



# CATCH THE BEST SHOW ON HUDSON BAY

See polar bears gathering on Canada's Arctic coast before it's too late, says **Rupert Parker**



Churchill, in Canada's far north, is known as the polar bear capital of the world. Every year, about now, the bears gather on the shore to wait for the Hudson Bay to freeze so they can get on to the ice and catch seals. However, climate change means the freeze happens later each year and the bears' numbers are decreasing.

As I get off the train, I'm told to get over to the Polar Bear Jail. The jail is the holding centre for bears who've been caught in town, and this morning they're going to release a mother and her cub. We're kept at a distance, but near enough to see that the animals are sedated, looking like lifeless glove puppets, ready to be transported 50 miles by helicopter and then released. The cub is put inside the chopper while its mother is suspended in a net beneath. It's not exactly first-class travel but it might teach her to stay away.

Around 900 bears call the area around western Hudson Bay home. They spend the winter on the ice, hunting and eating seal, and normally stay clear of humans. This year's early thaw and late freeze means they've been short of food for six months and are making regular visits to the town's rubbish dump in search of food. Armed patrols are on 24-hour alert and it's not unusual to hear warning shots late into the night.

I'm here to see the bears in their natural setting, roaming the tundra rather than the streets, so I catch a Tundra Buggy, a super-sized 4x4 mobile viewing platform.



The first hour's excitement is limited to negotiating deep ruts and ice pools as we make our way to the shore. Suddenly, a young mother and her cub are right on our path. We stop and they come close to the vehicle, so near that I can hear the cub making a low hissing sound at his mother. This "chuffing"

**Freeze-frame: a family of bears on Hudson Bay, above; a Tundra Buggy allows spectators to get a closer look, below**

is essential polar bear communication and across the snow I spy the reason for her concern. Another bear is approaching and they run off.

The intruder is a frisky two-year-old male who is definitely curious. He starts making leaps at our Buggy, rearing up on his hind legs, trying to paw at the windows. Luckily we're just out of reach but close enough to feel his breath. It's easy to forget that these are dangerous wild animals and I have to resist the temptation to reach out and touch him. It's like being in a zoo, except we're in the cage and the bears are the onlookers.

As we move across the tundra, I realise that there are bears on all sides, mainly mothers and cubs. I could easily spend all day here, but our guide is keen to find big males and he has a shrewd idea of where they might be. Half an hour later we're spectators at a polar bear wrestling match, each testing their fighting skills in a playful display of force.

It's a long day on the Tundra Buggy but it's never boring. Just when you think you've run out of bears, you turn the corner and there's the next lot. This runs contrary to my expectations – I thought I might only see one or two bears but my tally totals more than 50.

If you hope to see Churchill's polar bears, though, don't leave it too late: scientists estimate that there will only be a handful left by 2035.

**GETTING THERE**

Air Canada (0871 220 1111; www.aircanada.com) flies from Heathrow to Winnipeg via Toronto from around £600. There are connections from regional airports with its partner BMI (0844 848 4888; www.flybmi.com) for a supplement of £95. Calm Air (001 204 778 6471; www.calmair.com) flies to Churchill from Winnipeg for around Can\$560/£342 one way.

The VIA Rail train from Toronto to Churchill (0844 499 0771; www.viarail.ca) takes two days and two nights. Seat only is \$185/£115 one way, but better to take a sleeper berth at \$308/£190 or a single cabin at \$773/£475.

Frontiers North Adventures (001 204 949 2050; www.tundrabuggy.com) has a six-day package that includes all rail and return air travel, hotels and meals starting from \$5,499/£3,370. A day trip on a Tundra Buggy costs \$399/£245, including transfers and lunch.

**WHEN TO GO**

Polar bears gather on the shores of Hudson Bay from the middle of October to the middle of December, depending on when the ice forms. Polar bears are also occasionally seen in Churchill during the summer, during what is known as their 'walking hibernation'.

**THE INSIDE TRACK**

- Temperatures can vary from 5F to 32F (-15C to 0C) but often strong winds can push the temperature down several more degrees. Warm layers are essential.
- The same applies on the Tundra Buggies which are heated but windows go down when bears are sighted, so the

**WHAT TO AVOID**

- It's unwise to wander the back streets of Churchill late at night as bears occasionally enter the town. All vehicles and houses are left unlocked, so if you do meet an animal, then take cover immediately.
- Don't be tempted to feed the bears, as it's punishable by an instant fine of \$3,000/£1,839 – it's also dangerous.
- The Polar Bear Jail is on the outskirts of town and no visitors are allowed, to prevent the bears getting used to humans.

interior quickly cools.  
● Point-and-shoot cameras are fine at times when the bears are close, but an SLR camera with telephoto or long zoom lens allows the most flexibility.

**THE BEST HOTELS**

**Four Points by Sheraton Hotels, Winnipeg ££**

The Four Points is at the airport so it's ideal for an overnight stop at either end of your trip to Churchill (001 204 775 5222; www.starwoodhotels.com; doubles from \$170/£105 per night).

**The Tundra Inn, Churchill £££**

A comfortable base in the centre of town (204 675 8831; www.tundrainn.com; doubles from \$220/£135 per night).

**The Aurora Inn, Churchill £££**

Luxurious suites at a fairly reasonable price (675 2071; www.aurora-inn.mb.ca; doubles from \$235/£144 per night).

**THE BEST RESTAURANTS**

This is not a gourmet city by any means and restaurants tend to serve the same standard fare. Expect to pay around \$25/£15 for a three-course meal. All of the following restaurants are located on Kelsey Boulevard.

**Gypsy's Bakery £**

Licensed bakery, restaurant and coffee shop (675 2322; www.gypsybakery.ca).

**Trader's Table ££**

One of the fanciest restaurants in town; pleasant atmosphere but the menu is a sometimes a little ambitious (675 2141).

**The Reef Dining Room ££**

Located at the Seaport Hotel; offers "northern" cuisine (675 8807; www.seaporthotel.ca).



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**BRING HOME**

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**CORRECTION**

In our Ultimate Holiday Guide last week, we said that 95 per cent of Madeira's laurel forest had been destroyed by fire. The Madeira Promotion Bureau points out that it was the Funchal Ecological Park, a smaller area in the mountains, that was destroyed by fire and not the island's laurel forests.

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uth boasts a

pretty harbour and an excellent beach.  
**JOURNEY TIME** One hour 44 minutes.  
**COST** Anytime single, £24.80.  
**GET OFF FOR** A choice of good walks on the Solent Way (Lymington) or the Wayfarer's Walk (Alresford), or the

chance to spend time in the New Forest (Ashurst).  
**LEWES TO HASTINGS**  
**WHY?** This pleasant route runs through the beautiful South Downs, from the grand station at Lewes to the beach huts and fishing boats of

Hastings, via the elegant seaside town of Eastbourne.  
**JOURNEY TIME** 50 minutes.  
**COST** Anytime single, £8.90.  
**GET OFF FOR** Explore lovely Lewest and then consider the Seven Sisters Country Park popular for walking, birdwatching and canoeing.

● Visit [www.bestvaluefares.co.uk](http://www.bestvaluefares.co.uk) for money-saving deals from all of Britain's train operators. Use the 'Cheapest Fare Finder' tool to find the best prices and note that if you can be flexible about when you travel, then some exceptional deals are available.

