



PHOTOGRAPHS BY PREETI VERMA LAL

white new year

Preeti Verma Lal greets 2012 in the polar bear capital of the world

Never before has red looked so anomalous, so incongruous. It seemed almost a profanity to be wearing a red dress and brown mukluk when everyone around me was so draped in the swish of everything white. I had flown 20 hours into Winnipeg, Canada, for a polar bear expedition in Churchill, the polar bear capital of the world. As I sat waiting in the Four Points Sheraton for an expedition briefing with 39 other adventure enthusiasts, I was filled with questions about polar bears, the world's largest land predator, which we were about to see. The anticipation was

killing me, the excitement heady and the chill — deadly! And my red still an aberration amidst the chatter of white: Stark white landscape. White bears. White ptarmigan. White owls. White ice floe. White willow boughs.

Trevor Lescard, Tour Leader of Frontiers North Adventures, interrupted the white with a warning. "Please sign the no-liability form." Ah! The indemnity form. So, if the polar bears had me for dinner, no one was to be blamed. Ahem! Should I come to face-to-face with a 1,400-pound, 10-foot tall polar bear that could jump 6 feet and run at 25 kmph, I surely stood no chance. But I had no time for a

hasty being-petite regret. So, I scribbled a signature.

Then came even more warnings. "Remember, it will be freezing at the Polar Bear Point. The conditions are sub-Arctic. Bundle up. The temperature could dip to minus 15 degrees Celsius. Cell phones will not work. There is no Internet. You cannot step out for a walk. For three days, we'd leave early in search of polar bears and get back to the Tundra Buggy Lodge by evening. For three days, you will not touch land." Lescard, in a striped skullcap and blue jacket, continued instilling do's, don'ts and fear in equal measures. Then, he dropped another bomb. "There are

no roads into Churchill." My jaw dropped. "Actually, there is a 4x4 road, but it is not used often. You can fly in or take a train; we'll fly into Churchill."

That night, I dreamt I was Dave Lundle, the rapacious fur trapper of the 1920s, who along with his dog Boublack trudged with muskets ensnaring silver fox for fur. For nearly three centuries, Churchill was at the heart of the North American fur trade and being a fur trapper was a lucrative adventure. I dreamt I was as rich as Lundle, who hawked silver fox fur for \$300 apiece at a time when a lavish steak dinner cost barely 35 cents.

"This is your wake up call. This is your wake up call," a voice rasped over the phone. It was 5.30 am and pitch dark outside; I was still groggy and caught in a time warp. Reluctantly, I wriggled into Arctic jacket with fur trimmings and heavy

snow boots, tied my long hair into a tight bun, pulled on the ear muffs, and buckled up for the 90-minute chartered flight to Churchill. En route, I soaked in fascinating stories: of Churchill, population barely 700; a prison for rogue bears; a crash-landed C46 aircraft called Miss Piggy (she once carried a cargo of pigs, hence the name) that has been lazing on a rocky cliff since November, 1979; of spring, when the auroras (northern lights) light up the Churchill sky in enchanting sparkles; of summer, when the landscape wears the purple

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of heather and the white Beluga whales romp in the bay belly up, the warm water reverberating with their high-pitched twitter. I also learned of Merv Gunter's dream, who landed in Churchill on a World Bank tenure and founded Frontiers North Adventures to make the polar bear natural habitat so accessible to adventure and wildlife lovers.

As I hopped into the Tundra Buggy, a vehicle with 240 horse power and 1.7 metre tall tyres, I forgot to sing a requiem to the dead cell phone. So immersed was I in the thought of watching polar bears in their natural habitat that the rest of the world could have crumbled and I would not have blinked. By the time we reached the Tundra Buggy Lodge at Polar Bear Point, the evening's dusky orange tinge had melded into an inky night and the stark landscape was swathed in silence. I was in the middle of nowhere. Literally.



fact file

Getting There It takes several flights to get from Indian airports to Churchill, the first stop being Toronto, Canada. Air India has a direct flight between Delhi and Toronto. Mumbai, Hyderabad, Bengaluru and Chennai are connected to Toronto by one-stop flights from Kingfisher, Cathay Pacific, Emirates, Turkish Airlines, Jet Airways, Air India, Air Canada, Swiss Airlines, Etihad Airways and Dragonair. From Toronto, catch the 1-hour flight to Winnipeg. Churchill, on the south-western shore of Hudson Bay, is a 90-minute flight from Winnipeg.

Tour Operators Polar bear tours are conducted by Winnipeg-based operators offering set package tours which include the flight to and from Winnipeg, accommodation, meals and sight-seeing. A 3-day package costs CAD 3,599 upwards and a 6-day package CAD 4,995 upwards. The following are all among the larger operators in Winnipeg: Frontiers North Adventures (www.frontiersnorth.com), Natural Habitat Adventures (www.nathab.com), North American Veterinary Conference (www.navc.com) and Baobab Expeditions (www.baobabexpeditions.com).

There was nothing and no one around. As far as the eye could stretch, there was nothing else, except the four bogies of the Lodge complete with a pantry/ dining hall, lounge car, and two bogies with bunks. And the falling snowflakes and the wind whistling menacingly.

The Lodge was warm and well-appointed. My name was stuck on a bunk complete with soft, green blanket, blue curtains, personal thermostat, a square window and snowdrops peeping through the tidy pane. A wilted willow stood outside like a conscientious sentinel and the air was redolent with the aroma of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies and warm lasagna. I have never lived in a dorm or slept in a bunk, but that night I slept like a log.

Next morning, a quick breakfast, on with the Arctic overalls and off I was in the Buggy for a day out in search of polar bears. These big mammals move from inland towards the shore in the autumn,

yearning for the bay to freeze and the seals — their favourite meal — to pop their heads out of the breathing holes in the ice. Our driver Brian James Nicolle gently manoeuvred through the rugged terrain. Nicolle squinted hard for the polar bears as Lescard taught us all he knew about them. There were 900 bears in the neighborhood; I knew Nicolle would spot one.

"There. There's the bear. By the shore. Look at the brown bed of kelp," Nicolle shut the Buggy engine and whispered. "Look at 3 o' clock position. There's a bear", he muttered, his large eyes gleaming. I

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peered hard. In the snowy sheath, white was the only hue. I peered hard. Harder. Then, I saw him. The 800-pound bear plodding through snow with a cub. I whooped with joy. The cub was sauntering towards the Buggy and I waited with bated breath. The wind was cutting through my bones but I pushed the window open. Then, I saw the baby bear, nudging the monstrous tyres curiously. I muffled my delight. It was an ecstatic moment.

For three days, my world turned completely bear-ish. I did not touch land. I warmed bread and tortillas for lunch in the Buggy's propane heater. I survived without the cell phone. Without any contact with the world. But I watched the polar bears spar, roll in ice, plod, meander, laze in snow. For three nights, I peeped out of my bunk window. No, not for snow angels. For polar bears. In the polar bear capital of the world, it is all about the bears. And the outside world is blissfully forgotten. ■