

# **AMERICAN SAFARI**

***Overland from the polar bears  
to the penguins***

Jeroen Vogel

Books by Jeroen Vogel

*American Safari*  
*Baffling Banff*  
*In Vietnam*  
*In Australia*  
*In Britain*

**[www.writingtraveller.com](http://www.writingtraveller.com)**

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ISBN 9789402184204

Edited by Jennifer Olson ([www.jenolson.net](http://www.jenolson.net))

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# **AMERICAN SAFARI**







## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Jeroen Vogel (Hoorn, the Netherlands, 1981) is a travel writer, blogger and adventurer. Since the age of 18, he's been travelling around the world and has published six books about his journeys. In 2015 he travelled through the Americas on public transport from the polar bears to the penguins. Three years later he became the first person ever to walk "The Bryson Line" through the United Kingdom.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## IN THE LAND OF THE NORTH WIND

This train had never picked up speed during its long, bumpy journey through the vast emptiness of Manitoba. But at long last, here we were: Churchill, “The Polar Bear Capital of the World.” This northerly town was so remote that you couldn’t drive to it – there were no roads. Yet, due to its freight harbour with those monstrous grain silos clustered together into two buildings each as big as a NASA rocket hangar, the government had generously decided, many decades ago, that it needed to be reachable by train. These days, Churchill was the northernmost station on this rickety-rackety railway line.

‘I travelled for two-and-a-half days,’ said one tourist, a big man with a camera dangling from his neck and pulling a small rolling suitcase, as we stepped onto the tiny platform, ‘to be here for only one day.’ He laughed. ‘Can you believe it? Tonight I’ll be on that train again!’

He was hoping to see a polar bear in the wild. And judging from the other people with cameras, though there were only a handful of them, he was not alone in his desire. The polar bear season would start on October 1<sup>st</sup>, which was exactly one week away. From that day onward, hotel rates would soar at over \$250 a night, polar bear safaris would cost a few hundred bucks, and an all-inclusive package – flight, hotel, meals, tours – was reportedly available for the bargain price of \$5,000. Today being so close to the start of the season, that handful of people coming off the train decided to try their luck without paying such a vast amount of money. And yes, I was most definitely one of them. I wanted to see a polar bear here in Manitoba and then I would travel overland, using public transport, to Patagonia to see penguins.

‘I’ve got one day,’ he emphasized with a sigh, as though it now dawned on him that the vastness of the tundra and the individualistic nature of polar bears could at least make things slightly challenging.

‘I’ve got three days,’ I said, trying to sound optimistic.

‘That’s not a lot, either,’ he said pitifully.

‘What’s your plan to make it work?’ I asked, eager to get every piece of advice on which I could lay my hands.

He shrugged. ‘I’ll just pay someone to drive me around.’ He pulled his suitcase toward the door of the station building, behind which the visitor centre was located. ‘Anyway, wish me luck.’

‘Good luck.’

‘Same to you.’

And off he went.

I crossed a parking lot with a few tiny spruce trees; a handful of industrial halls stood scattered nearby. Walking into town under a thin, low-hanging layer of overcast, I carried my big backpack on my back and my smaller daypack on my stomach, feeling like a pack mule. Any traveller should travel light, take the bare minimum, and carry no more than one small piece of luggage. I knew that – all travel advice tells you so, and I had my previous trips to learn from. But the situation had been different this time. Previously, I left my parents’ house in the Netherlands to embark on a trip of some kind; this time, I had left an apartment in Banff, Alberta, where I had lived for two years, accumulating books, clothes, items. When you leave an apartment in exchange for your backpack, you find yourself sending things off, throwing items into the garbage. In my case, I was burning draft versions of my books in Banff’s public barbecues, and still I remained stuck with many items because they could be – for all the reasons a homebody can come up with – needed along the way. Bullshit, of course; but, in the comfort of one’s home where everything one *might* need is readily at hand, the brain doesn’t seem to be willing to admit that travel can only become more comfortable by doing the exact opposite of what one does at home. This is minimalizing, because being on the road is, obviously, the exact opposite of being at home.

In a similar fashion, instigated by that same comforting idea of having a home and a regularly paying job, I had thought of South America as a dark place. I imagined myself getting kidnapped or dying in the jungle – perhaps in Panama. At times I fantasized that my family in the Netherlands would receive that

knock on the door, hearing the sorrowful news from a local policeman – parents having to live with the death of one of their two children, a younger brother losing the older one. This sentimental feeling magnifies under the influence of alcohol. One night in Banff, I got drunk with an Australian colleague, Jason, who had lost his brother in a car crash. Now he carries his brother's name in a tattoo. 'He's always with me.' It made me think of my own brother, who also had two tattoos, and I knew he'd do the same if I came home in a coffin. In tears I gave Jason a hug, mumbling, 'That's beautiful, man.'

Pre-journey sentiments are hard to explain, even to yourself as justification once you've embarked on that trip. You think, *What was the big deal?* I dreaded my decision to bring so many items along, including a broken laptop. Walking through Churchill, I remembered what I was thinking back in Banff – *I might get it fixed somewhere*. But Banff, already, seemed like another era, a former lifetime. The decisions I'd made packing in Banff were now merely a burden. That broken laptop had to go, including other items; I knew I would start cutting down on luggage fairly soon.

Churchill, with its weathered asphalt and many buildings with wooden walls and roofs of corrugated iron, was merely a collection of about ten 300-metre long streets between Kelsey Boulevard and La Vérendrye Avenue. The town was designed to withstand the cold – a record low of  $-45.6^{\circ}$  had once been recorded in January – as one could tell from the houses that were elevated to allow for drainage pipes to be above (rather than buried in) the frozen soil. And although today was relatively comfortable at  $4^{\circ}$ , there were barely any people walking the streets. On Kelsey Boulevard, a man rode a quad – the snowmobile for days without snow – and, after turning right onto Franklin Street, I saw a man washing a pick-up truck on the gravel in front of his business. Beyond the human activity the revolved around the twice-weekly arrival of the train, they were the only ones I saw. There were a few hotels in town, all of them relatively small, and none belonged to a chain because the two tourist seasons – the beluga season in July and August and the polar bear season in October and November – were

both too short for any real potential. And that's a good thing: a town without businesses owned by shareholders – Holiday Inn, McDonald's, Travelodge, Burger King, and all of their counterparts – is often an authentic town, because when most companies are locally owned, the local mindset is represented in the products, service, and price.

