



Taking the slow train to chilly Churchill

By Geoff Stevenson
(First of two instalments)

You've all heard of a slow boat to China. This is a story about a slow train to Churchill.

And we mean really slow: Would you believe 19 hours to cover just over 400km? Of course, this includes a few station stops, but we used our watches and the mile markers to calculate a cruising speed of a steady 32km/h! (For long periods, we went slower than this).

But more on this slow train later. Let's talk about a two-wheel adventure first.



The road between Flin Flon and Thompson, MB., was mostly straight and flat.

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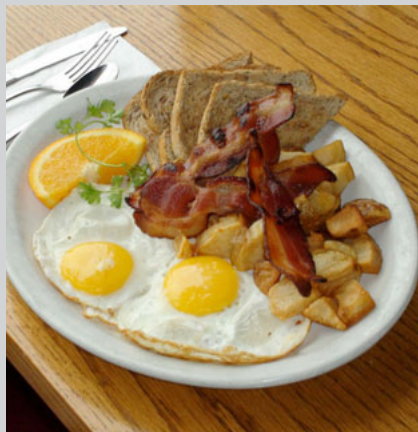
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Next Breakfast/Brunch

Sunday, October 6



WHERE:

Crooked Goose
4136 Wilkinson Road
Victoria, BC

WHEN:

11:00 am at the restaurant



One rider didn't manage Saskatchewan roads



Northern Manitoba's two seasons: Winter and Construction.

Jorgen Andersson, Ernie Lalonde and I had been talking about a trip to Churchill for years. This summer we decided to finally cross it off our bucket lists.

There's no road to Churchill. So, we decided to ride to Thompson, MB., where the pavement ends, then ride the rails to Churchill and back.

It's about 2,700km from Vancouver to Thompson, so Ernie and I planned a five-day ride, with overnight stops in Revelstoke, Calgary, Saskatoon and Flin Flon, MB.

Jorgen and his friend Dick Vest had left two days earlier and were to meet us in Thompson. In fact, we hooked up just north of Prince Albert, SK. – in the worst way.

Dick had crashed on a 35km section of gravel. His 1995 R100GS had a hole in the right-hand valve cover and clearly wasn't going any further. He was walking around, but feeling pretty stiff.

(When he got to hospital in Prince Albert, doctors diagnosed seven cracked ribs and a punctured lung. He spent about two weeks in hospital, but eventually flew home, while his insurance company was to truck his bike back to Lantzville for repairs).

After organizing a tow truck for Dick (the driver couldn't have been more helpful, visiting Dick in hospital and taking the damaged Beemer to his own garage for safe storage), Jorgen eventually caught

up with Ernie and me in Thompson – and we steeled ourselves for that slow train ride.

We'd booked these tickets in January. I reckoned that the \$161 seniors' fare was a good deal and didn't expect to get a partial refund for Dick's ticket. But VIA generously gave me about half the fare back.

When we boarded the train in Thompson, it became clear why the fare was so low. The coaches were from CP Rail and built in the 1950s. Duct tape repairs on the upholstery were common. We could have paid several times as much and gotten sleeper cabins, but I think we chose the better deal.

(The sleeper cabin fare included meals, but we were able to eat in town before each trip. We did try breakfast twice; the omelettes were just fine and the same price as most Victoria restaurants. Good coffee, too).

The schedule promised us a 14-hour ride to Churchill. But we were soon to discover that this wasn't about to happen.

First off, the train leaving Thompson was two hours late (a problem in one of the bathrooms needed repairs). There were then several stops en route and the ride to Churchill took 19 hours.

Global warming seems to be a major reason for this slow progress. Much of the track is built



No roads to Churchill mean a train ride



Our VIA Rail train prepares to leave Thompson for Churchill.

on permafrost, but record high temperatures in recent years have made this ground quite unstable.

Our coaches rocked and rolled haphazardly and the train staff told us that 30-odd km/h was as fast as the train could go safely. Apparently, things are better in the winter (when the ground's frozen again), but we won't be going back to check this out!

