

POLAR BEAR SAFARI

Way up in the Great White North, the people stay caged while the polar bears come to visit. No one knows more about pursuing this quarry with camera than Dan Guravich.

BY PEGGY WOLFF
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAN GURAVICH, RANDY GREEN
AND JOSEPH VAN OS

In the north, where snow lies deep and long on the land, rests a small town called Churchill, in Manitoba, Canada. It's unlikely that Churchill, population 1200, will ever become a tourist mecca. Although visitors can get there from Winnipeg without much difficulty, it's an outpost, the last stop on the railroad, and a man's town, full of hunters and trappers. They say that every household has a gun.

In October, storms are frequent, almost continuous, blowing ice crystals off Hudson Bay at a 70-mph clip. While fall temperatures can shrink to 30 below, in January and February, with the wind chill factor it's 100 below.

Yet, against these odds, 7000 tourists still pass through Churchill each year. One glance in the phone book reveals why. Right alongside police, fire and ambulance is another emergency phone number—a wild polar bear alert hotline.

For about six weeks each fall, the main attraction is the annual polar bear migration, during which hundreds of bears amble through town. Visitors are advised to arrange accommodations in advance, as the five motels fill to capacity with photographers, naturalists and adventure travelers.

There's one man responsible for turning Churchill into a wilderness quest. Dan Guravich. He got the ball rolling.

Guravich, 66, is a professional



Dan Guravich

photographer who specializes in nature and physical geology. He makes his home in Mississippi, yet he travels north twice a year, in spring and in fall, to see the bears. When he made his first excursion to Churchill in 1968, he discovered, along with wildlife biologist Ian Sterling, that the best place to see the bears was 40 miles from town, out on the cape. This finger of land, left behind by a glacier 15,000 years ago, is uninhabited and is unreachable by road.

Specially designed tundra buggies, which are hand built by a local Shell Oil distributor, use the transfer case from a gravel truck, the seats from a school bus, and the frame and engine from a snowplow. The hybrid buggy, which sits on giant balloon tires, gives about 20 passengers an angle from six feet above the ground. It cruises across the tundra at a whopping six miles an hour, on the look out for wild polar bears. Wilderness seekers who are uncomfortable at temperatures above zero can lower

their safety glass windows to get the full effect.

In 1979, Guravich began leading wild polar bear nature tours to the region for Victor Emanuel Photo Safaris. This October, he'll lead his fifteenth party of polar bear watchers out on the cape.

Guravich was leaning out the window of the tundra buggy telling his tour group to watch. "Look for yellow rocks. That's how you spot them." Nineteen Nikons, Leicas, Pentaxes and Min-

oltas held by amateur hands, search for the elusive beast. To the untrained eye, it's all white. The sky, the coastal ice and the ground are all varying shades of white.

"Lower your windows now. Be quiet everybody. Don't move for goodness sakes." There's a fourth slightly yellowish shade of white, about 1200 pounds of it, coming out of the blowing gray wind. "She's coming right over here. She smell us." Guravich always, *always*, with his naked eyes, see the bears first. Bean bags plastered with arctic emblems hold down his window. "She's moving fast! stop her at $\frac{1}{50}$ sec.!" But people just stand there with their mouths open, knowing they should be taking pictures.

There are few sights as spectacular as seeing the world's largest terrestrial carnivore galloping across the turquoise ice, against a monochrome backdrop of a winter that drags on for nine months.

