



VIA'S REMOTE SERVICE TO CHURCHILL

Endangered Species

DENIS CONNELL/PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR EXCEPT AS NOTED

CHURCHILL, MANITOBA, POPULATION 899, is a saltwater port on Canada's Hudson Bay which proudly claims to be the "Polar Bear Capital of the World." Although geographically south of the Arctic Circle, every fall Churchill is host to the annual migration of *ursus maritimus* to the newly formed sea ice. Among the most fearsome carnivores on earth, polar bears are an endangered species surviving principally on fish and seal meat. Another less obvious endangered species coexists with the bears in Churchill — at least for now — and given the uncertainty of recent events, 2017 may be the time to schedule your visit.

The other endangered species? VIA Rail Canada's classic 1950s streamlined,

first class passenger equipment that takes you to the bears on a leisurely schedule three times each week. VIA maintains service to Churchill as part of its remote services network and as a tenant of the Hudson Bay Railway. Hudson Bay, which acquired the line from Canadian National in 1997, closed the saltwater port in 2016 resulting in a drastic reduction of rail freight traffic in the region. Historically, millions of metric tons of wheat and other agricultural products were the main commodities shipped from Churchill during the shipping season since the railhead was established in 1929. An article in the *Thompson Citizen* of January 6, 2017, reported that OmniTrax Canada, owner of the Hudson Bay Railway, entered

into a memorandum of understanding with the Mathias Colomb Cree Nation and the Mississippi Rail Consortium for the transfer of its Manitoba assets. Regardless of future ownership, the loss of rail and port traffic does not project well for the future of first class rail passenger service to the region. Trains 692 and 693 to Winnipeg may become the other endangered species indigenous to Churchill.

Not so, according to VIA's Media Relations Spokeswoman Miriam Diaby. In a phone interview, she noted that no changes in service are contemplated and that VIA is taking reservations for the Beluga whale season (July–August) and the fall bear season (October–December). For most of the year, VIA assigns

a "standard" consist to the Churchill service — two 6400-class F40PH locomotives, one baggage car, two coaches, one diner and a *Château*-class sleeper. During the off-season, microwaved, prepackaged meals are served in the

diner, and there is no first class lounge for sleeping car passengers.

All of this changes during the "bear season" beginning in early October. A cook is added to the crew and freshly prepared meals are offered from the Café Express menu. Meals are included in the fare for first class passengers regardless of accommodation type. The most significant service upgrade during bear season brings out the dome-observation *Park*-series cars to serve as first class lounges, replicating — with the exception of motive power — a nearly perfect 1950s streamliner.

Winnipeg is the largest city in Manitoba, and as a provincial capital rates an international airport on the outskirts of town. VIA Rail calls here as well; its Toronto–Vancouver flagship, the

Canadian, provides triweekly service from May to October and biweekly service the rest of the year.

With an aggressive rail riding schedule ahead of me, I chose Air Canada to get me here quickly. On Sunday, October 4, 2015, my weeklong journey begins at Winnipeg's VIA station, a 1917 Beaux Arts masterpiece renovated by VIA a few years ago. Designated as a historic landmark, the building features a passenger concourse, office space for lease, a six-track train shed and the Winnipeg Railway Museum. Tracks 1 and 2 are sealed off at each end of the train shed, which houses the museum's extensive collection. Included are various pieces of maintenance equipment, Canadian National GMD-1 No. 1900 in the traditional green livery, a 1922 CP wood reefer, and (my favorite) inspection sedan No. 34, a 1946 Packard fitted with flanged wheels and once used by the Greater Winnipeg Water District. The museum is a volunteer organization and well worth the time to visit.

As noon approaches, VIA announces that Train 693 is prepared for boarding on Track 4. I am assigned "cabin for 1" (i.e., roomette) No. 6 in car 8221, *Château Radisson*. Ignoring the announcement that lunch would be served soon after departure, I'm in my room for 90 seconds to drop my gear before heading back to car 8718, observation-lounge *Yoho Park*. Today's consist has F40PH-3s 6437 and 6459, built in 1989 and 1986, respectively; baggage 8602 (1954); coaches 8129 and 8122 (1955); diner 8404 *Annapolis* (1955); sleepers 8221 *Château Radisson*, 8212 *Château Latour* and 8216 *Château Levis* (all 1954); and 8718 *Yoho Park* (1954). *Château*-class sleepers are configured with three sections, eight roomettes, one drawing room and three double bedrooms. The *Latour* and *Levis* were deadheading this trip, en route to Churchill to accommodate a southbound tour group. Departure is delayed until 12:15 p.m., but soon the 60-year-old consist is wailing westbound at track speed toward the first scheduled stop in Portage La Prairie.

