

Polar Bears and Beluga Whales in Churchill, Manitoba 2023

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March 7, 2024

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Booking my trip

- Tour from July 26, 2023 to August 1, 2023
 - Actual time in Churchill was July 27 to 31
 - Tour terminus was Winnipeg, Manitoba
- Tour offered through my undergraduate alumni association
- Tour “operated” by Orbridge
 - 37 people associated with 9 universities
- Most aspects appeared subcontracted to Lazy Bear Expeditions
 - Transport (buses, tundra crawlers, boats, etc.), lodging, some meals
 - Many activities and primary guides
 - 2 non-Orbridge travelers added to our group

Some web sites to check out

- <https://www.travelmanitoba.com/churchill/>
 - Gives a lot of useful information spread out among several subpages
 - I suspect this is operated by the Manitoba provincial government to promote tourism
 - Lazy Bear is in here if you drill down, along with competitors which might cater better to what you want
- https://orbridge.com/grp_departures/overview/obrfit_polar_bears_belugas
 - Cost looks considerably higher than booking directly with Lazy Bear
 - Check into what's been added on
- <https://www.lazybearlodge.com/expeditions/ultimate-bears-and-belugas-summer-adventure>

What was on this tour? (1 of 2)

- Welcome dinner at Assiniboine Park Zoo
 - This might be an Orbridge add-on
 - I missed this due to airline messing up my flights attempting to recover from a weather cancellation
- Take a tour on the tundra crawler
- Ride catamaran on Hudson Bay to see beluga whales
- Some extra cost activities would get closer to the belugas (I didn't do either)
 - Ride "Aqua-Glide" wearing wetsuit
 - Take kayak (prior experience needed, they aren't teaching you)
 - Orbridge guide took the people who weren't going on these around town
- Ride Zodiac boats out to Prince of Wales Fort

What was on this tour? (2 of 2)

- Some other sights
 - “Polar Bear Jail” (places like this are drive-by, no disembarkation)
 - Cape Merry
 - Dog musher (visited only, too hot for the dogs to pull us)
 - Churchill Northern Studies Center (not listed on current itineraries)
 - Itsanitaq Museum
 - Churchill murals
 - Driver will often stop if wildlife is seen and if it’s safe to do so

Could you get to Churchill by yourself?

- You can't drive to Churchill as the roads don't go that far
- Fly to Churchill from Winnipeg
 - The only regular service is by Calm Air
 - Commuter turboprops (Aérospatiale ATR 42 and 72)
 - I believe most of their passengers are from tour groups
 - Airline named for founder Carl Arnold Lawrence Morberg
- Train to Churchill
 - Service by Via Rail Canada
 - Train runs twice a week, takes about 45 hours from Winnipeg to Churchill
 - It is possible to drive from Winnipeg to Thompson (about 475 miles) and board there
 - Rail line was washed out in 2017, isolating Churchill
- Cruise to Churchill? Not yet...

Destination comments

- My tour was during the summer travel season
 - July and August
 - Beluga whales can be seen then – Hudson Bay not iced up
 - Polar bears are in “walking hibernation” per Polar Bears International
 - Typical daytime temperatures in the 50s (°F) per Wikipedia
 - Churchill is well below the Arctic Circle (doesn't have midnight sun)
- Autumn travel season is for polar bears (I haven't seen this)
 - October and November
 - Polar bears preparing to go out on the ice in the winter
 - October daytime average 31°F, November daytime average 10°F
- Aurora can also potentially be seen

Destination comments

- Town is very small
 - Around 1000 people (this might include the tourists)
 - A few hotels/lodges and restaurants
 - Don't expect to find any chains (e.g., Starbucks, McDonalds)
 - Information suggests it's possible to rent a vehicle
 - You might need to ask where you can really go
 - There is a helicopter company in town which probably does tours
 - There did appear to be a few independent guides and photographers in town with studios/shops and who take you around
 - I knocked on the door of one but he wasn't there

