

BUGGIN' OUT

ASSOCIATE EDITOR RACHELLE MACKINTOSH TACKLES THE TUNDRA OF SUBARCTIC CANADA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY RACHELLE MACKINTOSH
INSTAGRAM @MACKS_WELL_SMART

It's so quiet on the permafrost you could probably hear a pin drop – or a polar bear bottom-burp. And that's exactly what happens. Twelve of us are pressed up against the tundra buggy's windows, watching a lady bear put on an Attenborough-worthy show of rolling around... when she lets one rip without so much as a "pull my claw". We snigger like nine year olds. Surreal, much?

You bet. Here in Churchill, on the icy banks of Hudson Bay in subarctic Canada, it feels like I've travelled to the very edge of the earth. To get here, I flew from Sydney to Vancouver (14 hours) then on to Winnipeg (three hours). I stayed overnight, then got up early for the two-hour flight north. But I'm too invigorated for a nanna nap – exploring the wilderness is my passion, so I'm in my element here.

It's late autumn; snow is falling intermittently, the 30km/h winds are whistling and the temperature's swinging between -2°C and -18°C (quite tropical compared to winter, when temps can dip as low as -30°C plus windchill). I've layered up in merino and goose down, but nothing could've prepared

WINN & GRIN

On your way to Churchill you'll need a stopover in Winnipeg to pick up a connecting flight. Stay a few days and...

FUEL UP with a guilt-free vegan feed at Boon Burger Cafe (try the Wolsley Burger, made from grilled black beans).

SWEAT IT OUT with a Nordic hike at FortWhyte Alive; or get bendy at Yoga Public, Canada's biggest studio.

THEN RECOVER with a hamam treatment (aka a luxe Turkish bath) at the plush Fort Garry Hotel; or try the traditional Indigenous Hot Stone Massage at the Riverstone Spa for instant bliss.

me for this arresting, monochrome view. Flat, featureless, white and grey in every direction, there's nothing much to catch your eye – until a bear's camouflage slips and it reveals itself, all loping strides of white on white.

Countless bears appear like this during my three-night stay on the tundra. Churchill's known as The Polar Bear Capital of the World because, every autumn, at least 850 of them head to the Hudson Bay area to wait for the sea ice to freeze (they spend spring to autumn hunting seals and mating, and winter raising cubs in snow caves). Frontiers North Adventures' Tundra Buggy Lodge is smack-bang in the middle of the action, hosting up to 40 guests each night in toasty bunks. We spend our days exploring the tundra in buggies that'd look at home on Jupiter – they're massive, with 1.7m-high wheels, built-in fireplaces and open rear decks where we can step outside for clear views.

The buggies take us up close to the bears so we don't ever set foot on the ground – which is handy as they can weigh up to 600kg and clock speeds of up to 40km/h over short distances. (FYI, Usain Bolt hits around 44km/h. Bears are fast.) Two nights in a row, one tries to raid the lodge's kitchen, almost ripping the door off its hinges in the process. Big guy, too – his paw prints are a whopping 36cm wide. The lodge is too well built for us to have been in any danger,



but this break-in attempt highlights the effect of climate change on the bears' behaviour. There's less ice these days, so they have less access to ringed seals, their primary food source.

While my trip to Churchill was all about the bears from the outset, I'm surprised by just how much more there is to this experience. It's the most unique holiday I've ever had and, even though it crams in a stack of action, it's one of the most relaxing. The silence of the tundra is so complete it's kind of hypnotic – it's impossible to feel stressed in this environment. And though I spend most of my time searching for the huge furies, other intriguing locals like willow ptarmigans, arctic foxes, gyrfalcons and snowshoe hares also make welcome cameos.

Off the tundra, the tour includes a visit to the town of Churchill, where the Eskimo Museum showcases local Inuit artefacts and the Tundra Inn's vego curry is tasty-as (but if you're in the market for a mega carb fix, check out the poutine at Gypsy's Bakery & Restaurant). Burn it off with a dog-sledding jaunt at Wapusk Adventures, just outside of town. The sledding track is only slightly shy of 2km but, while it's no Iditarod, the quick sprint is through stunning boreal forest and the dogs almost jump out of their fur with excitement. Exhilarating.

Although I take 3500 photos during my short stay, the highlight of the trip couldn't be caught on camera (thank you, freezy-shaky fingers). One night at the lodge, at about 9pm, faint Northern Lights are giving the sky a green tinge when two polar bears come right up to the bunkhouse, stand on their hind legs and start sparring like teenage boys. As bears rarely make any vocal noise, the whole scene unfolds with only the playful crunch of snow under paw to break the silence. And I feel like the itsiest scrap of lint on the planet. *wh*

STAYING WARM

The cold temps can be confronting (as one bloke on the trip discovered, moccasins may look "on theme" but aren't sub-zero practical). I visited in autumn and needed four layers to stay toasty (see below). You can hire a heavy-duty parka from Frontiers North when you arrive.



merino base



merino mid-layer



short goose-down jacket



big goose-down parka



snow boots

MACKINTOSH WAS A GUEST OF THE CANADIAN TOURISM COMMISSION. CANADA TRAVEL AND FRONTIERS NORTH ADVENTURES. FRONTIERS NORTH COM. WITH THANKS TO GERRIE, CHERIE, AND THOMAS. PHOTOGRAPHERS: SNUGSACK, TONI VALDES, MICHAEL HUANG, SEBASTIAN LANGER - ALL AT THE INUIN PROJECT



SCAN HERE TO VISIT OUR GALLERY OF THE WORLD'S HEALTHIEST HOLIDAYS Download the free Netpage app to clip, save, share and more!