

## **Polar Bears of Churchill-An Excellent Adventure!**

**Monday, Nov. 4-***We (Karen Swanson and Barb Thoennes)* left Monday morning in a state of excitement about 2,000 feet higher than the altitude of the 37-passenger twin-prop plane that took us to Toronto. As anyone who has changed planes in Toronto can tell you, making the connecting flight to Winnipeg was an exercise of Olympic proportions. We had 50 minutes to retrieve all our baggage, get through customs and security, recheck our bags, and RUN to the next plane (where we then sat for 20 more minutes while they removed the bags of two people who never made it to the plane).

After a 2-1/2 hour trip on this (full-size) plane, we were met at the airport in Winnipeg by the reps for Natural Habitat Adventures, the tour company who planned our trip. They escorted us to the Fort Garry, an elegant and historic old hotel in downtown Winnipeg, where we were to spend a day and two nights. We decided to explore a nearby “mall” of small, ethnically diverse shops, food markets and eateries. The shops (and almost everything else around) closed at 6 p.m., which of course was 8 p.m. in Pittsburgh and well beyond dinnertime for us. So we set off to find one of the many restaurants we were assured were “just around the corner.” After walking several blocks and about half an hour in the windy dark we spotted a familiar sign and were happy to settle for the Italian cuisine of Pizza Hut Winnipeg. Back in our spacious hotel room, we hit our beds early in anticipation of the full complement of activities planned for Day 2.

**Tuesday, Nov. 5-**We strolled into the beautiful hotel restaurant bright and early (6:30 a.m.) for an excellent buffet of hot and cold selections, omelets and French toast made to order, fresh-squeezed O. J., and HUGE bowls of blueberries and raspberries. At 8 a.m. we met our tour guide for the day and the 11 other people from our group who had arrived a day early for this extra day in Winnipeg. We traveled about an hour north of the city to the Oak Hammock Marsh, a 9,000 acre game preserve and marshland with a

wonderful research and education center built of “tindle stone”, a type of limestone abundant in the area that blends in beautifully with the natural surroundings. The roof of the building was in several different but flat levels, much of it planted in grasses and vegetation to accommodate nesting birds. The marsh is a prime “birding area” directly on the flyway, although by this time in November most of the birds had left the area (We did see geese, eagles, white pelicans, and muskrats!) It was a beautiful sunny day with fresh snow on the ground, so Karen took the outdoor-guided walk while Barb stayed in the building to shop and explore. We saw a movie about the marsh and were treated to a private lunch. On our return bus trip to Winnipeg, our very knowledgeable and entertaining guide gave us a history lesson about the area (ask Barb about the hay bales). Back in Winnipeg, we went to their wonderful Museum of Man for a whirlwind highlight tour that was much too short-we could have spent hours there just looking at the beautiful wildlife dioramas.

At a private and excellent dinner in our hotel, we met the rest of our 19-member group (most of them zoo docents) who had just arrived that afternoon-several from Philadelphia, a couple from Houston, Detroit, Omaha, Seattle, Colorado and California. Excitement ran high as we were given our itinerary and then taken up to get our “cold weather gear”. We decided that our own Pittsburgh Zoo docent parkas were as warm (or warmer) than those offered by the tour group, so we only took the heavy boots with liners (not realizing how much we would need them.!)

**Wednesday, Nov. 6-**After another fabulous breakfast, we all boarded the bus for the airport and our flight to fantasy. Our plane (Calm Air) was another 37-passenger prop job, but an older model and REALLY noisy. Fortunately, the weather was sunny and beautiful (the day before, there were blizzards in Churchill). We spent the next three hours watching the ground below us turn more and more snowy and less and less navigable. The only constant trail was the

railroad track we seemed to be following. The train from Winnipeg takes 3 days (maybe) to reach Churchill, depending on the condition of the tracks. The train doesn't run in the winter when the tracks heave from the permafrost layer, so air travel is pretty much the only option (and a commercial flight from Winnipeg to Churchill runs a cool \$1500).

