

1999 IN SEARCH OF POLAR BEARS

Monday, October 11, 1999. Left Atlanta on the 8:10AM two-hour Northwest flight to Minneapolis. Met Martha coming in from Cincinnati and then we had to figure out what to do in our three-hour layover. The mall in the airport did not appeal to us despite the displays of clothing from places like Lands End, and Northwest coldly informed us that the first class lounge was not available to us since we weren't on an overseas flight! We walked around a little and then ended up at a leisurely lunch at Chilis, (for the flight to Winnipeg does not serve a meal). Finally left for the hour flight to Winnipeg, the capitol of Manitoba. Here we were met by Natural Habitat Adventures and taken to the Fort Garry Hotel, a lovely old hotel dating from 1913, built by the Canadian Railways system (The VIA Terminal is only a block away). It is cold and rainy and I decide not to join Martha on a walk in favor of a nap.

At seven we join the rest of our tour for our welcome dinner. Jeff, the leader, seems a nice young man who is taking a vacation from writing his master's thesis. He has done a lot of Arctic research. The 15 of us come from all over, including 6 people from Maryland who are traveling with their travel agent. They tell us they spent almost a year making the arrangements! I decided 5 weeks ago to come. After dinner Natural Habitat outfits us with parkas and boots.

Tuesday, October 12. Our adventure begins. Bags out at 6:45, we are loaded into a school bus at 7:30 for the trip back to the airport and our charter 40-passenger aircraft, complete with four propeller engines for the three-hour flight to Churchill, Manitoba. There are only 30 of us (two groups) so we have room to spread out a little. The biggest problem with the flight is that they don't have the heat working and it is -35 degrees Fahrenheit outside. The pilot jokingly tells us we are lucky to be inside! We were told the airplane would be very warm and so had packed our arctic gear. The poor stewardess was really cold! Fortunately I had my winter coat to wrap up in. Looking down at the ground we saw thousands of lakes, the whole landscape studded with water. There were patches of trees but not much sign of civilization. As we got further north the scenery turned to flat tundra (still with lakes). You could tell the lakes were starting to freeze and there were patches of snow. It is 980 miles from Winnipeg to Churchill.

Finally we spotted Hudson Bay and landed at the new terminal at the airport, a small rectangular building with a lounge area for the commercial flyers. The field was built as an army base some 40 years ago but the army departed leaving only the runways. At its heyday, there were 5000 people stationed here but now the whole population of Churchill is about 900. It is cold getting from the plane to the terminal but inside it is nice and warm. The temperature outside is below freezing.

Jeff rounds up his group and takes us to our compact bus and we take the scenic trip into town along the shore of the bay. Granite rocks line the shore and little is growing here due to the permafrost, which is just two feet under the surface. The scrubby spruce trees are bare of limbs on the northwest side where the winter winds come. "It takes two trees to make a Christmas tree in Churchill." We pass one home where the owner is raising Eskimo dogs. The houses are basic wood prefabricated buildings with little to distinguish them except paint color. We later learn that most of the housing is owned by the government and rented to people for 25% of their income. This is considered a bargain since it is so expensive to build a house here. The main street has several restaurants, two groceries, and several hotels, even a bed and breakfast, a Radio Shack and a number of gift shops, for tourism is a major industry here. Churchill is a major port for grain shipments and the grain comes in by rail and is shipped out by ship until the Bay freezes over in November. Despite all the conveniences you would have to be a rugged individualist to live here. But the people are friendly and Fred our bus driver even joins us for lunch when we get to our restaurant (or maybe he just wanted a free lunch). From his appearance he is at least half Inuit Eskimo, or Cree Indian the two indigenous species. The restaurant advertises itself as Chinese, even the place mats are describing the Chinese signs you are born under, but lunch turns out to be tomato and noodle soup, (hot!), followed by a choice of tuna or hot turkey sandwiches. No fortune cookies. From the quantity of food we shall not starve to death.

