



Churchill Wild's Seal River Heritage Lodge overlooks the water—and the wildlife.

Treading Lightly on the Land

Manitoba is a rich oasis of ecotourism opportunities

BY HEATHER HUDSON

It's one thing to encounter a polar bear in the confines of a zoo, where a limp, disinterested demeanor belies the magnificent beast's staggering size and natural instinct to roam. It's quite another to get up close to one of these elusive creatures on its own turf; to watch its shoulder blades rise and fall with every ambling step and its nose lift into the wind to get a read on what's near – all while standing just 100 metres away with an experienced guide and a good camera.

This is ecotourism at its finest and it's right here in our own backyard.

Most Manitobans know about the town of Churchill, located on the shoreline of Hudson Bay and infamous for being the "Polar Bear Capital of the World." But take a 30-minute bush plane ride north, halfway between Churchill and the Nunavut border, and you'll enter a whole new world.

Just a few miles north of Seal River sits Churchill Wild, a luxury lodge run by Mike and Jeanne Reimer. While gracious accommodations and gourmet food are part of the experience, this is no place to lounge around inside. That would be wasting a rare environment rife with wildlife.

The many tour packages boast up-close and personal encounters with polar bears, beluga whales, caribou, wolves and birds. But what makes their operation unique is the absence of vehicles traversing the tundra in search of wildlife. This kind of experience is done on foot and by water.

"We deal mainly in polar bears," confirms Director of Marketing and Communications Rick Kemp. "The main difference between us and any of the Churchill town experiences is that we offer walking and hiking with polar bears in polar bear country."

Photo courtesy Dennis Fast/Churchill Wild



Churchill Wild guests get within 100 metres of polar bears in their natural environment.

Combine up-close encounters with polar bears who are on summer vacation with a chance to swim with beluga whales and maybe a little geocaching and birding while you're at it and you've got an underlined entry on your bucket list stroked off.

This kind of travel can only be classified as ecotourism, a buzz word that is gaining popularity with a growing number of environmentally aware travellers who want to tread lightly on the lands they are exploring.

"We find it kind of funny that we don't get a lot of interest from Canadians and I wonder whether it's a matter of not really knowing about what's out there. We all tend to overlook what's usually right before our eyes."

—Rick Kemp, Director of Marketing and Communications for Churchill Wild

What is ecotourism?

The International Ecotourism Society defines ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people."

With environmental policies that include a rigorous composting and recycling program, solar energy and a commitment to sourcing local food, Churchill Wild certainly qualifies.

"When it comes to having a lodge in the middle of nowhere, it's very important to preserve what's around you," says Kemp.

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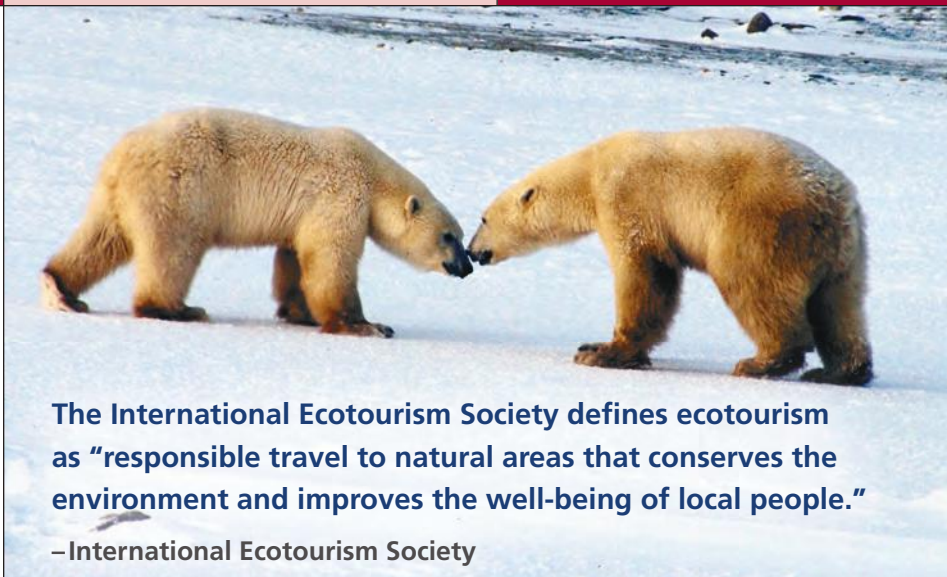
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– International Ecotourism Society

“We try to keep the land as untouched as possible by sticking to paths, lighting the occasional fire with driftwood we find in nature and avoiding the use of vehicles on the tundra.”

