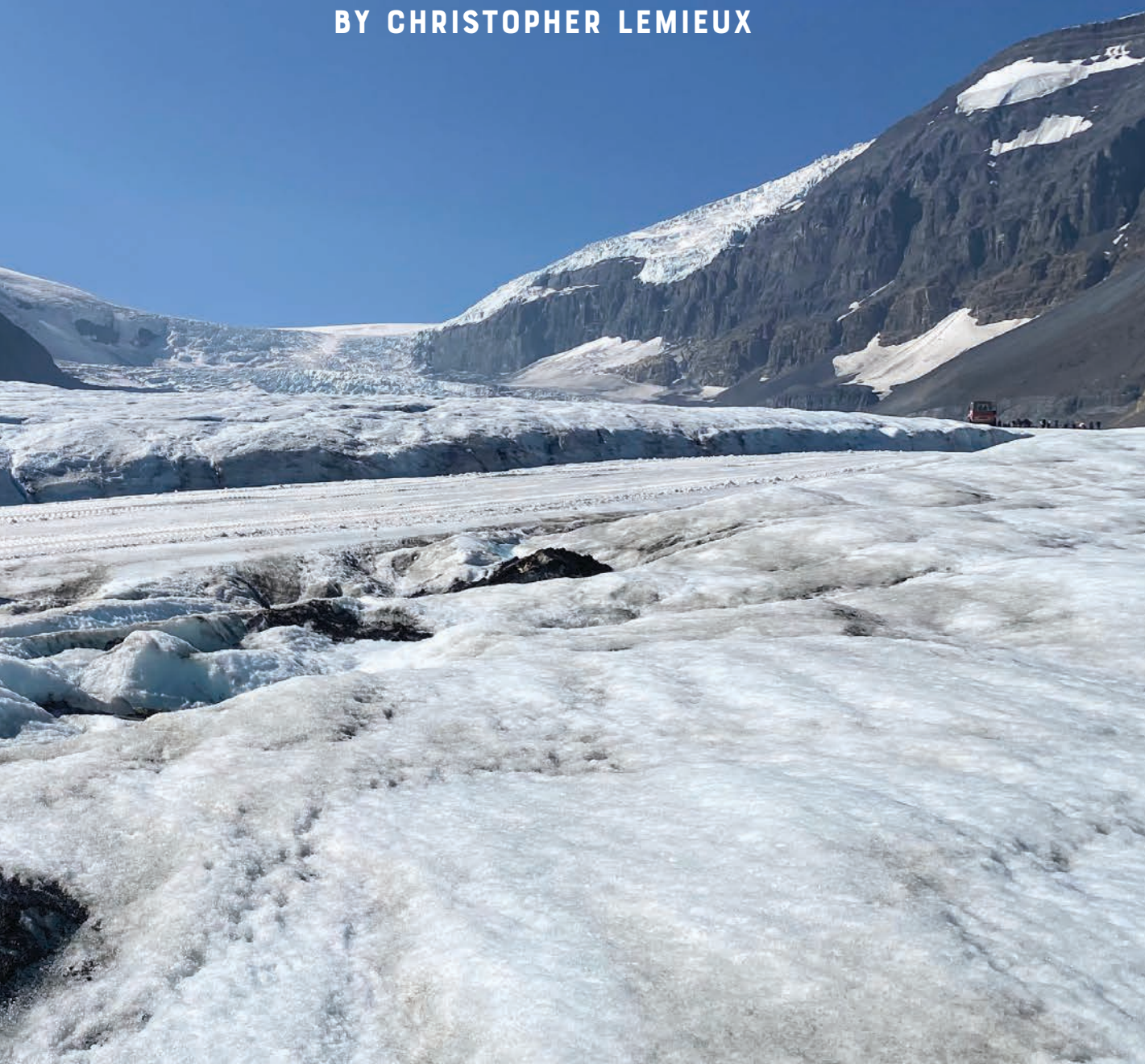




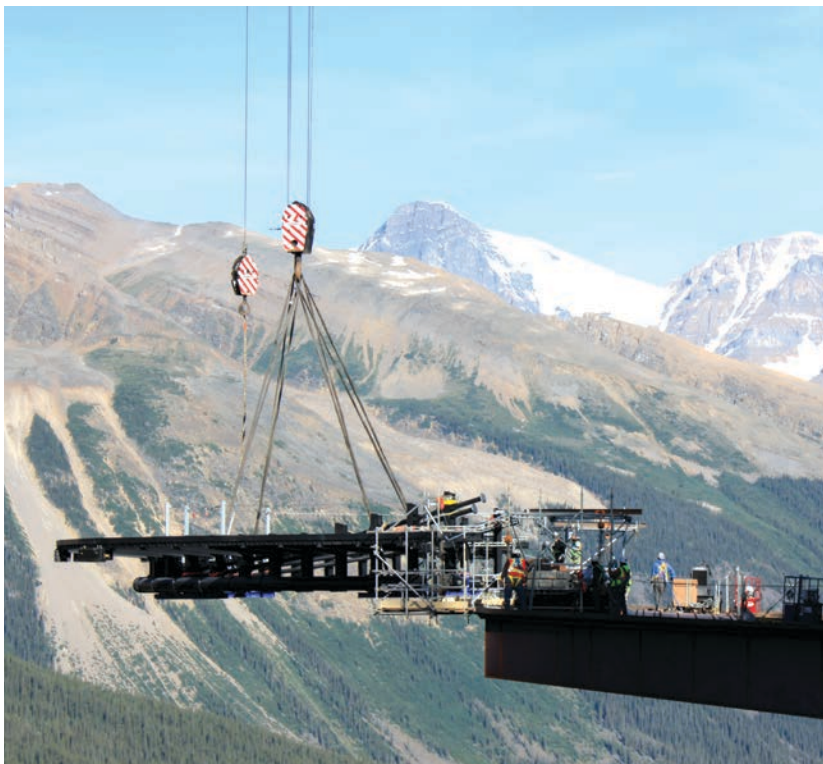
Tourism at the End of the World

Canada is one of the world's hottest destinations for travellers who want to see vanishing places before they're gone. But is the last-chance tourism trend just accelerating their decline?

BY CHRISTOPHER LEMIEUX



IN AUGUST OF 2023, I visited the Athabasca Glacier, high in the Alberta Rockies, for the fifth time. The experience is never less than profound—a chance to experience one of Canada’s most beautiful places up close. But my most recent visit was a little different. The meltwater flowing through the glacier’s crevasses was moving at a faster clip and, for the second year in a row, an eye-watering haze from nearby wildfires obscured the bright blue Alberta sky. Though you couldn’t tell by simply standing there, the volume of the ancient and enormous glacier was just a little smaller than it had been the year before.



A SKYWALK TOO FAR

The Columbia Icefield Skywalk was built in 2013. Critics say that, as a privately owned attraction, it amounts to privatizing part of a national park.

I’m an associate professor in the department of geography and environmental studies at Wilfrid Laurier University and, over the past several summers, I’ve brought undergraduate students from our classroom in Waterloo, Ontario, to Jasper National Park. There, we get an up-close look at the effects of climate change on one of Canada’s most iconic landscapes. Most of my students grew up in cities, some are newcomers to Canada and many have never been to a national park. Standing on the glacier, watching the joy and wonder play across their faces, I can clearly see that this is a major life event for them.