'When we first mentioned to the people here in town that we were planning to open up a hostel,' said the Australian owner of the Tundra Inn hotel, 'they disapproved of our idea. They thought backpackers would not bring in any money. But I just kept saying that the bits of money that backpackers do spend, will always be more than what they would've spend if they could not afford to stay here.'

'Which, of course, is a simple fact,' I said.

An observable fact, too – her hostel was closed during the super expensive polar bear season, as the house in which it was located would then be used for staff housing. The Tundra Inn Hostel was one of the reasons why I had been able to come to Churchill. My tiny budget – man, did I worry about finances during this trip! – did not allow for a stay at one of the town's hotels. The fact that the hostel would close just before the polar bear season added to my keenness to do everything in my power to see a polar bear in the wild. Money and the right time of year made things easier; I had to do this on my own, and any tourist or traveller succeeding in doing something when chances are low is, at the very least, entitled to feel proud of himself.

There were only two other guests staying at the hostel. One of them was Aaron, from Melbourne (the irony: here, not far below the top of the world, a guy from near the bottom). He had been on the same train; we had checked in simultaneously. Aaron, who was in his late twenties, was in Canada on a working holiday visa and had given himself a week to either see the northern lights or a polar bear, but preferably both. The third guest, a short guy with a balding head, stood in the living room when we entered the house. He looked at us as though we invaded his private property, and it could very well be that being alone in such a cozy house had made him feel enough at home to forget about this house really being a hostel. His name

was Pedro, a Colombian travelling through Canada, though he had been in Churchill for a few weeks already.

‘What’ve you been doing here?’ asked Aaron, after we had introduced ourselves in the dining area.

It was a good question, surely – only people with a working life or perhaps a certain project or a fondness of nature and solitude would stay longer in a town like Churchill. Pedro answered, ‘I just wait for my visa to expire and go home. But, my friend, I feel so sorry for you.’

Aaron frowned. ‘Why?’

‘You know aurora?’ asked Pedro, and he pulled a face of superiority.

‘Sure, mate.’

‘Northern lights?’ he asked.

Aaron nodded impatiently. ‘Yes. So, what about the northern lights...?’

‘Yesterday,’ Pedro exclaimed, ‘greatest opportunity ever! My friend, the northern lights were very great last night and you missed it, but I saw it. I feel so sorry for you. My friend, I feel very sorry for you.’

I had gone through these conversations before, and you wonder what the intention is. Pedro’s English wasn’t fluent, he came from another culture – perhaps this wasn’t bragging at all, but just sharing a great experience, and did he truly feel sorry for those who’d missed out.

Aaron said, ‘I’ll be here for a week. I’m sure there’ll be another opportunity.’

I nodded in agreement – there was no need for Aaron to be discouraged on his day of arrival.

‘Not like this. My friend, I feel very, very sorry for you.’

*Not like this.* Okay, he was bragging. Trying not to burst into laughter, I walked to my 4-bed dormitory, endearingly named Beluga, to drop my luggage on the bed. I was relieved to find that Pedro slept in another room; only Aaron and I were in here.

‘What’s your plan for the day?’ Aaron asked as he entered the dorm and unshouldered his backpack.

‘Coffee,’ I laughed, while putting my camera into a pocket

of my coat. ‘And then I guess I’ll go bear spotting.’

‘I’ll join you, if that’s all right.’

‘Absolutely, mate.’

We walked past Pedro in the dining area and left the hostel. I was happy to have someone with me on this mission, although Aaron seemed as clueless as I was. Come to think of it: what did I really know about these creatures? Let’s see. I knew that the animals are extremely curious and dangerous. I knew that the population around Churchill, which is the southernmost population in the world, consists of about nine hundred animals that are solitary and non-territorial. And the latter meant that they could be anywhere. That’s all I knew. A fantastic start, right?

We had coffee in the Seaport Hotel’s dining room. It was a simple but cozy venue with a lot of wood and no more than perhaps ten tables. Two rough-looking men sat in a corner, having a beer and a not very vivid conversation. But then one wonders how much there’s left to say after having lived for – what? – decades, perhaps, in this isolated outpost. I looked out the window. A teenager cycled by with groceries, and though he was just a kid on an errand, it struck me that growing up in Churchill could easily turn a kid into an Arctic version of Mowgli. The town was so quiet and so immersed in the vagaries of the surrounding wilderness that mankind and animal coexisted in a way that went well beyond an average Dutchman’s imagination. In the Netherlands, on the first day of the new school year, teachers made sure to lay down the rules of the institution: ‘No caps in class, no teasing, no talking unless it’s your turn.’ In Churchill, I imagined teachers instructing the kids to walk in pairs to school, hide inside the nearest building when the alarm sounded – almost like in a war zone, except for these people enjoyed living here and the “enemy” was cuddly looking.

Stirring his coffee, Aaron asked, ‘Where do you want to go bear spotting?’

‘Suppose we could have a look at the Bay for starters,’ I suggested brightly.

A suggestion that showcased my cluelessness. Three days.

I remembered how many black bears I had seen in New York State, where I'd worked as a camp counsellor and taken kids out camping in the woods, over the course of three summers. Sixteen young teenagers at a time, along with their bunk counsellors, and two camping trips a week. By the end of it all, I had seen three bears: one up on a forested slope, one crossing the road four hundred metres away, and one scavenging our camp three metres from my sleeping bag – I woke up and saw this black bear nosing around; one of the boys, 12-year-old Peter, also woke up, and I placed him on my shoulders ('We'll look like a huge monster,' I whispered, 'and he'll go away'), upon which the bear got up on its hind legs and ran off the moment I stamped my right foot on the soil. Three summers, three black bears.

