

INTO THE WILD

NORTHERN ODYSSEY IN NEW BRUNSWICK



STORY AND PHOTOS
BY CRAIG NICHOLSON



Early last March, a premature spring thaw quickly terminated already limited snow and riding across much of Eastern Canada. So where were snowmobilers to go? My choice was the highlands of New Brunswick's northern interior, (see green area on inset map) a massive wilderness where elevation, terrain and northerly positioning combine to attract and hold substantial amounts of the white stuff for a very long time. This part of the Appalachian Mountain Range is one of the most reliable bastions of winter and excellent for sledding.

True to form, it kept the snow thanks to cold nights and despite day time temps that rose as high as +5° Celsius (compared to double-digit highs elsewhere in the East).

For comfort, we stripped off layers and rode with all the vents and zippers open on our FXR snowmobile suits. But each morning the re-formed, crusty surface made us rely on our Woody's studs for better control and also to loosen the crunchy snow for much-needed slider lubrication until things softened up again.



CRAIG'S TOUR

Discovering New Brunswick

The sledding season in northern New Brunswick often starts before Christmas and usually extends well into April. What's more, hundreds of old logging roads crisscross the region, which includes the Miramichi Highlands, Chaleur Uplands, and the Notre Dame Mountains. Some of these man-made corridors are groomed as part of the New Brunswick Federation of Snowmobile Clubs' (NBFSC) maintained trail system. Others are simply available for riders to explore off the beaten track as we did on Days Three and Eight (see Our Tour Itinerary).

Maintained trails like PT (Provincial Trail) 23 east of Serpentine Lake and PT58 south of Serpentine are good examples of absolutely primo New Brunswick sledding: wide, rolling white carpets of packed snow that make for exciting, exhilarating and effortless riding. With so many outstanding trail choices, it's hard to know where to get started and even tougher to know when to quit. Best of all, most of these routes either avoid water crossings or are bridged, so spring riding in the interior continues even when ice goes bad.

So northern New Brunswick has long been a snow magnet for sledders from the Maritimes and Maine searching for reliable riding. Increasingly, it's also a popular destination for riders from Ontario and Quebec who can be on that New Brunswick snow after trailering no greater distance than they would to many more familiar destinations. Besides, New Brunswick is arguably Canada's most bilingual province, so communication is no problem regardless of which official language you speak.

Just remember that New Brunswick is on Eastern Time; we lost an hour entering from the west (and gained it going back). We also switched to daylight savings, so I never really knew what the right time was. But when there's amazing riding to be had, who cares?

Staging From Quebec

Our Snow Goer Canada crew of Glenn King, Jim Reavell and Don Webb, plus Marsha and I, towed our Triton trailers to Rivière-du-Loup, Québec. From there, we started our 10-day, 2,350-kilometre tour, promoted by New Brunswick as the "Northern Odyssey". Rivière-du-Loup is



Good bridges keep New Brunswick's interior trails open late into March.

10 hours from the Greater Toronto Area; less than five hours east of Montreal, and only two from the City of Quebec. (The Hotel Universel is also a great choice for staging a tour of Bas-Saint-Laurent or the Gaspésie, but those are other stories for another time.)

Thanks to its own highland topography, Bas-Saint-Laurent typically gets good snow accumulations, too. Its remarkable trails offers links to New Brunswick south of Cabano via TQ (Trans Quebec) 85 and near Biencourt via RT (Regional Trail) 548, which links with New Brunswick's LT (Local Trail) 135. We took advantage of Bas-Saint-Laurent's trails while sledding to New Brunswick and then again by riding an exceptional loop around Rivière-du-Loup on our final day, an easy 380 kilometre jaunt (see Our Tour Itinerary). This gave us a small taste of this Quebec region, so we'll be back to explore it more thoroughly next time.

I've written this article to describe the tour we intended to do, the one outlined in Our Tour Itinerary. It's also the one that you are sure to do in any normal season. But last winter, abnormal conditions made from Cabano (QC) through Edmundston (NB) very scratchy on our outward-bound journey. We seriously doubted any snow would be left in this sector for our return. So while Don, Glenn and I went backcountry riding around Moose Valley (NB), Jim and Marsha caught a 2.5-hour auto ride back to Rivière-du-Loup on Day Three (Thanks to Lisa, who gave them a ride!) to bring our two trucks and Triton trailers to Moose Valley.

