

# AN ARCTIC ADVENTURE



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PHOTOS BY DINA ALTHARDT & JEFFREY P. BONNER, Ph.D.

I DO NOT LIKE COLD WEATHER. I ENJOY A WHITE, SANDY BEACH WITH WARM SUNSHINE AND CRYSTAL-CLEAR WATER. IF YOU HAD ASKED ME SIX MONTHS AGO WHAT MY LIST OF TOP FIVE “MUST-VISIT” DESTINATIONS WAS, THE ARCTIC WOULDN’T HAVE EVEN RANKED. SURE, THE ARCTIC HAS POLAR BEARS, BUT IT’S COLD THERE—REALLY COLD.

Though I am not a fan of frigid temperatures, an opportunity to accompany Dr. Jeffrey Bonner on a trip to Churchill, Manitoba, to see polar bears in the wild presented itself. Obviously, I could not pass it up. And because of that opportunity, everything has changed for me.

## CHILLY CHURCHILL

Churchill is a tiny town in northern Canada that was established by the Hudson Bay Trading Company as an outpost for the various indigenous peoples. Churchill’s primary industry is tourism, with thousands of visitors each year arriving to view the wildlife and plant life that thrive on the icy waters of the Hudson Bay and the Churchill

River. The town is home to roughly 1,000 people year-round, as well as over 3,000 beluga whales in the summer and hundreds of polar bears in the fall, when they congregate to wait for the ice to form in the Bay. During my visit I felt as if I was in a part of the world that was nearly untouched.

After arriving in Churchill and getting a tour of the town—complete with red, cross and Arctic fox sightings—we were off to visit the Polar Bear Holding Facility (the temporary home to bears who have ventured into town looking for food.) The town of Churchill has a Polar Bear Alert program, complete with Polar Bear Patrols who monitor the bears to reduce conflicts with humans. Bears are typically deterred from coming into town through



Dog sled team



TO KNOW THAT THERE WAS A REAL BEAR RIGHT WHERE WE WERE STANDING—MAYBE JUST A FEW HOURS BEFORE US— WAS TRULY EYE-OPENING.



Churchill landscape



Polar bear

aversive conditioning or various non-lethal methods (including rubber bullets or loud “cracker shots” to scare them away) before being humanely trapped or sedated and transferred to the holding facility, located on the outskirts of town. Bears are tagged and released further north by helicopter. While we weren’t allowed into the facility, we did see a set of bear tracks leading up to a drainage pipe from one of the holding areas currently housing a bear. To know that there was a real bear right where we were standing—maybe just a few hours before us—was truly eye-opening.

After lunch at a quaint bakery in town, we were treated to an afternoon of dogsledding with a team of mushers who gave us a lesson on the history and art of dogsledding before introducing us to the pack of dogs and allowing each of us a ride with the dogs. Witnessing the strong relationships the mushers had with their dogs—and the dogs with each other—was quite special, leaving me

with a true appreciation and respect for the sport.

### POLAR BEAR SIGHTINGS

The second day started with a three-hour, 100-nautical mile helicopter excursion as well as a visit to an abandoned polar bear den. From the helicopter, we were able to see all of Churchill as well as the Hudson Bay and the Cape Churchill Wildlife

Management Area. In addition to some gorgeous landscapes, we saw many moose, including several mothers with their young and a large herd of bull moose. And then...our first polar bear! I will never forget seeing this majestic animal against the pristine, white snow. Even from the helicopter, the size and beauty of this animal was extraordinary. In all, we saw close to 40 polar bears that day—some mothers with cubs, some individuals and in one spot, seven large male polar bears all lined up on the edge of the bay sleeping, waiting for the freezing ice to give them an opportunity to hunt for seals.

The last two days were spent on a Tundra Buggy®, a specially designed all-terrain vehicle that enables guests to safely view tundra wildlife in their natural environment. Our first sighting of a bear from the buggy was a mother with her cub. Through the flakes of snow, we watched her walk across

the ice of a small lake with her cub closely behind her. To see a bear is a treat in itself, but seeing a mother and a young cub against the falling snow was almost unreal. I had to keep reminding myself to step away from the camera and take this moment in because it was really happening.