After lunch, to kill time until our hotel rooms are ready, we went to the bank and changed some money, and then wandered into the Park's Museum in the same building. They had a number of exhibits about the Hudson Bay Company and the early exploration of the region. A movie was announced and we seated ourselves for a 20-minute show about an English artist who, with her

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husband (who worked for the Bay Company), had traveled by canoe through the region sketching what she saw 150 years ago. A short film about the polar bear patrol followed this. The town has drawn a line around the town inside of which no bears are permitted, but they do get in from time to time to raid the garbage dump. The patrol captures the bears, either by dart gun or traps and then puts them in a holding pen or jail for a number of weeks with water but not food. This is to educate the bears that there is no reward for what they have done. Then they relocate the bears either by truck or helicopter to some place away from the town and hope they don't return. However about 1000 bears come here during October and early November, waiting for the Bay to freeze so they can go out on the ice and hunt seals. Churchill is known as the Polar Bear Capitol of the World, because here the Churchill River pumps a lot of fresh water into the bay. Fresh Water freezes faster than salt (for Hudson Bay is an arm of the Arctic Ocean) and so the bears come to the earliest freezing area.

After the movie was over we found our group had left and we had to walk to the hotel, but Churchill is not very big and we could see our blue Seaport Hotel a block away. Even detoured to one of the grocery stores to buy some decongestant tablets. When we rejoined the group at the hotel Jeff told us we shouldn't wander off like this without telling him and then told us we were one of the lucky ones whose room was ready! Our room is basic but has all the normal motel comforts even a refrigerator. The towels look as if they came from K Mart.

For dinner we were taken to the Traders Table restaurant, whose Portuguese owner had a good cellar of Mattheus wines. Had caribou for dinner but was disappointed in its lack of taste. Martha says it should have been cooked with cranberries or something to spice it up. After dinner we went to the nearby school (everything is nearby) where Steve Morello, the coordinator for Habitat gave a most entertaining slide show dealing with the polar bears and other arctic creatures. Steve is an excellent photographer and his wildlife photographs have been published on more than one occasion in National Geographic Magazine. When the ice melts in the summer, the bears come ashore, and have a sort of walking hibernation where they mostly lie around trying to conserve energy, for there is no food for 4-5 months until the bay freezes and they can once again go out on the ice to hunt for seals. Even the mothers don't fully rouse when giving birth to their young.

Wednesday, October 13. After a 7AM breakfast we are loaded into our buses and taken out on the tundra to our tundra buggies. Our driver Travis is from Saskatchewan, a biochemist who is leaving the field to go to work for Microsoft. He is new to this buggy driving. The buggy is reminiscent of the moving waiting rooms at Dulles. School bus bodies have been mounted on a sturdy frame with huge wheels such as those used by earthmovers. They are probably capable of 15 miles per hour in optimal conditions but of course we don't have that. The roads on the tundra were built by the army 30 or 40 years ago and have had no maintenance done to them. Rocky potholes, like small lakes abound, where the buggy travels through ice and water about two feet deep (below that is the permafrost). The buggy creeps along swaying and creaking from the road conditions. Inside they are equipped with bathroom and seats on each side, and in back is a sort of porch so photographers can step outside. Our trip does not begin well. About 20 buggies started off and the first ones found a mother with two cubs and, of course, stopped, causing traffic jam for the rest of us. While we could see the bears it was more of a binocular view. On the other side, also a hundred or more yards away was a big male bear sleeping on the ice in a pond. We went on in almost lockstep formation and the front buggy mostly enjoyed what was seen. When we protested, Travis said we should drop back and let the others get ahead of us so we would have an unobstructed view. We did see some snow buntings and a raven, as well as an arctic fox with two cubs, but they were well out of photography range. Then we had a half hour of worry, parked, while Travis got help to investigate an oil smell. It turned out to be nothing but cost us a good half hour looking at nothing. Later we caught up with the others who were watching a male bear feasting on the remains of a caribou, which had been shot by an Inuit the day before. Our view was somewhat obscure by the buggy parked in front of us but we did see a red fox running back and forth while he tried to figure out how to get some of the meat, if only the bear would leave!

We were served lunch while we watched. Then it was on to where another buggy was enjoying a polar bear right next to them, but Travis parked so that our view was through the wheels of yet another buggy. I was getting more and more annoyed (and bored) as were some of the others

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and we finally persuaded Travis to really get away from the others. We drove awhile without finding anything except some ptarmigans but then Martha spotted a muskrat in a pool and we speculated on what one was doing so far north. And since they are vegetarians, what the creature was finding to eat.