During my two years in Banff, I'd only seen one grizzly bear – it sat like a dog on the baseball field behind my apartment building. When you're in the vicinity of a grizzly bear, the previous encounters with black bears pale in comparison in the way your spotting a lynx gets overshadowed by encountering a tiger. It's not that you'd forget about the experience with the lynx, but the first story you'll tell about experiencing cats in the wild is the one about the tiger. And then, when that story gets old, you'll need a new one to top it ('Now, let me tell you about that day in Africa I got surrounded by five ferocious lions in need of food for their hungry cubs'). Truth be told: a grizzly bear sitting on a field of grass is not even a story; the story about waking up to a black bear three metres away from you is something that might entertain Dutch audiences for a while. I realized that I wanted a combination of the two: a good story and a good bear that featured in it. I simply wanted an adventure.

Three days...

We left the dining room and walked to the shore, where there was a warning sign with the image of a polar bear on it. Needless to say, I regarded this as a hopeful sign, and happily took a photo. We descended the wooden staircase onto the beach, a tiny stretch of sand between the coastal rocks, strewn thick with strings of brown seaweed. The Hudson Bay was just

as grey and cold-looking as the North Sea, but the water was rather tame, with only tiny waves rolling ashore.

I scanned the rocks, mumbling, 'Anything white...'

But because there wasn't a speck of hairy whiteness to be seen on – or between – the light-grey, flat rocks that stretched out along the water on both sides of the beach. It dawned on us that our standing here was a tremendous waste of time.

'We'll need local advice,' I said.

'An expert...'

We walked back into town without saying much. It was early afternoon and normally lunch time, but I couldn't be bothered. My eyes caught a huge building not far from where we were, and although I had no clue what it entailed, I impulsively said, 'I think I'm going to try in there.'

'I'll try the tour operators,' Aaron said. 'If we split up and talk to as many people as possible, we should have a fairly good idea of what to do by tonight.'

'Sounds good. I'll try the Visitor Centre later on, as well.'

'All right. See you later, mate.'

And off he went.

I liked Aaron – his attitude was perfect for our little mission. His proactive approach made me hopeful. On the road, it's always a gamble whom you end up with. I did a trip through Vietnam once with a very good friend from home, and I learned two major lessons: firstly, your favourite drinking buddy doesn't necessarily make for a fantastic travel partner (as we concluded in mutual agreement); and secondly, only when you travel by yourself is the journey truly yours. But once you have arrived somewhere, the most profound and important rule of travel comes into force: it's the people along the way that make your journey. You get to play a passing role in each other's life before moving on by yourself again. Oftentimes the other person is a local, which avoids the polite rejection necessitated by the inclination to continue alone; sometimes the other person is another traveller, and then – depending, of course, on how important solo travel is to you personally – you got to be sure to let him or her mention the next destination first, upon which you know what to do with your own travel



plan. Aaron would be framed as my man in Churchill. I didn't care about his last name, nor did I didn't want to be friends with him on Facebook. I had no desire to become involved in his life in any way; and, by the end of it, we would shake hands, wish each other good luck and move on. Perfect.

There were school kids waiting at the bus stop in front of the enormous building. In this town, clearly, they didn't want their kids to walk home after school. And rightly so – during Halloween, as kids go from door-to-door collecting candy, there's even a helicopter in the air to prevent polar bears from joining the party. This is because Churchill (as a quick search on Google shows) does have a fair track record of encounters between bears and humans, though rarely fatal. The town is well-prepared – many locals own rifles, and there's an alarm that goes off every night at 10 p.m. (as a reminder to get inside). As I entered the building, I found myself inside a large space where more kids and young teenagers were lingering. But this wasn't a school; this was the Town Centre Complex. It housed everything the locals needed beyond their homes, grocery store, school, and job. Indeed, it was their recreational centre, and I was welcomed by a wooden polar bear – hammered together with planks – with a slide coming out of its throat.

'Hi there,' said a man in a friendly tone of voice. 'Can I help you?'

'Well,' I said, 'I'm in town for a couple of days, and I was curious to see what kind of activities are being offered in here.'

I'd said this as a way to start a conversation. But before I could bring up the subject of polar bears, the man said, 'I'll show you around.'

I could only nod gratefully. There were a gym, a movie theatre, a hospital, a swimming pool, a library, and other facilities designed to keep the town people sane during the long winter months. If I were one of them, I would probably try and get a job at the Town Centre Complex and spend most of my spare time in there, too. Nothing inside the building was big: the gym was a small room, the pool – now devoid of users – only had three or four lanes, and the library – well, let me just say that the lady behind the desk seemed rather disturbed when

I opened the door after the tour and had a look at the book collection. As we walked through the building, passing the portraits of local legends, I mentioned to the kind man that the part making up the hospital seemed so big in comparison with this small town's needs.

'Yes, because it also serves communities that are even more remote than Churchill. I mean like, right now, there's a group of people in town from a native community up north that has just been flown in to receive proper dental treatment, for example.'

And not only that. Even when a passenger on a Lufthansa flight needed urgent medical care, the hospital at Churchill was chosen. There had been no need to continue onward to Winnipeg, the big city.

'What brings you to Churchill?' the man asked.

*Thank you!*

'Polar bears, of course. But the tours don't seem to be running yet, so I'm actually looking for an alternative way to make this happen.'

'Renting a car would be your best bet,' he said. I was happy to hear this rather than a discouraging comment. 'Just don't get out of the car. They're the most dangerous bears in the world. The Visitor Centre at the train station would be the best place to get information and advice.'

