

POLAR BEAR

CAPITAL OF THE WORLD

By: Ted Cookson

Photo by Ellen Hochman

"Bear with me," joked "Stu" Kelsey, our driver/guide, as he slowed to navigate a rocky patch on the unpaved track leading from Churchill, Manitoba to the shore of Hudson Bay. We were sitting comfortably in a massive 48-seat, butane-heated tundra buggy while en route to view the annual autumn polar bear migration. After spending one night at the gateway city of Winnipeg on 21 October, we had flown north on a 40-seat Hawker Siddeley prop jet from Winnipeg to Churchill early the next morning.

Billed as the polar bear capital of the world, Churchill, with a population of 1,500, is accessible both by air and via the Hudson Bay Railway. The 1,000-mile/1,600-km-long rail line was completed across the permafrost in 1929 by a crew of 3,000. Today, because the 36-hour train journey consumes a full two nights and one day in each direction, many tourists feel that the 2 3/4-hour, 650-mile/1,045-km one-way flight is a more desirable transportation option.

Discovered in 1619 and the site of a Hudson's Bay Company fort constructed in 1688, Churchill grew into a fur-trading port.



polar bear can weigh from 775 to 1,500 pounds (352 to 682 kg) and reach a length of 6 feet to 10 feet (1.8 to 3.0 m). The adult female polar bear is smaller, weighing from 330 to 550 pounds (150 to 250 kg) and reaching a length of 5 feet to 8 feet (1.5 to 2.5 m).

Polar bears range across the Arctic regions of Canada, Alaska, Greenland, Norway and Russia where they hunt the ringed seal, the most common seal in the Arctic. It is estimated that the current world polar bear population is about 25,000.



Then, after construction of the railway some 75 years ago, much of the wheat grown in Saskatchewan and Manitoba was exported via the port of Churchill to Europe, Africa and beyond. In fact, Churchill was once one of the largest grain-exporting ports in the world. Nowadays, tourism plays a significant role in the economy since Churchill lies astride a polar bear migration route.

During the 45 minutes that it took Stu to drive our tundra buggy from Churchill out to the shore of Hudson Bay, he conveyed much information about polar bears to the participants in our group tour.

The Latin name of the polar bear is *Ursus maritimus* or 'sea bear.' The youngest of eight bear species, the polar bear is thought to have evolved some 200,000 years ago from the brown bear. The world's largest land predator, the powerful and heavily-insulated polar bear is well-adapted for Arctic survival. The adult male

and also keen senses of hearing and eyesight. Their small ears and small tail help prevent heat loss.

Polar bears are excellent swimmers and have been known to swim as far as 60 miles (96 km) without resting. In fact, the bears' massive forepaws, measuring up to a foot in diameter, are partially webbed to assist in swimming. Polar bears' fat layer, some 3 to 4 1/2 inches (8 to 11 cm) thick, both provides insulation against the cold and increases buoyancy in the water.

Female polar bears normally give birth to two cubs. While mating occurs in the spring, delayed implantation doesn't take place until the fall which is also when the female bear digs her maternity den in a snow bank. Infant polar bears, covered with white

