



BEAR ESSENTIALS

Journeying through Canada and Alaska
with Natural Habitat Adventures, **AMY ROBERTS** discovers
an elevated approach to sustainable travel.

*A polar bear frolics near Tundra Lodge; Opposite: Natural Habitat Adventures celebrates
safe and natural encounters with wildlife around the globe.*





From left: Natural Habitat Adventure's Bear Camp in Alaska; daily wildlife viewing all but ensures excitement; the company takes guests bear viewing in Alaska's Lake Clark National Park.

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SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL, ECOTOURISM, ENVIRONMENTAL VACATIONS — BUZZY TERMS LIKE THESE, ONCE CONSIDERED PROGRESSIVE AND COMMENDABLE — CAN SOMETIMES BECOME OVERLY EMPLOYED. Yet Natural Habitat Adventures, the world's first carbon-neutral tour company and the first travel outfitter to pull off a zero-waste trip, is proving to the industry it can be done. The company is hyper focused on doing good versus pontificating about it.

Perhaps this is to be expected of a company that partners with World Wildlife Fund (WWF). You can't really place the leading environmental organization's iconic panda logo next to yours if you aren't able to justify the association. Even so, Nat Hab, as it's often referred to by travelers, seems to be on a continual quest to one-up itself environmentally.

How so? For starters, the company pays to offset 100 percent of the carbon emissions from each trip by funding carbon reduction programs all

over the world. Investing in renewable energy sources in India, protecting forests in Zimbabwe, and purchasing efficient cook stoves for villagers in Rwanda are just a few examples. While admirable, Nat Hab readily admits carbon neutrality is the floor, not the ceiling, and community impact must be part of the foundation.

This became obvious to me on two recent trips I had the pleasure of experiencing: one to the company's newest offering, brown bear viewing in Alaska's remote Lake Clark National Park, and another to its longest running adventure, a polar bear safari in Churchill, Canada.

ALASKA

The Experience

Accessible only by air or by sea, no roads lead to Lake Clark National Park. There's also no electricity, cell service, or Wi-Fi. But, if you're doing it right, none of those things are missed. The antics of the area's brown bears, the "pinch me, this can't be real" scenery, and the engaging dialogue with guides provide more entertainment, inspiration, and education than any website or Netflix special.

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A dogsled outing with Natural Habitat; Opposite: polar bear encounters are found along oceanfront acres of land.

The trip begins in Homer, Alaska, where seven passengers board a small bush plane (the kind where you're assigned a seat based on your weight and can expect to get intimately familiar with the tops of your kneecaps), for a 45-minute scenic flight across the Cook Inlet. Before landing on the beach in front of Nat Hab's Bear Camp, our pilot had to overshoot the landing and circle back. "We don't want to disturb that mom and her cubs," we heard him explain in our headsets. Soon enough, mama bear's stroll along the beach came to an end, allowing us to land and meet up with the seven other humans we'd be spending the next few days with.

Located within Lake Clark National Park, Bear Camp encompasses a handful of private ocean-front acres on the Alaskan coastline. Nat Hab acquired the land less than one year ago and committed to ensuring an intimate bear-viewing experience in nature's uninhabited — and largely uninhabitable — wild.

Tented cabins offer a cozy escape from the elements when needed, but given the nearly 18 hours of daylight during an Alaskan summer, a lot of time is spent bear viewing on the elevated platforms and observation decks, and walking through meadows and forests seemingly straight from a children's novel that begins with, "Once upon a time ..."





From left: “Polar Rovers” keep guests safe yet close to the action; navigating Natural Habitat’s Bear Camp; daily photography is a must.

ON OUR FIRST DAY IN THE TUNDRA OUR GROUP GOT LUCKY WITH TWO CURIOUS BEARS, ONE OF WHICH STOOD ON ITS HIND LEGS AND STRETCHED CLOSE TO NINE FEET TALL.

The Impact

The bush camp is 100 percent off the grid; a solar powered, rainwater collecting, composting, enclave that manages to feel more luxury than hippie — a proverbial pristine paradise that almost wasn’t.

