

In search of Canada's great white wonders.

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Story by Alexis Buxton-Collins

My paddle disappears almost as soon as I dip it into the Churchill River, the bright-yellow blade quickly swallowed up by water the colour of black tea. As the ripples spread, they disturb the reflection of a clear summer sky that stretches out in every direction. Suddenly, this high-definition tableau is broken by a white cloud that grows rapidly until it's almost as long as my kayak, which rocks from side to side when a beluga whale gently breaks the surface beside me.

A loud intake of breath alerts me to another on my left and I turn just in time to see its slick white skin glistening in the sun. Glancing behind, I realise that half a dozen of the creatures are following and soon the sound of air being expelled from blowholes is joined by gasps of delight from other paddlers in my group. One particularly curious individual swims so close that I'm sure I can see it smile as it floats beside me like Casper the Friendly Ghost.

Every summer, thousands of these distinctive white whales leave the cold waters of Hudson Bay to give birth to their calves at the mouth of the Churchill River in northern Manitoba, Canada. In number, size and curiosity, they seem more like dolphins than whales and they're clearly as interested in me as I am in them.

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Although the town of Churchill is world-famous for its wildlife, another species of charismatic megafauna tends to hog the headlines. This is the Polar Bear Capital of the World, where buildings are festooned with murals celebrating the region's most famous residents and street signs warn of their dangers. Every autumn, hundreds of bears gather by the shore near town as they wait for the sea to freeze over, making it one of the best places in the world to observe them.

Each day of the four-day Journey to Fireweed Island adventure (lazybearlodge.com) that I'm on with 19 others invites us to explore the region around Churchill in a different way. Mere minutes after the 2.5-hour flight from Winnipeg lands, we're given the first of many polar bear safety talks from a sandy-haired young guide named Deacon Daudrich.

When we cross the river to check out an 18th-century fort, there are so many belugas following our Zodiac that I soon lose count of them. A visit to a graffiti-covered plane wreck takes us past rounded granite boulders covered in fiery-orange lichen and fields filled with fluffy Arctic cotton grass and bright-pink Indian paintbrush.

At the end of each day's adventures we return to Lazy Bear Lodge, where Churchill's quiet main street is framed by

windows salvaged from a 19th-century trading post. Rough-hewn timber walls adorned with hunting trophies and outdoorsy paraphernalia fit the remote location. The meals are simple but hearty, leaning heavily on local proteins, including freshly caught Arctic char and juicy bison burgers. As I head through the lobby to my room, I notice one last activity for the day: a sign-up sheet to register for a midnight call if the aurora borealis appears.

After waking in the pink glow of the early morning, we take a boat along the coast as dozens of shiny white figures rise mysteriously from the ocean. This far north, the golden hour extends well beyond its usual remit and I watch as columns of spray are transformed into a shimmering haze by the soft light of the rising sun. For two hours we head through the "Beluga triangle", where superpods of hundreds of whales congregate several kilometres out to sea. But as we approach land near Fireweed Island, Daudrich reminds me of the other locals.

"The colour you're looking out for isn't pure white, it's French vanilla," he explains, fully aware that he's instantly transformed every second rock into a Schrödinger's bear. I scan the shoreline intently and after several false alarms I see an off-white boulder slowly rise and lumber between the rocks.

Raising my binoculars, I focus just in time to see a shaggy polar bear turn and look my way before lying down and disappearing from view.

The planet's largest land carnivores can grow up to three metres long and weigh 800 kilograms but they're not the only thing I need to keep an eye on. "Watch out for the Arctic terns," says Daudrich as we clamber into the Zodiacs and make our way to shore. "If you get near their chicks, they'll work together to make a bird tornado and swoop until they've driven you away." The threat of apex predators and cranky birds has me on alert from the moment we step back on land. Almost immediately we spot three bears a few hundred metres ahead – "a mother and two angst-ridden teenagers", according to Daudrich. But they seem unbothered by our presence and we follow them at a distance as they enjoy what looks like a typical day at the beach.

After playing about on the rocks and plunging into the water for a cooling swim, the trio wanders through a field of the wildflowers that give the island its name. For a brief window at the height of summer, the bright-red fireweed stalks are covered in clusters of brilliant purple flowers and the image of these magnificent beasts playing in a field of colourful blooms is as delightful as it is surprising.

Later, we see a catnapping male sprawled on his belly. "You can see why we call it the Lazy Bear Lodge," says Daudrich as we're treated to a giant, teeth-baring yawn. When the bear eventually comes in our direction, we move back to make space but the island's other residents are less accommodating. Soon the sky is alive with a flock of red-billed terns badgering the bear. The waifish seabirds allow us to track the big guy's progress, even when he disappears into a small depression.

It's a testament to the belugas' charisma that they manage to relegate this unforgettable spectacle to a support act. And while it's important to keep our distance from the bears, there are no such worries with the marine life.

On the warmest day of the trip, we split into groups of five and head out in Zodiacs towing a large sheet of foam behind them. Once the belugas have noticed us, we take it in turns to lay down flat on the foam pontoon and put our heads into the water. Trying to spot them in the tannin-stained water would be a frustrating activity if not for one of their most endearing quirks: in addition to being the most vocal whale species (belugas are sometimes called "sea canaries"), they're also attracted to anything that makes high-pitched sounds.

With a little encouragement, I do my best to serenade the cetaceans and though my attempts at submarine singing are closer to tone-deaf gargling, any embarrassment disappears when a large white ghost appears out of the gloom. Slowly approaching until it's just 10 centimetres from my face, the beluga swims at a leisurely pace to match the boat's speed before turning on its side and staring at me quizzically with an upturned eye.

I watch as it slowly moves up and down in the water then pirouettes as gracefully as a ballerina. Inspired, I launch into an aria from *The Magic Flute* and hear a German photographer onboard laughing as she recognises my attempts to emulate the Queen of the Night. Though I have no hope of getting close to a high C, my underwater audience seems entirely at ease and continues to return. Each time it turns on its side, I can see the gentle curve of its mouth and sometimes it nuzzles up so close that I can make out every detail on its melon-shaped head, right down to the small scar on its nose.

It's not until I hop back into the boat that I realise there's not just a single beluga following us but an entire pod, including a tiny newborn calf with darker skin that's just a few weeks old. And as the sound of underwater singing mingles with the soft exhalation of whales breathing, I decide that pod is far too prosaic a collective noun for these magical creatures. A "fan club" of belugas would be more fitting or maybe a "front row". Even a "surprise" of belugas, given how frequently they've defied my expectations.

Perhaps the biggest surprise comes when we return to the lodge on our final night. I'm exhausted but exhilarated after three full days of chasing (and being chased by) the wildlife. When I see the aurora sign-up sheet, I find myself uttering a phrase I never dreamed would pass my lips. "Don't worry about waking me up if the northern lights come out tonight," I tell the receptionist. "I think I've had enough excitement for one day." ✎



Chris Hendrickson