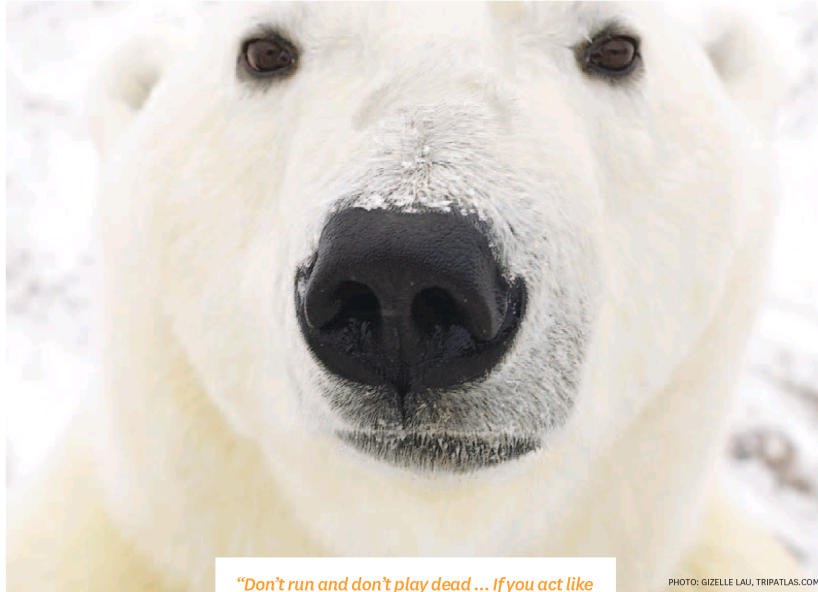


CHURCHILL, MANITOBA

Close encounters with polar bears



"Don't run and don't play dead ... If you act like prey, they'll treat you like prey."

PHOTO: GIZELLE LAU, TRIPATLAS.COM

GIZELLE LAU, TRIPATLAS.COM — If you find yourself face-to-face with a polar bear in Churchill, Manitoba — what do you do?

"Don't run and don't play dead," says Brad Josephs, a highly experienced naturalist and "bear junkie" who has been an expedition leader with Natural Habitat Adventures for six years and a brown bear guide in Alaska for nearly 11. "If you act like prey, they'll treat you like prey. If you see a bear in town, walk calmly to the nearest car or building and go inside. Then call Polar Bear Alert."

That's 675-BEAR, to get in touch with Polar Bear Alert: a team of conservation officers who are on-call 24 hours a day to deal with any bear issues in and around town — and boy, have they been busy.

Churchill's peak polar bear season begins mid-October and continues through No-

vember. During this time, over 1,000 polar bears congregate here around the shores of the Hudson Bay as they wait for the ice to freeze so they can begin their hunting season. This is the largest concentration of polar bears in the world at one time, giving this little town with a population of just over 800, the nickname: "Polar Bear Capital of the World."

Every year, thousands of visitors from all over the world visit Churchill for the rare opportunity to see these magnificent bears in their element — and this year, I was among them. With Brad, our trusty Natural Habitat Adventures' expedition leader at the helm, we flew 2.5 hours from Winnipeg and arrived in Churchill on Halloween morning. Halloween in Churchill is no small event: Children are not allowed

wearing any white costumes so as to not be mistaken for a bear. As trick-or-treating begins, a perimeter is formed around the town to keep the children (and their chocolate) safe from polar bears.

With my long underwear and 30-400mm lens packed, we made our way onto a tundra buggy: a 15-foot tank of a vehicle retrofitted for the very purpose of travelling on frozen tundra roads for polar bear watching in total safety. Our tour group was a mix of retirees, young professionals, solo travellers — but none could hold their childlike excitement every time we caught sight of a bear — a mass of slightly yellowish fur in the distance. "Bear at 3 o'clock!" someone would yell to a flurry of movement and heads darting to the right.

A mature male polar bear can weigh 1,500 lbs and reach a height 12 feet when standing on their hind legs. Although they have a reputation of being aggressive, here on the frozen

tundra in Churchill, the bears have grown accustomed to the tundra buggy vehicles and are simply curious. So curious, in fact, that they bears often approach the buggies.

Standing on the buggy's outdoor viewing deck, we peered over the railing and watched a male bear move closer and closer until he stood right beside our buggy. With a quick heave, he stood up on his hind legs, leaned his paws on the side of the buggy and extended his nose towards us.

For just a few moments as I came face-to-face with one of the world's most amazing creatures, time stood still. It was incredible — no wonder Churchill is ranked as one of the top "1,000 Places To See Before You Die."

Natural Habitat Adventures has offered polar bear tours to Churchill for over 20 years and it is their most popular trip. Go to NatHab.com for details. For more on visiting Churchill, go to TripAtlas.com.

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» Visitors down, consumption up

Beer consumption at the 2009 Oktoberfest festival reached a staggering 6.5 million litres this year, with visitors guzzling down an average of 1.14 litres each during the two-week event. While visitor numbers were down at 5.7 million from 6 million, beer sales remained unchanged from the previous year raising the average drinking performance to an all-time high. — 24 HOURS NEWS SERVICES

» No app for that

There's no app for The Florida Keys — that's the message from a new advertising campaign created for The Florida Keys & Key West. In a 30-second TV commercial that's reminiscent of the Apple iPhone spots, the viewer is treated to a series of iconic moments throughout The Keys while the announcer repeats the unapologetic claim, "There's no app for this." The spot concludes with the statement, "Real experiences are always worth more. So unplug and reconnect in The Florida Keys and Key West."

» Rebook online

Air Canada has launched a new web-based self-service rebooking tool to make it easier for passengers to get information about flights affected by events such as storms and rearrange their travel. "The rebooking tool will automatically notify customers when their flight has been cancelled or is expected to be cancelled, offer them an alternative flight and give them the option to choose a different flight or cancel their trip altogether," said Duncan Dee, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer.

Unpopular 'obligations'

Meandering Musings Nicole Feenstra



Here's a new travel buzzword: "obligation."

Urban Dictionary defines this as "taking valuable vacation time and dollars for obligatory family or friend visits." That sounds like something I've done myself.

A survey released by Travelocity reveals 93% of travellers use vacation time for obligatory engagements, with 14% saying a visit to the in-laws is the most dreaded vacation obligation.

Weddings, graduations, anniversaries, reunions and visiting family come in a close second, accounting for 9% of respondents' votes.

"The results of the survey show that while lots of travellers look forward to their family time, others would much rather hit the beach," said Brian Simpson, General Manager of Travelocity.ca.

Some travellers admit they don't tell family members they'll be in the area to avoid using vacation time for family functions, while 48% stay in a hotel when visiting family to gain some space.

Forty-one per cent of respondents said they do not resent using vacation time for family functions, while an angry 10% said they always resent using their hard earned vacation time to attend cousin Joe's wedding.

— NICOLE FEENSTRA IS CANOE, CA'S TRAVEL EDITOR