When we landed at Churchill Airport, it was VERY windy and COLD, but sunny and WONDERFUL!! We boarded yet another bus for a (very) short tour of the "town" before going to lunch and then the Seaport Motel. Churchill has a population of 800 people with one main street and no traffic signals. (If you've ever watched "Northern Exposure" and its town of Cicely, Alaska, you've seen Churchill, Manitoba!) All the buildings' and houses' doors open inward and remain unlocked so people can get inside should they experience a close encounter with a Great White Bear. The last fatal (to the human) encounter was about 20 years ago, but bears still wander into town, and "Polar Bear Alert" signs are posted everywhere. Our hotel room was comfortable, clean and warm, unlike some of the other rooms among our group that had no heat the first night we stayed! Everyone HAD to have a photo taken with the formerly real polar bear now standing in the hotel lobby. We had lunch at Gypsy's, a little deli and bakery of local renown and one of about three eating establishments in town. Some of the group opted for a 2-1/2 hour helicopter tour that afternoon (did we mention it was VERY windy and COLD?), while the rest of us took off to shop and explore before our evening tundra buggy tour. Our jackets and boots were plenty warm, and in our limited shopping time each day we valiantly supported the economy of Churchill.

Although technically Churchill is in the equivalent of the U.S. Mountain Time zone, it has another time difference- it's called "Churchill time". In other words, one can plan to do something at a certain time, but it might happen later or maybe not at all. Clocks are for the visitors, not the residents. Even so, we managed to get off relatively on time around

4:30 for our bus trip out to the tundra buggy dock and an evening "bear watch". The tundra buggies are vehicles built on a fire engine chassis with 6-foot high tires and bus-like bodies installed on them. They are heated and quite roomy and everyone had their own window! We headed out on the tundra toward a research "camp" of three big trailers where a camcorder documents the bears continually. Sure enough, there we found them, three bears in all, up close and personal. We were instructed to be very quiet-not an easy task as one bear ambled over to stand up just below our opened windows. "Elbows in," was the call from our guide-those beautiful teddy bear faces are extremely dangerous. We watched, silently OOOOHing and AAAAHing, and as the bear moved around to the back of the buggy, we all spilled out onto the outdoor deck. It was a cold place to be but a great vantage point. Our bear moved a short distance from the buggy to join the other two bears, and as they investigated each other (and a couple little arctic foxes), we enjoyed a full course dinner inside our buggy, including wine and appetizers, lasagna, salad and dessert! We were also treated to a fascinating showing of the aurora borealis, or Northern Lights. Because the sky was a bit hazy, we couldn't see their often-brilliant colors-they were mainly a glowing, phosphorescent greenish-white. But they flickered and danced for most of our trip back to the tundra buggy station. The legend of the lights is that they "hold the souls of those who have gone before us." All in all, a wonderful start to our adventure.

**Thursday, Nov. 7-**After another great buffet breakfast, we took the bus out to the tundra buggy dock to watch the bears in the daylight. On the way we saw red fox, arctic hare, arctic fox, and ptarmigan-not a bad start. This tundra land was originally used for rocket practice by American troops and was eventually given to Canada (2.5 million acres). Although the buggies sometimes seemed to wander in circles and meander aimlessly, they were actually traveling over "roads" that they followed in order to protect the natural flora and fauna. It was even more windy this day, and the bears were wisely holed up in snow drifts where they made "day

beds” to keep out of the wind. We spotted three single bears at different locations (male bears don’t generally associate with each other except at this time of year, and they usually travel alone). Our buggy driver moved to within 10 feet of one bear, and as we watched he lifted his head as if to say, “What are you, crazy? It’s cold and windy out there.1” He laid his head back down in the snow and huffed, but we got some good pictures of him before moving on to another sleeping giant. Our guide kept assuring us what great pictures we’d get when he stood up and shook the snow off so we waited, watched, ate lunch on the buggy, and watched some more for a total of about three hours-and he NEVER so much as looked up. (We found out later from other buggy groups that he never did get up that day.) Lesson number one: polar bears don’t like wind.

On our way back in, we had to rescue the passengers of a buggy that had become stuck in the ice and snow. We pulled up to their deck and transferred them directly onto our deck (lesson number two: you NEVER climb out of your vehicle down onto the ground while out on the tundra). Fortunately, our driver, Everett, was an ace who maneuvered that monster vehicle around on some pretty treacherous ground and never once got stuck.

Back to town for more economy supporting, and then our first dinner in our motel. That casual-looking little dining room served some fine cuisine, including Arctic chard (whitefish) broiled or blackened, steak, Caribou stew, Mediterranean chicken, and a vegetarian pasta meal, with a scrumptious selection of desserts from Gypsy’s. After dinner we piled onto our faithful shuttle bus for a 3-block ride to the town’s community center, one very large building that contained the elementary school, high school, hospital, gymnasium, hockey rink, movie theater, library, and just about every other activity in town. In one of the classrooms we watched a slide show presented by our tour guide (a professional photographer often published by World Wildlife of his own polar bear pictures. The program was educational and absolutely

gorgeous. Of course, he uses a telephoto lens that requires its own seat on an airplane.

