

Where belugas and polar bears roam

SUZANNE MORPHET

spends time with two iconic Canadian species

A few countries in the world are so strongly associated with certain wildlife that it's become their brand. Pandas in China, for instance, and tigers in India.

But few small towns anywhere can boast even one, let alone two iconic species.

That explains why Churchill, Canada, with fewer than 1000 year-round residents and no road access, receives almost 26,000 visitors a year.

Polar bears and beluga whales are the bucket-list animals that attract thousands of international guests, mostly from the US, the UK and Australia. You must fly in or take the train from Winnipeg (the odd cruise ship visits too), but once in Churchill, you're pretty much guaranteed to see either bears or belugas depending on the season, and in summer — if you're lucky — both.

I was lucky.

I joined a small group with Natural Habitat Adventures, a US-based company that offers tours to special places worldwide. With a focus on wildlife and nature, tours are led by knowledgeable local guides and often include experts from the World Wildlife Fund, which the company supports financially.

When we arrive in Churchill in mid-August, somewhere between 3000 and 5000 white belugas are frolicking in the wide estuary of the Churchill River. They've travelled south from the Arctic Ocean as part of the largest single beluga migration anywhere — about 55,000 animals altogether. Upon reaching the west coast of Hudson Bay, they return to the same river estuary where they were born.

Soon after we leave the shore by Zodiac — a small inflatable boat — belugas pop up everywhere. Several dozen, maybe more, give us a warm welcome as we motor slowly from the calm river mouth into Hudson Bay itself.

They come and go, but two or three adults swim alongside much



Paddleboarding with belugas. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



of the time, as well as the occasional pale grey juvenile. Often, the whales turn their necks and look up at us, causing more than one misty eye on board. A couple more belugas are always on our tail, getting as close to the propeller — which has a safety

cover — as they can.

"That gives them, like, a face massage," explains Morgan Ruiz, our French Zodiac driver who came here to work so she could see polar bears.

Instead, it's the belugas that have captured her heart. "They're so friendly and so interactive", she says, smiling broadly.

They're also highly intelligent. When Morgan stops the boat and lowers a hydrophone over the side, we hear a cacophony of "voices" — whistles, chirps, squeals and clucks.

"It just sounds like coffee time in a small town all the time underwater," laughs Eleanor Edge, our guide with Natural Habitat Adventures. Of course, we can't understand what they're saying, but a scientist with Canada's Raincoast Conservation Foundation, Valeria Vergara, has started to figure it out, Eleanor says.

"She has conclusively identified 28 different sounds that have specific meanings," she says.

These include something known as contact calls, the unique sound each whale uses to identify itself.

The belugas will stay in this relatively warm river nursing their newborns and feeding on fish



A pair of belugas in the estuary in August. Picture: Eleanor Edge

until early September, when they head back to the Arctic Ocean.

Polar bears are also on a migration, of sorts.

They are heading north along the shore of Hudson Bay, through the last bit of boreal forest, past Churchill, and on to the Arctic tundra while waiting for the bay to freeze so they can return to hunting seals from the ice.

We stop to see Churchill's famous polar bear "jail" where troublesome bears — the ones that hang around town — are lured



Beluga whales love to follow behind Zodiacs to enjoy the bubbles from the propeller.



A drive out of Churchill takes you past a beautiful stretch of Hudson Bay shoreline.

into traps, then placed in solitary confinement until the bay freezes.

It sounds cruel, but Eleanor says the jail has saved the lives of many bears that might otherwise have been shot. The Hudson Bay population of bears is already on the decline because of climate change — shorter winters mean less time to hunt seals, which the bears depend on — so killing problem bears is a last resort.

The more we learn about bears and belugas, the more fascinated I am with this place. On the one hand, the belugas are so friendly and harmless that I would jump in and swim with them if I could. Snorkelling was permitted at one time, but no longer because of the possibility of transmitting diseases.

On the other hand, polar bears are potentially dangerous and have been known to predate people.

Before arriving in Churchill, all Natural Habitat guests watch a video on how to be bear-safe. This includes not walking out of town, giving buildings in town a wide berth in case a bear is hiding, and always having an escape route in mind.

Every night at 10 o'clock the town siren reminds people to get indoors because bears are more likely to be active after dark.

Of course, we want to see bears, just not on foot.

