

travel

eye to eye

Paddling with belugas

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY BY SUZANNE MORPHET



S

tanding still on my paddle board, I scan the flat, calm water in the estuary of the Churchill River. It's unusual for a river to be this quiet, its steel grey water blending into an equally grey sky.

But every couple minutes, the surface dimples and a white shape appears from the deep. Sometimes it comes along side me, turns its beaming face upwards and momentarily looks me in the eye. I smile back.

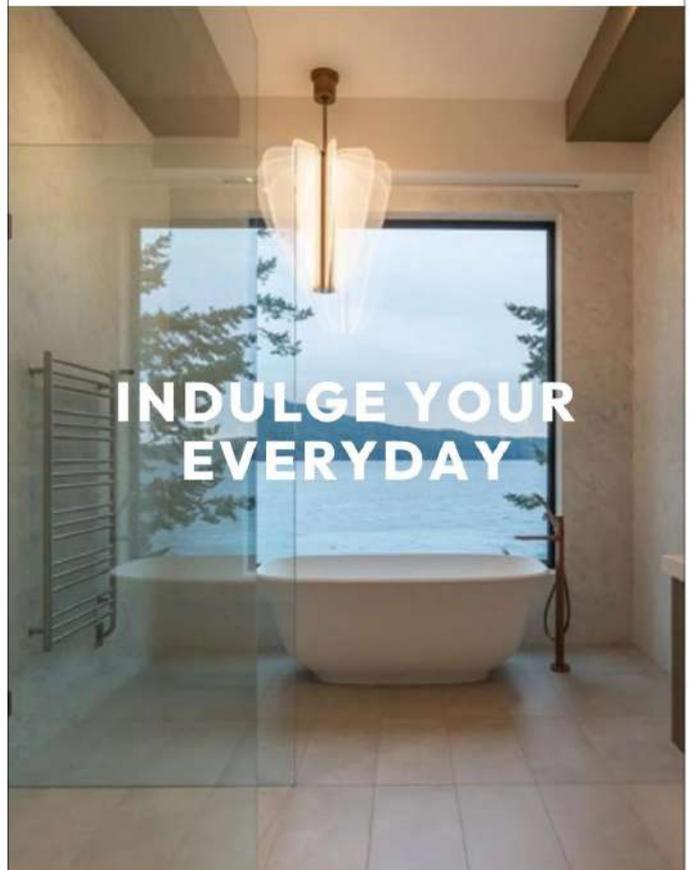
I've come to Churchill, Man., to see beluga whales in summer, when some 55,000 migrate from the Arctic Ocean to the relatively warm water of river estuaries like this one on the west coast of Hudson Bay.

It's the single biggest population of beluga whales in the world, yet the allure for visitors, I soon discover, is not the possibility of seeing many belugas, but making soulful connections with a few.

My women-only tour with Natural Habitat Adventures began in Winnipeg, where we boarded a privately chartered flight to Churchill along with a few other small groups, also with Nat Hab. (The Denver-based company offers tours throughout the year to Churchill, including polar bear viewing in the fall; northern lights viewing in winter; and belugas, bears and other wildlife in summer.)



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Over the course of five days, we interact with these white whales multiple times in multiple ways, deepening our connection to creatures that seem to be as curious about us as we are about them.

But on the first evening we do something unexpectedly wonderful and it has nothing to do with belugas. We go to the beach for a bonfire. With campfire bans throughout much of B.C. in summers, standing around a fire feels like a blast from the past.

Sipping wine and watching waves crash onto the sandy shoreline, I get to know the six other women in my group – all from the U.S. and ranging in age from their mid-30s to mid-70s – as well as our guide Eleanor Edy from southern Manitoba.

The following day we have our first encounter with belugas on a tour in a small inflatable boat. Within minutes of leaving the Port of Churchill, several belugas come alongside us. Two are adults, as white as marshmallows, which they vaguely resemble from a distance, and a third is a juvenile with pale grey skin.

A couple more soon follow behind and it feels like we've reunited with old friends. Now I understand what Eleanor was getting at earlier when she says, "every time I come back in the summer, I just have to find a moment to go cry a little bit with the whales, because it's been a whole year since I saw them."



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Seeing belugas so close is one thing but hearing them brings us even greater intimacy. When our driver stops the boat and lowers a hydrophone over the side, it's like we're eavesdropping at a beluga bar. Instead of words, we hear enthusiastic chirps and squeaks, clicks and squeals.

The belugas are sharing information, even if we can't decipher it. Eleanor tells us a scientist with the Raincoast Conservation Foundation, Valeria Vergara, has identified 28 different call types including contact calls, which are like names.

What will happen, I wonder, when the Port of Churchill gets busier, as climate change increases the number of ice-free days in the Arctic. With more ships coming and going, will these highly intelligent animals still be able to hear each other?

"If you look at the sound profiles of ships, it pretty well overlaps with where beluga whales talk," Eleanor says, explaining that much of the research has been done on belugas in the St. Lawrence River, an endangered population exposed to noise constantly. "They repeat themselves," she notes. "So every time a whale talks, they're like, 'Did you hear me? I said, I'm going over here, I'm going over here, I'm going over here.' And we see repeated patterns that you don't see anywhere else."

The fate of Churchill's belugas seems precarious, but Eleanor tells us the World Wildlife Fund – which Natural Habitat Adventures supports financially – is hard at work figuring out how ships and marine mammals can co-exist. For now at least, this population is healthy and stable.

And we're about to get to know them even better. It's time to kayak or stand-up paddleboard. I opt for the latter – a paddleboard just happens to be about the same length and width as a fully grown beluga, enhancing the feeling that I'm part of their family.

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After pulling on wetsuits, we listen as Erin Greene, owner of SUP North, tells us what to expect. “They like to give a little poke, so poke at the back, poke at the side. And sometimes they’ll go right underneath you and they’ll lift slightly. Sometimes they’ll tail slap. Those are all playful behaviours, not aggressive or anything like that.”

Of course, the whales can do what they want, but we cannot. “We always treat the whales with a high level of respect,” she continues. “We never chase the whales. We don’t crash into their pods. We do not touch whales at all.”

The Churchill River estuary is long and wide, but with an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 belugas here every day at their summer peak, it’s no wonder they’re popping up everywhere.

Soon, I have cetacean escorts as I paddle. I can’t say I enjoy stand-up paddleboarding, but this feels different. It’s not about the paddling but connecting with a wild animal that shares some of my traits. They swim about the same speed that I walk. We both love to talk. And female belugas even go into menopause, which is rare in the animal kingdom, but something I know all about.

When it’s time to go back to shore, I’m sad to be leaving my beluga friends behind.

But when I think of them now, back in the Arctic, living at the edge of the ice, raising their families, I can only smile. **B**

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