

# FORDTIMES

October 1989 Volume 82 Number 10

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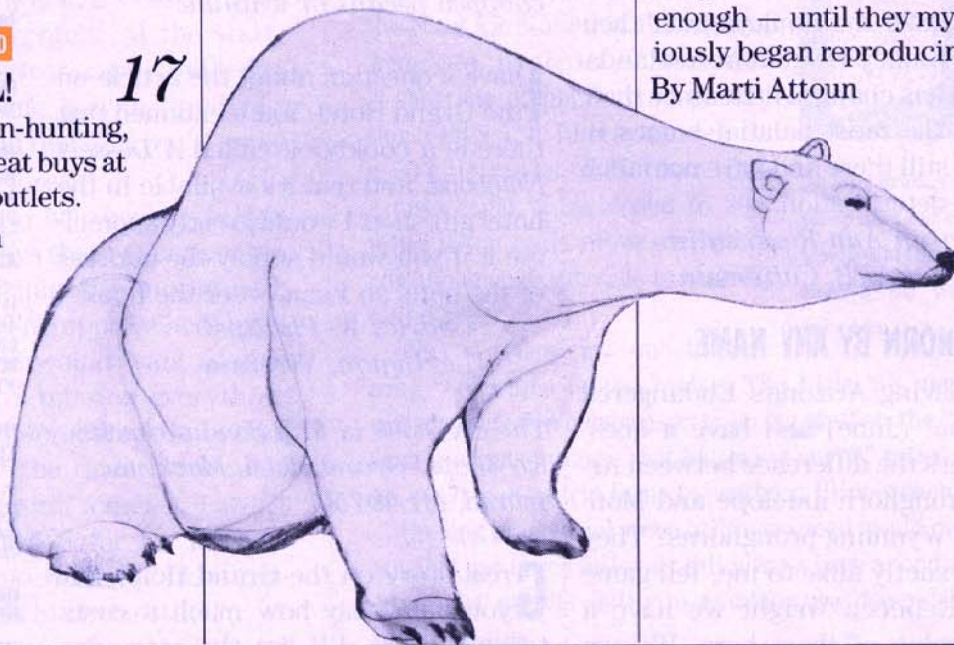
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Comic Tracey Ullman delights her television audience with an endless repertoire of characters. Daniel Ruth's tribute to this Brit wit and the comedians who paved the way on the small screen begins on page 34.

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# ARCTIC *Safari*

*New portable tundra camps bring you face to face with Manitoba's awesome polar bears.*

By IRENE MCMAHON

Tourists and photographers on the observation deck of the Tundra Camp watch polar bears on their annual migration near the Arctic Circle. In the distance, the Tundra Buggy.



**Photographer Dan Guravich, who dreamed up the Tundra Camp, plays host in its school-bus kitchen.**

**I**t was early on a blustery, skin-numbing morning, just below the Arctic Circle, in Canada's tundra country. A cream-colored chunk of the white horizon moved. We watched, awestruck, as half a ton of polar bear roused, rolled and scratched itself into alertness, then lumbered toward us, testing the wind for the smell of frying bacon. Probably, we thought, it was the same bear that had shaken and rocked our Pullman-style bunkhouse all night long.

For three days we lived in a portable Tundra Camp, a large vehicle held high off the frozen ground by huge rubber wheels. We were a bumpy two-hour ride from Churchill, Manitoba, the national railway's northernmost stop. It was almost the opposite of a trip to the zoo; we were in a kind of cage. There were about a dozen of us in all — explorers, naturalists, photographers, just plain tourists and one artist in residence — continually scanning the barren, snow-dusted rocks for polar bears on their annual migration to hunting grounds on the dark ice of nearby Hudson Bay.

In October hundreds of them emerge from their summer dens, hungry for seal, and move onto the ice until the following July. Pregnant females move inland to traditional denning areas. The Tundra Camp allows visitors to meet these majestic lords of

the Arctic on their own ground.

