

Checking Off Bucket List Items in Churchill, Manitoba

Last November, LuAnn and I took a long-planned trip to Northern Canada. I had always wanted to see the Northern Lights (Aurora Borealis) and LuAnn had always wanted to see polar bears in the wild, so we thought we could knock off both bucket list items on a trip to Churchill, Manitoba with the Iowa Voyagers.

It began to snow hard the same day we arrived (Churchill is a two-hour plane ride North from Winnipeg, Canada), and the forecast was for several more days of the same so we weren't overly optimistic of an Aurora sighting despite being at one of the top three viewing sites on the planet.

On the bus ride from our hotel to the Churchill Wildlife Management Area for our first polar bear sighting excursion, our bus driver (who also piloted one of the "Tundra Buggies" on later excursions) acknowledged that he had already been on four full-day trips this season that had seen a total of *zero* bears. Great.

My biggest fear was that we'd spend all four days in Churchill and not see any bears or the Aurora. Later on during that same bus ride, someone claimed to have briefly sighted a red fox alongside the road. I began practicing my lame recounting for our friends upon our return: "We went to Churchill, Manitoba where one of the people on our bus claimed they saw a red fox! It was really exciting!"

Fortunately, on the two full days we spent bouncing around on the tundra next to Hudson Bay, we saw dozens of bears – it was really exciting. Polar bears are so common even within Churchill's city limits that the locals usually leave their car doors unlocked to provide quick refuge. Our tour guide had warned us not to go out after dark in groups fewer than five, because there are no documented bear attacks on groups that big or larger. I thought about that for a moment and had to ask, "how high can polar bears count, exactly?"

A CBS film crew happened to stay at the same hotel we did – they were shooting a Sunday Morning segment about the Tundra Buggy tours, which featured an extended interview with our own driver/guide, Kevin. We had several conversations in the hotel lobby with substitute *Sunday Morning* host Lee Cowan, the CBS on-air correspondent, who showed us some of his raw footage on his laptop. That segment hasn't aired yet, as far as I know.

Polar bears, check! Up next was the Aurora. Maddeningly, on our third cloudy day in a row in Churchill we had a conversation with two locals who asked us if we had seen the “spectacular” northern lights the night before. “Don't tell us that!” I exclaimed, dismayed. “We haven't been checking at night because it's been so overcast.” It turns out that it's common for the skies to clear unexpectedly.

On our last night in Churchill our tour guide offered to venture outside in zero-degree weather every half-hour to check the sky. At 3:30 a.m. our phone rang three times; the signal to bundle up and head outside. A couple members of our group were already out there, and they claimed they “might” have seen the aurora, but they weren't sure. We couldn't see much amidst the lights of “downtown” Churchill, so we headed for the edge of town two blocks away for a better view, making sure there were at least five in our group.

Coming out of the darkness ahead of us – and walking right past a polar bear warning sign - was a lone Japanese man toting a camera on a tripod. We asked him if he had seen the aurora and he replied (in pretty good English), “Oh yes, very beautiful! Here, I have picture.” On his digital camera display he showed us a stunning time-lapse photo of the Aurora that had also happened to catch a spectacular meteor trail cutting through it. I fought a sudden impulse to knock him down and steal his camera; that was as close as we came to a sighting.

Final accounting: One bucket list item out of two, it will have to do.

Writer's Group member Dave Parsons looks North after dark every clear evening, just in case.