

October 2018

Dear All,

Just before we left for the family reunion in Waterton I had sent in all the forms for the renewal of my permanent residence card and was a bit surprised to find that the lead time was now over 90 days, a month or so after my card's expiry. This made booking any international travel in October or November a bit risky, so we looked for a trip inside Canada.

The obvious candidate for us was a trip on the railway to Churchill, Manitoba to see the polar bears. The time matched perfectly as the bears are on land during those months, waiting for the sea



water in Hudson Bay to freeze and give them access to their major diet, ringed seals. We couldn't get there by train however as the line had been cut by a washout last year and the line's American owners said that fixing it was not cost effective. The line was now back under Canadian ownership and repairs were underway but the line wouldn't reopen in time for us. There is no road to Churchill so we'd have to fly in.

The trip would not be cheap; the people in the tourism industry have to make all their money in those two months when the bears are easily accessible. In addition, in 2018, all goods, with the exception of barged-in fuel oil, were having to be flown in.

Most of the dozen tours I found lasted a week and were very expensive. A week of bear watching seemed an overkill, but these tours were padded out with dog sledding, helicopter trips, aurora gazing, lodge accommodation, and similar. Although there are plenty of tour companies there are only two or three companies that actually own and operate the tundra buggies. We picked the one with the longest history, Frontiers North, a company that offered a three day Town and Tundra tour, with one day in town and two days on a tundra buggy. I'd have skipped the town day if I could but I assumed it was there to boost the community's restaurants and gift shops.

By the time we were ready to book, all the prime dates in November had sold out. The number of bears in the area steadily increases as the weather gets colder and then plummets as the ice gets thick enough to support a bear's weight. In the end, there was only one date for us that didn't conflict with medical appointments.

Saturday October 20th

We were leaving Hope on a beautiful morning. We'd had a sunny, dry, and calm spell so the fall colours were at their peak. The reflections from the river were giving the whole house a golden glow. We were leaving all this colour and warmth for Churchill's black and white and cold, at around freezing point.



We were flying on WestJet from Abbotsford to Winnipeg via Calgary, and then on a charter flight to Churchill. Abbotsford was rather foggy, and as we came through security we saw that the waiting area was jam-packed. Many flights had been cancelled, with incoming aircraft unable to land. We were lucky to be leaving on the first plane that was able to land. It was a Bombardier Q400, a propeller plane, similar to those that fly out of Bellingham.

It was a scenic flight, taking a loop south past the great white volcano of Mount Baker to gain altitude, and then passing over Cultus Lake, Mount Cheam, Chilliwack Lake, and the Skagit Valley before losing me in BC's thousands of mountains.

We had a scramble in Calgary, off one plane and directly on to the other. Calgary was a warm 18C while Winnipeg was a near freezing 2C. We were booked into the Four Points by Sheraton, an up-market business hotel, just a few minutes' walk from the airport. We had time for dinner before our meeting that evening with Frontier North. We were tour #64, a number we had to remember.

There were four meetings scheduled at the same time. The other three were for other types of tour, some the luxury week-long type with a dedicated guide and lodge accommodation, and some the one-day type with no nights in Churchill. We had to admire their handling of the complexities of getting 130 people and their luggage to the right places. The purpose of our meeting was for them to tell us what to do to make sure our luggage got to and from the right hotel. It was also to give us instructions on how to survive in Churchill and

avoid encounters with bears. This sign (in Churchill's airport) summarizes the rules.



We had to travel to Churchill the next morning in the clothes we'd wear all day, so we'd repacked our suitcase that evening. Some people had rented parkas and boots and gloves from the company but we had gear from our Minnesota days. We also took hiking poles to help keep us upright on the ice.

Sunday October 21st

Our luggage was whisked away at 6am, leaving us with carry-ons. After a buffet breakfast we were bused across Winnipeg to the charter side of the airport and a Nolinor Airlines 737. We landed at Churchill after 90 minutes at an airport shared with the military.

The terrain looked to be flat, with straggly trees, flagged by the wind so that they only grow branches on their south sides. Officially, this is where the taiga (boreal forest) meets the tundra (no trees), and there are patches of healthier looking trees in protected areas.

