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# The Inside Scoop On Seeing The Arctic Polar Bears In Churchill, Canada



**Judy Koutsky** Contributor ⓘ

Travel

*I cover adventure, luxury and family travel.*

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A polar bear with her cubs in Hudson Bay, Canada GETTY

When most people think of bucket list trips, going to the Arctic to see polar bears often tops the charts. And with so much talk about global warming and

the future of polar bears, it's no wonder that these trips are more popular than ever.

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And while many people want to see the polar bears, they have a lot of questions: when is polar bear season, how cold does it get, how close will you get to the bears, is it dangerous and where exactly is the best place to go?

We have the answers, so you can hit the road on one of the best bucket list trips imaginable.

## **Where to See Polar Bears?**





If you're looking for polar bears, head to Canada, where 60% of the world's population lives. TRAVEL  
MANITOBA

**Churchill**, Canada, is known as the polar bear capital of the world and for good reason. Canada has 60% of the world's polar bears (there are between 25,000-30,000 in the world) and Churchill is the southernmost place to see them and the most accessible. It is one of the few human settlements where polar bears can be observed in the wild. Churchill is a remote town of fewer than 1,000 people and sits on the edge of the Hudson Bay in Canada. There are no roads to Churchill so travelers can only get there via train, plane or boat. What makes Churchill world-famous, of course, is that it lies on the migration path of the polar bears.

These polar bears spend their winters feasting on seals—their favorite food—on the sea ice of the Hudson Bay. When the ice melts, they return to land. In the summer months, visitors come to Churchill to see the beluga whales (as many as 3,000 of them) and can often spot polar bears along the shore. As the temperature drops and the season turns to autumn the bears start to assemble on the shores eager to enter their winter-feeding grounds. October and November are the best time to see the polar bears in Churchill because the first winter ice begins to appear at that time (known as the autumn season).

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What makes Churchill so unique is that it's the intersection of three different eco-zones: arctic marine, subarctic tundra, and boreal forest.

## Picking a Tour Operator

Of course, viewing polar bears in the wild is not something you can do on your own—you have to go with a trained guide and have the right vehicles for driving on the tundra.

**Frontiers North Adventures** is a family-owned and operated company and they have specialized in Canada's North for over 30 years. Additionally, the company is a recognized leader in sustainable tourism.

There are 18 permits given by the Churchill Wildlife Management Area (CWMA) to explore the network of trails in this area and Frontiers North holds 12 of those permits. In the winter, they are the only company to travel across the frozen Churchill River to view the northern lights. There are a variety of tours and the Classic Churchill Polar Bear Experience is one of the most popular. It includes two full days of Tundra Buggy safaris, plus time to explore Churchill. It's a classic adventure package that combines wildlife viewing with cultural exploration.

The staff of Frontiers North also makes it stand out. Over 70% of the Frontiers North staff is Canadian with the majority of those people from Manitoba. Additionally, over 60% of the suppliers Frontiers North uses are locally-owned businesses and 33% of the Churchill suppliers are indigenous-owned business.

## Seeing the Polar Bears on a Tundra Buggy





Travelers can get very close to the polar bears when in the Tundra Buggy. JESSICA BURTNICK / FRONTIERS NORTH

The Tundra Buggy vehicle made its debut in 1979 by Frontiers North and thus a booming industry to see the polar bears in their natural habitat began. Of course, the Tundra Buggies have changed quite a bit over the years Frontiers North is slated to debut their TK sustainable launch in 2021 (or 22). Today, there are 17 Tundra Buggies in the Frontiers North fleet.

A Tundra Buggy has enormous wheels so the vehicle can maneuver on the ice and over the tundra's bumpy terrain. The Churchill Wildlife Management Area (CWMA) and Polar Bear Point lies directly within the migratory path of one of the largest polar bear populations in the world. Driving around in the Tundra Buggy is surprisingly quite comfortable (good shock absorption for sure). And even though the tundra may be quite cold, there are heaters in the vehicle. Plus, there's a bathroom facility, so travelers can be out all day viewing the polar bears without having to make stops. Each buggy also has a viewing platform on the back and the windows slide down for great video and photos.

The drivers find a strategic spot for lunch and often travelers are viewing polar bears sparring or playing while a lunch of soup and sandwiches is served within the buggy. In fact, the bears keen sense of smell often brings them close to the buggies at lunch to see what is on the menu (obviously feeding the bears is strictly prohibitive). Sometimes the bears even stand on

their hind legs and lean up against the buggies. What surprises many travelers is just how tall polar bears are. While they are about five feet tall when on all fours, they can reach almost nine feet when standing on their hind legs. The Tundra Buggy Height is almost 14 feet, so it's ideal for polar bear viewing. Most tours include two full days on the Tundra Buggy.

