

Edge of the Arctic

From snorkelling with belugas to hiking the tundra, summer is a special time to experience Canada's north.

By Michele Peterson

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POLAR LIGHT FROM CHURCHILL, MANITOBA

“Fox Island isn't as deserted as it seems,” says the helicopter pilot as I peer out the window of the cockpit at a polar bear loping along the shoreline of Hudson Bay, a jumble of rock, willow scrub and windswept tundra. There's not a human soul in sight.

Canada's north is one of the world's last great wildernesses. Its saltwater shoreline wraps like a ribbon through the glacier-carved fjords of the Arctic and Subarctic. Stretching for more than 200,000 kilometres, it's the world's longest coastline. I'm hovering above it with Hudson Bay Helicopters, a company based in Churchill, Manitoba, a town best known as the “Polar Bear Capital of Canada.”

While winter is a popular time to visit, the summer months of July and August offer their own special appeal. It's the time of year when polar bears gather to wait for the ice to form, and up to 3,000 white belugas shelter in the Churchill River estuary to give birth to their young. My aerial sightseeing jaunt is part of a three-day northern adventure that will include hiking the tundra, exploring a historic fort and even taking a dip in Hudson Bay to snorkel with gentle beluga whales.

TUNDRA TREK

The adventure continues with a tundra hike where our group walks single file behind a guide along a rough footpath through a vast plain. I sidestep around a rock and almost stomp on a green splotch the size of a dinner plate. “Careful, that's map lichen,” says our guide. “It can take hundreds of years to grow that size.”

Vowing to tread more lightly, I realize the landscape is not as barren as it first appeared. The guide explains that the Churchill region is a transitional zone between the northern boreal forest and the southern Arctic tundra, so is quite diverse, supporting more than 400 native varieties of plants. The lower layer of soil is permanently frozen, but in summer, the top thaws enough to support mosses, lichens and wildflowers.

Although it's tempting to delve deeper into the micro-world of seaside buttercup, cloudberry moss and gooseberries, I quickly learn it's wise not to get too distracted. “We call this the tundra pirouette,” says the guide, as he spins 360 degrees on one foot. “It keeps you aware of your surroundings – and bears.”

Close to 60 per cent of the world's population of polar bears live in Canada's north – and for wildlife lovers, this is one of the region's biggest draws. In winter, polar bears hunt for fat-rich seals on the ice floes, but in summer, they head to shore to tend to their young. To help prevent encounters between bears and people, a Polar Bear Alert Program monitors sightings. Bears that venture into populated areas are hauled off to a specialized holding facility until released back into the wild.



POLAR BEAR FAMILY