We climbed onto a bus that was going to take us on an orientation tour of Churchill and deliver us to our hotel. But it took our driver a long time to get the bus going on the ice and then even longer to avoid taking out the airport fence. Once he got going Sandie began smelling hot brakes and it seemed likely that one of the brakes was stuck on. Then she saw flames around the back wheel. She yelled “Fire!”, and we all



piled off the bus in a hurry. We were grateful we had our winter clothes on!



Fortunately the fire didn't spread to the tyres and the bus didn't burn. We had time to look at this odd mural that graced the old military buildings next to us. We were discouraged

from wandering away from the group. Sandie wasn't wandering; she thought she'd seen a bear just before the fire started. Three smaller buses came out from town and collected us.

On our way into town we passed the polar bear jail. This is where troublesome bears, those that repeatedly come into town, are incarcerated. They are starved for a month and then relocated in a helicopter net. They aren't supposed to enjoy the experience or they'll do it all again.

Churchill's business district is fairly simple, with five cross streets that connect two long ones, one of which extends to the airport. In the other direction it extends to the Churchill River and the port authority, mostly closed because there's no rail link at present. Until recently, some of Manitoba's grain would be exported via the railway to Churchill and then by freighter out across Hudson Bay to the Atlantic.



The other long street runs along the shore of Hudson Bay and it is dominated by the massive town centre complex that houses the hospital, doctors, school, library, hockey rink, pool, and town administration. It also acts as a windbreak against the wind coming off the lake. It was designed in 1976 for 10000 people, but after some closures and disappointments, the current population is only about 800, so today it looks like overkill. This picture shows less than half of the building.



We passed the hotels and the Tundra Inn's restaurant where we'd be eating breakfast, took a quick look at the town's churches and murals, and then we got out at the giant inuksuk for a look at Hudson Bay. I think we stopped there so that we wouldn't feel any urge to go there by ourselves. We were warned not to go there without a group as bears can lie hidden among the rocks.

Some of us were dropped off at the Ice Berg Inn. We went in and found our suitcases lined up in

the lobby and a list of names and room numbers, a short list as there are only 8 rooms. The keys were in the rooms. There was no sign of the owner. We had twin beds, large TV, small table, and a good sized bathroom, clean and comfortable.

We went to shop as encouraged, beginning at the Trader's Table where we found some beautiful and expensive sculptures, which we luckily didn't need. Sandie came away with a t-shirt and that was the end of our shopping. We checked out the Tundra Inn restaurant for lunch, mainly to make sure we could find our way there in the dark for breakfast. The food was a bit expensive but reasonable considering the costs of flying in all the ingredients.



It took us a while to find an open door into the centre complex, but once we were in we could walk through most of it. The school was closed on a Sunday but the play areas and library were open and there was art everywhere, even in the form of this bear slide.

We'd hoped to visit the nearby Itsanitaq or Eskimo Museum but it is run by this stylish Catholic Church next door and it is not open on Sundays.



Unfortunately, our schedule wouldn't allow us to visit on our two tundra days. We went on to the other museum in town, run by Parks Canada inside the impressive railway



station. This was quite good, telling the story of the forts and trading posts in the area. The story began with the Danes, and alternated between



British and French possession until the fur trade declined. After many years of obsolescence, interest in Churchill increased when the railway provided an export route for Manitoba's grain.

In more modern times Churchill became a US Army Air Corps base, and then a RCAF and NATO base, a radio base spying on the Russians, and a Rocket Research Range. It was even a contending site for the testing of nuclear weapons, but they were lucky enough to lose that competition to Australia.



The fauna section included this stuffed polar



bear; the males can be 10 feet tall and weigh up to 1500 pounds, but this one looked to be on the skinny side.

We walked through town, getting a better look at the murals.



Some are funny and one is sad, a memorial to a drowned girl. The colourful bear is impressive but at first glance I thought it was a hockey goalie!





We found the Anglican church. It was constructed in England and sent to Churchill as a kit, an early form of flat pack. In those days Churchill was on the other side of the river. When the focus of the town moved across the river to meet the railway the church came too, disassembled and reassembled.

