



Polar attraction

The little town of Cochrane might be a one-trick pony, but what a trick it is, as visitors get to mingle and even swim with polar bears.

TEXT LUCY CORNE



Canadian Tourism Commission

It was my debut polar bear sighting and what an encounter it was – her seemingly grinning face was a little more than a foot away from mine. Luckily, between the bear's inquisitive face and my own was a thick and, what turned out to be, a very sturdy wall of glass.

We had driven for 12 straight hours to reach Cochrane, a one-horse town in Northern Ontario. It has a population of 5,500 and the nearest



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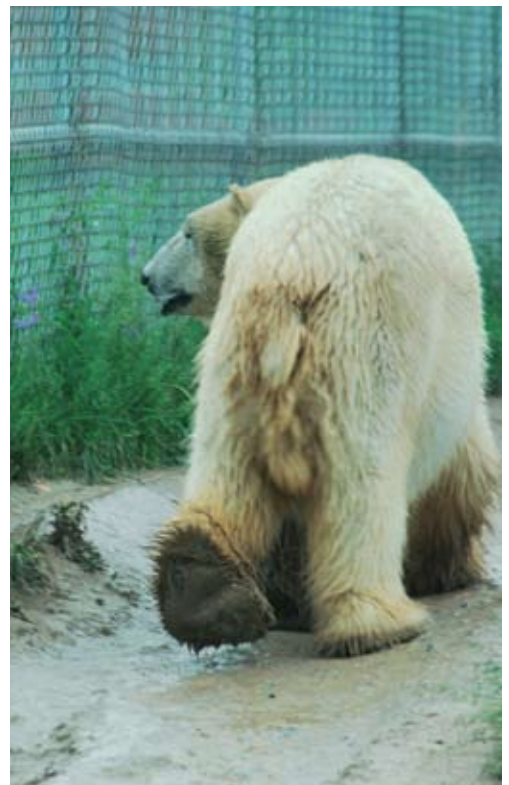


neighbouring town is more than 100 km away. The town does come across as an odd choice for a holiday, but throw one look at Cochrane's giant mascot and you'll know why anyone would want to be here.

LARGER THAN LIFE

Conspicuous installations assume centre stage on the Northern Ontario skyline – 9m-tall coins, an outsized UFO marking your arrival in the hippie-sounding town of Moonbeam, a giant snowman reminding Beardmore's residents that winter is always around the corner and of course, Chimo. Chimo – meaning *be welcome* in Cree – is Cochrane's contribution to the area's panoply. An 11m-long polar bear guards the town with a grimace and assures visitors that they have found the starting point of the Polar Bear Express. It is the scenic train connecting Cochrane to the wonderfully-named town of Moose Factory in Ontario's far north. But we were here for an even lesser-known attraction – the Polar Bear Habitat.

Following a North Ontarian night on the tiles (dinner at the only open-restaurant and a beer in our guesthouse's communal hot tub), we arose early to visit the Habitat, stopping first to kill time in the accompanying Heritage Village. It was a cute set-up



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of wooden homes, retro gas stations and streets only marginally more deserted than Cochrane’s own.

LUNCH, ANYBODY?

Soon enough, it was feeding time and we headed to the bears’ enclosure to find a crowd slowly gathering inside the Info Centre. After a briefing session, we jostled for prime views through the floor-to-ceiling windows as the keepers dropped a variety of fruit and fish into the pool on the other side of the glass. The 20-member audience – largely locals with a few wanderers thrown in – waited for the stars of the show and uttered a collective gasp of delight when an adolescent pair of bears arrived for their lunch.

I silently praised my camera’s sizable memory card as I snapped an absurd amount of photographs, capturing the bears’ clumsy underwater ballet, their surprising grace when diving for tiny morsels of food and above all, photos of their feet – wholly reminiscent of an oversized teddy bear. Outside, in a separate enclosure, ‘Nanook’ – the granddaddy of the group – paced, most likely cursing his younger, cuter counterparts for stealing his limelight. Perhaps my keenness to snap a few shots of his huge and scary, yet somehow still adorable feet, cheered him a little as he waited for his turn in the pool.

Nanook has lived at Cochrane’s Polar Bear Habitat since it opened in 2004, but has been in captivity since poachers shot his mother when he was just a cub. Now 25 years old, he’s classed as a ‘non-releasable’ bear – one who cannot fend for himself in the wild and exactly the type of animal the Habitat is created for. Welcoming polar bears from other facilities unable to care for them or bears who can no longer survive in the wild, the Habitat is more of a retiree’s home than a rehabilitation centre, though a key focus is to improve the health and quality of life of these magnificent animals.



GETTING CLOSER

A light drizzle had set in and there was a certain chill in the air, making me think twice about following through on the activity that had actually brought us to this remote corner of Canada. But the pool was calling out and I donned my swimsuit and goggles for just about the closest encounter you can have with a polar bear without fearing for your limbs. Feeding time was still going strong as we stepped into the water, only for adults. On the other side of the glass, one of the bears was diving for grapes and lettuce and from our new vantage point under water, it was like sitting inside a documentary, witnessing every movement the bears made.

Peering underwater at a polar bear induced a childlike wonder that kept us in the pool long after our wrinkled fingers and toes told us it was time to leave. The bears alternated between gliding like



sea creatures and sitting on the pool floor, looking as out of place in the water as I did. As the food petered out and the bears became less active, our fellow bathers started to drift away and all that remained were a couple of latecomers, a young girl determined to match the bears' prowess at holding their breath underwater, and us – travellers who were a long way from home and had no plans other than watching increasingly lazy bears and perhaps, glimpsing a few more enormous fibreglass models in the surrounding towns.

We savoured this unique experience a little longer, floating in our knee-deep pool as the bears floated in their far deeper version on the other side of the glass. Some might think the barrier would take away from the experience of meeting a polar bear in person, but as all other bathers trickled away leaving just the four of us – my fiancé, the two bears and me – we couldn't have felt closer to this majestic mammal. And this way, we were able to leave with all our limbs still attached. ■



QUICK FACTS

GETTING THERE

Jet Airways has daily flights to Toronto from Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai and Brussels. Cochrane is a 10-hour drive from Toronto and hiring a car works out the best, though public transport is available.

BEST SEASON TO VISIT

June to September are the best months to visit Cochrane. Many outdoor events and fests take place during these months. You might miss out on visiting select attractions as some remain closed in the long winters.

ACCOMMODATION

Cochrane has motels and guesthouses to pick from and it helps to book in advance. Toronto has plenty of options to suit all pockets. Two of the most popular hotels are: Four Seasons Hotel Toronto (www.fourseasons.com/toronto) and The Hazelton Hotel (www.thehazeltonhotel.com).

VISITING THE BEARS

The Polar Bear Habitat is open everyday from 10 am to 4 pm. Visit www.polarbearhabitat.ca for timings and address details. Entry charges are Canadian \$20 per adult and \$12 per child, with an extra fee if you wish to take a dip with the bears. The Polar Bear Express runs on weekdays and return tickets cost Canadian \$100 per adult and \$50 per child.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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