

Whales, Walruses & Polar Bears In The Russian Far East

By Don Mankin



The polar bear sauntered down the beach toward us. My heart pounded as he squinted in our direction, no doubt weighing the nutritional value of the 20 or so tasty morsels wrapped in fleece, down and Gore Tex just 40 yards away.

I hurriedly took several photos, then looked around and figured I could probably outrun the short, round woman standing next to me. Fortunately for her, and possibly for me, he decided we were more scary than tasty, made a sharp left turn and headed directly for the water.

We weren't in any real danger as long as we followed our guide's advice,

"stay together and don't run." I don't remember her suggesting that we knock someone over in panic but I kept that option open just in case.

This was only one of many polar bear sightings in our 4+ days on and around Wrangel and Herald Islands in the Russian Arctic on Heritage Expeditions' Across the Top of the World adventure cruise. From the Zodiacs (the inflatable boats that ferry passengers from ship to shore and on sight-seeing excursions away from the ship) we saw bears up close on the beach and farther away on the tundra and distant ridges. From our ship, the Professor Khromov, we saw even more on ice floes near the islands.



My favorite was the mom and her two cubs exploring an ice floe just off our port bow as we approached Wrangel island. Unlike our jumpy friend on the beach, she seemed unfazed by our presence and sidled up to the edge of the floe as the Professor slipped slowly by. Maybe her agent had negotiated a hefty appearance fee with Heritage Expeditions.



The bears were only the third act (fourth if you're a birder) in an impressive wildlife production that started with the bird cliffs (more on that shortly) on Day 1, grey and humpback whales on Day 2, walruses on Day 3, more walruses and our first polar bears on ice floes as we approached Wrangel Island on Day 4. The bear on the beach on Day 5 seemed to open up the ursine floodgates which reached its peak on and near Herald Island on Day 7 (about 30 by most estimates).

And the birds! I'm not a birder -- picking out and naming specific breeds and species is not my thing, though I admit a special affection for the Puffin, tufted or not. But you don't have to be a birder to appreciate the bird cliffs we cruised by almost every day in the Zodiacs. The cliffs are like avian high-rise apartment houses occupied by all kinds of birds, apparently living together in relative harmony, aside from occasional bickering and outbursts of air rage. At one point I just leaned back in the Zodiac and watched the birds dart, dive and soar above me, surrounded by the sound of cackles and screeches.

The magnificent scenery and unique culture were almost as compelling as the wildlife. We hiked on the tundra in the long shadows of the endless dusk; visited remote, windswept Kolyuchin Island, the site of a once important but now abandoned Russian polar research station; and strolled through Whalebone Alley, an evocative site of whale skulls, pelvises, and jawbones with some undetermined archeological significance (or maybe the ancient Inuits were just having a bit of fun fooling around with the pretensions of future scholars).

We also visited a summer encampment of an indigenous, Chukchi family as well as the very nontraditional town of Laurentiya. At first the town looked like a gloomy relic from the Soviet era, with tall smoke stacks, large apartment blocks and a statue of Lenin prominently displayed in the town square. Then I noticed the gaily-painted sides of the newer buildings, the colorfully painted, repurposed old tires in a playground and the

smiling faces of the kids waving to us from the schoolyard as we walked by.

At a time when the relationship between the US and Russia seems to be chilling yet again, I was warmed by the hospitality of the Russian people we met as they told us about their country and their lives. I was especially impressed by the enthusiastic performance of an indigenous folkloric ensemble whose members sang and danced with smiles as wide as their vast land.

Then there were the sunsets. I have seen my share of spectacular sunsets but the sunset we witnessed from the ship on our last evening may have been the most spectacular of all, accompanied as it was by a double rainbow spanning the bow from port to starboard.

As a grandchild of Russian/Ukrainian émigrés who fled to the US to escape the pogroms at the end of the 19th Century, I wondered if the grizzled old man sitting on the steps of a building in Laurentiya smoking a cigarette could have been me in some alternative personal history.

As I walked slowly by, I silently thanked my grandparents for their sacrifice and foresight in ensuring my future and enabling me to visit, but not reside, in this wild and majestic land.

For more info on award-winning travel writer Don Mankin, aka "The Adventure Geezer," go to his website and blog at www.adventuretransformations.com

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