She paddles toward you, black nose



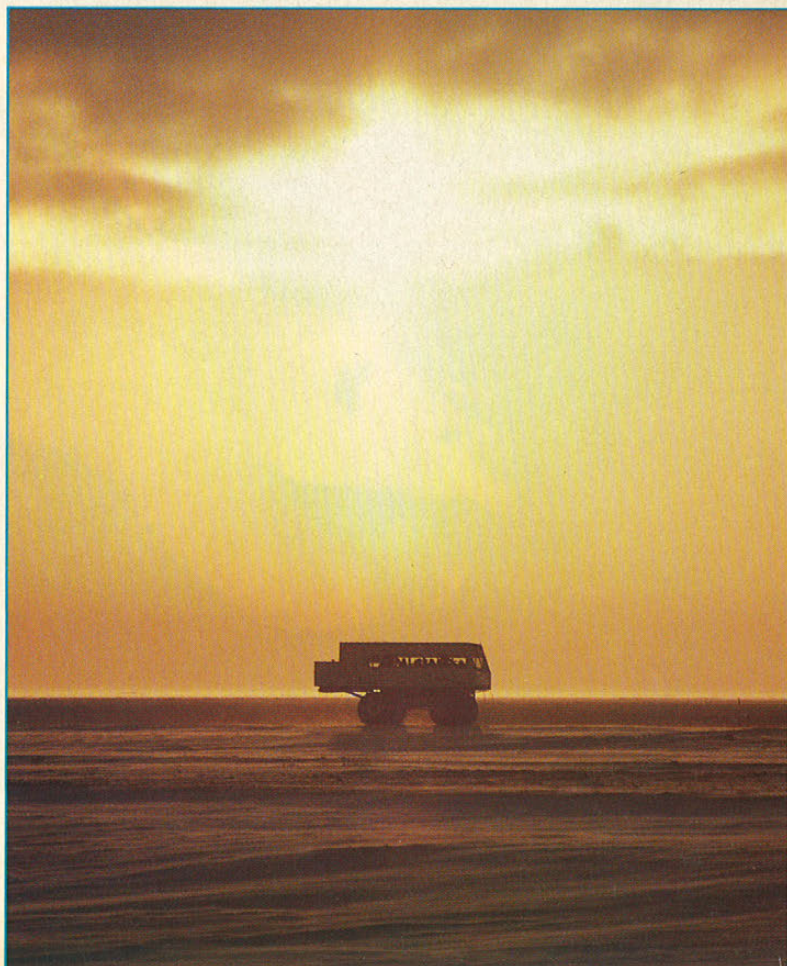
SIZE ON ICE: A large male polar bear makes his way out to sea for hunting in mid-afternoon.

Minolta Maxxum 9000, 70-210mm zoom, Kodachrome 64, $\frac{1}{250}$ sec. at $f/8$

DAN GURAVICH

**RUBBER BUMPY
TUNDRA BUGGY:** A hybrid rig made of equal parts gravel truck, school bus and snowplow, the tundra buggy carries 20 passengers six feet above ground to photograph the bear migration.

Nikon F3, Nikkor 300mm $f/2.8$, Kodachrome 64, $\frac{1}{1000}$ sec. at $f/8$



JOSEPH VAN OS

WINTER WANDERER: This adult weighs upward of 800 pounds. Feeding polar bears is a no-no because they develop a taste for human's food, for which they'll search. When they can't get it, they develop a taste for humans.

Canon F1, 200mm, Kodachrome 64, 1/250 sec. at f/14



DAN GURAVICH

COYS WILL BE COYS: Mother and infants, called coys, couldn't be less worried about photographers. These small fry are nine months old.

Minolta Maxxum 9000, 70-210mm zoom, Kodachrome 64, 1/250 sec. at f/8

POLAR GAMES: It's playtime for two adult males. Photographer Guravich comments, "Snow in the air made the typically low sunlight hazy, which softened the image."

Minolta Maxxum 9000, 70-210mm zoom, Kodachrome 64, 1/250 sec. at f/14



DAN GURAVICH

Polar Bear Safari

held high, twitching back and forth. She comes straight up to the tundra vehicle and stands on her hind legs to reach to 10 feet. This animal fears nothing. She has picked up the scent of your salmon sandwich lunch from 30 miles away. She's curious. Will there be some food?

This is an animal with good vision and good hearing, but the thing that really turns her on is smell.

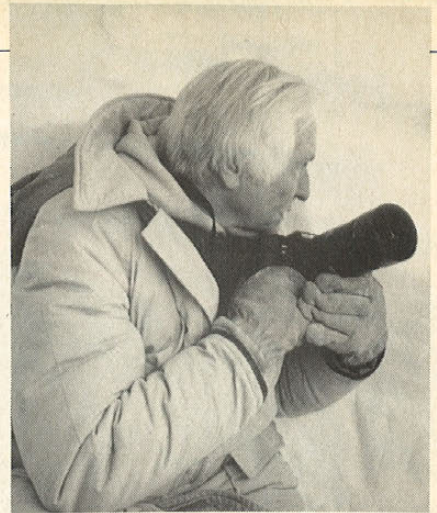
Most tourists are ill-prepared for their first sight of a polar bear. All they can see are the blowing whites coming off the barren arctic desert. Guravich, the family patriarch, takes complete charge. For six days, these are his sheep. He tells people where the bears are, when coffee will be served, when to move ahead, and when to stop for lunch. Arctic commentary runs on through the entire day: why 180-year-old spruce trees are dwarfs (the strong winds prohibit trees from growing taller than six

feet), why arctic flowers are so tiny (the year round layer of permafrost makes it impossible for plant roots to search for water deep in the ground) and why everything from the ripple effects in the Northern Lights to the fall congregation of polar bears hangs on the weather.