We'd intended eating at the Dancing Bear as it is only a couple of buildings away from our hotel, but they close early on Sundays so we had a longer walk in the dark to the

Tundra Inn again. We tried to keep our eyes on both the ground, looking for icy patches, and on the shadows, watching for big furry shapes.

We'd been told that the locals left cars and front doors unlocked so that pedestrians have a refuge if threatened by a bear. We never checked this out for obvious reasons. The threat however is real. Five years ago, a girl walking home late from a party was attacked. A neighbour heard her screaming and attacked the bear with a snow shovel, saving the girl but at the cost of severe injuries to him. Another man drove a truck at the bear and frightened it off. The bear was later shot but only after another bear had been killed by mistake.

Back at the hotel I found that the toe of my Sorel boot had fractured, almost split around. And I'd forgotten to pack my duck tape! Luckily we weren't going to be doing much walking for the next two days.

Monday August 22nd

It was snowing gently as we walked across to breakfast, still in the dark. Breakfast was chaotic. The restaurant and bar had been combined into a single breakfast buffet with over a hundred people milling around. Someone had forgotten to tell our group that tables were reserved for specific groups. I went to get food just as Sandie was told that she was at the wrong table, and then she was moved on again. By the time she found our table she felt she had to stay there as I'd never know where to go. This wouldn't have mattered if the kitchen hadn't kept running out of food. As one of the Swiss members of our group put it, at the top of his voice, "Zerr ees no fud!" A long time later I made it to the table and then Sandie went through the same experience. We were about the



last to leave, the last to get on the bus that took us to the buggy dock, and the last to get on the tundra buggy.

The tundra buggies have large wheels with knobby tyres. They seat forty guests and a driver, all under cover, and they have an open deck behind, high enough to be above the bears. The front windows tend to fog up so there's little advantage to the front seats. The top pane of the side windows slides down for

photography at the expense of wind, cold, and snow. No one takes a coat off. As last on, we had the back seat, just in front of the kitchen cupboards and across from the toilet. We had three rows of windows we could access and, as closest to the back door, I was usually the first out the back door onto the deck, so we'd lucked into the best photographic position.

Buggies have a large diesel with four gears, but our driver only used bottom gear, about 4-5 mph. We were driving on tracks across the tundra, sometimes through ponds. The most important rule was not to stand up while the buggy was moving. Even so, it was sometimes difficult not to fall out of our seats.

Neil was our driver. His other job is as a raft guide in Jasper, on the Athabasca. He lives in Tete Jaune Cache, though he insists on calling it Teet John; as he said, privately, “We don’t have any French in town so we can pronounce it however we like.” Our group was mainly North American, with eight Swiss and some Japanese and French.

We were following trails in the Wildlife Management Area to the east of town and close to Hudson Bay. Off to our east was Wapusk national park, home to a caribou herd and the denning areas for pregnant polar bears. The terrain was mostly flat with shallow



ponds, partly frozen, patches of willow and thin straggly white spruce, and low winding ridges, possibly eskers from some ancient glacier.

We were all on the lookout for bears and it didn’t take long to find our first, though it was far away and lying in a heap. Our second, a few minutes later, was a little closer and standing up, but after a while it too lay down. Neil would move on as soon as we stopped clicking at a distant bear, “There’ll be closer bears”.



And there were. This bear was asleep amongst the willows alongside the trail. It woke up, checked us out, and put its head back down.

The bears have little to do. They are not actively hunting anything on land and it’s doubtful whether they’d get enough payback from hunting down ptarmigan or arctic hares even if they could catch them. They aren’t fast enough swimmers to hunt seals in the water. Sometimes they’ll be lucky enough to catch a seal that’s fallen asleep on a rock and not noticed that the tide’s gone out. Tides around Churchill can be 15 feet, which really surprised us. Maybe that’s the incentive for the bears to go on patrol: there’s always the chance of something.



There were plenty of snowshoe-size bear tracks to be seen, interesting and exciting to us safely in our buggies, but a terrifying sight if you were trying to walk across this country.