There were plenty of empty seats in our coach and we were all able to get a bank of four seats to ourselves. We all got some sleep, but it was hardly a good night's rest.

(The locals were far better organized: They boarded with pillows, blankets and foam mattresses and soon had reasonably comfortable double beds ready for the family).

We'd expected late summer temperatures when we arrived at the Churchill station. Boy, were we in for a surprise! I doubt the thermometer got above 5deg. during our stay there, but it felt cooler than that with a steady wind blowing.

With a population around 800, Churchill depends heavily on tourism. In the 1960s, it was the

launching site for a number of Canadian space rockets and wheat shipments from the port have recently resumed – but most local cash these days is generated by visitors coming to see polar bears or beluga whales.

The best polar bear viewing is in October and November (most of you will have seen those Polar Bear Buggies with their 6-foot high tires) and we knew we were too early for that.

But about 3,000 beluga visit the Churchill River every summer to calve and we had an excellent view of some of these graceful creatures.

This was from a purpose-built aluminum tour boat, designed and welded in Vancouver. It carried 32 passengers (our three-hour tour cost \$120 each) and was powered by a 1,000hp Volvo diesel, driving twin jet drives (no propellers to threaten the white whales).

At one stage, the captain shut down the motor and activated an underwater microphone to capture the sounds of the beluga. (They have poor eyesight and navigate primarily on their own sonar systems, "talking" to each other all the time, it seems).

Ernie reckoned the sound was just like being in a daycare centre; I thought that was an apt description.

The boat also took us to Prince of Wales Fort on the northwest shore of the river. I've always



Hudson's Bay Company history a highlight



Passengers board the Churchill "Express" (for a 19-hour ride, often at 30km/h).

been fascinated by the history of the Hudson's Bay Company and thought this visit was a highlight of the trip.

When the British Crown in 1670 gave the HBC a few hundred thousand square miles of what later became Canada, the deal was that the company would build several forts to defend the British possessions.

It took 40 years to build the classic star-shaped fort from local stone. We could only imagine the English – thousands of miles from home and in a climate they could never have imagined – cutting local stone blocks and somehow hauling them into position.

Once completed, the fort was occupied for only 11 years. In 1782, Jean-Francois de La Perousse arrived with three French warships. Samuel Hearne, the fort's commander, had just 39 men to defend his outpost, and quickly ran up the white flag of surrender.

No shots were fired. The French came ashore, torched the wooden buildings in the fort's interior and left. (The French ransacked other HBC outposts, but all were restored to English control under the terms of a peace treaty later drawn up in Europe).

The English used saltwater to mix the mortar between their building blocks. It should have been freshwater and this soon weakened



The dining car served good, honest food at reasonable prices.



Polar bears on Churchill tour

the mortar. The fort was abandoned for more than a hundred years, when the Canadian government began refurbishing it around 1920..

This is a huge project. A lot of the replacement stonework looked pretty solid to my untrained eyes, but there are no refurbished wooden buildings inside the walls yet.

Churchill attracts polar bears, plus grizzlies and black bears. We toured the fort watched over by Parks Canada marksmen with loaded shotguns. We did see a single polar bear, but he (she?) was several hundred yards away and Kevin, our guard, reckoned he posed no danger to the visitors.

To be continued.



Brrrrr! Churchill greets us with an icy blast.

Club 2019 Event Schedule

Date	Event	Location
Sunday, October 6, 2019	Monthly Gathering	The Crooked Goose
Saturday, October 19, 2019	Annual Meeting	SVI Rangers Clubhouse
Saturday, November 2, 2019	Monthly Gathering	Spitfire Bar & Grill
Sunday, December 1, 2019	Monthly Gathering	1550's Pub

Interested in doing the monthly newsletter?

Our current editor is stepping away at the end of the year and the club is looking for someone who wants to take over the task. If you are interested please contact ***Klaus Kreya at bmwrvi@shaw.ca***