Destination comments

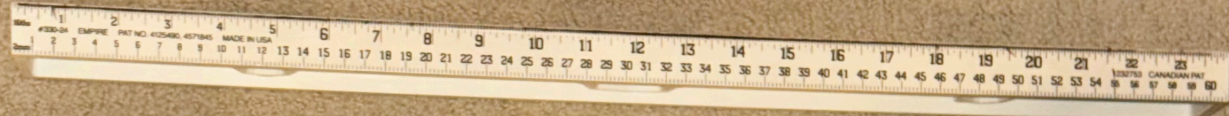
- As with any trip for photographing wildlife or natural events, you need some luck
 - Our guides said we had a lot of polar bear sightings relative to a week or two earlier
 - It's possible you'll see very little wildlife if you're unlucky
 - I didn't get to see an aurora again, although I wasn't counting on it

Photographic equipment

- Sony Alpha 7 IV full-frame mirrorless camera, 33 Mpixel
- Tamron 50-400mm F/4.5-6.3 DI III VC VXD E-mount lens
 - I originally was going to carry a Sony 200-600mm f/5.6-6.3 G OSS lens
 - That lens is much larger and heavier and I opted to try the smaller lens
- Sony FE 24-240mm f/3.5-6.3 OSS lens
 - This was a kit lens option for my camera and is my general purpose lens
 - I did use it, but primarily brought it in case of aurora, which I didn't see
- Apple iPhone 12 Pro
 - I used this for wide angle shots if the Tamron lens was on the Sony

Photographic equipment

- Think Tank Digital Holster 30 V2
 - Bought for the trip, but I'll use it again at some point
 - This was to hold the camera with the Tamron lens attached
- Manfrotto Befree Carbon Fiber Tripod
 - This was only for aurora and never got used
 - This tripod is light and compact
- People who went on the Aqua-Glide or the kayaks often used smartphones (I think mostly in waterproof pouches) to take pictures
- I only changed lenses at the lodge
 - It was very dusty on the bus and tundra crawler
 - Smoke from the western Canadian wildfires was also present on the last day