In addition to polar bears, which are understandable the star of the show, travelers can also spot arctic foxes, ptarmigan and other arctic wildlife.

## Exploring the Town of Churchill



The Northern Lights are often seen in Churchill. TRAVEL MANITOBA

While most people come to Churchill to see polar bears, there are plenty of other things to do in this town. In fact, it's one of the best places in the world to see the northern lights (otherwise known as the aurora borealis). The reason for this is that Churchill is located under the auroral oval, so it's possible to see the northern lights up to 300 nights a year. Those are some good odds. Check before you go to sleep at night (and check again if you

wake in the night to use the bathroom). Also, many guides will have a sign-up sheet and they will call travelers' rooms when the northern lights are viewable.

There are a variety of activities in Churchill including:



Dog sledding is a popular activity. TRAVEL MANITOBA

**A favorite excursion for just about everyone is dog sledding.**

Wapusk Adventures allows travelers to learn about the history of dog sledding as well as the philosophy of local legend Dave Daley on handling and training dogs. Then everyone gets a chance to enjoy a mile-long ride through Churchill's boreal forest.





The Polar Bear Holding Facility is where the bears wait until they can be transferred to a safer ... [+]  
TRAVEL MANITOBA

**The Polar Bear Holding Facility** is also known as the polar bear jail. It's the holding facility for polar bears who have been chased from town; they are held here for 30 days before being transferred and released north of Churchill or onto the frozen Hudson Bay (for their own protection and safety).



A visit to PBI is a great way to understand the conservation efforts underway. MADELINE GRANT / FRONTIERS NORTH

**Polar Bears International House** is well worth the visit. Travelers will learn more about polar bears around the world as well as the latest research



on the bears and how climate change is affecting their habitat. It's a great way to learn more about the polar bears and support conservation efforts.



The Itsanitaq Museum MADELINE GRANT / FRONTIERS NORTH

**The Itsanitaq Museum** holds a vast selection of Inuit carvings and artifacts dating from pre-Dorset, Dorset, Thule, and modern Inuit times. The Inuit stone, bone and ivory art depicts the cultural, spiritual and physical story of a people deeply rooted in the Arctic region.

**Parks Canada Interpretive Centre** is the place to learn about the history, culture and wildlife of or the region.

Stop at the **Canada post office** and get a "Churchill—Polar Bear Capital of the World" stamp for postcards.

## Conservation and Sustainability

"We are not just observers of ecology, we're participants in it—every time you step out of the door of your house, you have some influence on your

environments, and you have some ability to influence the world," explains Dr. Steven Amstrup, the chief scientist at Polar Bears International.

The polar bears are in trouble because of global warming. Frontiers North advocates for the wildlife, ecosystems and communities where they operate in order to share their passion and values with the travelers who will then also become stewards of protecting this land.

## How to Pack to see Polar Bears in the Arctic

Seeing the polar bears in late October and early November, means dressing for a variety of temperatures. During this time, temps can range from 9 to 29 degrees Fahrenheit and if that's not cold enough, the wind chill factor can make it seem much, much colder. The key is to layer, layer and layer. Going from the heated restaurants, buses and tundra buggy to the outdoors (windows up in the Tundra Buggy, please there's an outdoor viewing platform) means going from toasty warm to frigid cold. It's good to include a base, mid and top layer of clothing and outerwear. Snow pants, a warm parka and warm snow boots are a must (Frontiers North these items if you don't feel like lugging the gear or if you're traveling on to other destinations). Other recommended items include:

- Thermal layers
- Wool blend socks
- Warm gloves and thick gloves (for photography)
- Hat, scarf, and neck warmer
- Travel mug or reusable water bottle
- Binoculars (it's always recommended to bring your own, so you can observe wildlife as long as you want—without potentially sharing binoculars. Plus, with covid, it's smart not to share).

- Sunglasses to protect your eyes again the bright northern sunshine reflecting off the snow

Also, it's mandatory to book travel insurance when booking a Frontiers North tour. This is because travel in Canada's North can be remote and hard to access if one needs medical attention. The money spent on travel insurance is well worth the peace of mind.

## Traveling During Covid

For U.S. travelers, a negative covid test is needed to board the flight back to the States. A company called [Star Drug Testing Services](#) lets travelers sign up for the covid test in advance and the test is administered in the Churchill airport. Travelers take the test before boarding their flight to Winnipeg and get the results by the time they land. It's easy and convenient. Travelers can then board their flights to the U.S. with the negative covid test in hand.

*Check out my [website](#).*



**Judy Koutsky**

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