Like on any safari trip, there was a fair amount of radio chit chat between drivers, some of it in code, to stop the competition from benefitting. An “Einstein” is an MC2, a Mother Cubs 2. But anytime there are a couple of buggies stopped together, it’s worth going over there to see what’s going on. Our company has the most buggies; we were #17. Their term “tundra buggy” is trademarked so the competition has to use other names.



The weather was reasonable for us, around 0C, windy with snow showers, a bit warm for the bears. We’d been worried that falling snow might wipe out our view, but Neil said that a complete white-out is rare.

We drove around the company’s lodge. Each fall, these lodge components are towed out onto the tundra by buggies and then assembled into a train

of bedrooms, dining cars, kitchens, and bathrooms. Guests have the advantage of being able to look out at bears from their bedrooms (on the left). Bears like the lodges too, as they smell of food and humans. Tours that included a lodge stay were a couple of days longer than ours and cost about twice what we paid.



This picture shows why radio collars don’t work for male bears. They do for females as their necks are thinner than their heads. Radio ear tags work but can’t transmit as many signals. The picture also shows the bear eating. Neil said that they eat vegetable matter but no one’s sure why as they need meat and fat to survive. He said it was kale, but even though kale is a tough plant it isn’t native to the Arctic so we doubted this. He also referred to it as kelp and that seemed likely along a shore line with 15 foot tides, but not as far inland as we were. It remains a mystery. Bears that live further north with year-round ice don’t eat any veggies.



Neil would find us a bear, like this one, to watch at close range and then serve up a hot drink, soup, and sandwich, tasty and good enough for this type of trip. We were there for the bears, not gourmet food.

The bears have a predator's mouth, with incisors clearly evolved to grab and shred flesh. Unlike grizzlies and black bears they don't eat grass, so they don't need grinding molars. They have beautiful eyes, but they are best gazed into at a distance. Their fur is not white like that of an arctic fox but rather a creamy colour.



Does a bear shit in the woods? Obviously not in this case; polar bears have to use the tundra. Maybe this is a clue to why they eat veggies, just to keep the digestive system going until they chomp onto their first seal of the season.



We were stuck in a buggy jam when this bear

strolled between the buggies checking us out. I reckoned it was coming around the rear corner of our bus, so I switched to my little wide-angle camera and hung out over the back rail waiting for it. I'd guessed right and it came around the corner but with one fluid lunge it was standing up next to me. I got this one shot before retreating. The guy with the camera got a great video before scrambling out of the way.





The bear then strolled over to the next buggy, #1, the original, which is now a scientific lab, picking up signals from tagged bears and streaming polar bear video. After checking out the buggy's undercarriage the bear rolled around in the willows having a good scratch, mostly hidden by the buggy. We drove around and there was the bear at its most cuddly.



This last bear of the day was furiously digging, looking for veggies and giving us a comical picture.



We returned to the buggy dock and our bus, arriving at the inn before dark. We'd heard that the Dancing Bear had a restaurant and bar but we couldn't drink wine with our meal so we two little bears danced over to the Tundra Inn again.



Tuesday October 23rd

My other boot now had a fractured toe too. It must have been an age-related failure. The boot, not mine!



Breakfast ran more smoothly as most of the group arrived early and there were fewer guests there. The morning was colder and much of the snow had turned to ice. We were glad we'd brought our poles. We thought we saw a fox crossing the street, definitely not a bear anyway!

Our luggage was packed for transport to Winnipeg and we were taking our carry-ons on the buggy with us. We met our hotel owner for the first time; he said 350 jobs had disappeared when the port authority had closed.

We had the same buggy and driver, with similar seats. We had lost a French lady who'd had travel sickness the previous day from the rolling motion of the buggy. We had gained a representative of Polar Bears International, an organization that promotes the conservation of the bears and the sea ice; they are responsible for the streamed webcasts from Buggy #1.

She soon had an opportunity to tell us all about bear motherhood as our first bear was an Einstein, yes MC2, a mama bear with two cubs.

The day was still dark and mama bear stayed well away from us so the photos aren't great but it was nice to see the cubs. They generally stay away from the males too as they will kill and eat cubs if they have the chance. However it doesn't happen very often as the males know they can be badly injured by a ferocious mama bear defending her cubs.