### LIFE-CHANGING TRIP

I lost count of how many bears we saw in total, but each bear we encountered was special in its own way. Seeing a mother bear walk her tiny cub right next to my buggy window brought me to tears. She was so trusting and curious, and her cub was intently watching his mama to make sure he followed her lead. The large male bear who came right up to the back of our buggy and stood staring at us for what seemed like eternity was equally moving. All 18 of us on the tour walked out to the open deck and quietly

WANT TO HAVE YOUR OWN ARCTIC ADVENTURE?

You can visit Churchill with your own Saint Louis Zoo guide! Call Ali Kochtanek at (314) 646-4823 for more information or to reserve your space on the October 23 to 28, 2014 Polar Bear Adventure. Space is limited!



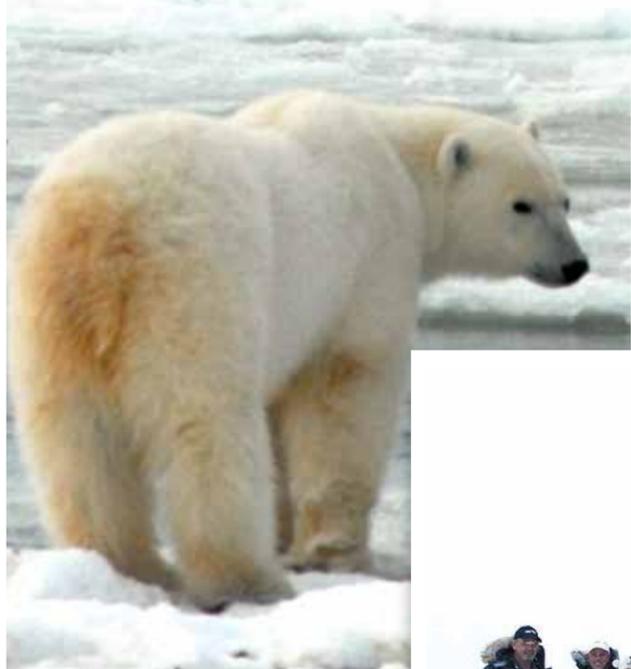
I COULDN'T HELP BUT FEEL A STRONG SENSE OF CONNECTION TO THIS BEAR AND A RESPONSIBILITY TO DO WHATEVER I COULD TO ENSURE HIS FUTURE ON THIS PLANET.



Polar bear and cub

## MISS SEEING POLAR BEARS AT THE ZOO?

Have no fear—our frosty friends will soon return to the Saint Louis Zoo! Opening in 2015, McDonnell Polar Bear Point is currently under construction and will more than double the size of our previous polar bear exhibit. Soon you will be able to see polar bears swimming about through an underwater viewing window. The exhibit will also feature a zookeeper interaction area where you can get an up-close look as keepers work with these majestic animals.



Polar bear



Gyrfalcon



Bull moose

to do whatever I could to ensure his future on this planet.

Locking eyes with a polar bear changed me. I now analyze almost every action I take and consider the effect it will have on the planet and its creatures. I love and appreciate the cold weather, ice and snow a little more. And I take every opportunity to educate my 2-year-old on the importance of conservation. But perhaps the most impactful experience I had upon my return to St. Louis was sharing polar bear stories with my son who said, "I wanna go see polar bears, too!" That small request has left me with a great obligation to protect this species and many others so that they are here for future generations. Because our children, and their children, deserve the opportunity I was given, too.

Everyone does. ■



Group next to a Tundra Buggy®

recorded video and snapped pictures as this exquisite creature sniffed the air and surveyed us. As I gazed back at him, wondering what he was thinking, I couldn't help but feel a strong sense of connection to him and a responsibility



Polar bear