Ecotourism in Manitoba

With its largely unspoiled terrain and varied landscape, Manitoba has the potential to be an ecotourism destination for travellers from all over the world, not to mention for those of us right here at home.

A number of tourism operators are making the connection between ecotourism and the kind of experiences they offer. Photography, star gazing, and “eco-explorer” tours are just some of the easy ways to invite travellers with a conscience

to explore the natural world. While hunting and fishing will always be popular, especially in Manitoba, it’s possible to cater to a different kind of vacationer and help the earth while they’re at it.

With the help of Manitoba Lodges and Outfitters Executive Director Gordon Gage, we took a look at just a few ecotourism options that wildlife and outdoor lovers might find right here in Manitoba.

Border to Beaches Trail

If you haven’t hiked, cycled or camped your way on even a portion of this staggering 370 km trail, you’re missing out. Starting at Falcon Lake near the Manitoba-Ontario border, it winds its way across

the province to the sandy shores of Lake Winnipeg. “This trail takes you from pre-Cambrian Shield through to the open prairie right up to the highly-rated, white sand beaches,” says Gage.

For more information on this trail, visit www.mrta.mb.ca

Birding

When done with care, bird watching is one of the most environmentally friendly ways of being in nature. In response to its increasing popularity, a number of travel operators are offering packages that take advantage of Manitoba wildlife. And this spring, Manitoba will be opening its portion of the Pine to Prairie Bird Trail to create the first international birding trail. It begins in Detroit Lakes Minnesota and ends at Hecla-Grindstone Provincial Park 800 kilometres away.

For more information about birding, visit www.birdingmanitoba.com

Geocaching

This modern-era pastime requires a Global Positioning System to hide and locate geocaches (usually a waterproof logbook) in both urban and rural locations. A number of Manitoba tourism networks have collected coordinates for caches to be found throughout the province. When tramping through the woods, however, it’s important to be aware of preserving the natural surroundings and to avoid disturbing wildlife.

For more information about geocaching in Manitoba, visit www.travelmanitoba.ca/geo/

Whether it’s forest, tundra, wetlands or grasslands you’d like to explore, Manitobans are in a unique position to be able to see it all without the huge expense usually associated with travel.

Back up north, Kemp says that despite the natural wonders at our fingertips, there aren’t many Manitobans in the mix at Churchill Wild.

“We find it kind of funny that we don’t get a lot of interest from Canadians and I wonder whether it’s a matter of not really knowing about what’s out there. We all tend to overlook what’s usually right before our eyes.” ♦

For an eco-friendly outdoor adventure you won’t forget, visit www.travelmanitoba.com and explore your options.

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Licence to Boat

Bigger engines, more traffic on waterways make boating safety more important than ever

BY HEATHER HUDSON

In the early 1960s, boat safety expert Rick Scott learned how to drive a small boat with a 25 horsepower motor on peaceful Gull Lake in Manitoba. Under the direction of his father and uncle, he learned about showing courtesy to other boaters and being alert to what was going on 360 degrees around him. Only a couple dozen other small boats populated the lake and the obstacles were few and far between.

Times have changed.

According to Scott, today, that same body of water could have 500 or 600 boats on it, all with 250 horsepower engines. Every one of the drivers is required to pass a test to earn a Pleasure Craft Operator Card but even so, Scott says proper

safety training is critical. “The speed and density of traffic on the waterway can lead to some serious difficulties.”

