

TRAVELABROAD



A dog-karting (or in winter, sledding) experience is a must



Summer in the Tundra

Irina Birnie finds a little piece of Scotland in the Tundra, with wildlife, kayaking and skies that seem to go on forever



From my vantage point in a kayak at the mouth of the Churchill River, I can see the northern boundary of the boreal forest, and vibrant colours of the tundra on either shore.

The water is alive with beluga whales, gathering here in their thousands for a few weeks each year to give birth, and to feed on the marine life which flourishes in summer.

'Any luck?' shouts my guide, asking if I've managed to touch one of our playful and curious companions. Answer negative, so he glides up alongside, and in no time has whales trailing us, showing off, and within easy reach. (In case you're wondering, they feel squidgy, a bit like jelly.)

I've come to spend a few days on the western shores of the Hudson Bay, in the town of Churchill - not only reputed capital of belugas and polar bears, but also, during summer months, an area alive with the colours and sensations of the tundra and a hot spot for birding.

Whale-watching opportunities aren't limited to kayaking here; for those keen on getting down under with these friendly creatures, don a wet suit,

*This is how we were taught
The land is not something you own
Land is a gift you use to live
Protect it and look after it'*
Chief Vera Mitchell, Poplar River First Nation

son Bay, was the last stopping point for supplies before ships headed west. Local people became valued not only for their ability to survive a harsh environment and mix with indigenous peoples, but also for being less prone to drink than southerners.

Back in town at the Parks museum, I find further links with a resident closer to home: the renowned John Rae, former doctor-turned-explorer from Kirkwall, and learn that his bicentennial is being celebrated this year in Orkney.

Once again I'm struck by the triumphs and sorrows shared by both communities - even the roots of the towns' names are in common: Kirkwall, Churchill.

At the Eskimo Museum, a poster explains that the 'Peterhead boat', originally used for whaling, became popular with Inuit trappers and traders. And there is a whole vocabulary around the traditional kayak, including a word for that special tranquillity which comes from being on the water, so difficult to describe - a peace called 'stanaq'.

Don't miss an outing to Seal River, a three-hour trip up the Bay to explore creeks for whales and polar bears.

Not long ago I thought that Buchan did 'big skies' - but skies over the Hudson Bay are vast by comparison, accommodating a multitude of weather fronts at once.

Summer visitors may be lucky enough to spot a polar bear or two swimming, or just browsing around the water's edge. But if you want the full polar bear experience, it's best to visit in October and November, when bears head back out into the Hudson Bay in their thousands to hunt for seals. Unique local tundra vehicles, designed to move smoothly on snow and ice, are used to protect passengers from curious or hungry bears.

It was in one of these 'arctic crawlers' that we explored the rocky terrain of the tundra in summer. The crawlers offered big vistas over glacier-sculpted rocks at the edge of the Bay, purple-pink fireweed and mirror-clear pools scattered across the landscape. Binoculars are a must, and if you're lucky, you might see an arctic fox, ptarmigan or polar bear here, as well as Canada geese and snow geese. Trips ashore to Cape Merry (a battery built to provide additional protection at the river mouth), as well as Fort Prince of Wales,



Don't wander too far - polar bears have no natural enemies and therefore no fear

allowed opportunities to find beauty in the detail of some of the 400 native plant species - blousy avens, orchids, crowberries - and an array of colourful lichens and mosses spattered across the rocks.

But don't be tempted to wander far unaccompanied: polar bears have no natural enemies and therefore no fear, so it pays to be wary of their possible presence at all times.

The warmth, food and ambience of my accommodation at Lazy Bear Lodge, left little space for the bannock generously provided by Gerald's wife Jenafor Azure. 'Bannock as in Selkirk?' I enquire, since the Selkirk settlers did indeed pass this way, en route to the Red River Colony (now Winnipeg).

But no, this was traditional musher's bannock, as eaten in the trapping and fishing communities.

The jury's out on that one, as the loaves bear a striking resemblance to each other.

Either way, I came away from my northern experience feeling there is much we could learn from indigenous peoples.

Travel facts

Irina Birnie was a guest of Lazy Bear Lodge, Churchill, Manitoba

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