



FANTASTIC BEASTS OF THE ARCTIC AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

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TOURISM IS SAVING THE POLAR BEARS IN CANADA'S REMOTE HUDSON BAY.

Manitoba, Canada

The polar bear approaches slowly, its huge paws leaving massive footprints in the fresh snow — closer and closer, until we can almost feel it breathing. Face to face, the bear stares at us with an inquisitive look.

We hold our breaths and wonder if maybe we're too close. But we are safe, snuggled into the elevated platform of our mobile Tundra Lodge (glamping on wheels), which was designed specifically for viewing the Kings of the Arctic in their natural habitat. We are just shy of the Arctic Circle on the edge of Canada's Hudson Bay, a remote outpost accessible only by charter flight to nearby Churchill.

Our guide Rachel breaks the cold silence with a whisper. "This one is female," she says. "She isn't pregnant or with cubs this season. Otherwise, she'd be nursing in her den."

About 850 bears (roughly the same number as human residents up here) congregate every fall and wait for the bay to freeze so they can hunt seals. They sleep in bushes, roll about the tundra, rub against rocks, play-fight in the snow and even rise on their hind legs to size us up for a snack. Fortunately, we're not seals. As we stand on the metal mesh of our lodge's outdoor platform, the bears saunter beneath our feet, eliciting involuntary gasps.



Gene Hollander (top) and Colin McNulty (bottom)

We haven't come this far simply to admire these creatures. We're here to help preserve them. Years ago when hungry bears came to town trolling for food, people shot them.

The mission of tour companies such as Natural Habitat Adventures has been to inspire locals and visitors alike to keep these fantastic beasts alive.

"We want everyone to see polar bears as a source of economic sustenance, to see more value [in tourism] than killing," says Katrina, another of our guides. And it is working. Churchill has become a model of sustainable territory sharing.

In the evening, having savored braised Angus beef ribs and warm apple cobbler, I lie on my bunk bed, swaddled in puffy blankets, gazing out the window. I am one-on-one with the endless tundra, which is lit only by stars. In the distance I hear a flock of white-tailed ptarmigans urgently flee their nest, likely to evade an Arctic fox. My eyes grow heavy, and I slowly envision a huge cream-colored bulk taking shape in the darkness. It lumbers toward my window... Did I really see that, or am I dreaming? I honestly can't be sure. But I know I'll see another tomorrow. ■

WRITING: LINA ZELDOVICH



Polar Bear Express: A polar bear in Hudson Bay and Natural Habitat's mobile camp.

Details:

Natural Habitat's six-day Tundra Lodge polar bear adventures start at \$11,795 per person.

Also consider:

Quark Expeditions' Ultramarine crosses deep into the Arctic Circle of Canada and Greenland with a 20-day adventure in September that begins and ends in Toronto, from \$18,866.

Abercrombie & Kent offers a 15-day polar bear expedition in September aboard Le Boreal, sailing from Norway's Svalbard Islands to Reykjavik, Iceland, from \$17,995.

Ponant's Le Commandant Charcot in September 2024 will embark on a 20-night route from Alaska to Norway to reach both the magnetic and the geographic North Poles, from \$47,030.