

Bear facts

Nikki Bayley shows how to line up encounters with three different species of Canada's iconic predators

Britain has much to recommend it, but when it comes to large predators, we're a bit lacking. The biggest thing you'll spot in the wild is a badger.

And while a badger is not without its charms, for sheer excitement, it's not in the same league as a bear.

The moment that you spot a bear in the wild for the first time will stay with you for ever. And Canada's the place to do it, positively bristling with them from coast to coast, leaving guests spoiled for choice when it comes to adding bear-watching to their holidays.

There are three species of bear in Canada. Most common are the black bears that can be found in

every province. They're fond of woodland and thick vegetation, and adult males weigh in at about 250kg and grow up to two metres in height. Rather confusingly, only about 70% of black bears are actually black - others range from dark to light brown, cinnamon coloured and even blonde.

With this level of colour variation, the best way to distinguish black bears from their less-common cousins grizzly bears is by the pronounced hump grizzlies have on their shoulders. They're weightier generally than black bears, with an average male standing at about the same height as a black bear but weighing about



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100kg more. Grizzlies are found in Alberta, British Columbia, the Yukon, Northwest Territories and Nunavut. They tend to be solitary, except during the annual salmon run when they gather around rivers and lakes to catch the fish swimming upstream to spawn.

Perhaps the most magnificent of all are polar bears, with adult males weighing up to 700kg. They're classified as a vulnerable species - one notch less threatened than endangered - and though they are found in northern Quebec, northern Ontario, the northern Yukon, Nunavut and Northwest Territories, most tourists will see them in Manitoba. It's by far the easiest place to do it, with great infrastructure and two short seasons where viewing is possible.

Here's a guide to help clients get the most bear for their buck.

▶ BLACK BEARS

Many Canadians in rural areas regard black bears in the





LEFT: A black bear

RIGHT: Watching a grizzly bear

BELOW: A 'spirit' bear



→ same way that Brits view urban foxes – an annoyance but one to be respected. The possibility of seeing them in the wild or, indeed, crossing a road in some areas, is high, so when getting off the beaten track, it's a good plan to be vigilant and to carry bear spray.

Accidental sightings aside, if you're looking for a guaranteed bear-viewing experience, the best bet is a few days in a high-end lodge in a remote wilderness destination. For a more budget option, most provinces offer half-day or two-hour bear-spotting trips by boat or minivan.

Exclusive bear-watching lodges are accessible only by boat or float plane. These all-inclusive wilderness experiences

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offer small groups and relative luxury in the wild, with hours dedicated to nature viewing alongside specialist guides.

On the budget side, Tofino on Vancouver Island offers excellent opportunities for bear watching. West Coast Aquatic Safaris offers trips by covered boat or Zodiac

for about £47, just half an hour away from the surf beaches. Clients can see bears between April and October, feeding on the beach by flipping over stones so they can gorge on the sea life found underneath after high and low tides. whalesafaris.com

Three hours north of Quebec City on the Saguenay fjord, the Ferme 5 Étoiles Family Vacation site runs a 95% guaranteed black-bear observation activity at sunset from the start of May to the end of October, from a sheltered area that overlooks the bears feeding in their natural habitat. There's a variety of accommodation options on site, including cottages, a motel, and camping in tents, yurts or teepees. ferme5etoiles.com

One of the rarest species of black bear is the kermode or 'spirit' bear, which is found only in British Columbia. Clients can see the creamy-white bears on an ecotourism adventure on the ancestral lands of the Kitsoo/Xai'xais First Nations at Spirit Bear Lodge in the Great Bear Rainforest. The viewing season runs from June 1 to October 10. spiritbear.com

▶ GRIZZLY BEARS

Visitors to Banff in Alberta can stop at the Kicking Horse Grizzly Bear Refuge, which houses the largest enclosed and protected grizzly-bear habitat in the world. It is home to orphaned Boo, who plays, forages and explores just like bears in the wild. Guests →



→ can book an hour-long tour or go behind the scenes assisting a ranger. kickinghorseresort.com

Rated by National Geographic Adventure as one of the best adventure-travel companies on earth, British Columbia's Great Bear Nature Tours offers grizzly-viewing adventures from its floating lodge in the heart of the Great Bear Rainforest. Bear viewing is organised with photography in mind, either from hides or small boats. Canadian Affair offers two-night/three-day tours from £879, including float-plane transfers and full-board accommodation, but excluding international flights. greatbearstours.com

Up in the Yukon, Bear Cave Mountain offers a unique grizzly viewing experience from mid-September to the end of October, when about 50 bears gather to feast on salmon. Thermal springs percolate through the limestone, warming the river so



The bears' fur freezes, making chandelier-like tinkling sounds as they walk


it flows year-round. The bears' fur freezes, making chandelier-like tinkling sounds as they walk. Only four guests at a time can go on this ultra-high-end 12-day trip that Wildlife Worldwide offers for £10,950. The price includes flights, a four-hour return helicopter transfer to Bear Cave Mountain and seven nights' full-board in a remote rustic lodge. wildlifeworldwide.com

► POLAR BEARS

Although guests can view polar

bears elsewhere in Canada, Churchill in Manitoba is rightly known as the polar-bear capital of the world, and it's certainly the least challenging place to spot the bears in their natural habitat, with operators well-equipped to deal with visitors.

There are two bear-spotting seasons: the brief Arctic summer from mid-July until the end of August, or October and November, when the ice returns and sightings are all but guaranteed. Visitors motor out in huge tundra buggies to view the bears in complete safety.

Prestige Holidays offer a five-night Ultimate Polar Bear Wildlife Tour in October from £3,580. The price includes return flights from Heathrow to Toronto and on to Winnipeg and Churchill, two days' bear viewing from a tundra vehicle, a cultural tour, and three nights' accommodation at Lazy Bear Lodge and two nights in Winnipeg. 

3 OF THE BEST

OTHER WILDLIFE

No bears? No worries. Most adventure companies pair up bear watching with other nature activities, so even if you miss out on spotting bears, you'll be rewarded with other natural highlights of Canada.

Snorkel with Salmon in BC

If you miss out on spotting bears while you're in Campbell River, you can try the exhilarating experience of snorkelling with salmon between mid-July and September, with the added chance of spotting eagles and harbour seals. Destiny River Adventures supplies wetsuits, boots and gloves. Guests take a boat to the slow-moving pools to swim alongside thousands of salmon.

Hear wolves howl in Quebec

The Auberge Refuge du Trappeur in Saint-Mathieu-du-Parc, on the outskirts of the pristine wilderness of La Mauricie National Park, offers a 90-minute experience viewing black bears and wolves from a shelter. With luck, participants can also tick off the Canadian must-sees of moose and beavers.

Kayak with belugas in Manitoba

Strictly for summer visitors, you can book a kayak session to paddle with beluga whales in the Churchill River, at the mouth of Hudson Bay. This is the place where some 3,500 curious, snow-white belugas gather in the world's largest concentration of super-pods to feed, mate and give birth throughout July and August.



LEFT: Tundra-buggy polar bear viewing
BELOW: A grizzly bear

