

So who's for

Tiny Churchill in northern Canada is invaded every year by hungry polar bears. Now wildlife fans are flocking to see the spectacle, writes **Mike MacEacheran**



Clockwise from left: a curious polar bear comes face to face with the driver of the Tundra Buggy; a mother and her two cubs appear to check out the humans; an ursine neighbour drops by to borrow a cup of kelp



Every October, the town of Churchill and nearby Wapusk National Park are invaded by hungry polar bears. As they make their way to Hudson Bay, with voracious appetites, the bears' presence makes the town the scene of one of the world's most spectacular wildlife dramas.

This northern outpost of Manitoba in the Canadian sub-Arctic – with a human population of 923 and a polar bear population of more than 1,000 – knows the routine well.

As soon as enough sea ice has formed on the bay, the bears march in hypnotic procession across the ice shelf hunting for seals, which bask in the icy waters farther north. When spring arrives, the bears will return to the mainland to den down for summer. But for now, this outpost is the kingdom of the ice bear. And as I fly in from the provincial capital, Winnipeg, the polar bears are still awaiting the big freeze.

I had heard about Churchill's great polar bear migration for years, and I had always dreamed of travelling here. But few people get the privilege of coming face to face with polar bears in their natural habitat and, in a few generations' time, this opportunity may vanish altogether. Sea ice is shrinking at an unprecedented rate, affecting how many seals the bears can eat before their metabolism slows down in the warmer months. It's a vicious circle: without enough food, mating is less successful and fewer healthy cubs are born.

A new study by Canada's leading wildlife authorities says the polar bear population could fall by 30 per cent by next year. So I decided to see them in the wild while I still had the chance.

Only moments from Churchill's airport, with temperatures nudging minus 15 degrees Celsius, tour guide and resident Paul Ratson points out the town's most famous building: the polar bear jail. With his frozen beard and whiskers, which bristle as he puffs through the cold, Ratson looks like a frost-bitten walrus.

"The polar bear jail came into being to control the number of nuisance bears wandering through

town," he says. "There are only 29 cells, but in jail right now there are 22 or 23 bears. It's getting kind of busy."

As it costs C\$2,000 (HK\$16,000) every time a bear needs to be sedated and flown out of town by helicopter, it's more cost-effective locking them up.

Despite its fame, Churchill remains a remote outpost, linked to the rest of Canada by rail, air and the occasional ship. There are no roads in or out, and the only real connection with civilisation is the daily flights to Winnipeg. It is fitting, then, that there is more than just the one reason to visit this haven of solitude and serenity. You can go husky sledding with Manitoba's best rider (who lives in the nearby boreal forests) and experience the aurora borealis, the kaleidoscopic Northern



My guests never ask me, 'Can we not get a little closer?'

HAYLEY SHEPHARD

Lights. One moment it is salmon pink; the next, violent orange. This natural light show allows Churchill's visitors to be spoiled with not one, but two, once-in-a-lifetime experiences.

I choose to stay at the aptly named Tundra Lodge, a rustic inn pampered with antique furnishings. The bedrooms are decorated in pale floral shades, with puffy sofas and thick duvets, which seem to have been stuffed with feathers from an entire family of Canada geese.

Another memorable way to experience the polar bears of Churchill is to stay at the mobile Tundra Buggy Lodges. A refuge from the staid image of a chalet holiday, they offer guests solitude, silence, great air quality and a real sense of life amid nature. From morning to the endless nights of winter, the lodges offer round-the-clock bear viewing – the very rarest of luxuries.

The following morning, I join my group tour in the company of polar

dinner?

bear expert Hayley Shephard. A pioneer of wildlife trips to Greenland, Norway and the Northwest Passage, Shephard has studied her maps and planned a two-day tracking mission. Of course, adventures like this bring out only the finest in society: on board with me are a real estate director, a London barrister and a misguided philanthropist who keeps asking where the penguins are.

Beyond the town's outskirts, it remains a hostile but epic environment. The skies are vast, the sunrise evangelical and the remote wilderness is nothing short of inspiring. Abounding with natural marvels and largely untouched by human ambition, it strikes me as a land of endless prospect. Despite nomadic Arctic and Inuit tribes having lived and hunted in northern Manitoba for 4,000 years, it wasn't until 1717 that the Hudson's Bay Company built Churchill's first permanent settlement – a lonely log fort and trading post – to capitalise on the North American fur trade. This is the wild Canada I had imagined since I was a child.

Coloured by these thoughts, I climb aboard the tundra buggy – engineered as a cross between a Soviet tank and a Nasa moon explorer – and head out into the void. Out on the chalk-marked tundra, the willow bushes are dusted in fresh snow and look like small animals. There is a solitary grazing caribou – either lost or antisocial – and the scuttling shadows of arctic foxes and arctic hares.

Next to me, Shephard peers through her binoculars. Focusing, she turns from side to side and gasps: "Polar bear at one o'clock." After an hour of searching, we have found our quarry on the coastal road, scratching its belly as though it has just devoured an entire all-you-can-eat buffet. He gracefully turns to watch us, raises his snout to the wind and makes a bear line for us. My heart skips a beat.

From the open-top rear section of the buggy, the polar bear eyeballs the group from afar. Then, with childlike curiosity, it plods forward to meet us head on.

Although polar bears are the world's largest land carnivore, as I stand almost nose to nose with an inquisitive one, I feel oddly at ease. Within seconds, a second smudged white bear appears with two baby cubs in tow. And then there's another. Momentarily, we are surrounded by nosey bears.

"This is the only type of guiding I ever do when my guests never ask me, 'Can we not get a little closer?'" says Shephard, laughing. My chapped lips break into a smile.

The next day, as our twin-engine plane ascends above Hudson Bay to return to Winnipeg, I see an incredible sight. Dozens of cream-coloured bears are returning to their winter home on the bay, grasping for kelp on the seashore with paws the size of dinner plates.

It is only a fleeting glimpse, but the view from my porthole captures the migration in all its serene, timeless beauty.
lifestylepost.com

HOW, WHEN TO GO

Organiser: Frontiers North
www.frontiersnorth.com

Frontiers North also operates the Tundra Buggy tours
www.tundrabuggy.com

Manitoba Tourist Board
www.travelmanitoba.com

Flights to Vancouver and Toronto (with onward connections to Winnipeg) are available on Cathay Pacific and Air Canada

When to go: Churchill's polar bear season takes place in October and November