Not much later, I was the only visitor at the Parks Canada Visitor Centre, located inside the 1929 railway station building. In a way, it was remarkable that I found it open. I mean, many places around the world shut their visitor centres down (or at least limit their opening hours) in the off-season, when there aren't enough tourists around to conduct any profitable hotel and tour bookings. Even the handful of people getting off the train this morning didn't seem to wholly justify this place being open. But, to the credit of the good people of Canada, it was; I walked around with a sense of awe. There were a polar bear den, pelts, a tepee, stuffed animals of the area, a polar bear skin, and information signs that introduced the novice visitor to this empty, barren region's surprisingly interesting and captivating history, culture, and nature. One of the many signs said, "For

countless generations, Cree, Dene, and Inuit peoples have inhabited this territory and known the rhythm of the seasons. Long before Europeans stepped ashore here the people travelled and traded, hunted, told stories, made peace and war, and worshiped the Creator. They were the first people in the land of the north wind.”

I read that last sentence again. *In the land of the North wind*. And I thought of windy Tierra del Fuego, not so much the land of fire as the land of the South wind. Windswept tundra on both sides of this enormously long landmass, and jungle and desert and mountains in between. And here there were the Inuit, and along the way I would most certainly bump into Mayas, for example. Suddenly, I realised what the real significance of this journey was – the Americas, and the people that made the Americas so unique. Polar bears and penguins were on other continents. I remembered that I had merely focused on a feature from the northern hemisphere and its southern hemispherical counterpart without giving much consideration to the fact that the demographic element of such a trip would be one of the most enriching ones. But initially this journey was about the native people – I wanted to meet them and record their stories. Yet, as departure day drew closer and my actual funds materialized, the focus shifted promptly to purely a north-to-south trip, from the polar bears to the penguins on public transport, without further meaning, just because, but it dawned on me that using the Americas as the intended background would not happen: they became the foreground, the décor, of this very journey.

‘How are you today?’ asked a voice.

I turned around and looked into the bearded face of a Parks Canada employee. His name badge told me that this was Mike. And that bearded, friendly face was just perfect to the stereotyping of remote, wild Churchill. The subject of the conversation turned quickly to the animals. In Mike’s experience, he said in a friendly lecturer’s tone of voice, there were always visitors who underestimated the polar bears. People have opened their windows while a polar bear approached their vehicle, or got out entirely for a quick selfie. Surely we all know

that people become limitlessly stupid when they get to be the centre of attention. There are characters who jump off roofs and into cactuses because youths watching YouTube videos will give them a thumbs up, but I wasn't aware of "limitless" being literally without limits. "Let's take a selfie with a polar bear, dude!" And the one job that each visitor to Churchill automatically gets bestowed upon him or her, as Mike emphasized, is the responsibility to avoid any contact between human beings and polar bears. The world's southernmost population of polar bears was waiting for the ice to return. Once that would happen, they would migrate north. Churchill had been established in the middle of their migration pattern. Right now, some of these animals were lingering around town, but mainly farther away on the tundra, and the tourists would not appear until the number of bears around Churchill increased due to the migration. While he spoke, I smiled, nodded, listened. Then I asked almost impatiently, 'But how do you go about seeing one?'

Mike shrugged. 'You can rent a car and drive out of town, do it yourself. You can talk to the locals and see if they want to drive you out – you just give them some petrol money and some extra cash for them to buy a case of beer. You can ask one or two companies if they are willing to do a tour – maybe you can get some people together and all chip in. I'll give you a list of phone numbers.'

But I knew that there were no tours running. And the option to pay a local didn't seem economical: I imagined we would agree on one or two hours for a certain amount of money, and risk not seeing anything. And so I walked into the office of the local car rental company, the only one, where the lady informed me that she had a pick-up truck available for the next day.

At the hostel, toward the end of the afternoon as we stood in the living room, Aaron nodded. 'Yeah, let's do that.' And he added, 'I also talked to some people, and they basically said that if we could get a group of twenty-five persons together, and paid a hundred dollars each, we could get a tundra buggy to go out.'

He looked at me expectantly, and we both laughed.

‘I’ll get the truck tomorrow morning,’ I said, and walked to our dorm to fetch my laptop.

Pedro passed me by in the hallway with a little nod. My walking out on his account of seeing the northern lights probably caused his reserved approach toward me, but it was a subject he happily brought up again when he saw Aaron in the living room. Returning from the dorm, I heard him say, ‘I was there for three minutes, and it was amazing.’

‘You’ve been looking at the northern lights for three minutes?’ the surprised voice of Aaron beamed from the living room.

‘Yes, yes,’ Pedro said, standing against the wall between the common area, where I sat down at the dining table with my laptop, and the living room. ‘There was nothing, and it was amazing.’

‘That’s great, man.’

‘And you? You come only for the bears?’

‘Bears and the northern lights. If I see one, or the other, I’ll be happy.’

‘You don’t have many days. If you want, you can go to this hunter. He works at the train station. He’s got weapons, very strong weapons. He knows everything.’

‘Did you go with him?’

‘I’ve just been asking him questions. Every time people come inside, or go outside, he knows. Because he’s in charge of security. I don’t know if he can do it, but if he allows you to do it... But he can do it very well, because he’s very good, and you are absolutely protected.’

‘That’s quite all right, Pedro,’ said Aaron. ‘A car should provide enough protection.’

Whether the idea of weaponry against animals would have gone down well with the fourth guest, who joined us just before darkness fell around 6 p.m., is a question I didn’t even dare to ask. The man was a Canadian who was about to start a life as far away from humanity as possible – at least, that’s what it sounded like when he mentioned the name of the Nunavut community he was about to travel on to: Resolute – and he had,

on his way from the airport to the hostel, dropped by the supermarket: all his food consisted of vegetables. That was all he ate, and water and tea were all he drank. He was a skinny man with a goatee, who had said goodbye to a previous, more common lifestyle, and I derived from the look in his eyes that he'd made the right choice for himself: rarely did a person look so content, happy, pleased.

