

POLAR BEAR SAFARI

All white on the day beside Hudson Bay

Walking with the biggest land carnivore takes SUZANNE MORPHETT into the winter wonderland of Canada's north



It doesn't take long to realise why polar bears are white. Or, for that matter, Arctic foxes, Arctic hares or snowy owls.

Looking over Canada's Hudson Bay through the big picture windows of Seal River Heritage Lodge, we could be looking at paint chips for the colour white, with its endless gradations.

In early November, ice is beginning to form on the bay, which is really the enormous inland sea that dominates any map of Canada. The ice piles up along the shore in disorderly chunks with every incoming tide.

Fresh snow blankets the boulders left behind when the last glaciers retreated 11,000 years ago and they add to the jumbled white mass.

Whether you're predator or prey, it's smart to blend in with this mostly colourless but enormously dramatic landscape and seascape.

We, on the other hand, are a riot of colour.

When we gather outside the lodge each morning and afternoon, our group — seven Americans, three Aussies, a couple of Israelis, two Brits and one Canadian — is bundled up in bright red, blue and yellow parkas to protect us against the frigid cold and biting wind. We couldn't blend into this white environment if we wanted to.

But as Andy, our lead guide, told us earlier, we don't want to.

"We're not trying to hide," he had said, when prepping us on how we'll go about our main objective for the next four days — observing polar bears in the



Polar bear peers through shrubbery near Seal River lodge.

wild, on foot. When I first heard about Churchill Wild's walking safaris on the edge of Hudson Bay, it sounded risky, if not foolhardy.

After all, polar bears are the biggest land carnivore on the planet, so powerful they can pull a slippery seal out of the water with seemingly little effort.

Canada has the biggest number of polar bears in the world, about two-thirds of the estimated 23,000 left in the wild. And this particular stretch of western Hudson Bay coastline is thought to have the highest concentration of these bears.

Churchill, a port town just 30 minutes south of here by small plane, calls itself the "Polar Bear Capital of the World" for good reason.

About 900 polar bears migrate up this coast and past Churchill every autumn as they wait for new ice to form. They're marine animals and they hunt seals from ice floes.

With climate change, sea ice is melting earlier every summer and forming later every autumn. It means polar bears are spending more days on land than they used to, and having to fast for longer, up to four months.



This photo was taken from inside the lodge.

Pictures: Suzanne Morphett



According to Polar Bears International, a science-based conservation group, the western Hudson Bay population of bears has shrunk by 30 per cent since the 1980s. (Whether any particular population of polar bears is increasing or decreasing is controversial and depends on whom you ask.)

Still, it's no exaggeration to say we're standing in the path of polar bears. We haven't even left the lodge on our first afternoon when one comes into sight.

She's striding confidently along the shoreline, pausing occasionally to raise her long snout and sniff the air. When she's within a few metres of the lodge she puts her nose to the ground where, moments earlier, a pair of Arctic foxes were playing tag in the snow.

And then she's gone, ambling north along the coast.

Churchill Wild was the first company to offer walking safaris with polar bears and may still be the only one. In 26 years of operation, the guides

have never had to shoot a bear, Andy tells us proudly.

"Having a line of people is a powerful thing and far less intrusive than firing guns," Andy explains.

If a bear gets too curious, he'll talk firmly to it, like you would to your dog. Other tactics include throwing stones or snowballs but all the guides carry guns, just in case.

Our days quickly fall into a comfortable pattern; up early for breakfast in the dining room, then outside for a 2-3km walk, back to the lodge for lunch, followed by another walk mid-afternoon, then appetisers and wine in front of the roaring fire, a home-style dinner around big tables, followed by a talk in the lounge and finally bed. But nothing's obligatory and surprises are always in store.

One day, we wake to find the world is not so black and white.

On this morning the ice and rocks in the bay are bathed in a soft blue light. Further out, mist

Morning at the Seal River lodge, with spectacular views over Hudson Bay.

