to -40C."

Interestingly, Churchill is on the same latitude as the Orkney islands, although Scotland is spared such a harsh climate by the Gulf Stream.

Thinking of snow, I decided Churchill would look far better with it; there was something almost post-apocalyptic about the place in "summer".

A former Air Force base, the town is scattered with disused military buildings, not to mention vehicles that presumably weren't worth transporting back from this remote part of the world (there are no roads to Churchill and it

of town, the landscape is equally austere. Thanks to the permafrost, vegetation struggles to grow and trees hundreds of years old look like saplings, suspended in youth by the harsh climate.

Yet the diverse wildlife found in this chilly corner of the world belies this seemingly inhospitable land and makes it well worth visiting.

Generally speaking, if you're going on safari, a Land Rover will suffice. Not here, because while the terrain isn't challenging, a typical 4x4 won't offer enough protection if you stumble upon a polar bear.

So instead we jumped in a Tundra Buggy, an enormous, modified bus that started as a hobby for local handyman, Len Smith, who made one in 1976 to explore the tundra. However, when a photographer paid Len to drive him into the

wilderness,

he realised the commercial potential and now there's a whole fleet.

Boasting 6ft wheels, Tundra Buggies are about the size of a small house. However, more impressive is the barbecue on the open deck, which our driver, Dave Allcorn, promised to fire up later - well, it was summer.

He also promised to stop when we saw something interesting, which turned out to be about every 100m. In fact we'd barely set off and already I spotted a bald eagle so big it nearly eclipsed the sun.

"You turn into a birder out here," said Hayley, peering through binoculars.

Little wonder; the tundra's wetlands were teeming with birds, from the ubiquitous Canada goose to sand hill cranes and loons. These feathered inhabitants

were magnificent

right enough, but I was hoping to see a polar bear and I didn't have to wait long; while the rest of the group gravitated towards the barbecue, I was rewarded for my patience by not one, but two bears feeding on a seal carcass.

It was like a scene from a wildlife documentary, I was extremely lucky. So were the bears; that seal was a bonus, usually they'd have to wait until winter to feed, when their icy hunting platforms had reformed. Even through binoculars they looked large and intimidating.

Yet at the same time there's a vulnerability about these white beasts; they are facing an uphill battle as climate change threatens their very existence.

After the safari we returned to sleepy Churchill. There wasn't much going on



Beluga watching; a Tundra Buggy, below; flowers on the tundra, below left



encounters with nature that I've had.

How was I going to top that? Well, I wasn't, at least not in Churchill. However, a tour of the Prince of Wales Fort did appeal to the historian in me. Situated the other side of the Churchill River, it was built by the Hudson Bay Company in the 18th century to protect their lucrative fur empire from the French.

Of course, it failed and the French destroyed it, only for it to be rebuilt in the 1920s for history's sake. I also explored the Eskimo Museum, which taught me about the Inuit and their incredible lives in the harsh arctic environment.

Before bidding Churchill farewell, I visited local "mushing" champion, Dave Daley, who offers dog sledding experiences for tourists. The respect between him and his canines is fascinating, albeit a tad strange; he gives them a little bite on the nose when they misbehave. It was brilliant fun being pulled around the forest by dogs, although it would have felt more authentic had it been winter. Then the clouds of mosquitoes, which gorged on my blood that evening, would have vanished into hibernation.

Still, a drop of blood was a small price to pay Nature for the incredible experience it had given me.



**THE FACTS** Frontiers North ([www.frontiersnorth.com](http://www.frontiersnorth.com)) offers itineraries that vary with the season.

The five-day Belugas, Bears and Blooms trip (CA\$3,349/£2,125) runs in July and August. The price includes excursions, accommodation and the flight from Winnipeg to Churchill, but not food. Polar bear excursions run in winter and the northern lights can be seen in February and March. Gavin flew to Winnipeg with Air Canada ([www.aircanada.com](http://www.aircanada.com)). Return flights from Glasgow cost around £1,098



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so I dined at Gypsy's, a local hangout that proudly displays a signed picture of Ewan McGregor, who ate here while filming *The Polar Bears of Churchill*.

The town's nightlife is pretty quiet, as the Tundra Inn, where I was staying, seemed to be the place to go. So I joined locals and fellow travellers for beers before hitting the hay - it was gone 11pm when I went to bed, but still light.

