



A polar bear taking a stroll; a bear taking a closer look at the camera (right); an inukshuk, a traditional stone marker built by the Inuit (below)



# NORTHERN WILDERNESS

Near the Arctic Circle, **Cameron Dueck** came face to face with the fuzzy but dangerous polar bear



## HOW TO GET THERE

Air Canada has daily flights between major Asian cities and Canada.

[www.aircanada.com](http://www.aircanada.com)

VIA Rail runs two trains a week from Winnipeg to Churchill during polar bear season, as well as regular services on other routes across the country.

[www.viarail.ca](http://www.viarail.ca)

Frontiers North Adventures is the largest and most established tour operator in Churchill. They also host tours at other times of the year that allow you to swim with beluga whales or watch the northern lights.

[www.frontiersnorth.com](http://www.frontiersnorth.com)

I'm not sure if I'm feeling joy or fear as the polar bear slowly shuffles towards me. He stops and sniffs the air, then chuffs and paws at the frozen ground.

I am leaning through the window of a vehicle on the Canadian tundra. In my hands is a cup of hot chocolate. Behind me is a warm heater, a clean bathroom, and the soft murmurings of others who have come north with me to see the king of the Arctic.

Our "cage" is comfortable, but we know better than to step out into the wilderness. Leaving the safety of our vehicle would be suicide. We are being kept prisoner by the bear, and he seems in no hurry to leave.

I have taken a two-day train journey from Winnipeg, travelling straight north through the wilderness, to reach Churchill on the shores of Hudson Bay. We're still some 800 kilometres short of the Arctic Circle, but we're already in the land of ice, bears and wide open tundra.

There are bear warnings everywhere in this town of 850 people. Signs along the beach, stickers next to phones advertising the "bear hotline" number, a droning curfew siren every evening, the pop of explosives used to scare bears away from our hotel.

Churchill is the "Polar Bear Capital of the World", thanks to the oddities of Mother Nature. The Churchill bear population are the most southerly polar bears on the planet, and the only ones that spend large amounts of time on the land. Their last real meal is in July, when the ice breaks up. Then, they wait through the summer for the new ice to form, eating little.

Freshwater flowing from the Churchill River means that the salty Hudson Bay freezes in the Churchill area first, and the bears know that. They come to these shores at this time every year

to await the fresh ice, and once it forms they will return to the sea to hunt seals.

Climate change means an earlier break-up of sea ice each spring – and therefore fewer seals for the bears – and a later freeze-up in autumn, which again keeps the bears away from their food. They are hungry, restless and in a bad mood.

"This area has the most stressed-out bears in the Arctic because it's so far south they get a lot less time on the ice than other populations," Sarah Oistad, in-field ambassador for Polar Bear International, tells me as we watch the bears.

There are 935 bears in the area, although some of them are in jail. The town captures bears that become too inquisitive and puts them in a cell until they can be taken back to the wilderness by helicopter.

These bears have been on a five-month diet, and when they run their skin flaps like an oversized coat. An adult male can easily weigh 600kg, but it will lose as much as a kilogram of fat per day while it is waiting to return to the ice.

The bear approaches our Tundra Buggy, a double-wide school bus on a monster truck chassis. I'm hanging out of the window, but not too far, because I remember that the bear is hungry and in a bad mood. Then, before I can react, the bear has reared up and put his paws on the side of the buggy, stretching his long, elegant neck to get a better look at me.

The bear's nose, pitch-black against its thick white coat, is only a metre from my own. I can smell his rich, musky scent and feel his breath on my face. His paws are monstrous; a tangle of yellowed fur and long, curved claws.

Despite his size, his intelligent eyes and shaggy fur make him look cuddly rather than dangerous. For one fleeting moment I think, "Oh, I'll see if I can pet him on his fuzzy head!" Then I remember that I'll need that arm later. ■