Sony
200-600

Tamron
50-400

Sony
24-240

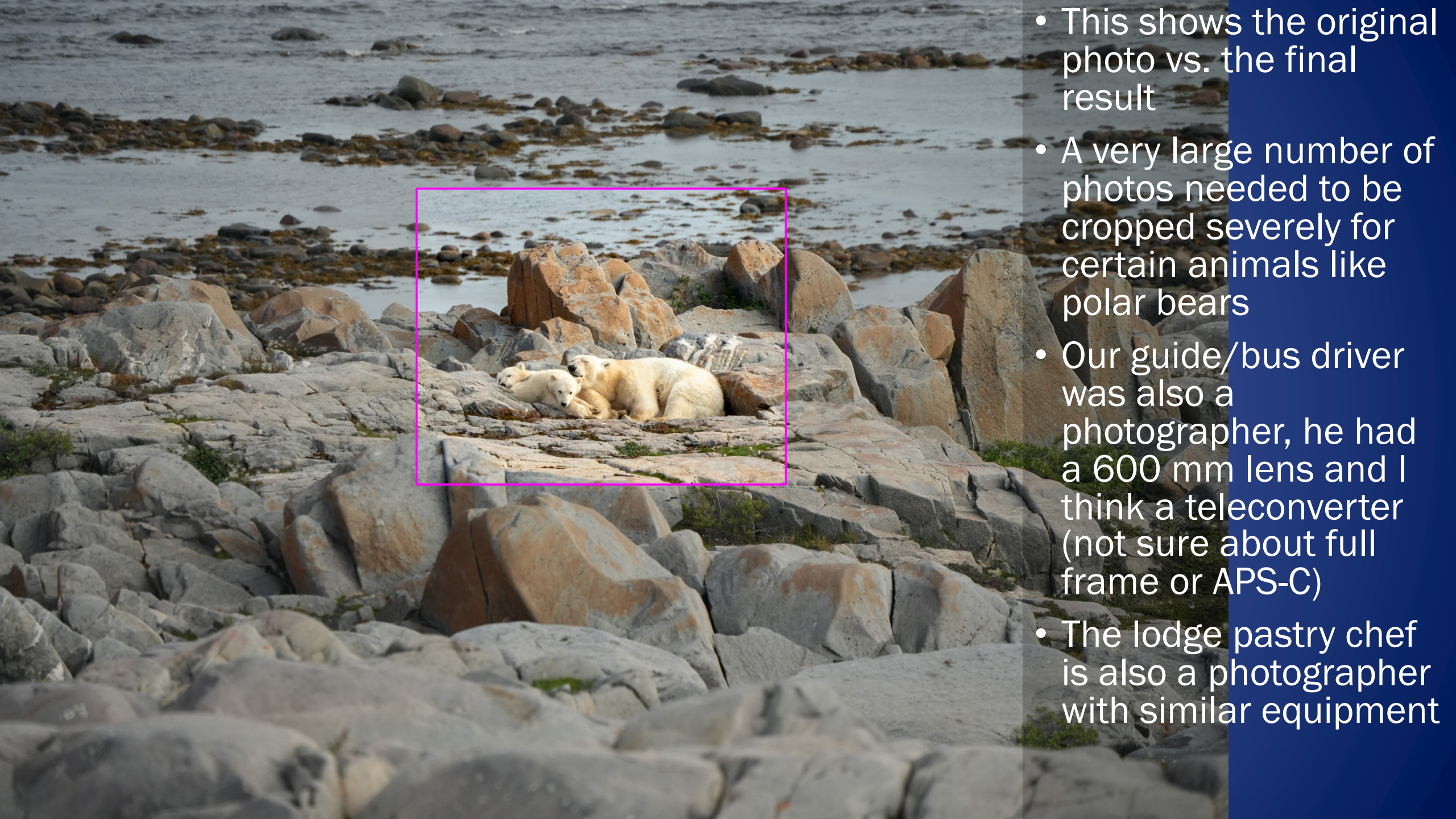


Photos

- Some photos are from my 4 Facebook FCDCC posts:
 - Polar bears: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/fcdcc/permalink/6759098910808815/>
 - Beluga whales: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/fcdcc/permalink/6771055016279871/>
 - Other wildlife: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/fcdcc/permalink/6777141279004578/>
 - Everything else: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/fcdcc/permalink/6797806093604763/>
- I won't show all of those
 - There's too many in those posts
- Others have not been shown before
 - Some demonstrate other points about Churchill or traveling there
 - Others demonstrate points about photographing in Churchill
 - Not all of them will be pretty



- This photo got the most emotional reaction among the polar bear photos
- It was taken with the Tamron lens at the full 400 mm zoom
- It was taken from a bus parked on the road shoulder through an open window
- The polar bears were sharpened to make their fur look more defined, but the rocks were not because that looked artificial
- This picture is heavily cropped, what did it look like originally?



- This shows the original photo vs. the final result
- A very large number of photos needed to be cropped severely for certain animals like polar bears
- Our guide/bus driver was also a photographer, he had a 600 mm lens and I think a teleconverter (not sure about full frame or APS-C)
- The lodge pastry chef is also a photographer with similar equipment

- This shot was taken at much closer range
- Tamron at 400 mm
- Taken from top deck of catamaran (see next slide)





- I was surprised that the boat captain got this close
 - I actually have a shot where the polar bear looks even more freaked out, but which I never published
- He did say he was operating within Canada's rules
- I've heard that Norway would not have allowed this close of an approach at Svalbard

- Juvenile beluga whale
- It's hard to get a shot with an eye, as belugas tend to surface only momentarily
- Belugas don't breach or spy-hop
- I did get some shots of tails out of the water



- Shots like this are more likely with the belugas
- I initially thought that they would move in a straight line and the pod would be gone, but my later impression is that they'd often circle back
 - This means that you might be able to get multiple shots of probably the same pod passing near the boat, including under the boat and back
- People on the kayaks and Aqua-Glide probably got much closer shots, likely using cell phones



- Tundra crawler (compare to bus)
- Restricted to old dirt/gravel roads (constructed for the Cold War military base) – very bumpy ride



- There is an open deck in back but you can only be out there when the tundra crawler is parked

- Catamaran
- Used mainly for beluga whale excursions, but can see some polar bears (most onshore)
- Also can see some birds