But just as we all despaired that it was a bad day, it got better. Next to the Tundra Hotel (which accommodates 40 people who wish to overnight on the tundra in a series of tundra buggies hitched together) we finally got close to a big male bear sleeping within range for a Kodak moment. We watched quite a while but polar bears that are partially hibernating are as interesting as lions to watch, (they mostly just lie around).

Then came the wonderful sight of a mother polar bear with her two babies crossing on the ice of a small lake. She crossed and continued up to where we were parked, stopping to investigate the tires of the buggy parked behind us and then crossed the road and went on to the lake on the other side, her adorable babies bouncing along behind. So the trip ended on a high note.

Dinner that evening was in the Seaport Motel and except for the jug wine was a nice buffet, soup salad bar and a choice of lasagna or roast beef. Then we were taken to a presentation by Myrtle Catherine deMeulles. She was one of the Metis, of mixed blood, with two Scottish grandfathers and two Cree grandmothers. She had an interesting upbringing with both cultures and as an adult married and raised a family before stating an artistic career. She has originated a style using left over caribou skin pieces to create pictures showing polar bears and so forth. She had brought an interesting collection of traditional Indian handcrafts for us to enjoy.

At 11:00 PM we got a call from Jeff inviting us to come see the Northern Lights. About 8 of us (all women) sprang out of bed throwing out-of-door gear over our nighties and ran downstairs. Jeff loaded us into the mini bus and drove out of town where we could have a clear view without extraneous light. It was magnificent. A cloud-like ribbon stretched across the sky above us and as we watched it changed shape and then began to "dance". Green, blue and pink colors flashed in the sky as we watched. It was remarkable.

Thursday, October 14. For our second day in the buggy we had a new driver, Kelsey. At least Kelsey had some experience. It was a bright clear day but at first we had trouble finding the bears. Did find two near the old carcass of yesterday and couldn't decide if it was two males or a mother and child. The problem was that there was no confrontation but the smaller one decided to leave! Then we drove for some time until we got down near the shore by the Tundra Inn and here we found all the buggies clustered for the two or three bear displays going on. We watched a mother and cub for some time, and she even came up to one of the other buggies and stood on her hind tippy toes to look in the window. It made a fun view for our lunch hour.

After lunch the other buggies left but we continued to watch to see what would happen.

Unfortunately two other buggies joined us and when the bear decided to investigate another buggy it was the one, which partially obscured our view. In the distance we could see two male bears confronting each other and also in the distance a mother and two cubs moved away from the two males. Finally one of the belligerent males came over to find our mother and cub and you never saw any bear move more quickly to get away. She and the cub lit out across the tundra and the big male followed for a while but soon felt he needed a nap and lay down so the female got away. We went to view another male lying in a patch of seaweed and then went on to see what had happened to the other mother with the two cubs but she was sleeping when we got there. Went back to where our mother with one cub was now lying down with her cub and watched them for some time. The nice part was how close we were to them. Then it was time to head back but not before an arctic fox came and searched out the land beside the buggy. The fox was about the size of a cat and pure white with a bushy tail. Really an interesting day.

Dinner again at the Seaport Hotel and then many of the group went to hear a presentation on Antarctica but I opted for some time alone to work on this journal and finish the book I've been reading.

Friday, October 15, 1999. A more leisurely day with our morning City Tour starting at 9:00 AM. Denise is very knowledgeable and, like the other natives we have met, a real individualist. She takes us first to see Brian Ladool and his dogs. Brian is a middle-aged hippie type with long white hair, held back with a forehead band. He has managed to revive the Canadian Eskimo dogs,

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which were on the verge of extinction. He has also gotten the breed recognized by the Kennel Association. The pure Eskimo dog is born with erect small ears and a twisted tail. Color scheme is unimportant. When he breeds his hundred odd dogs, any puppies that don't meet the physical requirements are destroyed. The dogs are bred as working dogs and a dog team can pull well over a thousand pounds as well as carry three men, unlike the dogs of the Alaskan Iditarod, which are bred for speed. The Norwegians called the indigenous people "Huskies", and the dogs as "Huskie Dogs". The term is often used for all arctic dogs but this is a misnomer. The dogs are raised in arctic conditions being out of doors in all weather and fed a sparse diet. In winter they must get their water from eating snow or ice. They are healthy friendly dogs and were so delighted to see us. A long chain that gave them room to run but not fight with other dogs secured each. Nearby a large polar bear watched but a female dog, name Limpy, was loose and she acted as a guard dog. She barked and chased the bear and he retreated. Brian tells us he feels safe working with the dogs with Limpy around to act as a warning system. The females and their pups are kept in more sheltered conditions until they are old enough to survive out-of-doors. Brian doesn't want to see his dogs leave the Arctic. He says that the warmer climate changes the dogs, the texture of their coats even the bone structure. It was fun to pat the ones who formed his sled team.