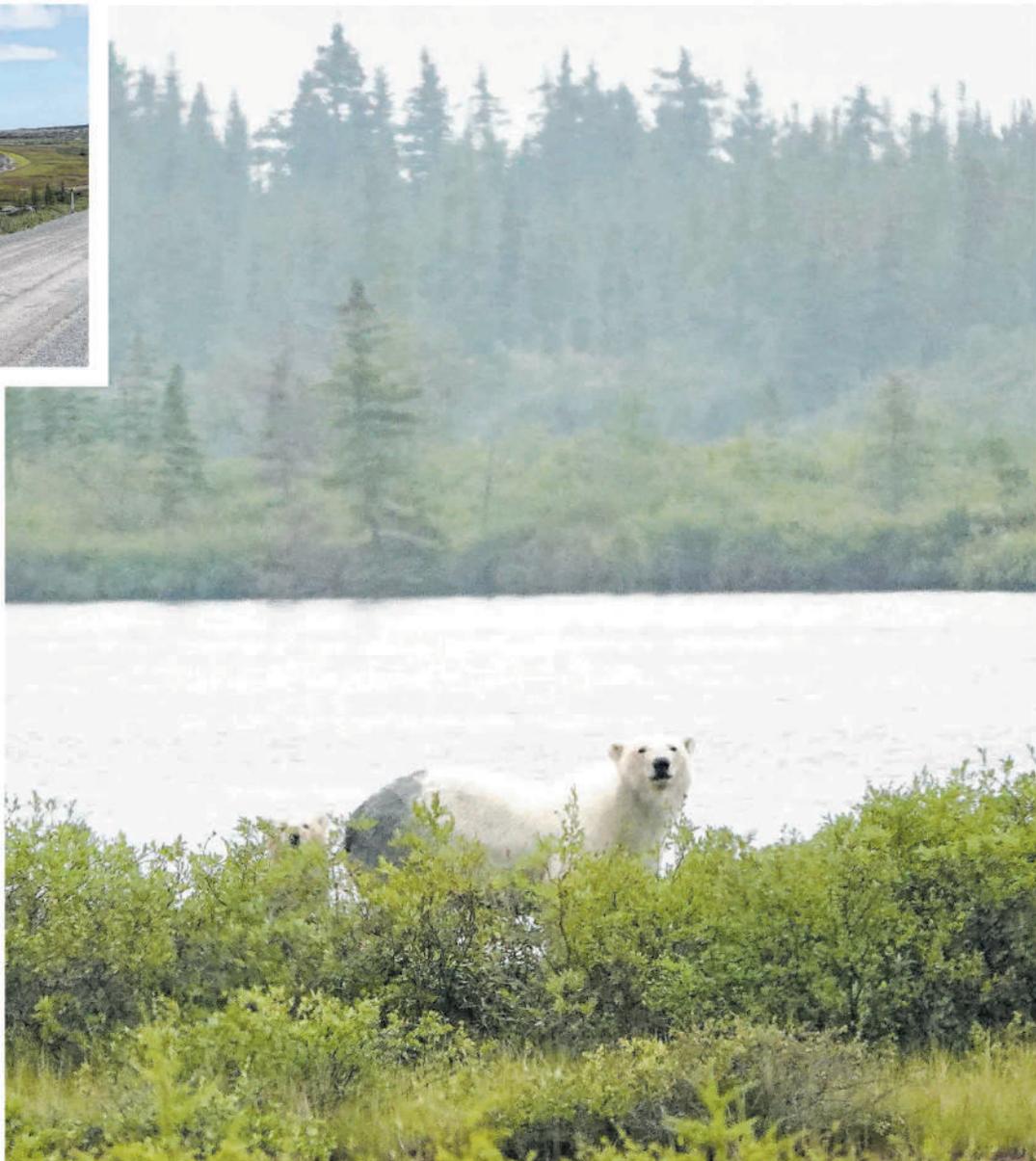
It's one day while driving out of town that we get lucky.

From our van window, Eleanor spots a white shape in the distance, what she describes as "a lightbulb on legs" — a bear that's skinny towards the head, with a big butt.

"That is a bear in good condition," she says approvingly, looking through binoculars.

"This is what you want to see, especially at this time of year, is a polar bear with fat storage."

When a cub pops up beside its mum a few minutes later, we all cheer.



A mother polar bear in good condition, with a lot of fat to help her get through summer. Her cub is almost hidden from view.

Back on the river another day, it's time to get re-acquainted with belugas, this time on a stand-up paddleboard.

Wearing wet suits in case we fall in, we paddle into the calm river and soon we have beluga escorts.

They're as friendly as before, sometimes playfully nudging our boards and swimming under us.

With their big smiling faces, we can't help but smile back.

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Natural Habitat Adventures and Travel Manitoba.

They have not influenced this story, or read it before publication.

fact file

- Natural Habitat Adventures offers tours to Churchill, Manitoba, throughout the year. Its seven-day Beluga Whales and Polar Bears begins in Winnipeg and includes a private flight by chartered aircraft to Churchill. nathab.com
- It's worth staying a few extra days in Winnipeg, capital of Manitoba and home to the Canadian Museum for Human Rights; the Winnipeg Art Gallery-Qaumajuq (with the largest public collection of contemporary Inuit art in the world); and the Forks National Historic Site. travelmanitoba.com



Above, a bear monitor watches for polar bears near the shore of Hudson Bay while a group from Natural Habitat Adventures is in the area. Right, someone has attached a bus to their shack on the shoreline of the Churchill River. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