'Everything I consume is unprocessed,' he said, while unpacking his groceries in the kitchen. 'It's all about health. I used to eat everything – meat, fish, hamburgers. I drank alcohol every now and then. But I've cut it all out, even the substitutes. I long for a more nature-oriented lifestyle.'

I asked, 'Don't you miss the tastes of the foods you cut out?'

'You'll be surprised how good this is, as long as you know how to prepare a good meal. Why don't you both join in?'

I looked at the amount of vegetables that filled the kitchen counter and wondered if maybe he had a horse tied up outside to the wooden lamppost. I could, by now, certainly eat like a horse. 'Thank you,' I said. 'I'll join in.'

Aaron nodded. 'Sure, mate.'

Besides friendship, there's hardly a greater gift imaginable than a person cooking up a meal for you. And although I couldn't possibly have a clue about this man's finances, these vegetables combined represented a small fortune. I had, you see, been to the supermarket myself on my way back to the hostel and the prices were, by the lack of a better word, extraordinary. It had taken me a while, as I strolled from one aisle to the other, before I stopped thinking, *Holy cow, check out that price tag!* and, *Seriously? Twelve dollar for that?!* I can't recall any specifics, but it was almost cheaper to simply go out for a meal – unless, I suppose, you lived in Churchill and could stack up on the occasional special. Yet it seemed likely that the nature of Veggie Man's newly acquired lifestyle would keep him away from common restaurants for as long as he retained it. And you got to admire people who swim against the current, and stubbornly persist in the midst of frowned eyebrows, laughter, dis-

missive gestures. For most people it's hard enough to put their mobile phones away – even when having a drink with friends in a bar or checking in to hotels.

'Checking in,' they would say upon presenting themselves at the desk in the Banff hotel where I worked, and pull out their mobile phones to unlock the device and surf to Facebook, as if by some miracle they would be teletransported to their hotel rooms. Well, technology is not quite there yet, and then, when a silence befell them, they would stare after quite some time at me with a disturbed gaze. I would say, 'Whenever you're ready, Sir.' And then – *oops!* – their faces would show a certain shame or guilt, and the phone would be switched off; we could proceed.

Veggie Man (and I mean that in the most respectful way) didn't touch any electronic device during the three hours we sat with him at the dining table, eating his stew of vegetables, which were boiled to perfection and didn't require the adding of half a bottle of ketchup. It was great, healthy to say the least, and I must admit that I didn't dare to confess to him that, later that night, the old-fashioned Jeroen of beer and cigarettes came out again at one of Churchill's handful of bars and quite enjoyed himself, too.

\* \* \*

There are two roads out of Churchill. Neither of them, however, are very long: one leads to a hydro facility on the Churchill River about fifteen kilometres to the south, and the other – first named Hudson Drive, then becoming Launch Road – leads to the Churchill Northern Studies Centre about twenty kilometres west of Churchill. It meanders along the Hudson Bay's coastline a few hundred metres away from the actual shore. It was between this road and the coast that we had to keep an eye on the rocks, the ponds, and the swamps.

I drove the white pick-up truck along Hudson Drive, toward the airport and away from the town site. Aaron sat next to me, keeping his eyes open. We were full of energy and excitement, and drove past an old snowmobile that had been dumped

in the verge of the road. The scenery was the grey water, the small patches of sand, the tall, yellow grass, the ponds, the swamps, and the grey-brownish low rock beds. There was no other traffic. Although past the airport the asphalt stopped, the road remained smooth with only the occasional pothole. While keeping a lazy eye on the road, we kept a close eye on the landscape but without seeing the landscape. Everything that was white was potentially a polar bear. Sometimes a rock had a misleading white substance, like bird shit, on it. The thin overcast was always there, and always hanging low. Slowly we moved along this road – staring out the window, driving in second gear – and the reality of what we were doing sank in: the chances of seeing a polar bear seemed slim to none.

In addition to the dumped snowmobile, there was plenty of everything else to see – shacks, more snowmobiles, quads, old cars, barrels, piles of scrap metal and wood, the *MV Ithaca* – the 1922 cargo vessel that had run aground during a storm in 1960, a rusty monstrosity –, an abandoned radar station with two radar domes shaped like golf balls, and a crashed airplane named “Miss Piggy.” It was sitting there on the rocks like a fridge magnet on a fridge door, its metal-grey colour blending in perfectly with the grey rocks, as though a spoilt rich kid had abandoned a toy after his father had just bought him something even better, like a fighter jet. We parked the car and had a closer look at this bizarre object. The Curtis C-46 had crashed on the rocks between the coast and the airport in 1979. It was, traditionally, never removed.

‘Polar bear!’ I shouted instantly at the first glimpse of something white and furry, while driving on a muddy track. There was a white animal that walked along one of the many ponds. We took our cameras out, zoomed in as far as possible, but saw on the resulting picture that this animal was, in fact, a husky. The white husky had been half-hidden behind the plants, far away, and as we discovered from the pictures, there were about five or six of these huskies kept in the same place. Each of them held by a long rope.

Wild huskies on a leash?

‘Yeah,’ said the front desk lady at the Churchill Northern



Studies Centre, which was located at the far end of Launch Road. 'There's a man in town who keeps those huskies out there because they are pure-bred huskies, and so he keeps them exposed to the elements. The town is divided on it. There is the fifty percent who say that it's a great way to keep the huskies pure, and there's the other fifty percent who think that he endangers his dogs because they are tied up and make for an easy catch for the polar bears.'

I added, 'Which are said to be around there...'

'Yes, that's the word.'

'We'll keep looking,' I said. 'So, what's this place?'

The CNSC – housed in what must be one of the world's most isolated office buildings on the mainland, built on an angle to keep the bears off – was a facility where school groups and researchers from around the world came to work on their projects, such as the young lady who was working upstairs on her PhD – drawing up a new method to measure the water levels and quality in relation to global warming. Parks Canada was going to use the new method.