It’s also an incredibly poignant one. Within these young people’s lifetimes, the glacier may disappear. It’s been shrinking for more than a century, but climate change has dramatically accelerated the rate of decline. When the Icefields Parkway, which connects Jasper and Lake Louise, first opened in 1940, the toe of the magnificent glacier was one kilometre closer to the road than it is now. In 2023 alone, the ice retreated by roughly nine metres, an all-time record. By the end of the century, there may not be enough left to chill a cocktail. That’s why we visit: to come face to face with our future.

It’s also, at least in part, why 1.2 million other people come to view the glacier every year and why hundreds of thousands set foot on it, mostly on guided bus tours that bring hundreds to the site every day. The Athabasca Glacier is Canada’s most popular example of last-chance tourism—a relatively new kind of adventure travel in which people seek out threatened and disappearing destinations before they’re gone forever.

Last-chance tourism is happening all over the world. In Australia, two million people visit the fading Great Barrier Reef annually. According to surveys, 70 per cent of them are there to see it before it vanishes. In the French Alps, people flock to the shrinking Mer de Glace, a glacier so popular that a new gondola was recently built to bring visitors closer to the retreating ice. And in the Galapagos Islands, where warming waters are upsetting the delicately balanced ecosystems Charles Darwin described, tourism has surged 50 per cent in the past decade.

As a northern country rich in natural wonders, Canada is at the forefront of the trend: cruise tourists sail the waters of an increasingly ice-free Northwest Passage, and thousands flock every year to the tiny town of Churchill, Manitoba, to see one of the world's most threatened polar bear populations. At its best, this kind of travel provides experiences like the ones my students had in Jasper, confronting the urgent challenges overwhelming our planet. It also creates real economic benefits for the small, often remote communities where these sites are concentrated. In some, like Churchill, it's the main economic driver.

