

## CANADA

# Whale tales

In Manitoba, I went paddle boarding in a river full of playful wild belugas

SUZANNE MORPHET  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

A ghostly green shape appears in the water beside my paddle board as I lean forward to take another stroke. Seconds later, a smaller, darker shape joins the first, effortlessly gliding alongside underwater. Turning my head, I smile to see two more on my tail.

It's summer on the Churchill River, and I feel like I'm cruising down a freeway of whales as belugas surface every few seconds. They're following my standup paddle board and, endearingly, smiling back at me.

Churchill, Man., is better known as the polar bear capital of the world, but from July to September the water of the Churchill River estuary churns with these gregarious whales. According to Oceans North, a charity supporting marine conservation, they're part of the world's largest migration of belugas, about 55,000 altogether, which swim from the Arctic every summer and congregate in estuaries on western Hudson Bay to birth their young.

I'm visiting this town on a trip with Natural Habitat Adventures (Nat Hab), which offers all-inclusive, small-group tours throughout the year to Churchill. Our itinerary also includes exploring the surrounding subarctic tundra and boreal forests, searching for other wildlife, visiting historic sites and witnessing the aurora borealis.

But our primary focus, and the absolute highlight, is having fun with belugas.

We soon discover that Delphinap-

terus leucas ("white dolphin without a fin" in Latin) shares traits with humans, which may explain why we find them so appealing.

When they swim alongside us, they often turn on their side, look up at us and make eye contact. That's because, unlike other whales, the vertebrae in their necks are not fused, allowing them to turn their heads. Female belugas also go through menopause, something rare in the animal kingdom.

What we find most fascinating, though, is their astounding vocabulary.

"They talk a lot and we talk a lot," chuckles Eleanor Edye, our expedition leader with Nat Hab. "They're really big gossipers. It just sounds like coffee time in a small town all the time underwater."

On our first excursion, by inflatable Zodiac boat, our driver drops a hydrophone over the side, and we're immediately immersed in a symphony of squeals, clicks, clucks, chirps and whistles.

It's unintelligible to us, but Edye says a scientist with the Raincoast Conservation Foundation, Valeria Vergara, has identified 28 different call types. These include contact calls, which whales use to identify themselves, akin to saying, "Hello, my name is ..."

Our Zodiac driver, who hails from southern France, is obviously smitten. "So I came here for the bears, to be honest, and I discovered the belugas," says Morgan Ruiz, breaking into a big smile. She describes them as "so friendly and so interactive."

Ruiz suspects belugas follow closely behind the Zodiac because they enjoy the bubbles from the



propeller. "That gives them, like, a face massage." She assures us that each prop has a cover that prevents the belugas from injuring themselves.

With their engaging personalities, it's easy to see why aquariums wanted belugas. Lorraine Brandson, curator of Itsanitaq Museum in Churchill, tells me about belugas being lassoed and captured by local men. Known as cold-water cowboys, they would jump in the frigid water to hold the whales until they could be contained.

Thankfully, those days are long gone. In 2019, the federal government banned the taking of whales and other cetaceans for captivity. Today, people who want to see belugas can observe them in the wild. After our Zodiac tour, some of the seven people in my Nat Hab group go kayaking with the belugas and, on another day, join me in paddle boarding.

After we change into wet suits, Erin Greene, owner of SUP North, tells us what to expect from the belugas, which are known for their curious nature. "Sometimes they like to give a little poke (to the

**The writer's fellow paddle boarders get close to belugas on a tour in the Churchill River estuary in Manitoba.**

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board), and sometimes they'll go right underneath you and they'll lift slightly. They're all playful behaviours."

Greene also tells us how to behave on the water: no touching whales, no chasing them, no crashing into their pods. "This is their home that we have the absolute privilege and honour to be able to enter," she says. "So we always treat the whales with a high level of respect."

Greene was inspired to start her business after a traumatic experience in 2013. She was walking home after a Halloween party when she was attacked by a polar bear. "I was looking for ways to heal myself," she explains. So she went to Hawaii to take a course on yoga for trauma, which included doing yoga on a paddle board. "And for the first time since my incident, I felt present."

I get it. During the hours I spend on the water, surrounded by the belugas, I forget everything else. It's just me and the whales.

SUZANNE MORPHET TRAVELLED AS A GUEST OF NATURAL HABITAT ADVENTURES AND TRAVEL MANITOBA, WHICH DID NOT REVIEW OR APPROVE THIS ARTICLE.

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