It was how Churchill went with the times: here, inside, science contributed to progress; there, outside, stood the Churchill Rocket Research Range as a remnant of the town's scientific past. The launching structure – an open silo on the roof of a massive concrete-walled cubicle where the rocket flames disappeared into – stood there to decay. Boulders had been placed against the doors and windows were boarded up. Because the CNSC office building and the rocket range stood at the end of Launch Road, we turned around and slowly drove the distance again and again without any result.

I thought: *If I don't see a bear, should I still see penguins?* Aaron, in the passenger seat, had gradually started to daydream. We continued on La Vérendrye Avenue, which began at the airport, hugged the coast before leading back into town, and ended at Cape Merry Battery, where the Churchill River emptied into the Hudson Bay. We poked around on the coastal rocks for a while. We saw the white backs of beluga whales appearing in the cold and dark river. And then a seal swam by – its head sticking out above the water like a fat periscope. I took a

photograph of an impressive bald eagle seconds after it took off from a tree, capturing its entire wingspan diagonally on the picture. Each of these sights were a bonus, but none were the jackpot, and, after having driven out to the hydro facility, I suggested to drive out to the dogs one more time. They were said to attract polar bears. Aaron, the outgoing, enthusiastic Australian who had been sitting in the passenger seat for more than seven hours and gone from daydreaming to becoming lackadaisical, shrugged and then nodded.

‘Let’s just park the car there for twenty minutes,’ I said in an attempt to garner support, ‘and wait in silence.’

‘We can try,’ he mumbled.

But I had to try. Aaron had six more days left; I would be on that train again the next evening. The enthusiasm I had long harboured about seeing a polar bear in the wild had vanished; I now felt that the symbolic legitimacy of this trip depended entirely on that encounter. It had become an obligation. We drove back to the dogs, and then as close to the Hudson Bay as possible.

I got out and stood there in the wind, which always seemed to be there, gazing at the rocks behind us and the beach below us. It was discouragingly quiet. Aaron sat in the car, his head leaning on his hand, a bored look on his face. The sky turned purple, the sun was setting; I began to think of hiring the car one more day and try again tomorrow. I walked around the vehicle, and as I stood there leaning against the trunk a large white animal walked into view from behind a rock, two hundred metres away from us.

‘Yes! Yes!’ Aaron shouted, and he jumped out of the car like a little kid who had just arrived at the theme park. He came running toward me. ‘See that? That’s a fucking polar bear!’

‘Yeah...’ I whispered, completely in awe with the big animal, its might and its seemingly random appearance at the end of this very long day, realizing that my journey could now begin. ‘That’s a fucking polar bear.’

\* \* \*

There is only a railroad out of Churchill. The short train – one wagon, one sleeper, two coaches, a dining car, and two locomotives – shook to life at precisely 19:30. Gently sliding out of the station, the train's slowness resembled a grand, dignified departure, as though the whole village was standing there outside the train, waving, in tears, with handkerchiefs, while the passengers were waving back before settling into the comfy seats with smiles and heartwarming memories. Well, at least *I* liked to think so; maybe I'd wanted people to wave at me, because this grand departure was a deeply personal one, the start of my journey, though nobody seemed to care. And hell, why would they? Even Aaron was probably drinking a beer somewhere, perhaps with Pedro. We had seen our polar bear and moved on.

Standing in my seating bay of four, I threw my coat on one seat, placed my big backpack on the luggage rack, sat down, took off my shoes, and took my laptop out of the small backpack. Looking out the window, we moved into the rapidly approaching night with the moon in the East, and the last of daylight in the West. I fired up the laptop. This, I felt, was simply great: the train was moving at a nice pace, the seat was comfortable, there were forty hours ahead of me, my feet were up on the opposite seat, and I set myself to working on the Churchill chapter.

A few people in the back of the coach were still looking for their perfect seats. I could hear them whisper, 'Here?' And: 'No, let's try there.' Four American backpackers sat down behind me. I placed my fingers on the keyboard and looked out the window one more time. The lights of Churchill were already out of sight. A pair of legs appeared beside me – one of the people still looking for a place to sit. I typed, "Chapter one." The legs remained where they were.

A deep voice said, 'Excuse me?'

I looked up. In the aisle stood an Indian with a beard and a turban. 'Yes?'

'Could you please move? We would like to sit together.'

I was completely taken aback by this. Would it occur to you to ask a person so clearly settled and working to pack up and move? Rude people are given their space by the silent

majority, who do not wish to be in the way of anyone, like me. I stood up and scanned the coach. The available seats were scattered, and these fat Indians could have two adjacent seating bays if I moved. There were three other seating bays available, one of them diagonally behind the Americans.

‘Certainly,’ I said in a quasi-polite tone of voice.

‘Thank you,’ said the turban.

I smiled and said, ‘You seemed to insist.’

And so, as the train picked up speed, I closed and unplugged my laptop and started moving things over. Two of the Indian men then took my seating bay, the other two had already taken their seats in the adjacent bay, and the four of them fell into a loud conversation across the aisle in unintelligible English. But whatever they were saying, it was serious, as one could tell by their faces and thoughtful intonation, and the seriousness was underlined by the Indian idea of manliness: the bushy moustache. Once I was settled again, I went back to writing.

Outside, darkness had completely fallen. Moving through this barren land, we were a steel snake with yellow lights shining through holes along the body. These were the only visible signs of human life. Here it was all tundra and swamps and this single railway line headed south to the rest of our fellow human beings. Around 22:00, each of the Indian men took a seating bay to sleep in, scattered throughout the coach, with their feet dangling in the aisles, very soon snoring away like a bunch of cave bears with their mouths wide open, lying there like gunned-down bodies, having surrounded me and the American backpackers – who looked at each other and moved to the next coach.

