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TRAVEL

LATEST NEWS AT CALGARYHERALD.COM/TRAVEL

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TRAVEL NOTES

Embr-rrrracing Canada's north

ARCTIC • Sunny, hot and a sandy beach nearby. That's not what everyone wants in a holiday.

The Great Canadian Travel Company's stock in trade for the past 30 years has been offering Top of World tour packages: Greenland, the Arctic, Iceland and Siberia to name just a few.

The 2012 lineup from the company makes the arctic and sub-arctic look as appealing as any tropical holiday, only enjoyed with more clothes on.

Here's a sampling of some of this year's excursions, which combine independent travel, escorted touring, expedition cruises and rail travel, all in a range of prices.

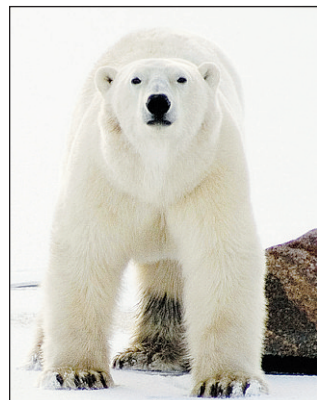
■ Journey to the centre of the earth, Westfjords, Iceland: An eight-night, seven-day, four-wheel self-drive trip exploring the dramatic western and southern regions of Iceland, which includes volcanoes, geysers, an ice cap and several national parks, charming fishing villages and fjords.

■ Arctic safari: You've heard of Africa's Big Five, but Arctic Canada has its own wild bunch: walrus, caribou, muskoxen, whales and polar bears. You're sure to see at least a few of them on an 11-day, 10-night expedition cruise that takes guests on a journey along the frigid routes European explorers took in their search for gold and a way to the East. Along the way, you'll visit remote northern communities during the longest days of the year and when the tundra is at its most colourful with flowers.

■ Bear Country Adventure, Churchill, Man: If you've always wanted to see polar bears but can't make a big time commitment, this trip is the perfect way to fulfil that wish. Try a three-day, two-night journey from Winnipeg to Churchill in October and November. That's when the bears are waiting for Hudson Bay to freeze so they can get busy hunting seals. A large Tundra vehicle takes visitors to view the bears in their natural surroundings. The second day, go dogsledding or take a helicopter ride for a bird's-eye view of the region.

For details on these and other trips, go to greatcanadiantravel.com.

— Lisa Monforton, Calgary Herald



Herald Archive A polar bear wanders the tundra near Churchill.



Ho'okena Beach Park, 20 kilometres south of where Captain Cook was killed by Hawaiians in 1779, is now managed by the local community and is a popular campground for visitors. Tents can be set up right on the sand, while campervans park at one end of the beach. Photos, Suzanne Morphet for the Calgary Herald

HAPPY CAMPERS in HAWAII



Rent a VW van and hit the road for footloose freedom on the Big Island

SUZANNE MORPHET FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

As the setting sun drew pink wisps across the evening sky, two surfers played in the waves in front of us. They seemed oblivious to the impending darkness that would soon envelope them and the treacherous shoreline.

My 16-year-old daughter and I watched with trepidation from our picnic table at Isaac Hale Beach Park on the rugged southeast corner of Hawaii's Big Island, while my husband barbecued a fresh ahi tuna that we picked up en route.

The early tropical darkness would also pose a small challenge for us — eating by flashlight — but we weren't concerned about safety. Our 'room' for the night — a rented Volkswagen Westfalia van — was only a few steps away.

As blackness closed in, the surfers disappeared from sight and just as suddenly a cacophony erupted from the trees overhead. The raucous cries of dozens of birds settling in for the night was deafening, almost drowning out the roaring surf.

It was our first night of a weeklong camping trip, but already we felt immersed in the landscape in a way one never does when you stay in a hotel with four walls and air conditioning.



Allana Spence sniffs the flowers on a coffee tree at Hilo Coffee Mill. A tasting room allows visitors to sample and buy coffee.

We booked our van from Happy Campers Hawaii in Hilo on the recommendation of my dentist's wife and receptionist, who convinced me during a checkup that this is a fun and affordable way to see the Big Island. "We spent one evening watching the waves roll into these small tidal pools made from lava," said Linda Anaka of Sidney, B.C. "The lava was still warm from the day's sun

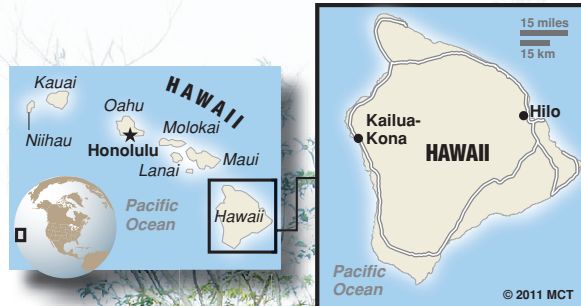
and it was like taking a bath under the stars." When we arrived in Hilo, the owner of Happy Campers — Teri Fritz — greeted us with fresh leis and pointed to a blue Westfalia she's nicknamed Kila Kila Kei, Hawaiian for Majestic Ocean. It would be ours

Fierce wooden carvings of gods greet visitors at the Place of Refuge, a national park and one of the island's most-visited sites.

for the week. The van's immaculate condition and low mileage — a little more than 100,000 kms — belied her age. She was built in 1987, but spent most of the last 20 years in someone's carport in Honolulu, un-driven.

Fritz has 15 VW vans in her fleet, including a red and white "hippie van" from 1971. Before stashing our gear, Teri showed us how to pop the top to reveal the upper bed and how to pull out the back seat to create a lower bed.

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It takes only a few minutes to pop the top of a VW camper van and unfold beds for the night.

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