OPPOSITE: It's 6:50 p.m. and angry skies prevail at the Churchill station. In just 40 minutes, VIA Train 692 to Winnipeg will depart with the *Revelstoke Park* carrying the markers.

BELOW: Built by Budd in 1954, the lounge in *Revelstoke Park* harkens back to a bygone era. The author had the entire car to himself on the return to Winnipeg.

BOTTOM: Looking the opposite direction, stairs lead to the observation dome of the Budd-built *Revelstoke Park*.



At Portage, a massive Canadian Pacific freight fouls the CN diamond, causing us a 20-minute delay. Once again underway, the Canadian Northern branch to Churchill splits away from the CN transcontinental main here and wanders into the agrarian heartland of Manitoba. *Yoho Park* is my vantage point for most of the afternoon, until first call for dinner is announced approaching Dauphin. After a hearty pot roast dinner in the *Annapolis*, I settle into my room for a much-needed nap in anticipation of a 1:30 a.m. arrival in The Pas. Two days of riding the spartan accommodations of the Keewatin Central Railway's Pukatawagan mixed are ahead of me (see RAILFAN & RAILROAD, January 2017).

Back Toward the Bears

Two days aboard the Puk mixed is an exhausting ordeal, even for hardcore railfans, so I'm thrilled to be boarding VIA 693 on The Pas platform at 2:15 a.m. on Wednesday, October 7. VIA service attendant Darcelle Collette cheerfully greets me, then escorts me to my sleeping accommodations for this leg of the trip: a lower section in car 8202, *Château Bienville*. In minutes, I'm fast

RIGHT: The diner *Annapolis*, built for the Canadian Pacific in 1955, is ready for seating. The car was assigned to Train 693 on October 4, 2015. VIA maintenance forces keep the 60-year-old equipment in top shape.

BELOW: VIA's classic consist of Train 692 glides effortlessly southbound at milepost 241.5 near Nelson Manitoba, having just crossed the Nelson River bridge. The view is from the dome of the Revelstoke Park on October 9, 2015, at 8:06 a.m.

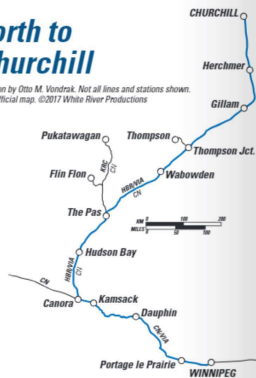
asleep and it's no secret why — the bed is twice as wide as any you will find in roomettes or bedrooms. VIA generously provides plush pillows and blankets for added comfort in section sleepers in the *Manor*- and *Château*-series cars. Best of all, section sleeping accommodations are less expensive than roomettes but still qualify for the first class amenities of meals and *Park* car access.

After breakfast in dining car *Princess*, I'm off to document the classic Budd consist. Youngsters 6455 and 6448 (F40PH-3s, 1989) head today's "high season" train including baggage car 8600 (1954); coaches 8105 and 8110 (1955); diner 8415 *Princess* (1955); *Château Bienville* 8202 (1954); *Château Closse* 8205 (1954); and observation-lounge 8711, *Revelstoke Park* (1954).



North to Churchill

Illustration by Otto M. Vondrak. Not all lines and stations shown. Not an official map. ©2017 White River Productions



ABOVE: VIA 692 pauses at what passes for a station in Kamsack, Man., on August 24, 2013. STEVE BARRY PHOTO



LEFT: Arrival at Churchill is early on October 8, 2015, and anxious passengers grab their luggage on the platform. It's 24°F, with wind and flurries blowing in from the bay.

HBR track is relatively smooth, with alternating sections of stick and welded rail; train speed is approximately 40 m.p.h. We met only one freight train during the night and won't see another until we reach Churchill the next day. VIA Rail is the only railroad activity on the HBR line today as we head up the Thompson Subdivision for a scheduled meet with Train 690, our southbound counterpart. Thompson, Man., population 13,158, is the second-largest city in Manitoba and site of the Vale-Inco

smelter, once a significant traffic generator for the CN and HBR. Thompson is accessed by a 30.5-mile subdivision that breaks off the main at Thompson Junction, milepost 199.8. When on schedule, north- and southbound VIA trains meet in Thompson for scheduled layovers every Wednesday and Friday. Northbound trains have a five-hour layover (12:00–5:00 p.m.) while southbounds are scheduled for a three-hour visit (11:00 a.m.–2:00 p.m.).