The talking hadn’t bothered me much, but the snoring coming from four different directions annoyed me. I wasn’t quite ready to sleep – I had been awake for only thirteen hours – but couldn’t do any writing, either. I tried to read a book I had brought along. It was Paul Theroux’s *The Old Patagonian Express*, in which the author sets out on a trip nearly similar to mine. He took his trip in 1978, when trains still ran through most of Central and South America. I took my trip in 2015,

when trains were no longer running south of the Mexican border. But the snoring kept me from reading, too. I looked at my stuff. Would I move? I sighed at the idea. The guy in front of me started snoring louder, producing the irregular sound of a failing outboard engine (now the pulling of the cord, then the sputtering blades in the water. It was followed by a short – too short – period of silence). There had to be a way to stop this snoring, but how? Squeeze their noses? Make *them* move? One thing that would most definitely work was doing something that would make them too scared to be asleep on this train – not something painful or otherwise harmful, but something nasty, disgusting, like filling their open mouths with diarrhoea. I mean, I would certainly stay awake after such an experience, and I bet you would, too.

Without contemplating the effectiveness of such a move, the boy scout closed his book and walked over to the next coach: there were only the four backpackers, sleeping. And because it was quiet in there, I quietly moved and settled in to my third seat – the laptop fired up, my shoes off, my big backpack up in the luggage rack, my small backpack on the seat next to me, and my feet up. I started writing again, but soon fell asleep on the peaceful and symphonic rhythm of the wheels on the tracks.

‘Kill ‘m!’

The shout woke me with a start. The train was slowing down; the four backpackers were packing up, going to the bathroom, slamming the door. Since they were the only other passengers in the carriage, they didn’t seem to mind the other guy. I thought, *For goodness’ sake!* The train rolled into a station and came to a stop. I looked at the time on my smartphone; it was 4:15. The signs dangling from the white station building announced that this was Gillam, where the Canadian road system began. The Americans got off. Had they parked their car here at Gillam, and taken the train to and from Churchill? I looked out the window. Two families with children were also getting off; a group of people stood on the platform. The station building was in a poor state: two windows were boarded up and the paint was peeling. An obese, grey-haired man,

breathing heavily, placed his three pieces of luggage on the benches in the seating bay next to mine, and went back outside.

Judging from the people on the platform, Gillam seemed to be a town of natives. When they entered, twelve of them filled five seating bays behind me. I wondered how Christopher Columbus could have been so wrong in calling the indigenous people of North America Indians. The real Indians – those moustached cave bears in the other coach – were about 900 decibels louder with the four of them than these twelve people combined, who settled in and talked quietly.

Then the train departed again.

The fat man walked through the coach to collect tickets from those who had got on at Gillam. So, was he a conductor? I could see that he worked for the railway company because he now carried a reflective jacket and a radio, but he was also dressed in sweatpants and a neutral shirt that sat so tight around his manboobs that his large nipples stuck out. When he was done and sat down, they all went to sleep. I also tried to sleep, but was merely dosing. The five hours of solid sleep before Gillam had been so good they could not be replicated. I turned sideways, trying to find a position that would allow my brain to switch off. It only worked for short periods of time, if at all, and suddenly there was reason to stop these attempts.

Outside, a new day began. The sun rose quickly and illuminated a barren land of heathen and wetness, where permafrost gave only the smallest of pine trees a chance to survive. The train slowed down. Seeing that I was awake, the railway worker pointed at the bench on which I had my shoeless feet, and said in exasperation, 'We'll need those seats right away. You'll have to move coaches in Thompson, too. This one will be closed off.'

And so I moved to a two-seater, which allowed the conductor to rotate one of the benches in my old seating bay around. Such a staff member – sweatpants, shirt, unfriendly – gave me the impression that some rich, financially careless yahoo had bought a few sets of trains and received permission to operate a railway company. We stopped again, in Ilford, where more natives boarded the train, filling up most of the

remaining seats.

After departure, I went to the dining car to buy a cup of coffee, and asked Ronald, who seemed to be the train manager because he was in uniform and wore a name tag, if it was true that the first coach would be closed off after Thompson.

‘Yes, that’s right,’ he said. ‘So far, you are the only passenger who goes all the way to Winnipeg.’

I returned to my seat with the cup of coffee. We were in the transitional zone between the subarctic and milder continental climate of the approaching prairies, and very soon the pine trees became larger and interspersed with deciduous trees. Leaves were turning yellow, lending an extra colour to this landscape of green, blue, and brown, and there was an abundance of wide rivers and swampland. This was the first climatic change visible in the landscape on this journey. Such transitions are often too gradual to notice, but Churchill was low enough in the north to see a substantial difference after just one night on a crawling train. I did not know it then, but I would only notice climate changes again once they were dramatic enough – now surrounded by desert, now sweating it out in the jungle – comparing the current landscape to previous ones, such as seeing trees at an altitude of three kilometres and higher in the Andes at Quito while remembering that there had been no trees at sea level in Churchill.

Toward the end of the morning, in Thompson, which was on a spur line off the main branch, I packed everything again: laptop into the small backpack, shoes on, and the big back-pack off the luggage rack. I waited for everyone to get off and brought my belongings over to the other coach. This was the fourth time I moved to a different seat, which began to seem rather ridiculous, and I was determined to make it the last. The train would remain in Thompson for more than two hours, which was plenty of time to get lunch.

Thompson was a town established in the 1960s to serve the local mining industry. Interestingly, it has almost the same street plan as an Australian outback town that was also designed and built in that era, Kununurra. And when I saw a signboard that described the history of a transmission line, I concluded

that this sign represented the dullness of Thompson. The town's attractions were a 15 kilometre walking trail (the Millennium Trail) *around* the town, statues of wolves, an impressive mural of a wolf, and the local museum. I pushed on, went to McDonald's, and returned to the station.