Several years ago, a Canadian company called Northern Dynasty Minerals proposed the Pebble Mine project — a gold and copper mine that would destroy crucial denning areas and poison the salmon runs of Bristol Bay — which would decimate the area’s bear population.

Plans for Pebble Mine included an open pit mine roughly six football fields deep and covering more than a square mile. A 270-megawatt power plant, 165-mile natural-gas pipeline, and 82 miles of road were also intended. Toxic mine tailings were to be dumped in nearby ponds.

It’s hard to believe this proposal was ever probable. Fortunately, for now, plans are halted, in large part due to the activism of Nat Hab guides and WWF, both of which played a major role in stopping the mine. Together, they continue to monitor the threat and work with local native communities and administrations to protect the ecosystem.

CANADA

The Experience

It can be difficult to watch a polar bear roll around on its back in Canada’s sub-arctic tundra, struggling to sit upright and think anything but, “Awwww.” When I witnessed a pudgy white bear doing this, paws flailing about, I couldn’t help but suggest he was auditioning for a Coca Cola commercial. But when that same bear silently covered 100 yards in less than ten seconds to approach our Polar Rover, I changed my mind. Sure, he was still adorable. But his paws were the size of snowshoes and when he yawned, I was certain a bowling ball could fit in his mouth. Observations that reminded me cuteness is not a disqualifier for being a lethal hunter.

On our first day in the tundra our group got lucky with two curious bears, one of which stood on its hind legs and stretched close to nine feet tall to get a better look at the people safely perched atop the vehicle. When the bear walked underneath our Polar Rover and stood to sniff the bottom of my boots through the grated steel-mesh floor, I silently prayed I hadn’t stepped in seal blubber.

As one of only two companies to hold an exclusive

permit allowing access to the Churchill Wildlife Management Area, Nat Hab can safely provide these unforgettable encounters with one of the world’s top apex predators. And while polar bears are certainly the main attraction, the tundra is home to several other species uniquely adapted for the severe environment, including arctic fox, snowy owls, and willow ptarmigans who comically appear to be strutting down a catwalk, showing off the latest in footwear fashion.

The Impact

Polar bears are the poster child for climate change, so it’s little wonder Nat Hab’s initiatives are focused on protecting the bears and their environment, which includes the small town of Churchill. Neighboring the Hudson Bay, Churchill is home to roughly 900 humans. At times, the lines between town and tundra are blurred, and it’s not uncommon for bears to wonder into the city limits. “It’s the only place in the world where if a stranger speeds towards you and opens the car door and yells, ‘get in!’ you do it,” Nat Hab’s Director of Travel Industry Relations, Don Martinson, told our group.



When bears roam too close to town, conservation officers try to scare them off with loud noises, flares, and if needed, rubber bullets. If those measures fail, bears are trapped, consciously sedated, and sentenced to a few weeks in what is colloquially referred to as “polar bear jail,” where they’re given nothing but a block of ice for the duration of their stay. It might sound harsh, but the goal is to ensure the polar bear equivalent of a one-star Yelp review.

“We don’t want them associating humans with food,” explained our guide, Garrett Fache. “We want the experience to be harmlessly unpleasant.”

When their stint is up, bears are again consciously sedated and flown about 50 miles away in a net that dangles from a helicopter. This prison reform program is successful, but pricey. Between pilot time, helicopter rental, fuel, and other expenses, each release can cost upwards of \$3,000 – a tab regularly picked up by Nat Hab.

These ongoing efforts make it clear; Nat Hab isn’t your average sustainability-driven company. Equally of note, its “playground” is even more reason to return, be it for the alpenglow, unexpected bear encounters, or the truly transformative nature of travel. 

Opposite: New life, up close and personal; Above: Alaska’s preferred mode of transport.

➔ **Bear Minimum.** Enter **OFFER M25048** for more wildlife and uninhabited landscapes with Nat Hab.