**Friday, Nov. 8**-Lesson number three: bears like it sunny and calm-and today they got it! The weather was beautiful all day, and we were able to watch and photograph three bears wrestling, standing up at the buggies, rolling in the snow, and play fighting (right now it’s play; when the females come out of their dens in the spring, the guys will fight for real). It was a truly awesome sight-today the hours seemed like minutes. We watched, snapped photos, had lunch while we watched, and just watched some more. Two of the bears ventured out onto the ice where the Bay was frozen near the shoreline, and we followed them to the edge of the ice. They pounded through the thick ice with their forelegs, dragged big glops of kelp out of the water and ate it like salad, then settled down to nap. We decided to go exploring and came upon another bear, this time a young and shy fellow. We didn’t get very close before he retreated into the willows (which are more like bushes than our trees). We took the long and scenic route back to the buggy dock so we could stop along the way and photograph the wildly barren and beautiful landscape.

After another wonderful dinner, including comedy, vocals, and guitar music by the local singing waiter, our increasingly weary little band was bused up to a tiny Anglican church for a narration of the history of Churchill by one of its long-time residents. Though the presentation was interesting, heads were bobbing like ducks on a pond as we all fought valiantly to stay conscious. Finally, at the end of a VERY good day, we hit the sack with BIG smiles on our faces. We had seen our bears.

**Saturday, Nov. 9**-We celebrated our last morning in the Arctic with a group breakfast at Gypsy’s, then a couple hours of last minute shopping, including a visit to the Eskimo Museum. Some of the group scheduled rides on the dog sled (although we heard on the last trip that went out, the dogs all lay down in the snow and went on strike). We all had lunch at the Trader Inn, one of the other two eating places in town (does it seem like all we did was eat all

week?), then headed to the airport. On the way we stopped at the compound known as the Polar Bear Jail, a holding tank for the “bad bears” who come into town or cause a threat in the area. They’re kept at the “jail” until they can be transferred to zoos and other animal parks. (We were told that, other than those who were born in captivity, most of the polar bears in zoos in this country have come from the Churchill area.) The seven bears who had been in the jail were released the day before we left, so it was empty. Another three-hour flight on the twin-prop, but we sat in the back this time where it wasn’t quite as noisy. Returning to the Fort Garry in Winnipeg, we turned in our boots, had dinner with some of our new docent friends from Philadelphia, and said our goodbyes. The trip was over, except for the journey home-which turned out to be another trip in itself.

**Sunday, Nov. 10-**After some final shopping at the airport and ingenious packing of overstuffed

carry-ens, we left Winnipeg a little late due to some mechanical problems and de-icing. Of course, that meant we missed our connecting flight from Toronto to Pittsburgh. After MUCH moving from one airline’s desk to another’s, we finally got booked on a flight with United to get home via Chicago. We sat on THAT plane for over an hour due to severe thunder and lightning until the crew was no longer eligible to fly, and the flight was cancelled. After lots more waiting in lines, we had to re-book for the next morning and were put up in a hotel in Winnipeg. We got about four hours sleep before heading back to the airport to stand in more lines, customs and security (where they searched ALL our check-in luggage and carry-ons) for two hours, before finally catching our 70-minute flight back to Pittsburgh. Lesson number four: if you have to change planes in Toronto, rent a car instead-it’s guaranteed to get you home faster.

### Personal notes:



*I took this picture on our first day out. It's the only one we saw "uncovered" because it was -20 and windy. I call it "shy bear". Barb Thoennes*

I really didn't know what to expect on this trip, but I assure you, all of my excitement was justified. The people on this trip were fun; the guides were very knowledgeable; and the memories, well, I will never forget the first photo I took of a living, wild polar bear. He looked right at me before sticking his head back into the snow. He did look up a few more times, but that first one was the best.

*Barb Thoennes*

This trip was the fulfillment of a dream that began years ago, and I was not disappointed. Watching that first bear ambling toward us on our first night out on the tundra was the thrill of a lifetime. The sight of his beautiful big face in my camera viewfinder brought me to tears (which I only admit to fellow animal lovers!) In fact, one of the best things about the trip was sharing it with people who understood the thrill. I would definitely recommend AZAD trips to other docents.

*Karen Swanson*