One mile east of Thompson,

northbound trains wye the entire consist and back into the station; southbound trains pull in straight and wye the consist after leaving the station at 2:00 p.m. Passengers are free to leave the train and taxi into town (about \$7.00) since the station is on the outskirts of the city. Thompson is a major city with shopping malls, restaurants, and the University College of the North. Smelting, milling, mining, and nickel processing are the principal economic activities here. Before heading into town, I spend an hour photographing the station area and positioning movements of both consists.

Remote Services Manager Don Saindon has our consist loaded and ready for its 5:00 p.m. departure. A number of new passengers join us at Thompson, most headed to Churchill. The schedule posts mostly "flag" stops, none of which are made this trip. Without freight interference, we head back to the HBR mainline at milepost 199 as dusk approaches. Dinner is announced upon departure,



TOP: *Ursus maritimus* ambles along the Churchill coastline looking for his next meal. As the sea ice forms, algae draws in the fish, fish attract the seals, and seals attract the polar bears. ROB ALBERT PHOTO

ABOVE: Tundra buggies provide a safe vantage point to view and photograph the bears. The elevated platform and heavy-duty tires also provide access to the rocky coastline, areas off limits to conventional vehicles. ROB ALBERT PHOTO

RIGHT: The *Interlink Levity*, a bulk carrier sailing under the Marshalls Island flag, has a gross tonnage of 24,168, and is seen loading at the Port of Churchill on October 8, 2015.



scene. Only one HBR locomotive (ex-CN in ratty paint) is present in the yard along with a string of grain cars; VIA is the only active railroading in town.

With fewer than 12 hours here, I stop into the Parks Canada office inside the VIA station looking for area information. The park rangers provide a wealth of information on the flora, fauna, and wildlife of the region, particularly the polar bears. The first fact they emphasize is *be careful*, especially in bear season. Be aware of your surroundings at all times and remember that those cute, docile-looking bears are wild animals and always hungry. Most important to this new stranger in town is the Churchill area map with all the important facts you need to know.

Map in hand, I walk toward the grain port on Hudson Bay, still open and operational in 2015. The *Interlink Levity*, a bulk carrier with a gross tonnage of

24,168, is loading in port; two other ships are at anchor waiting for dock space as the shipping season will soon end.

Walking back toward town, I noticed the mixture of paved, sand, and gravel roads everywhere. Downtown Churchill is about one-and-a-half miles square and everything is accessible within walking distance. The map is enormously helpful. As a remote services community, everything comes here by sea, rail, or air, since no roads connect to southern Manitoba. The international airport on the outskirts of town is a massive, strategic installation for North American Military Defense with commercial service to major airports throughout Canada.

In season, polar bear tours are popular and probably the best way to get up close to the bears. More important is that by using specially designed tundra buggies with elevated platforms, these guided tours are the *safest* way to view the

bears. Many companies have packages which include lodging, a scarce commodity in this town. Check the internet and shop around.

Bring warm clothes, as frigid weather is common along Hudson Bay. A blizzard on March 7, 2017, stranded Train 692 in Churchill until March 23! Crews battled almost seven feet of snow for nearly two weeks until full service was restored.

My day in Churchill ends too quickly. After a farewell dinner with Eliot, I'm walking back to the station for Train

692's 7:30 p.m. departure. The ever-gracious Darcelle settles me into Room 6 of *Château Closse*, my home for the 44-hour trip back to Winnipeg.

And the Future...?

As of this writing, the future of the Hudson Bay Railway sale to the First Nations consortium is unsettled, complicated by the loss of port and rail traffic. VIA's future landlord will have to demonstrate the sustained ability to maintain nearly 1,000 miles of track to

passenger train standards in order to maintain Churchill as part of its remote services network.

Polar bears have been on the planet for thousands of years and are endangered by a shrinking habitat. Intercity, first class passenger trains of historic equipment in daily service, a species of a different sort, are similarly endangered. VIA's ex-CP equipment is in excellent condition considering its age, a rolling tribute to the proactive maintenance programs of the carrier. Sixty-year-old equipment will not last forever, particularly in the harsh operating environments of northern Manitoba. If you love polar bears, need the mileage, love riding classic 1950s streamliners, or all of the above, consider a call to VIA. And do it soon — the earlier you plan your trip, the better. ☐



Train 693 backs into Churchill and remains at the station platform until departure at 7:00 p.m. on October 8, 2015. The wye is about a half-mile south of town. The Hudson Bay freight to the left of the consist was the only freight seen on the entire trip.

The *Yoho Park* brings up the rear of southbound Train 692, due out of Thompson in 30 minutes on October 7, 2015. Layovers in each direction allow passengers to visit downtown Thompson.

