



CANADIAN

Carole Edrich goes with the flow in Hudson Bay.
Pictures by the author

CURRENTS

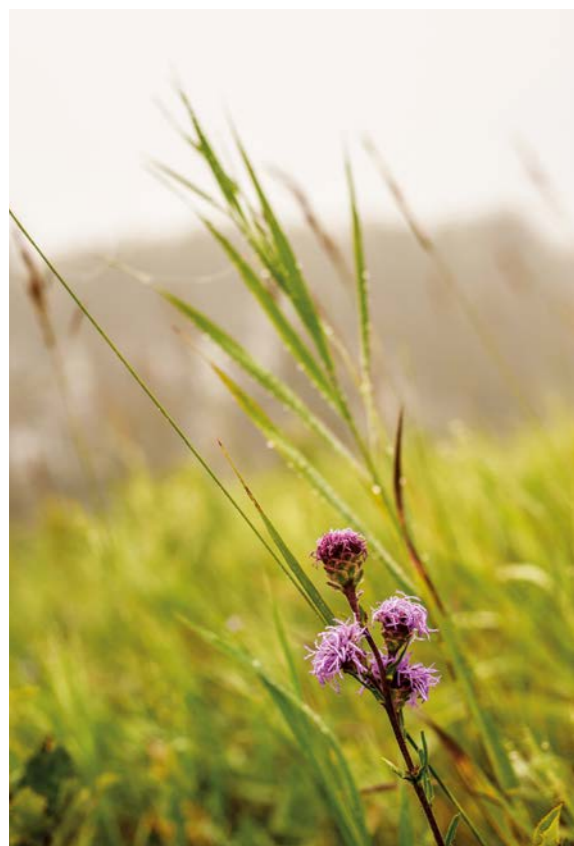
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**FIVE HUGE
WHITE
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SLIDE
SLOWLY
OUT OF
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UNTIL THEY
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BELOW ME**

I SWAY SLIGHTLY WITH THE current, hanging from the furthest extent of the towrope. Buoyed up by the restfully cloudy waters, there is little sense of movement and no real feeling of what is going on above the surface of the waves. I'm staying as still and as quiet as I can. Legs and arms splayed, an oversized floating lure hanging precariously on a clothesline, my efforts to stay motionless are rewarded when I hear strange underwater voices resonating through the rather too turgid sea. We've been told that beluga whales are attracted by the rhythmic vibrations of the Zodiac's engine, but I'm sure that my colleagues' sudden moves have been scaring them off.

Although it's summer, the Hudson Bay is still fed by melted snow and glaciers. In the zodiac above its bitter cold waters, we all feel the chill, and since wetsuits only work when one is moving, we have got steadily colder too. I want to move to create some warmth, but don't, because with growing excitement I realise that the cacophony on which I'm eavesdropping is resolving into distinct and recognisable sounds.

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is dauntingly huge. So, while the Inuit whaling boat would make for a great photograph, there's no way we'd find it if we looked. About 20,000 Beluga whales inhabit the western Hudson Bay and Churchill River estuary over the summer, more than 3,000 of them moving between estuary and bay with the tides. This means that visitors have a good chance of whale encounters, providing the weather holds good.

While whales are carefully protected both by statute and by the locals' inclinations, judicious provision of beluga whale-hunting permits ensures that the Inuits' traditional way of life is maintained. At the impressively stocked Eskimo Museum in Churchill, you can learn how they still use whale oil for fuel and food preservation, whale skin for dog food, and whale flesh for making *muktuk*, their traditional food.

Started by missionaries in 1944, the museum includes historic and contemporary sculptures

of stone, bone, and ivory, as well as archaeological and wildlife specimens, and a fascinating pair of slippers made from the feathers of the Arctic Loon.

This fragile edge between earth, air, ice and water, in the province of Manitoba, is absolutely jam-packed with life. We've seen herds of huge hairy bison big as jeeps in the early morning mists, brown bears so well hidden in the woods that one could easily wander into their paths, a polar bear loping sinuously through brown and tan boulders where it had stashed its prey, caribou, deer, nesting Loon and a single coyote watching us board a plane.

As if that was not enough in itself, we were treated to a spectacular display of the Northern Lights.

Cold and tired, I peel my off my gear with my fellow explorers. We share smiles as we pile into the coach to return to our Churchill hotel, blissed-out on nature and not caring who sees.



I forget the cold and the rain and the huge grey lowering sky. It's an effort not to react to the whale song I hear. Both alien and intensely familiar, among the tones are noises I can relate to from life in the world above. The plaintive sound of a distant violinist, the slow squeaky tuning of an old-style radio, the scratching of rusty nails along glass, and a chirping and tweeting that I'd normally assume was from birds. I then realise that the sounds are repeating, a never-ending low-frequency symphony accompanied by shriller refrains that take quite an effort to hear.

We are later told that this whale song is connected with mating. Songs evolve over time and some last as long as 40 minutes. Males who demonstrate the best memory through song are the ones that have the most young.

As I listen, five huge white shapes slide slowly out of the murk until they're scant metres below me, close enough that even in this turbulent water their details can be seen. They know I'm here but don't seem bothered. If they were, they'd be speeding away and not cruising beside me at well under their average speed (about 22 kilometres per hour).

Previous pages: A pod of beluga whales seen from underwater (Tourism Manitoba) and watching the whales from above (Carole Edrich).

These pages (clockwise from top left): Manitoba's prairies are host to an abundant range of plant life. Antlers shed by a male caribou in Churchill. A male bison waits patiently before rejoining the herd. The cars and trucks which take visitors across taiga and tundra. Young trees in an early morning mist – Manitoba's forests are in a constant state of renewal (Carole Edrich).



They reel away in perfect synchronisation and I feel a sense of loss. I endure more cold to see if they'll return. They do, in pods of three, five, eight and more. Huge alabaster-skinned adults and their young, whose colours vary from light creamy grey brown to opalescent ivory blue. It's impossible to estimate their sizes through the diffracting murky water, but I know that the young start at about a third the size of a full grown male, which itself can reach a five-metre span, weigh 600 kilos, and occasionally live to 30 years.

Undisturbed by the water's murky swirls, their senses work well at distances that have me struggling to make out what I'm seeing, and as they come closer and pass, they swivel their heads to examine me and the zodiac from which I'm towed.

Belugas are the only whale with a flexible neck, and the way they use it makes me feel that there's humour in their eyes, along with an ageless playfulness born of wisdom.

I'm getting colder than I thought was possible, so reluctantly make my way back to the boat.

Our guide says the whales were spooked by an Inuit hunt in the estuary, but the scale of this place



THIS FRAGILE EDGE BETWEEN EARTH, AIR, ICE AND WATER, IN THE PROVINCE OF MANITOBA, IS PACKED WITH LIFE

