

ENDANGERED ENCOUNTERS

In a white wilderness at the frozen top of the world, Sue Wallace has a vivid adventure with some magnificent – and dangerous – polar bears.



A large thump makes us jump as polar bears take centre stage in front of us in an icy wilderness near Churchill in northern Canada, known as the polar bear capital of the world.

Rushing to the locked staircase at the rear of our Tundra Buggy, a vehicle made for travelling over the harsh landscape, we watch as the 'thump culprit' slides his huge muddy paw, with sharpened claws and thick hair glistening with icy snow crystals, onto the highest step.

Just one look at this huge paw reinforces what our guide, wildlife biologist Angèle Watrin, has been saying: that there is no such thing as a cuddly polar bear and that they are mean predators that can rip prey apart with one swipe of their hefty paws.

"Look at the power and strength in that paw. They really are killing machines and nothing stops them; you never want to run into a polar bear up close," she says. "Yes, they are inquisitive and fascinating to watch as they go about their daily routine, but they are extremely dangerous."

While we are in no danger and the polar bear can't get his paw any closer than the step, it is definitely as close as I want to get.

Daily adventures

For three days we are spoilt watching polar bears play with each other from the safety of the Frontiers North Adventures' Tundra Buggy and we return each afternoon to our lodge on wheels.

The buggy has a heated cabin and outside viewing platform and is perfect for travelling around the 85,000-hectare Churchill Wildlife Management Area, about 20 kilometres from the town.

We dress in snow gear to combat the chill of minus-14 degrees and the icy-cold winds on the open viewing area – the best place for photographs.

Angèle says the conditions are pretty good for November, compared with days when it can plummet to minus 30: "Then it's really cold, believe me."

The magic of the bear

So why do these polar bears gather near Churchill every October and November?

They are waiting for Hudson Bay to freeze over so they can finally go on the hunt for seals on the ice. That time provides a brief opportunity for animal-lovers from around the world to see the bears in action, taking a nap, searching for lichen and amusing themselves.

Their numbers along the coast were about 900, but global warming is changing things. We learn of concerns for the future of polar bears at an onboard lecture by Polar Bear International chief scientist Dr Steven Amstrup. He says their habitat is disappearing due to global warming, but he believes if we act swiftly to reduce greenhouse gas emissions we can save them.

Seeing polar bears up close is one of the greatest thrills ever; no matter how many nature documentaries you have watched, it's just not the same.

When I pull up the blind one morning while tucked up in a comfortable bed and see a polar bear stretching outside my window, it's sheer magic.

But be warned: 'polar bear fever' – which involves window scanning every five minutes in case you miss any sightings – soon sets in and squeals of joy are totally acceptable.

At home on the tundra

Lodge life is very comfortable and lodge 'mamma' Emma Acorn makes delicious muffins and cookies as well as serving



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01 Killing machines?
02 Nose to nose with a polar bear © Canadian Tourism Commission
03 Tundra Buggies keep you out of harm's way
04 Set up for adventure © Frontiers North. Images 01 & 03 © Bob Debets



POLAR EXPEDITIONS WITH QUARK

There's more than one way to see a polar bear. Quark Expeditions offers an eight- or 10-day land-based adventure exploring the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, a group of 35,000 islands in the very north of North America. Fly in from Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories to your basecamp at Arctic Watch Wilderness Lodge, 805 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle.

You'll venture into the natural habitats of iconic Arctic wildlife – polar bears, beluga whales, muskoxen, ringed seals and more. Exploring the area on all-terrain vehicles and a Mercedes Unimog is half the fun, and you can choose to go kayaking, rafting, fishing and hiking during your stay.

The family-run Arctic Watch Wilderness Lodge is located on Somerset Island, Nunavut, which is otherwise unpopulated despite its size (24,786 square kilometres). With 24 hours of daylight (and the expertise of photography guide, Nansen Weber), you can expect to bring home some extraordinary photos.

www.quarkexpeditions.com

tasty meals. For breakfast it is pancakes and bacon and eggs, and for lunch homemade soup and sandwiches eaten in the Tundra Buggy. For dinner bison and Arctic char are on the menu and there's always a tasty dessert.

Emma says even though she has worked on the buggy lodge for several seasons the thrill of looking out and seeing those bears still excites her.

Back in the town of Churchill it is an unwritten law that car doors and houses remain unlocked just in case of a bear encounter. Although uncommon these days, there are tales of residents coming face to face with a polar bear.

Churchill even has a polar bear lock-up with 26 cells where rogue polar bears who stray a little too close to the town

are held for 30 days and then relocated.

At night I dream of Norse poets' descriptions of polar bears as 'riders of icebergs' and 'sailors of the floe' and, like so many, hope these magnificent animals will long continue their reign on these shores. ♦

Travel file

Experience
www.frontiersnorth.com

Getting there

Air Canada flies from Brisbane, Sydney or Auckland to Vancouver with onward flights to Winnipeg where you'll meet your Frontiers North Adventures group.
www.aircanada.com.au

Information

www.polarbearsinternational.org
au-keepexploring.canada.travel
www.travelmanitoba.com