While most animals and birds are able to move south, polar bears head north.

"Winter is their season," the polar bear obsessive explains. "There's something like a half million ringed seals in Hudson Bay. The bears eat an enormous amount during winter. They like the blubber, the fat. They convert the blubber to blubber on themselves." Successful seal hunts insure the bears against the lean summer months, when the ice melts and they are forced ashore.

While they wait for the deep icy sting of a Hudson Bay storm and their ritualistic return to the ice, bears



Dan Guravich—seasoned shepherd for yearly flocks of polar bear photographers.

could be anywhere—camouflaged snowdrifts, playing in the streets or scrounging around the town garbage dump in search of leftover salami sandwiches and jars of Hellman's mayonnaise.

It's the reverse of a zoo. People stay

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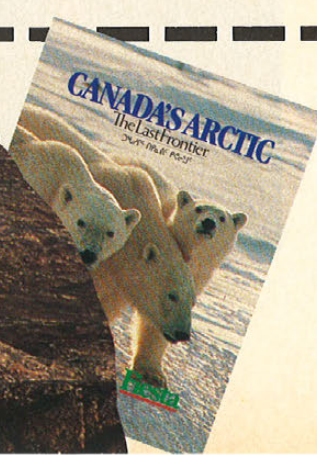
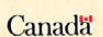
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inside and the animals run free.

Unlike our national parks, naturalists who come here do not go wandering off in the tundra, getting stuck on icy side roads, looking for their own private bear. An incident can happen so quickly, conservation officers warn, you won't know what went on.

The tundra buggy is momentarily surrounded by a half dozen bears who have gotten a drift of turkey and roast beef sandwiches. Six bears become nine, then nine become 20. Guravich positions the buggy with the sea in the background. It's a kindergarten outside, all youngsters. Several have radio collars. Although Guravich calls out exposures, everyone's pictures do not come out the same.

"There's always the magic moment you should've been exposed, you should've had your lens on, and you should've had the window down. Even though it's the same subject, the same bears, the same time, the same condition, it has to do with the way people hold their cameras, the kind of film, and their ability to compose a picture—to put the bear in under pressure."

Since his first footsteps on this Hudson Bay shore, Guravich has returned 23 times to photograph the bears, crossing the arctic by dog sled, snowmobile, ship, airplane and foot.

"The bear needs to be underexposed to get texture in the fur, whether it's overcast or sunny. I always shoot slow film. I use Kodachrome 25 on sunny days and Kodachrome 64 on overcast days. I never shoot Fuji. I stick with Kodachrome because it's constant all the time. Look, you've got thousands of PhD's running around (the lab) with thermometers, measuring this and measuring that. You just know it's going to be good and that the processing chemistry will be right."

If you have a spot meter, meter the bear, then open up one stop, or ½-stop. Snow reflects about 90 percent and the bear reflects about 50 percent."

October daylight in the arctic is between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. By November, there are a mere five hours of daylight, between 9 a.m. and 2 p.m. Guravich

won't use the "fancy fast" films like Ektachrome 200 or 400. On overcast days Ektachrome has a bluish-green cast that he finds objectionable. "If there's not enough light to take a picture, I don't shoot."

Every once in a while, the sun produces a shaft of light that shoots straight up to the heavens. To commemorate the precious moment, he passes around chunks of Swiss chocolate.

"We always have spectacular light. The sun makes an acute angle this far north. You get pinks, oranges, roses and yellows. There are tiny, almost microscopic ice particles in the air. You can't see them, but they do a lot of filtering."

About 100 yards away, a bear is sleeping in a day bed of kelp. Guravich steers Paul, the tundra buggy driver, to the sleeping beast. "Pull up slowly, 10 feet at a time. Oh, that's E.N." Bears whose white coats are blemished with black (Clairol Nice 'N Easy) identification letters are being tracked by the Canadian Wildlife Service. Guravich knows them all by heart. "He's a big old male. 19 years. Probably weighs 800 pounds." E.N. rolls over in the snow to dry his creamy coat, then plops down on his tummy to watch *you*.