This move meant that on Day Eight, we sledded from Saint-Quentin (NB) to Moose

Valley, then did some more back country riding before loading up and trailering a couple of hours back to Rivière-du-Loup (QC) to continue our planned itinerary. Trail conditions between Edmundston and Cabano were impassable by then, but plenty of snow still covered the interior highland areas of both New Brunswick and Bas-Saint-Laurent.

So as already mentioned, we got another good day's riding in on Day Nine from Rivière-du-Loup, where the snow was still okay right to the door of the Hotel Universel. I want to emphasize that it's very unlikely you will run into the same conditions we did: you should have no problem completing this entire tour on good snow from mid-January to at least mid-March.

Touring Tips

Having already scratched through Edmundston on Day Two, we decided to avoid the other towns at the periphery of New Brunswick's northern interior: Campbellton, Bathurst and Miramichi. Instead, we went into the wild by riding the more isolated interior trails. Staying at Moose Valley Sporting Lodge, Auberge Ressources Inn (Sugar Camp), O'Donnell's Cottages (Doaktown), Governor's Wilderness Lodge (Popple Depot) and Auberge Evasion de Reves (Saint-Quentin), we enjoyed all the comforts of home, warm hospitality and great food. They provided a very snowmobiling-friendly and rustic atmosphere — quite different from city ambience — and one I highly recommend to get the real feel of northern New Brunswick snowmobiling. One tip: Some of the outfitters have



The Appalachian range backdrops New Brunswick's interior trails.

limited lodging space, so be sure to book in advance, especially in peak season and on weekends.

Fuel was no problem at any time on our tour, with availability at Island Lake, Chalets Restigouche and Serpentine Lake as well as the places we stayed. But be advised: payment at the outfitters is mostly by cash; line ups can occur on busy weekends; and sometimes fuel sells out by Sunday, with no new supply available until the next midweek delivery. So my advice is fill up at every opportunity and carry a jerry can just in case...or ride new technology sleds with exceptional fuel economy like our long range Ski-Doo E-TEC's and my 4-TEC (see Tour Information).

Northern New Brunswick is an especially picturesque area, with many panoramic views and stunning vistas where we could see for miles over multitudes of hills and valleys. The breathtaking scenery on this tour started as early as RT565 in Quebec

and continued into New Brunswick between Edmundston and Moose Valley (on PT12 & 17); on LT135 (Atkinson Tower), LT503 (Tower Road - windmills), LT236 (Squaw Cap Mountain — 2nd highest peak in NB) and when it's open, LT504 (Mont Carleton — highest peak in NB). Many other incredible sights abound — did I mention lots of moose? So bring your camera!

Navigation wasn't all that difficult. The province is divided into eight zones. This tour occurs entirely in adjacent Zones 1, 2, 3 and 5, which are covered by two maps. I started by orienting myself using an atlas or road map that depicted the entire province; this way I knew where the major towns and highways are and how the two zone maps fit together. Then I followed the Provincial or Local trails designated on the zone maps using their matching trail markers.

But take care at intersections: we frequently had to look carefully because

the signage was sometimes confusing for visitors. Also, many unmarked and unploughed logging roads and other pathways go off every which-way from the maintained trails; sometimes its not immediately obvious where to go. One other word of caution: on New Brunswick trails, many Stop signs are not preceded by a Stop Ahead sign; we kept a sharp eye out, especially on rail trails like PT42, 28 and 17, where road crossings can come up very unexpectedly. Navigation-wise, all of our lodgings were easy to find, due to good signage or being located right on the trail.

Locals Lend A Hand

The only time we used a guide was for the backcountry riding around Moose Valley; too many unmapped logging roads exist to go on our own. Finding a guide was easy: we simply asked at the Moose Valley Sporting Lodge and on Day Three, our guide was Ron Card, a rider from the Saint John area; on Day Eight, we met up with Mike Michaud and Raymond Plourdy from Edmundston. We had a blast and I highly recommend including backcountry riding from Moose Valley, Serpentine Lake Lodge or Governor's Wilderness Lodge in your tour.

If you're looking for a new riding experience, you should go into the wild by making northern New Brunswick's Northern Odyssey your next touring adventure. It's a piece of paradise for snowmobilers where the white gold is virtually guaranteed and the sledding is second to none.

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Don't miss visiting the windmills off LT503 near Governor's Wilderness Lodge.

