

The small northern outpost of Churchill is a gateway to the Arctic. It was originally a Hudson Bay Company trading post in the 1800's, where the trade was in furs, especially beaver pelts. The Hudson Bay Company built one of its original fur-trading posts at Churchill and Churchill became a stopover point for explorers searching for the fabled Northwest Passage and was instrumental in the opening of the Canadian west. Now the economy is based on conservation tourism. There are no roads leading into or out of Churchill. There was a railroad at one time, but floods washed out the tracks and the railroad is no more. Wheat was collected, delivered by the government to large container ships, and subsidized by the government, but the government stopped collecting and delivering the wheat to the ships. Individuals had to collect their own wheat and make their own shipping arrangements. The container ships would not arrive if there was no guarantee for a full load which was difficult and expensive to transport. Thus, the container ships come only very rarely. Churchill is desolation incarnate. There are a few stores and hotels on the main street but that's all there is. The only way to access it is to fly in to Churchill and when one leaves, out to Winnipeg, the major city in Manitoba province. The population is 85% indigenous people, with the Cree and Dene Indians, the Metis (those families who are descended from the half Indian and half British), and the Inuit or Eskimos. There is a terrific Inuit museum that has tiny ivory carvings. Dog sled racing is a major activity. We spent some time with the musher, the person who is the driver for the dogs. He has 30 huskies, each with its own little house. He would have taken us on a sled ride on a sled with wheels, but it was too warm for the dogs. The musher has won awards for his sled dogs. It took him 20 days and 200 miles in freezing cold weather to win an event.

Churchill is known for its large number of polar bears and beluga whales, as well as other wild-life like the Caribou, bald eagle, and other birds. The beluga whales are a major tourist attraction. They congregate in the mouth of the Churchill River where it joins Hudson Bay. More than 3000 of these small white whales spend the summer in the region and return to the Arctic in the winter. With the use of a hydrophone, you can listen to their communication with one another. The different sounds that are communicated through echolocation probably keep the whale pods together but they sure have lengthy conversations. Some of the people we traveled with spent some time kayaking and snorkeling. It's pretty cold in Churchill, so I opted to spend time whale watching by traveling in a zodiac, a rubber raft with a motor. Unfortunately, a whale turned over one of the kayaks, dumping the hapless tourist into the Churchill River. The group that snorkeled got caught in a lightning storm on the river and had to be pulled into the zodiac. I was perfectly happy, as a non-swimmer, to observe the whales.

A big attraction is the Polar Bears. Churchill is known as the Polar Bear capital of the world. The bears live on the ice, but in summer where there is no ice some of them stay on land and forage for food. They are very big, aggressive bears. There is, in fact, a polar bear jail!! Polar bears that are injured or young males that are aggressive and found rummaging through the garbage and bothering the local population get a jail sentence. It sort of reminded me of North Philly. Helicopters pick them up, tranquilize them, and keep them in a jail cell until they are calmed down. Then they are flown to a location that the bears like but that are not surrounded by people. We were not permitted to take walks on our own, especially in remote locations. We were kept together as a group, with a bear guard holding a rifle in front of the group and a bear guard in the rear with a rifle making sure no-one was

harassed by the bears. I saw 5 bears at a distance, but got a good look at them through a telescope and watched them roaming around. Mother bears dig caves into the snow and keep the cubs with her during the winter. She gorges on food during the summer and can go several months without eating, while protecting her cubs.

A good way to see a variety of wild life is the Polar Rover, a big vehicle with gigantic tires that can traverse the tundra. We saw arctic foxes, large gulls, and caribou. The Northern Studies Center where scientists are researching the Arctic environment and sustainable resource development, was initially a fort during the 1950's doing atmospheric research with rockets in conjunction with the army. The research station was eventually closed down because the army left so there was no money to perpetuate the station and the technology was old fashioned and thus there was no longer need for the rockets. Now, one of the remaining buildings is used as an educational center for college kids to learn about the Arctic. However, it is very expensive to fly to the environs of Churchill and there is a decrease in students coming to the educational center due to the expense.

There were 13 people, including us, on the trip. They were all terrific, including two young teenage girls who were there with their grandparents. I really enjoyed this trip because it not only gave us a perspective on the sub-Arctic but also was interesting culturally. I think the kids would enjoy it. I am also attaching a live stream video of the whales and their conversations.

There is a zodiac on the water with a camera- the remainder of the beluga season will be livestreamed. Every day at high tide, there is a boat that livestreams both above and below the water. They will replay highlights when the tide is not in. Click on the link to see our lovely whales!

<https://explore.org/livecams/beluga-whales/beluga-boat-cam-underwater>