But it creates a major paradox, one I've spent years struggling with in my life and work. Travel generates somewhere between eight and 11 per cent of all global greenhouse gas emissions. The long, multi-legged journeys required to reach hard-to-access, last-chance destinations—dying coral reefs, shrinking glaciers, sinking archipelagos—are especially carbon-intensive. From the Galapagos to northern Canada, there are also concerns that the increased traffic, pollution and noise in these sites may be hastening their decline.

Some days, it all seems like way too much. The next day I'll wonder if it's the only way for people to forge a connection with these fragile, important places and learn from them. I feel this uncertainty even in my own work as a researcher and teacher: flying students from Ontario to the Rockies, renting cars, treading across a glacier. But when I debrief with my students and hear what they've learned, it feels uneasily justified. Some are inspired to pursue graduate studies or careers in conservation, exhibiting a greater commitment to protecting the Earth and the species that inhabit it. All of them leave with a more potent understanding of what is happening to our planet and why.

I've wondered for years how, and even if, last-chance tourism can be conducted ethically in Canada and beyond. Natural wonders offer enormous ecological, spiritual and economic value to all of us—and that's why we need to enlist the whole of Canadian society to manage the pressures on them. Right now, it's all too clear how badly we're failing.

LAST-CHANCE TOURISM HAS no simple definition—it's a know-it-when-you-see-it situation. Many companies have a foothold in the space. They include outdoor-attraction purveyors, cruise lines and adventure-tourism companies. Few market their destinations as "last chance," understandably reluctant to call attention to their attractions' eventual extinction. Instead, demand is mostly built by other means, like news coverage, social media and the growth in what I'll call "selfie tourism." A recent *Reader's Digest* article was entitled "10 Places to See Before They Disappear"; it included, simply, "The Amazon" and "The Arctic."

One of Canada's last-chance hot spots is the Northwest Passage, the winding route through Canada's Arctic Archipelago that European explorers spent centuries trying to traverse. Today, increasingly ice-free waters have made passage relatively safe, and a booming cruise industry is taking advantage. Last year, Nunavut hosted more cruises than in any prior year, with ships collectively carrying 5,200 passengers making 105 stops.

Churchill is another northern hot spot. Thousands of people every year visit the tiny town, some paying more than \$10,000 for multi-day polar-bear excursions. Just as in the Arctic, the trips aren't explicitly marketed as last-chance tourism. But research shows that experiencing these places before they're gone, or dramatically altered, is a major draw for most tourists. People visiting such sites tend to be older

and affluent. Some feel a desire to connect with nature more deeply and they're willing to spend a lot of money to do so. For others, it may be more about having an elite, exclusive travel experience.

The Athabasca Glacier is a little different. More accessible and much busier than these other sites, it is not only a last-chance destination but a mass travel enterprise. To me, the industry that surrounds the glacier represents a turnstile-like tourism entirely inappropriate to the delicate nature of the site.

The Athabasca Glacier lies in a national park and is therefore under the stewardship of Parks Canada, whose mandate, in its own words, is to be a guardian of Canada's national parks and historic sites. But a casual visitor might barely notice Parks Canada's presence at all. It appears as if the glacier is a privately owned commercial operation of an Arizona-based company called Viad. Through its Pursuit brand, Viad owns many of the major attractions in Banff and Jasper, including 11 hotels, the Banff Gondola and several lake cruises. Pursuit earned revenues of \$350 million last year, a 17 per cent increase over 2022. The company is earning a great deal of money off a public good.

Pursuit's crown jewel, though, is the Columbia Icefield Glacier Discovery Centre, essentially the gateway to the Athabasca Glacier. Parks Canada maintains a facility there called the Glacier Gallery, where educational displays discuss the local effects of climate change.

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A MASS TOURISM SITE

A crowd of visitors hike alongside the Athabasca Glacier. Dozens of groups like this visit daily during the summer months aboard diesel-powered Ice Explorer buses that carry up to 56 people each.

But the gallery is relegated to the Centre's basement. (I have never seen any Parks Canada staff near the glacier itself.) The main draws are the Viad/Pursuit attractions. These include two restaurants, whose offerings include "artisan toast" and a \$50 bison steak. There's a hotel,

where the cheapest rooms go for more than \$400 a night. The Centre is the departure point for the Columbia Icefield Skywalk, a huge horseshoe of glass and steel anchored into a mountainside, which was constructed to much controversy in 2013. The Canadian Parks and

Wilderness Society criticized the skywalk for turning the views in a national park into "a private, pay-for-use theme-park-like development."

