

**The Autumn of the Bear
By-Leslie C. Wood**

It's autumn. The time of the year where in many parts of the world trees are turning from a lush green to a myriad of reds, yellows and oranges; days are getting shorter; and thoughts of apple cider, pumpkins, and brisk autumn nights are occupying most people's thoughts. However, for some adventurous people when autumn arrives their thoughts are occupied with something very different.

In Churchill, Manitoba autumn marks the beginning of polar bear season -- where blankets of snow, cold, ripping arctic winds, and the great white bears are returning to the 53rd parallel. It's the time of the year when arctic dreams come true.

The polar bear capital of the world

Sitting on the east bank of the Churchill River, where it empties into the Hudson Bay, Churchill is Canada's answer to 'Northern Exposure.' During October and November this northern community's 1,000 residents are preparing for modern day hunters -- camera wielding tourists of all ages (and from all over the world) who have come to seek out the *Ursus maritimus* -- the scientific name for the polar bear.

The area surrounding Churchill hosts the world's largest concentration of polar bears. Every year these great white bears move along the coast, waiting for the ice to freeze over in anticipation of their winter hunt on the frozen expanse of the Hudson Bay.

Churchill is a favorite resting place for the bears and although most bear activity takes place during the months of October and November, there is always a chance that visitors to this region may encounter a great white bear while exploring the rocky shoreline or one of Churchill's historic sites during the spring and summer months as well.

The beauty of the tundra

Churchill occupies a transitional zone where the stunted trees of the taiga (subarctic coniferous forest) meet the mosses of the tundra. Blanketed with snow in the winter and covered by bogs and lakes in the summer, this terrain is completely flat until it reaches the sloping banks of the Churchill River and the ridge around the Hudson Bay.

The area surrounding Churchill harbors splendid wildlife including caribou, moose, arctic and red foxes, timber wolves, tundra swans, snowy owls, falcons, ravens, and Churchill's main attraction, the polar bear. These great white bears start to lumber ashore when the ice melts on the Bay in late June. And, when autumn arrives, and the bay freezes over, the bears come back to the ice to begin hunting seals and Churchill lives up to its claim as the 'polar bear capital of the world'.

Getting up close and personal with the great white bears

As cute and as furry (and often quite amusing) as these bears may be, (it's tempting to want to hug and squeeze them) they are extremely dangerous and will attack human beings. So, if you go to Churchill, don't try and pet one. Unlike black and brown bears, which will normally avoid people, a polar bear may approach a human being out of sheer curiosity. But, not to worry --- the folks in Churchill have made it possible for you to see these magnificent creatures up close and personal without becoming their afternoon snack!

Great White Bear Tours, Inc. is one of the outfitters in Churchill, which specializes in subarctic land tundra adventures. The autumn tour, which is priced at around \$227 per person, leaves at 7:30 am and returns at 5 pm -- with lunch included. *Great White Tours* also has group rates,

which vary depending on the size of the group. The tour of the tundra is conducted in a vehicle commonly known as a 'tundra buggy'. These buggies look like a big white busses with 6 feet tall tires, which allow the vehicles to easily navigate the rocky terrain and frozen land lakes of the tundra. The windows (which can be opened) and outdoor viewing decks are high enough so you don't have to worry about a bear hitching a ride. The tundra buggies are comfortable, heated, and equipped with a restroom. In addition, the buggies are operated by an experienced driver/guide who will move you close to the action with minimal disturbance to the wildlife or the environment.

Between October 10 and November 23 (the best time to see the bears), the tundra is either a colorful sheet of lichen, moss, flowers, miniature shrubs, and trees or it's a blanket of freshly fallen snow. The vastness of this arctic region is nothing less than remarkable. The expanse of the Hudson Bay and watching the arctic sun dance over the tundra's land lakes like sparkling diamonds will leave you awestruck.

During the tour, everyone is anxious and on full 'bear alert.' When bears are spotted, the tour operator drives to the area where the bears were seen and what was once a very quiet and serene tundra, becomes filled with the happy squeals of excited tourists who flock to the observation deck to snap photos of these magnificent animals. For more information about *Great White Bear Tours*, Inc. call 1-866-765-8344.

Churchill is a trip for adventurers of all ages because a northern adventure is a journey of the mind and the heart. It's a showcase of flickering northern lights and a celebration of the animals and people who live there. It's an odyssey for people of all ages. It's what arctic dreams are made of.

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