A polar bear can be a formidable foe. The largest males weigh 1,600 pounds; a single paw, with its three-inch claws, may weigh as much as 55 pounds. They are twice the size of tigers and, for short distances, can run 30 mph. The fact that they are bigger, stronger and faster than black bears, their Southern cousins, and have better eyesight makes them more dangerous in confrontations. Their sense of smell is so keen that they can sniff out a seal beneath the snow. A full-grown polar bear can kill a 500-pound seal with one blow, and in the past 20 years there have been 10 human fatalities in the area.

October or early November is the season for the 1,200 or so bears in this part of Canada to hunt, put on weight and, eventually, breed. Males frequent the freezing fringes of Hudson Bay, while females stay ashore, digging maternity dens and giving birth in December and January to one- or two-pound cubs. Fasting, the mothers nurse until March or April, then leave the dens with cubs in tow and head for the ice, where they will feed for the first time in months. In July, when the ice melts, all of them come ashore. Older bears dawdle on the beaches while the younger bears, and bears with cubs, move farther inland. By October the ice is beginning to form again, and the bears move back to shore.

Polar bears no longer move through Churchill in their migrations, however. Now they are captured before entering town, put in holding pens about 20 at a time, tranquilized and helicoptered to points 50 miles north.

**T**he Tundra Camp's giant rubber wheels, originally made for farm machines, make the tundra passable. Moving in old tracks across the fragile surface, the vehicle

goes through high water and past gravel ridges covered with spotted saxifrage and more than 300 species of lichens. What appear to be ponds of water are actually poorly drained permafrost, unfrozen for as little as two years or as long as the last ice age.

Stationed on a 50-foot strip surrounded by brackish pools edged by Hudson Bay, the Tundra Camp, with its bunk house and school-bus kitchen connected by a photo-shooting platform, makes it possible to watch the bears all day long. It was conceived by Dan Guravich of Greenville, Mississippi, one of America's foremost nature photographers and polar bear experts, and created by Len Smith of Churchill. The first buggy, made from spare parts, was similar to the big-tired vehicles used by oil companies to lay pipelines through Louisiana swamps.

At high tide, Hudson Bay drifted beneath the wheels of our camp as we watched and photographed bears sniffing, rolling in snow, lying in kelp beds, play-fighting, licking their paws or swimming.

At a distance, they seem friendly as a teddy bear, but when one of them lethargically approached camp and suddenly rose on its hind legs, it sent photographers scurrying backwards.

Smith told us about the time he was hunting geese at a pond outside Churchill. He shot a goose and went over to retrieve it. He shot another, and a bear emerged from the bushes and swam out to collect it. Smith said he just kept on hunting and sharing the kills. If a goose dropped near the bear, it belonged to the bear. If it landed near Smith, it was his. The final score: the bear 3, Smith 2. ■

*Travel writer Irene McMahon lives in Lake Forest, Illinois with her husband, artist Franklin McMahon. Their piece on Williamsburg, Virginia was featured in the August issue.*

## BEAR TOURS

The town of Churchill has a national harbor with grain elevators and rusting ships. Plan your visit ahead — the five small hotels in this town of 1,300 are fully booked during the bear season. Visitors can book day trips out of Churchill or stay, as we did, for three days aboard the Tundra Camp. Reservations are made through Victor Emanuel Photo Safaris, P.O. Box 33008, Austin, TX 78764, (512) 328-3900.

For more information about tundra outings, contact Joseph Van Os Photo Safaris, P.O. Box 655, Vanhos Island, WA 98070, (206) 463-5383; Canada North Outfitting, P.O. Box 1230, Watertown, Ontario, Canada L0R 2H0, (416) 689-7925; Len and Bev Smith, Tundra Buggy Tours, P.O. Box 662, Churchill, Manitoba, Canada R0B 0E0; or Lynda Gunter, Frontier North, 774 Bronx Ave., Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R2K 4E9, (204) 663-1411.



**Len Smith of Churchill, Manitoba built the Tundra Camp.**