From May to October, the Discovery Centre is where visitors will find the Columbia Icefield Adventure tours. They



depart every 15 to 30 minutes, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., on buses that carry 56 passengers each. It's hard not to see the irony in heavy-duty diesel buses rumbling, day after day, across the surface of a glacier being rapidly lost to climate change. It's not a small amount of traffic, either. According to Viad, nearly half a million people travel to the glacier aboard its vehicles every year. (According to a spokesperson, Pursuit is working on piloting an electric Ice Explorer in 2025.)

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One of my graduate students, Brooklyn Rushton, lives and works in Jasper. She describes the local perception of the tours as mixed, at best. "People want the experience of being on the glacier," she says, "and the buses make it easy to have the experience, especially compared to walking there on challenging terrain. But people also wonder why we're allowing this in a national park."

Tensions around the tours peaked in 2020. That July, one of the Ice Explorers, carrying about two dozen passengers, tried to navigate an overly steep grade. As it descended, it missed a curve in the road and flipped over, rolling 50 metres down an embankment before landing on its roof. Three people died, and more than a dozen people were injured, some catastrophically.

Rushton was hiking with friends nearby when she heard the bus sliding down the embankment. At first, she thought it might be an avalanche; her group ran down and triaged the injured before first responders arrived.

The company pleaded guilty to two charges under Alberta's Occupational Health and Safety Act, including failing to mandate seatbelt use and failing to control the hazard of the slope. It paid \$475,000 in penalties. According to Rushton, some people in Jasper hoped the tragedy might presage the end of the tours. "People were horrified," she says.

The trade-off between the benefits and drawbacks of last-chance tourism is even more potently felt in the tiny Arctic hamlets along the Northwest Passage that are grappling with growing cruise traffic. Jackie Dawson is a geography professor at the University of Ottawa and an expert on Arctic tourism—in fact, she coined the term "last-chance tourism" in 2008. She's been travelling to Pond Inlet, on the north shore of Baffin Island, since 2003, when Arctic cruising was in its infancy. The ships used are much smaller than the ones that cruise the Caribbean, averaging around 200 to 300 passengers. The ports of call are tiny, mostly Inuit communities, which passengers reach by piling into zodiacs—small inflatable boats—and motoring to shore. The passengers are not sun-seekers. They are drawn by the chance to see Arctic wildlife, to hike the tundra, to visit Inuit communities and to encounter dramatically different ways of life. And they can afford it. On the budget end of the spectrum, a Norwegian company called Polar Dream Travel offers an 11-day Arctic excursion for US\$9,000. Adventure Canada has two-week journeys costing up to US\$29,000. Margaret Atwood has been a special guest on the company's cruises more than a dozen times in the past 20 years. At the higher end of the scale, American company AdventureSmith Explorations has a 24-day Northwest Passage itinerary for US\$48,000.



UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

Tourists in Churchill, Manitoba, get an intimate encounter with one of the region's polar bears. The local polar bear population has declined by half since the 1980s.

The last-chance paradox is extreme here, given the carbon emissions associated with travelling to the top of the world and sailing through Arctic waters. And many people who live in the Arctic are increasingly anxious about the cruises' impacts on their way of life and environment. Harvesting foods from land and sea is a crucial cultural practice for Inuit and a major part of the food supply. As cruise traffic intensifies, locals have grown worried about the possible effects of marine pollution, about invasive species that could be carried in on ship hulls and in ballast water, and about the effect of noise and light pollution on animals. Dawson and her colleagues have even found ship paint in ocean sediment. These anxieties have fuelled tensions between locals and tourists. A few years

ago, a group of youth in Pond Inlet slashed a cruise ship's zodiac with a knife.

In Churchill, too, the contradictions between the draw of tourism and its costs can be staggering. Research by Dawson and others, published in 2010, found that the carbon cost of travel to see these bears may be up to 34 times greater than the average global tourist experience, due to the remoteness of the site. In 2021, she and Mark Groulx, a last-chance tourism researcher at the University of Northern British Columbia, published research showing that tourists to Churchill tended to be affluent and well-informed about the realities of climate change. But, for the most part, they didn't clearly understand how travel and tourism exacerbate the problem.