Back on the train, the Indians were no longer there. I sat down in my old four-seater, being the only passenger on the entire coach, but was soon joined by a grandmother, her daughter, and two boys of about eight and ten years of age with toy guns, playing and shooting – 'Pang! Pang!' – at each other. They sat down across from me, contentedly, but no sooner had the family settled into their seats than the train manager climbed on board behind them, and pointed at the other coach – the one which I had been told to vacate in the morning – and said as though they had missed the sign with the big arrow pointing the other way, 'We've got a whole coach for you.'

And so the family moved to the other, empty coach. I gave the train manager an angry look, but this was not Ronald; this was another guy. More people boarded the train and soon my coach was nearly full.

'Ticket, please,' the train manager said just before departure.

'Your colleague has taken it off me back in Churchill,' I said, in the same condescending tone of voice he had used on that family.

'A receipt will do.'

I gave him the receipt, which he studied. 'HBRC did the first part, and CN is now taking over,' he explained. 'It's a cooperation between two companies. Just need to check things again, that's all.'

We departed perfectly on time, at 14:00, and the train manager positioned himself in the aisle right beside me. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'can I have your attention for a moment? Just wanted to go over the safety procedures. There are four exit windows with a hammer beside them.' He pointed them out. 'And these hammers will work on these windows only. You smash the window once, and the first layer will crack. You smash the window again, and keep going until you have



gone through four layers. After the fourth layer, you have broken the seal, and the window will crumble. Just be careful when you climb out: there will be glass and it's more than six feet high. 'Thank you. Any questions?'

We shook our heads, mumbling, 'No.'

He pointed at me. 'Since you are going all the way to Winnipeg, I need to show you how to open the door in case of an emergency.' This amused me: I was being promoted to Passenger Extraordinaire, the one who yells confidently, "Just follow me, folks!" He waved his hand over his shoulder. 'If you want to follow me?'

'Sure.'

We walked to the exit door, where he showed me how to remove a metal bar, and then how three different handles would eventually open the door. Having worked on trains myself, I wanted to remark on the questionable safety standard that was being maintained here: only four breakable windows throughout an entire coach and a door that did not have a single emergency opening button. But at least I sat next to one of the emergency windows, and was the only one who knew how to open the door in case everybody wanted to get out when the flames would be crawling up to their feet.

The train slowly made its way back along the spur line to the main branch. Outside, I saw hundreds of scattered railroad ties, empty metal buckets, and, every one-hundred metres, a defunct wooden tripod that once held up electricity (or perhaps telegraph) wires – but was now left to rot – standing or lying next to the railway. We crossed a wide river, and in the middle of a tiny side-platform (just wide enough for one man to walk on) along an one-way-bridge stood, seemingly random, a barrel filled with fresh waste.

The train stopped a few times during daylight hours in tiny villages. One was called Thicket Portage, and the another Wabowdem – both villages barely possessed a platform, the latter's an interesting mix of gravel and overgrown weed, and in each village the arrival of the train was somewhat of an event. People, mostly native folks, came to the station upon hearing the honking horn of the locomotive to see who would get off.

What I noticed in both villages, but also when the native people had surrounded me on board during the night, was that so many of them were so enormously overweight. In Wabowdem, on the platform, I saw a boy of no older than twelve years of age whose stomach was quite literally bigger than a basketball. His yellow shirt sat as tight as a balloon around his upper body, and not because it was tucked in. An even younger kid was well on his way to similar proportions. It seemed so sad because the two boys were no exception at all.

A chubby guy in his early twenties, wearing a dark blue shirt, sat down in the seat diagonally across. It was around 18:15, and he pulled out a bag of chips and a can of Fanta Orange. It made me hungry, and I went to the dining car to get something to eat. But there wasn't much dining to be had on the Hudson Bay Railway – everything was microwaved, and I ended up with one of the better options on the limited menu: a moist cheeseburger. With the hot burger wrapped in paper I walked back to my seat.

I took my shoes off and ate the disgusting cheeseburger. The taste reflected on my face.

'There used to be chefs on this train,' said the guy with the bag of chips. 'But they were fired some years ago.'

'Profits?'

'I guess.'

These things always amazed me: there were people sitting behind desks who had been granted the authority to decide that the passengers – to them the numbers on their computer screens, hardly ever real people they've spoken to – could do without healthy food. 'Some people spend forty hours on this train,' I said. 'They might want a good meal or two.'

'Only tourists, though. The local passengers just travel short distances.'

He was visibly a native son of this land. 'Like you?'

'Yeah. I'm going to The Pas.'

'Five hours from Wabowdem, isn't it?'

He nodded and held his bag of chips up. 'So I brought along some snacks and a few cans of pop.' He ate his chips by the handful. 'I stayed with family, though.' The potato chips

crunched between his teeth. 'They fed me before I boarded this train.'

'That was nice of them.'

'Us natives take care of each other.'

'Good on you. One big, happy family.'

'Where are you from? I can hear an accent.'

'Overseas.'

'Where's that?'

'Europe?'

He shrugged. 'Not sure.'

'You don't know where Europe is?'

'I didn't really pay attention in school.'

This shocked me. I could understand that people lacked knowledge or skills regarding school subjects such as history, mathematics, languages, physical education, or anything technical, but even the worst student should at least know the names of the continents. Or perhaps he was being polite and didn't want to point out that my Dutch accent made "Europe" sound like some unknown outpost in Siberia.

I asked, 'What do you do for a living?'

'I work in a store. I'm a salesman. What do you do?'

'I'm unemployed,' I said.

'What used to be your job, then?'

'I used to work in hotels as a front desk agent.'

'Sort of job I'm doing. I sell fridges, you sold hotel rooms.'

'True.'

The conversation fell quiet until we approached The Pas. In the dark it looked like a small place, just like all the other towns along the railway line. I asked, 'Is there anything to do here?'

'Well,' he said. 'You see that gas station? If you need to fill up your car, that's where you want to go. And see that restaurant there? They've got the best Chinese food. And that store there... You can't really see it because it's so dark now, but that's our supermarket. That's where you can do your shopping.'

'I get your point,' I guffawed.