

TRAVEL

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Snow wonder

Canada's Hudson Bay is the place to see polar bears in abundance, writes **Ellen Hale**

"Over there, I see something!" someone yells. On a lake shore a few hundred metres away, across a thin sheet of ice, a yellowish blob lies on the pristine white snow. Glenn Hopfner, our driver, steers closer and everyone reaches for their binoculars and cameras.

Collectively, we gasp. A mother polar bear, rocking back on her haunches, head tilted skywards and eyes closed, is nursing a cub. It's like a Renaissance painting: Madonna of the Tundra.

"I can't tell you how lucky you are," says Hopfner, marvelling at the sight. "In 700 trips I've made out here, I've seen this eight times."

It's our second day tracking polar bears in the tundra off Hudson Bay in the far reaches of northern Canada. We had 27 sightings the first day out.

Huddled in layers of clothing, long-lens cameras and spotting scopes at the ready, we trundle along in trailer-like buggies set atop huge tyres that put us out of reach of any curious – and, most likely, murderous – 450kg bears.



The young males wrestle and roll endlessly. Often, one approaches to stand on its hind legs and peer up at us

There are only a few places on the planet where humans can see polar bears in their natural environment, and, even then, for just a brief window before winter sets in.

In the last weeks of autumn – usually from the middle of October to early November – no place on Earth has more polar bears than

Churchill, in Manitoba. It's there that hundreds of bears, stranded by melting pack ice, spend the warmer months (a relative measure this far north) waiting for temperatures to drop and the ice to form again so they can start hunting and fatten up for the colder months.

During these few weeks, visitors can take carefully guided tours to see the bears, heading outside the historic frontier town of Churchill to clamber aboard tundra buggies for a day of inching along rutted trails in search of wildlife.

Our group of about 20, organised by Victor Emanuel Nature Tours, had met up in Winnipeg two nights earlier, before heading north the next morning aboard a puddle jumper prop plane.

Warm soup and sandwiches stave off the chill during the long hours on the trails. The buggies, while heated, grow frigid instantly whenever a window is opened to look at the bears.

The snow and freezing temperatures are late this year – an unfortunate omen for a species that, perhaps more than any other, has come to symbolise the potential impact of climate change. The bears feast on ringed seals, which live year-round in the Arctic waters, but they must have pack ice to serve as their hunting platforms.

As the Arctic ice continues to retreat, the bears must swim longer distances to find food. Scientists have documented polar bear drownings, and just last month researchers from the US Geological Survey reported that the melting ice may be forcing the bears to move

onto land, where food supplies are scarce. The US Department of the Interior last year proposed designating them a threatened species.

But it's hard not to see bears on this trip. Generally, polar bears aren't gregarious. But many have

congregated off the Hudson Bay shoreline, so we drive there to watch the young males wrestle and roll around endlessly. Often, one approaches our buggy to stand on its hind legs and peer up at us.

Bears aren't the only creatures on the agenda. We search out the

beautiful Arctic hares, so still and white only the dark tips of their ears give them away.

We see an Arctic fox, white like the hare, repeatedly jump straight up into the air and pound on a mound of seaweed, trying to force out something edible. Birdlife we spot includes owls, auks, the plump willow ptarmigan and even a gyrfalcon (in pursuit of the aforementioned willow ptarmigan).

But the bears steal the show. At one point, we pull over to watch a mother and her cub near the edge of a small pond.

As she snoozes, the young bear practises using his front legs as a battering ram against the ice – what adults do to break through ice and reach a seal.

Then he practises walking on ice. Adult bears can weigh up to 770kg, but distribute their weight so adroitly over their tyre-sized paws that they can walk on ice just 1.3cm thick, Hopfner tells us.

After a while, bored, the cub takes to sledging across the pond on his chest, all four legs splayed out. He looks like a rug. He's skating on thin ice, and loving it.

Associated Press

Getting there
Air Canada (aircanada.com) flies from Hong Kong to Winnipeg via Vancouver. Several tour operators conduct trips to see the polar bears of Churchill from mid-October. See ventbird.com for details of the Victor Emanuel Nature Tour; you can find more information about polar bears at polarbearsinternational.org



Tourists can watch the bears at play from the safety of elevated tundra buggies that protect them from these deceptively cuddly creatures. Photos: AP

Detours: World of ice

Mark Andrews

As we swoop low over the ridge, the white of the Franz Josef Glacier, New Zealand, stretches below us. Banking hard, the helicopter lands on the temporary ice helipad. Slipping our way to the holding area, we wait for the helicopter to ferry the rest of our group onto the glacier. Until our crampons are fitted, this icy mistress tempts us with shades of white and blue in the clear mountain air but we cannot move.

Franz Josef and Fox glaciers, on the west coast of New Zealand's South Island, move faster than most. With a typical flow of 1 metre per day, and up to 5 metres on some days, the landscape is in constant flux. Glaciers form where the winter snow has not completely melted during summer. Snow compacts into great banks of ice. In the case of a valley glacier like Franz Josef, the force of gravity draws the sheet of ice slowly down the hillside.