The following morning I was woken by firecrackers, which had been set off to scare a bear away - you're never far from the action here. Feeling brave, after breakfast I set off to go snorkelling in the Churchill estuary, where up to 3,500 beluga whales gather to breed and feed every July and August. The water was 4C, but this was an opportunity of a lifetime and had to be done.

Kitted out in an extra-thick wetsuit, I boarded a boat belonging to local legend Mike Macri, who owns Sea North Tours, the whale watching specialists. Mike is a true bushman; he's been known to disappear into the wilderness mid-winter and live in an igloo.

Unsurprisingly he quickly tracked down a pod of belugas, a friendly, curious species similar in size to a dolphin. Keen to join these playful whales, I plunged into the water, which was so cold it stole my breath. But it was worth it to see these magnificent creatures swimming around me, gliding through the water so gracefully, almost smiling at their visitor. It was one of the finest

# The road less travelled

*With its food, festivals and fantastic scenery, the Cowal Peninsula is waiting to be discovered*

KIRSTY MCLUCKIE

An hour northwest of Glasgow, on a high pass nicknamed The Rest and Be Thankful, there is a large brown tourist sign with a panel missing. The missing piece, before it fell out years ago, directed travellers left, to Cowal. This mirrors the experience of this somewhat-forgotten peninsula, tucked between Ayrshire and Kintyre. The casual tourist needs something to persuade him to explore the quiet delights of turning off the more established route north.

For the Cowal Peninsula is very much worth the detour and now, marketing itself as Argyll's Secret Coast, it is beginning to attract visitors with year-round festivals and events, two of which are coming up in the next month.

Cowal Open Studios is a collection of 33 artists in the local area who go far beyond the souvenir landscapes of

tourist galleries. A forthcoming open weekend allows access to some great exhibitions, many of which are held in highly unusual spaces, giving a real insight into the art and its inspirations.

Armed with an Open Studios map, visitors can walk or drive from gallery to gallery, taking in everything from photography to furniture design, ceramics and traditional paintings. In the tiny Clachan of Glendaruel, for example, there is a choice of a stained glass exhibition by Anne Ferguson in a tiny woodland chapel, requiring a stout pair of wellies to get to, Sandi Anderson displays her beautiful figurative paintings from a static caravan studio and Eleanor McLaughlin invites visitors into her workshop where she makes beautiful freshwater rush baskets.

There is plenty more art on display in the local hostels, village halls and galleries, such as the space at the Benmore Botanic Gardens. Perhaps the real joy of this weekend is that you get to meet the artists, in some cases over a cup of tea and a scone. Sarah Sumsion is worth seeking out, in a breathtaking spot on the Ardkinglass Estate overlooking Loch Fyne; she dyes yarns and fabrics to create beautiful wall hangings and scarves.

While the Cowal Open Studios weekend might involve a spot of walking here and there, the second autumn event, Cowalfest, is firmly themed around the out-



# 48 HOURS IN Port Douglas

■ **Saturday, noon** Drop off your luggage at the Peninsula Boutique Hotel (9-13 The Esplanade, Port Douglas; [www.peninsulahotel.com.au](http://www.peninsulahotel.com.au)).

■ **2pm** Take a dip in the hotel pool before tackling a walk up Flagstaff Hill. The pay off - a first class view of Four Mile Beach and the Coral Sea.

■ **6pm** Time for an early dinner at the "outdoor Tropical dining experience" that is the Nautilus Restaurant (17 Murphy Street, Port Douglas; [www.nautilus-restaurant.com.au](http://www.nautilus-restaurant.com.au)). Try the seven-course Chef's Tasting Menu.

■ **Sunday, 8:30am** Stroll through the Port Douglas markets, on the waterfront, where more than 100 stores sell jewellery, furniture and gifts until 1pm every Sunday against a beautiful backdrop.



PHOTOGRAPH: ALAWY

# Bargain Breaks

COMPILED BY ALICE WYLLIE

## BULGAR WEEK

Prices for seven nights in Bulgaria start from £310pp. This includes accommodation at the three-star Meridian Superior Hotel in Sunny Beach on a half-board basis and return flights from Glasgow departing on 23 September.