"In the old days we would've thrown out some sardines, but now they have a law. They fined a person \$25 for baiting."

Baiting, Guravich assured, is extremely dangerous. If you start feeding bears, you're building a relationship between humans and bears. They'll develop an instinct of where the food will be. If you don't come up with food, the bears become aggravated. Then, if they want you, you're like a sardine. In a class by itself.

Guravich has about 3000 high quality polar bear photos, enough product for his past 26 magazine articles on polar bears and for those yet to come. (Of all the polar bear stories in magazines, about 70 percent are his.) His shots of polar bears and other outdoor subjects have illustrated more than 2000 photo essays in magazines such as *Life*, *Smith-*

(Cont'd on page 70)

Polar Expeditions

What's the attraction to polar bears? For six years, Joseph Van Os has led photographic safaris in search of these magnificent animals, yet according to him, "Even after dozens of trips, it's always exciting." Joseph Van Os Nature Tours are another way of getting close to the arctic's great white hunters.

According to Van Os, one major difference between his tours and others is that his variation provides evening photography seminars focusing not only on the challenges of polar bears and white-on-white exposures, but wildlife photography in general.

During the prime season from Oct. 15 to Nov. 10, 11 tours are offered. Before that time, the chances of sighting bears diminish, and afterward, the bears disperse as the first freeze arrives. Groups range from 16 to 19 persons and cost between \$1,500 to \$1,900, depending on the length of stay. Optional one-hour helicopter rides are also available for approximately \$125.

Van Os saves one trip per year for the super-serious photographers, sometime during the transition between October and November. What to bring? Van Os finds that travelers overlook footwear the most. He suggests purchasing Sorel pacs, or waiting until arrival at Winnipeg to buy Canadian duffel mukluks, deemed by Van Os as the "ultimate cold weather boot."

As for photography, an 80-200mm zoom with a longer 300mm or 500mm is recommended. Also, a bean bag is a must for resting your lens on tundra buggy window sills. Churchill is solidly booked during the season, and Van Os tours fill up quickly. That's why April is the time to start thinking about next October.

For more information, contact these outfitters:

Amazon Safari Club

P.O. Box 252
Elverson, Pa. 19520
(215) 286-9041.

Joseph Van Os Nature Tours

P.O. Box 655
Vashon Island, Wash. 98070
(206) 463-5383.

Travel Keewatin

272 Park Ave.
Thunder Bay, Ontario
Canada P7B 1C5
(807) 343-9472.

Victor Emanuel Photo Safaris

P.O. Box 33008
Austin, Texas 78764
(512) 328-3900.



RANDY GREEN

Tundra buggys make polar bear photography safe.

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Why? “They took out 350 patents. When you take out 350 patents, you’ve got it all covered. I’ve got the XK

motor, three XE 7s, three XD11s and an X7000. These are my weapons.”

He has about 22 lenses and likes to use a skylight filter on all of them. “It has a very, very slight pinkish cast.” He prefers that to an ultra-violet filter, which has a slight yellowish cast. “In our part of the world, the lower 48 states, you could interchange them and never tell. You have green grass, forests, buildings—so that little bit of color isn’t going to show.”

“But on white snow, it’s just like holding up a yellow filter and a red filter. If you start with a 135mm lens on a bear and then switch to a wide-angle 35mm or 24mm, and you’ve got a different filter on each one, the colors won’t match. The bear will be fine, but you’ll see the pinkish or yellowish cast in the snow.”

From his perch in the front seat of the bus, his sight is aimed at the horizon, a barely distinguishable line

that will be buried within moments in a half frozen storm. Before this occurs, he will get the parting shot. Scarecrow (they all have names), who seems to be an arctic light year away, comes up quickly within range, showing fight scars that immediately make you feel even safer inside.

Now, conditions could hardly be worse. The blizzard is completely obscuring our view but Guravich is still negotiating for the shot, keeping the bus at a constant angle from the bear. How he can navigate through the driving snow is about as big a mystery as his still keeping watch. Visibility couldn’t be 20 feet, and you could spit ice cubes, it’s getting so cold. Even the jokes get a bit nervous, like the one about throwing out seal tartare. But Dan Guravich needs no lure. He finds his bear covered with snow and ice, and shoots away, until Scarecrow disappears into the freezing night. **OP**

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