With the second group safely on the ice and helicopter whirring away, it's time to apply crampons. Now at last dignity can be kept on the slopes. The key to walking with crampons is to make solid flat movements with your feet to ensure the spikes embed in the snow and ice. Peter, our blond, bronzed guide, makes it all look so easy as he leads off, ice axe in hand.

We pass between mounds of ice, cross small pools and streams of water formed from melting ice. The ice ranges in colour from a dirty black to pristine white and through to a mesmerising blue.

You reach a much higher point if you go on a heli hike rather than starting a hike at the terminal (the ice face where the glacier ends). This means that the ice is much thicker and cleaner.

It is surprisingly warm on the slopes and many of the group are in shorts. But sunglasses are essential to protect eyes from the glare from the ice. The ice caves and crevasses formed by the glacier's slow descent provide many photo opportunities.

After about two hours on the ice it is time to be ferried off by the



chopper. With one last look at the pinnacles and crevasses stretched out below us, we land at the heliport in Franz Josef township.

Back on the ground you can walk to the terminal of the glacier, which is a sheer wall of ice. If you are lucky you may see a chunk of ice break off and crash to the ground with a roar. The surrounding land is almost lunar, scarred by movement of the glacier over the years.

A chart shows the extent of the glacier through the vicissitudes of time and climate. In 1865, when the glacier was first explored by Austrian Julius Haast and named after the Austrian emperor, it was much larger. It then retreated and in the 1970s was barely visible from the observation area. Confounding global warming, the glacier has been advancing since 1983.

Heli hikes can be done by anyone with moderate fitness. My mother, in her early 60s, said she "wouldn't have missed it for the world". Heli hikes operate year round and cost about NZ\$350 (HK\$2,110) per person. In the peak summer season there are three hikes a day. It is generally better, weather-wise, to take the morning or midday flight.

For more information contact Fox & Franz Josef Heliservices at www.scenic-flights.co.nz (tel: +64 3 752 0793) or The Helicopter Line at www.helicopter.co.nz (tel: +64 3 752 0767).



An ice cave, and setting off for a heli hike (top). On the Franz Josef Glacier (above), Westland National Park, New Zealand. Photos: Mark Andrews

Big deal Edited by Peter Walbrook
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From November 1 to December 20, HK\$2,350 will buy a two-night package to the mainland port city of Dalian, with accommodation at the Nikko Hotel (www.jalhotels.com) and round-trip, economy-class flights with Dragonair.

You can also choose from the Furama (www.furama.com) for HK\$2,450, the Kempinski

(www.kempinski.com) for HK\$2,490 and the Shangri-La (www.shangri-la.com) for HK\$2,690.

The prices (per person, twin share) include breakfast but not airport transfers. For details call Westminster Travel on 2313 9800, or e-mail itravel@hkwtl.com, quoting reference number 6971.

Entrée: Sentosa

Sentosa is Singapore's little island of pleasure connected to its mainland by a short causeway. The beaches team with locals playing sport, its restaurants and bars afford relaxing sea views and its countless attractions, including golf and historical forts, provide visitors with a host of activities. Sentosa means tranquillity in Malay and it's easy to understand how the name came about after spending a day on the island.

Barnacles Restaurant & Bar
Rasa Sentosa Resort
This elegant dining room with sea views on Siloso Beach is decorated



Photo: Nicole Fall

in calming whites and blues. An international menu offers something for everyone but moules marinieres (S\$32, HK\$170) is a solid bet followed by sticky profiteroles (S\$14). Twinkling lights from passing ships provide an ever-changing backdrop.

Il Lido
Sentosa Golf Club
27 Bukit Manis Road
An Italian restaurant and lounge with sea views, Il Lido's high ceilings and trendy furniture provide the ideal background for modern Italian cuisine. For antipasti, pick seared diver scallops flavoured with

porcini mushrooms, blueberries and truffles (S\$29).

Roti Mama
Underwater World
Roti Mama is a small booth positioned outside Underwater World that sells one snack only: coffee-flavoured buns for S\$2 each. Latte buns, cappuccino buns, mocha buns ... you get the picture.

Café del Mar
Siloso Beach
Open 24 hours at the weekend, Café del Mar offers a club vibe right on the beach. The main draws are cocktails, cool people and house music, but when you need a boost of energy turn to a menu offering bar staples, including chicken wings and nachos (S\$12).

Silver Shell Café
Rasa Sentosa Resort
Shangri-La's Asian and international buffet restaurant offers a large spread three times a day, but every Sunday the feast relocates to the seafont (left). A simple barbecue dominates proceedings, with tiger prawns, roasted lamb and succulent fish the mainstay, and oysters a decadent start. Grab a table large enough for your mates and enjoy its free drink and all-you-can eat menu for S\$68.

Nicole Fall

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Source: Synovate PAX Q1 to Q4 '05 report

www.scmp.com South China Morning Post