And he would know. With wife Marian McGurran-Scott, he co-owns S.C.O.T.T.S Boat Safe in Winnipeg (S.C.O.T.T.S stands for Safety Certification, Operator Training and Testing Services), providing training and testing to people looking to acquire a Pleasure Craft Operator Card. With instructors scattered from Thunder Bay to Alberta, they are heavily invested in helping boaters stay safe in the water.

With boating season coming up fast, we asked Scott for common sense tips all boaters should know...but may not follow.



"It's not the same as operating a car... There are complicating issues on water that are not on land."

—Rick Scott, Owner of S.C.O.T.T.S. Boat Safe

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Alcohol

"I get asked the question, 'How big a boat do you have to have so you can drink on it?' countless thousands of times and the answer, without a doubt, is you can't drink on board a boat," says Scott. "A driver can't operate a vessel over the legal blood alcohol level of the province – it's illegal. Even having open alcohol in a boat will result in a fine."

He says many boaters fail to grasp the seriousness of operating a watercraft while impaired. "It's not the same as operating a car. On water there might be underwater obstructions you need to be prepared for and other boats that don't follow roadways you have to look out for. There are complicating issues on water that are not on land."

Speed

Many of today's boats are built for speed. And while zipping up and down a lake can be tremendously fun, it can also be incredibly dangerous.

"You don't have to do 60 and 70 mph just because your boat will do that," says Scott.

"There are things that can happen when a boat hits a wake or a submerged object that can be very devastating at speeds as low as 50 kph. I describe speed on the water as double whatever you're used to doing in a car. That means 50 kph feels like 100 kph on the water. You want to be confident in your driving skills when going that fast."

It's also important to be aware of the size of your wake and what it might be doing to other boaters, swimmers and the shoreline. The unposted speed limit on all waterways is 10 kph or less when within 30 metres of shore, but Scott says common courtesy is a more accurate barometer when assessing your wake around others.

360 degree watch

Driving a boat requires a slightly different skill set than cruising on land. Because there are no lanes – or even roadways – on the water, it's crucial to keep a 360 degree watch around the boat at all times by sight and sound.

"You have the freedom to make a sudden turn when driving a boat, but you need to know if there are other boats you could hit. And it's up to boat operators to make sure they do not interfere with swimmers. Either could be anywhere and you need to be aware of that at all times," says Scott.

A little known fact is that boaters are obligated to offer assistance to anyone making a distress signal on the water. "You can never use the excuse that you didn't see it because that's admitting you're not keeping watch," warns Scott.

Collisions

When driving on the road, we generally know how to interpret the intentions of other drivers. Signal and stoplights are helpful, as are stop and yield signs. But there is none of that in the middle of an open lake.

That's why it's important to understand how to interact with other boats on the water. And understanding right of way is key.

"I teach that the right of way goes to the person on the right, the same as on the road. But you can't take right of way – it has to be given. That means you need to make sure that the vessel that's supposed to be giving you the right of way sees you, understands the rules and gives it to you. That is not always the case," says Scott.

Seasoned boaters know that when you meet another vessel head on, one blast of the horn is the signal that you want to move right. Two blasts means you're heading left. But Scott says not many people remember that bit of information when out on the water. His best advice when approaching other boats? "When in doubt, slow down."

Lif jackets

Most people know that having life jackets for every person on a boat is the law, but true safety regulations go beyond just having a pair of dusty old jackets stowed under a seat.

"Your lifejacket must be a Canadian-approved. And there must be one in the appropriate size, in good working order and suitable for the activity for every single person aboard vessel," says Scott. "Make sure they are readily accessible, and if any situation develops that could be dangerous, put on your life jacket. In small or open boats these should be worn at all times."

He recommends pulling on the straps every once in awhile to make sure they don't rip off and test them to see if they have adequate flotation value since they can break down over time, if not cared for properly.

With so many boaters on the water, it wouldn't hurt to update your safety and regulation training. After all, teaching your kids to drive a boat isn't as simple as it once was on tranquil Gull Lake. ♦

For more information on S.C.O.T.T.S Boat Safe training, visit www.scottsboatsafe.ca.



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