

- [Education](#)
- [Life](#)
- [Discussions](#)

[1](#)

Belugas and caribou and bears, oh my!

Plan a summer excursion to the—yes—beautiful beaches and coastlines of the Arctic Ocean in Manitoba

Written by George Burden on March 8, 2011 for [The Medical Post](#)



Drawn by the sound of the motor, pods of beluga whales followed in the wake of the Zodiac.

You should have seen the looks on the faces of my Maritime friends and colleagues when I told them I was going whale watching in Manitoba. Our Canadian mindset tends to run in a linear east-west direction and we forget that it's possible to have a seaside holiday in that prairie province, provided it's on the shores of the Arctic Ocean.

Manitoba has a chunk of ocean frontage tucked on the western side of Hudson Bay, a mid-continental projection that's home to a unique eco-system including thousands of beluga whales, polar bears, caribou and other wildlife. Here is Canada's only significant Arctic port, the town of Churchill, which can only be reached by plane, train or boat.

Visitors often head north during a six-week period in October and November to see the throngs of hungry polar bears that gather at the mouth of the Churchill River, waiting for the ice so they can venture out to hunt seals. But the northern tundra has other treasures to surrender in the summer—ones that I was determined to sample last year.

Jetting from Halifax to Manitoba, I overnighted in Winnipeg's stately Fort Garry Hotel, built next to Union Station in the early 20th century to lodge rail travellers. The next morning I boarded VIA Rail's Hudson Bay line for a 1,000-km trip north over prairie, boreal forest, muskeg and tundra.

The 36-hour run can be delayed and disrupted by frost heave, rocky outcroppings and a tenuous rail base, but it's worth the occasional delays to see the gradual transition of Manitoba's terrain and experience the camaraderie that develops among passengers. Included among those I ended up sharing company was an amiable septuagenarian gold miner named Ronnie, who sported a three-ounce nugget on a chain around his neck and an inexhaustible fund of tales about the old days of mineral exploration.

Arriving at Churchill's Tundra Inn, I met our Frontiers North Adventures guide, Doug Ross, a retired director of Winnipeg's Assiniboine Park Zoo, who introduced me to the rest of our group. We had the afternoon to stroll around and get acquainted with the town. (Another fringe benefit of taking the train was I kept running into fellow passengers and didn't feel like a stranger at all.)

At the west end of town the port's huge grain elevators dominate the skyline. During the four or five months a year that the harbour is ice-free, Churchill acts as a funnel to Europe for prairie grain. Other local landmarks include the Eskimo Museum, with a fabulous and eclectic collection of Inuit art of all forms, including carved walrus ivory and soapstone carving, as well as antique kayaks and ancient Dorset and Thule stone artifacts. Visitors can also head over to the Arctic Trading Company, housed in a log building with 19th-century ambiance, to purchase caribou tuftings, a traditional Cree art form.



Left: During Dr. Burden's visit, the local vegetation was in full-summer bloom, and included grass of parnassus, a tundra wildflower. Right: Dr. Burden and fellow passengers were transported over the local terrain on the Tundra Buggy.

A sandy beach lies to the north of the Town Centre, a huge indoor complex housing a movie theater, hockey arena and other facilities all under one roof. Rather incongruously there were children playing by the seaside and splashing in the waves, making it more like a scene from the Caribbean than the Arctic. Then, the day was a sunny one, with temperatures in the mid 20s, which is very unusual weather for Churchill but which was to last my entire five-day stay.



The next morning saw our group zipping off in Zodiacs operated by Sea North Tours for a round of snorkeling with the legion of beluga whales that populates the mouth of the Churchill River in the summer. The surface of the harbour was dotted with the bright white bodies of adults and the grey of calves as they surfaced to breathe while feasting on capelin, a sardine-like fish that congregates here in the Arctic summer. Plunging into the water in a wet suit, mask and snorkel, I entered another world where the high-pitched whistles and clicks of the whales created a sort of cetacean symphony. Belugas flashed by and some cruised under me, belly up, to get a better look at these interlopers to their realm.

Surface cruising provided another element in our enjoyment of the belugas. Drawn by the sound of the motor, pods of whales followed in the wake of our Zodiac, then passed us. Every once in a while a whale would “spy hop”—that is, pop its head out of the water to have a look, then plunge back in. Incredibly, a beluga calf spy hopped our boat, although this behaviour is almost never recorded in calves. Belugas are the only species of whale with mobile necks and it’s quite humorous to see them craning their necks to have a better look at humans.

Back on land it was onward for a taste of the Tundra Buggy. These monster vehicles sport massive wheels and can be used to cross the local rugged tundra and provide a vantage point to spot bears during the snowy autumns. This time of year, however, everything was in full-summer bloom, with huge fields of purple fireweed so neatly interspersed with blooms of other hues that one passenger innocently asked, “Who does the landscaping around here?” A closer look will reward amateur botanists with glimpses of rare Arctic orchids, colourful lichens and other plants, including carnivorous butterworts.

Spotting a caribou I then pulled out my binoculars for a closer look, but was startled when a huge bald eagle flew in front of the animal. We also saw flocks of snow geese, several tundra swans, a Bonaparte's gull (discovered by and named for Napoleon's nephew) and Arctic terns, but failed to get a glimpse of the rare and elusive Ross's gull.

Our next day's adventures included more beluga whale-watching and a Zodiac trip across the river to Prince of Wales Fort. Commenced by the British in 1731, it took 40 years to build and was captured by a scurvy-ridden and starving French force 10 years later without firing a shot. Later abandoned, the fort is now being restored and run by Parks Canada.

Just as our Zodiac neared the fort we spotted a solitary polar bear on the shoreline, then another two, a sow and her cub. I considered this a neat bit of serendipity until I realized just how close these walking appetites were to our destination. However, as we prepared to land, I noticed to my relief that Parks Canada had two employees there whose only function was to watch for these creatures.

Inside the interior of the fort I discovered a stonemasons' workshop, where I noticed an 18th-century worker had inscribed the Masonic brotherhood's square and compass, faintly visible on the wall.

Later on, back in Churchill, I dined on muskox at the Lazy Bear, an inn and restaurant housed in a rustic log lodge. Owner Wally Daudrich likes to explain that he built it all by hand using only logs taken from dead trees.

The next morning I was off to the airport for my flight home. I was content, however, as I'd scored the proverbial Churchill hat trick: viewing polar bears, beluga whales and caribou all in one visit!

George Burden is a GP from Elmsdale, N.S.

Travel Manitoba

www.travelmanitoba.com

1-800-665-0040

Frontiers North Adventures

www.frontiersnorth.com

1-800-663-9832

Sea North Tours

www.seanorhtours.com

1-204-675-2195