After an hour or so we continued the tour having the various features of the old air base pointed out to us. Also the cracked rocks, created when snow formed in racks and expanded as it froze. Although the glaciers flattened the land there has been some uplifting since then and you can see where the Bay has had several shorelines. We went on past the town to where the grain port sits where the Churchill River flows into the bay. The point is called St Marys and is a National Historic Site. We spotted an arctic hare before we got to the lookout at the end. Many varieties of berries grow on the point, which is said to have more oxygen than any other place in the area.

It had now been three hours since we left the motel with no pit stops and the troops were getting restless so we went into town to Gypsy's Bakery and Cafe and a speedy lunch for Martha and I are scheduled for the 1:30PM helicopter flight. The helicopter gave us a different perspective. We flew down the coast past where the buggies are allowed to go. Spotted two handsome caribou and several tent rings. These circles of stone can be quite ancient and were the sites of old encampments by the native people. We landed on Knight's Hill, the only hill in the tundra and on the top found remains of habitation from the indigenous people who regarded it as sacred and used it to store their hides and food. We changed seats in our five-passenger helicopter and flew on, spotting many polar bears but when we would go down to see them more closely they were obviously frightened. Since 85% of the bear population has been darted with anesthetic at one time or another, they have reason to fear. We flew out to a new island created in the Bay, part of the new Province of Nunavet, an archipelago being caused by uplifting, about 10 feet every 150 years. We changed seats again and then flew back to Churchill, and then the thrill of the day was to find a bear on the coast that had made a kill of a seal. We didn't see the actual kill but the bloodstains on the snow patches was dramatic.

Back at the motel we had 45 minutes to revive ourselves and go out again for an evening buggy ride. For a long time we didn't find anything but then found two large male bears sparring. They would rise up and wrestle each other, then fall on the ground and wrestle some more. It was fun to watch but then another buggy appeared and scared them off out of sight.

Greg, our buggy driver suggested we wait and see if they would return and we were served a delicious supper of rice and chicken with Caesar

Salad washed down with lots of wine. Martha had treated us to a bottle of Pouilley Fuisse, a great improvement over the jug wines we have been served. After this pleasant interlude, sure enough, the bears returned, but only one came close enough to the buggy for us to see well for it had gotten dark. He rested for awhile about 20 feet away and then, when Greg put a flashlight on him, circled the buggy at a range of about two feet checking us out before going off into the night. What a thrilling end to our bear viewing.

Saturday, October 16. We had to be out of our room by 1000 AM and so walked up to the small Eskimo Museum run by the Catholic Diocese of Churchill. It had exhibits of Eskimo artifacts and beautiful carvings depicting various facets of Eskimo Life. We then went to the Parks Museum but it was closed so there was little else to do but shop! It is really warm today, several degrees

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above freezing and I am really too warm in my Gortex, coat and insulated boots! Found a lovely porcelain statue of a polar bear, which the store wrapped and put into a large box for me to ship home. Jeff took us to the Traders Table for lunch and then on to the airport for our charter flight back to Winnipeg. We were back at the Fort Garry by 7:00PM and to our delight were assigned a suite. A large room with sitting area with two double beds, but no closet, and adjoining it a smaller single bedroom with closet but no access to the bathroom! We ordered sandwiches from room service.

Sunday, October 17. Our last day. Since our plane doesn't leave until 4:00 we went to see the Museum of Man and Nature. Many dioramas describe everything you ever wanted to know about Manitoba. Since China Town was near by we walked over there for lunch at the Dim Sum Restaurant where a parade of small Chinese dishes were offered us. At last it was time to get our plane and we headed home. It was almost midnight when I walked in my door.