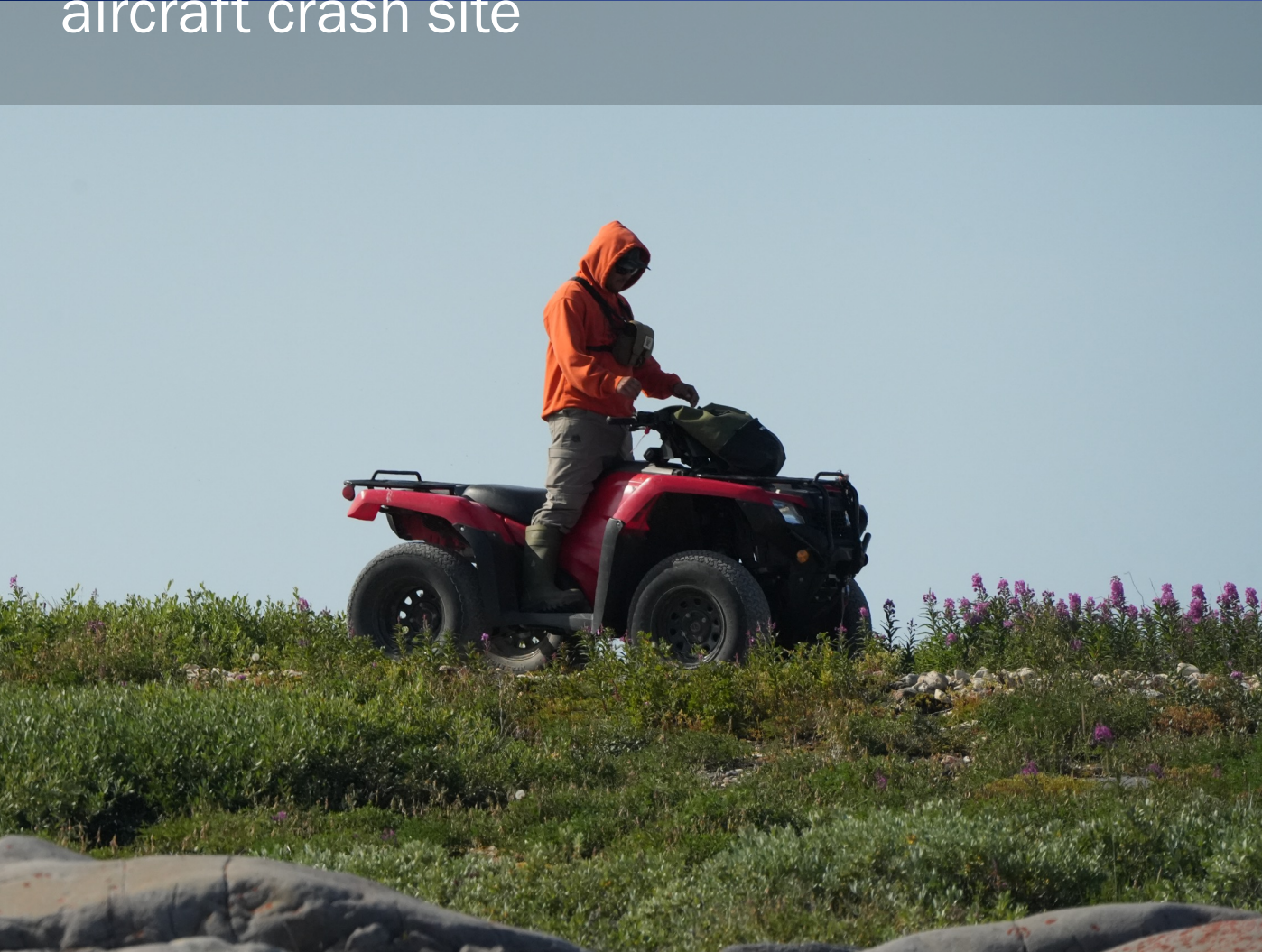


- The town does have other sites of interest
- Left: wreck of SS Ithaca. Supposedly there are guides who can take you there at low tide. This photo taken from tundra crawler.
- Below: town has many murals. These were started when the rail line was damaged in 2017 and the town became isolated.

- This one was taken through the bus window and says “Know I’m Here”



- Polar bear safety (neither picture has been shown, both cropped)
- Left: ranger for Parks Canada on ATV keeping watch on a polar bear near where we were about to go ashore. Another ranger also had a shotgun slung over his shoulder.
- Right: our guide/bus driver carries a shotgun while we're roaming around this aircraft crash site



- This beached boat is a landmark but also intended as a polar bear escape area
 - Climb to the top deck over the wheelhouse
 - Stairs to wheelhouse won't support a polar bear and will collapse
- Residents supposedly leave their cars unlocked so any car can be used to hide from a polar bear