Whether or not tourism directly affects the bears is up for discussion. What's certain is that the bears are suffering and in decline. This year, University of Manitoba scientists published a paper suggesting that the Western Hudson Bay polar bears near Churchill could be locally extinct by mid-century, perhaps as early as the 2030s. The loss of sea ice in Hudson Bay is a key driver of their decline. The bears use it to hunt for seals and, as the ice diminishes year by year, they go hungrier. Many no longer eat enough to maintain healthy pregnancies. The population dropped by more than 27 per cent between 2016 and 2021, and by half since the 1980s—even as the number of tourists keeps growing, now to more than 10,000 per year.

WHEN THE POLAR BEARS disappear, so will the economic activity they generate: more than \$7 million annually, a fortune in a town of fewer than 900 people. “The bear-watching businesses will survive,” says Dawson. “Operators are nimble, they’ll move with the bears, they’ll buy hot air balloons, they’ll figure it out. But the community can’t move.” Here is another problem with last-chance tourism: what creates prosperity today may be gone tomorrow.

When Dawson began working in Pond Inlet, there was a great deal of optimism about the industry’s potential for the local economy. Those predictions were overblown. “Economic benefits are fairly minimal—arts and handicrafts and the odd cultural performance,” she says. In 2019, cruise operators spent \$850,000 in communities across Nunavut, paying for performances and other services for passengers. When cruisers disembark, they also spend money on arts and crafts made by locals. This is welcome, but relatively few individuals directly benefit, she says.

Communities including Clyde River have looked at places like Pond Inlet and said a hard no to cruises—but others, like Gjoa Haven, an even more remote Nunavut community, are just now getting onto cruise itineraries. In spite of the experiences in Pond Inlet and elsewhere, they remain hopeful that for them, the benefits will be worth the costs.

In Jasper, the industry surrounding the Athabasca Glacier is a major economic contributor to the community, creating steady employment for locals and generating millions in revenue. But Viad’s dominating presence has sparked criticism from people in Jasper who worry that it’s established a commercial monopoly. Some, like the owners of Lake Louise and Sunshine Village ski resorts, have recently asked the federal Competition Bureau to investigate Viad. Charlie Locke, owner of Lake Louise Ski Resort, called it a “monopolistic situation” in a letter to Parks Canada and the Competition Bureau.

I don’t want to come off as overly critical. I believe the advantages of last-chance tourism can be worth the costs, when they’re managed well. But that’s not easy. No one wants to go on holiday and feel guilty about how much carbon

As cruise-ship traffic intensifies in the Northwest Passage, some locals have grown anxious about the possible effects of pollution, light and noise on the delicate Arctic ecosystem

they burned to get there, or hear that their mere presence may be harmful. Educational messaging can be done effectively, however. Parks Canada has installed signage describing the effects of climate change along the toe of the glacier, and its Glacier Gallery at the Columbia Icefield Discovery Centre highlights the environmental implications of glacier loss. That includes reduced water supply to cities like Edmonton—a buzzy topic in light of the recent water crisis in Calgary.

There must be a limit to the commercial potential of these sites. When my students and I go out, we use a small local guiding company called Rockaboo Mountain Adventures. It offers “Tread Lightly” tours: small guided glacier walks. They’re focused on educational messaging, but these are not dull experiences—if anything, the smaller scale puts the spectacle of the glacier front and centre. There are no crowds or huge buses; some of the tour groups may be only one family. For me, these excursions are a much more comfortable way to grapple with the trade-offs between the environmental impact of tourism and its value as something not only educational but emotionally and intellectually transformative. Of course, that also means the revenues are smaller by several orders of magnitude, and accessibility is more limited. These tours aren’t going to move hundreds of thousands of people on and off the ice.

Time is running out. This September, the *New York Times* interviewed Corin Lohmann, a small local tour operator who works on the Athabasca Glacier. His business is booming—if not for the devastating Jasper wildfire, 2024 would have been the biggest year yet. He also knows it won’t last. “This trend probably has an expiry date that could be anywhere from 30 to 50 years, if not sooner,” he said. “The guests feel like it’s important that they bring their kids because it’s a very stark reminder, when they’re standing with their 10-year-old and they’re, like, ‘You may be the last generation to stand on this glacier.’”

The wildfire this year razed a third of the Jasper townsite, destroyed hundreds of homes and businesses and left a vibrant community in disarray. Photos of the town showed a lifeless, smouldering street, instilling a sense of grief in anyone who’s had the privilege to connect with this special place. As I write this, the vibrant heart of the town beats quietly, overshadowed by loss. The economic need for tourism in Jasper has never been greater—and the toll of climate change never more obvious.

The wildfire closed Jasper National Park, providing the glacier a respite from the bustling throngs. I hope that the rebuilding will provide a way to reimagine how tourism is conducted. But our window is brief. This August, the glacier was the first attraction in the park to reopen.