Call 0844 879 817 or visit [www.directholidays.co.uk](http://www.directholidays.co.uk)



Yachts and boats in the Kyles of Bute; the Morag, below left, offers various marine trips

doors with accompanied historical and wildlife walks, bike and horse riding, outdoor theatre and orienteering. The scenic Cowal Way runs from the ferry from Kintyre at Portavadie and eventually joins the West Highland Way at Loch Lomond after meandering through its shore, hills and farmland route. Food plays a big part, too. A typical event is the Forest Kitchen Walks at Dunans Castle, which involve a stroll around the castle gardens, poetry recitals, history and some foraging for mushrooms and herbs before eating rabbit stew cooked outdoors.

Outside its growing festivals, the area has year-round attractions; it is surrounded on all sides by world-famous yachting waters and on the strength of the visitors that this brings in, there are some great restaurants whose reputation goes far beyond the local. The imposing



and starkly modernist new Portavadie Marina is a surprise, coming as it does at the end of a single track road, but most of its patrons arrive by sea. Seafood is on every menu and most small villages have good hotels serving local produce, such as the Inver Cottage, Colintraive Hotel and Royal in Tighnabruaich.

If you don't have a yacht there are other options to take to the water. DC Marine runs trips on a converted fishing boat, Morag, from Tighnabruaich until the end of October and it is a great way to spot seals, dolphins and seabirds. You can also use her to fish; the boat comes equipped with rods. Even the driving is spectacular, especially the road into Tighnabruaich, whose view must be one of the most breathtaking in the UK, with a near thousand foot high vista of the Kyles below.

Then there is Ostal Bay. An unmarked

layby near the clachan of Millhouse points to an unpromising walk through farmland. But if you follow it for 20 minutes, you go over the dunes and hit one of the best beaches in Scotland; with shallow waves and sheltered golden sand stretching for what seems like miles either way, and the whole of the island of Arran laid out before you like a painting. Which is the sort of good surprise that happens a lot around here.

**THE FACTS** Cowal Open Studios, 23-26 September, [www.cowalopenstudios.co.uk](http://www.cowalopenstudios.co.uk); Cowalfest, 7-16 October, [www.cowalfest.org](http://www.cowalfest.org); The Glendaruel Caravan Park camping pod can be hired from £20 per night for one person, rising to £40 for a family of four. Tel: 01369 820267, [www.glendaruelcaravanpark.com](http://www.glendaruelcaravanpark.com); DC Marine boat trips charge £10 per person per hour. Tel: 01700 811538, [www.dcmarine.co.uk](http://www.dcmarine.co.uk)



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## NORWAY OUT

Visit Oslo for three nights with prices starting from £390pp. This includes return flights from Edinburgh departing on 26 September and accommodation at the three-star Anker Hotel on a bed-and-breakfast basis.

Call 0203 320 3320 or visit [www.ebookers.com](http://www.ebookers.com)

## TURKEY TALK

A seven-night break in Turkey costs from £425pp. The price includes accommodation at the three-star Greenwood Hotel in Kemer on an all-inclusive basis and return flights from Edinburgh departing on 10 October.

Call 0844 879 8200 or visit [www.airtours.co.uk](http://www.airtours.co.uk)



■ **Noon** Visit the multi-award winning Daintree Discovery Centre ([www.daintree-rec.com.au](http://www.daintree-rec.com.au)) at the edge of the world's oldest rainforest, which has roots going back 135 million years. The proprietors created the centre after visiting this area in 1986 and being disappointed that there was no way of entering and exploring the rainforest. Over the years they've created a series of aerial walkways that allow visitors to discover the rich variety wildlife living in the forest canopy.

■ **3pm** Arrive at the unique Jungle Surfing attraction ([www.junglesurfing.com.au](http://www.junglesurfing.com.au)) for a slightly different view of the rainforest. Race through the trees on flying fox ziplines.

■ **7pm** Head back to the Peninsula Boutique Hotel for dinner. Like many parts of Queensland, Port Douglas takes environmental conservation very seriously and you will be served only fresh local produce - fortunately, they have that in abundance.

### GARETH ROSE

**THE FACTS** Return flights from Glasgow to Brisbane with Emirates ([www.emirates.com](http://www.emirates.com)) start from just over £1,000. Flights from Brisbane to Cairns start from £100, with Virgin Australia ([www.virginaustralia.com](http://www.virginaustralia.com)).



Port Douglas; 'jungle surfing' on a zipline, inset