Mating takes place in April/May. If the female is healthy and well fed then the egg implants in the fall. She digs a den in a peaty area, possibly in Wapusk national park. Her cubs are born 2 months later and weigh about one pound. When they leave their den in March, they are up to 30 pounds. By the time she leaves the den and takes her family out onto the ice she hasn't eaten for about eight months. They go back on the ice at about the time that seals are having their pups, giving her a ready source of meat. The cubs live on her milk

for about 20 months. The cubs learn everything from her; orphans usually die but sometimes another female will adopt them. The cubs we could see were about ten months old and each weighed about 200 pounds.

The bear population is greatly affected by temperature changes. When Mount Pinatubo blew up in the 90s, global temperatures dipped, the sea ice melted late and refroze early, and the bears were fat and happy. During a recent very warm year, the opposite happened and no cubs were born.



We continued to see more large males like this one.

Most had that creamy colour but there was one that was almost white, so pale that it almost disappeared as it walked into snowy zones. This other had just found a comfortable spot amongst the rocks but it would be all too easy to walk through there and step on a sleeping bear.



This other bear was marching

across the landscape with some mission in mind known only to bears, but then it picked up some sound or smell from us and took a sharp turn and came over to check us out.



This bear was walking the shoreline, maybe on the lookout for kelp left by the tide.

At one point our buggy broke through the ice and Neil



had to back out of the pond we'd dropped into. This bear came over immediately to check out the open water to look probably for fish, but maybe to see if there was any other opportunity.



The temperature was slightly below freezing but that is warm for a polar bear and this one was stretched out on

the ice to cool off. When we showed up it looked to be irritated by all the attention and then looked to be happier as we circled around the pond and had a last view from its good side.



It was getting late and we hadn't seen any bears in a while and some of the group were nodding off, when Neil took us back towards the lodge as bears hang around there because of the food smells. We found a mother and two cubs, but realized they were probably the same ones we'd seen that morning, though there's no way to be sure. The two cubs are just visible hunkered down behind her.



We transferred to our bus which took us directly to the airport where we said goodbye to driver Neil and waited for our charter flight back to Winnipeg. There was only our group flying this time so we didn't warrant the 737 jet. Instead, as we filed out onto the tarmac I thought it looked like we were in a scene from the film *Casablanca* with the chunky, bulbous plane and its propellers. In fairness the plane wasn't as old as the *Electra* in the movie, but it was only a generation away, a Convair built around 1954.



The feeling persisted as we climbed inside a round tube and sat in our imitation leather seats. Looking down the



dimly lit fuselage I expected to see Ingrid Bergman, and maybe even Bogart. The toilet was a camping-style long drop, probably a very long drop. Only dwarves with severe spinal deformities could stand and use the toilet. The engines were too noisy for us to hear each other, but the food was good (cold of course) and the plane got us there safely.

(I had a little room left on this last page so I have included pictures of a few spare bears from Monday.)



We were back in the Four Points hotel and actually in the same room. Our tour officially ended next morning and we took our two flights back to Abbotsford where it was still a warm fall afternoon.

Apart from our missing the Itsanitaq Museum the tour had delivered well. We had seen over two dozen bears in various activities and seen even more in the far distance; what Neil referred to as “pixel bears”. Our count was about twice that of the previous tour so perhaps we’d hit the sweet



spot. The tours after ours could expect to see as many or more until the bears took to the ice.

Did we see the Northern Lights? No, this would have involved walking to a part of town that had no streetlights and sitting and waiting. It would be a toss-up as to which showed up first, the lights or a bear. As it happened we had cloudy skies anyway. Prime viewing time for the lights is

January/February, when the skies are usually clear. I believe there is a lodge with a safe viewing area.

So would we go there again? Not in the winter, but in the summer the Churchill River is full of beluga whales and the tundra is a mass of flowers, so it’s possible we may go back then. Sandie is keen to travel on the railway so we may be able to drive to Thompson or the end of the road at Gillam and catch the train there. There’s no published timetable yet but the line has just reopened. The first train arrived in Churchill on Halloween.

Love to you all from Pete and Sandie