PLAN YOUR TOUR



Who To Contact

- Tourism New Brunswick www.tourismnewbrunswick.ca
- Tourisme Le Québec Maritime www.quebecmaritime.ca
- New Brunswick Federation of Snowmobile Clubs www.nbfsc.com

Maps Needed

- NBFSC Edmundston & Campbellton (Zones 1 & 2)
- NBFSC Bathurst & Miramichi (Zones 3 & 5)
- Quebec – Bas Saint-Laurent

Our Tour Itinerary

Notes:

1. Toll free phone numbers are included only when they connect directly to the hotel (as opposed to an off site reservation system).
2. For Quebec: TQ = Trans Quebec; RT = Regional Trail.
3. For New Brunswick: PT = Provincial Trail; LT = Local Trail

Tour Info:

2,350 kilometres. Average Fuel Economy for 2010 Ski-Doo GSX SE 1200 4TEC: 8.10 km/l. Average Fuel Economy for 2010 Ski-Doo 600 ETEC's (2010 models on this tour included 2 Renegades; 1 MXZ RS, 1 GSX LE): 10 km/l. Average oil consumption for ETEC sleds: 5.5 litres (426 km/l). Total cost per person per day: \$190 (includes lodgings, meals, sled & truck fuel, sled oil, trail permits).

DAY ONE

Trailer to Rivière-du-Loup (drive time from Greater Toronto Area: 11 hours.)

Where To Stay: **Hotel Universel** 1-800-265-0072 or www.hoteluniverselrld.com. (See 2011 Bas-Saint-Laurent trail guide – direct trail access via RT526, follow signs to hotel.) This full service hotel, located at exit 503 on Auto Route 20 is an excellent staging location for tours of Gaspésie, Bas-Saint-Laurent or New Brunswick. The Hotel Universel offers excellent food in the La Verrière Restaurant or Le Rialto bistro, on site bar, well-appointed rooms, indoor pool, hot tub, sauna and massage services. Secure sled parking in heated garages or locked compound, plus ample and securely fenced in vehicle parking, complete with loading ramps and video surveillance. Fuel, convenience store and Ski-Doo dealer next door.

DAY TWO

Ride from Rivière-du-Loup to Moose Valley (about 7 hrs. Note: add one hour for New Brunswick time change—lose an hour!) Ride 218 km via RT526/TQ5east/RT565south/TQ85 south/PT12 south/PT17 east. Fuel & lunch: Cabano

Where To Stay: **Moose Valley Sporting Lodge** 418-476-5047 / 506-736-6909 or www.moosevalleysportinglodge.com. Direct trail access on PT17 at intersection of RT135. Well-established outfitter offers warm hospitality, homemade pub fare in on site restaurant and bar in main lodge, lodging in five modern cottages and on site fuel. Ample vehicle and sled parking. No cell service, but access to satellite phone at lodge.

DAY THREE

Back country riding around Moose Valley Sporting Lodge. Ride 412 km on amazing network of old logging roads. Fuel & Lunch: Moose Valley.

Where To Stay: **Moose Valley Sporting Lodge**

DAY FOUR

Ride from Moose Valley to Sugar Camp (about 8 hrs) Ride 260 km via PT17 east/PT28 south/PT19 east/PT22south/LT301 east. Fuel & Lunch: Saint-Quentin.

Where To Stay: **Auberge Ressources Inn** 506-544-6872. Located on Route 180 just west of Bathurst as part of the Erabliere Sucre d'Or Maple Sugar Camp operation, this auberge offers modern hotel-style rooms, homemade food and on-site fuel. Ample parking for vehicles and sleds. No cell service, but phone available. Direct trail access from RT 301.

DAY FIVE

Ride from Sugar Camp to Doaktown (about 6 hrs.) Ride 227 km via LT301 west/PT22 south/PT23 east/PT52 south/PT42 south. Fuel: Nepisiguit Falls, Doaktown. Lunch: Miramichi. This is a short day; to add about 60 km more clicks ride: LT301 east/PT19 east/PT23 south/PT52 south/PT48 east/LT515 south/PT52 south/PT42 south.

Where To Stay: **O'Donnell's Cottages** 1-800-563-8724 or www.odonnellscottages.com. Located on north side of Miramichi River at west side of Doaktown, O'Donnell's Cottages have direct trail access from PT42 when the ice crossing is good. Otherwise, trail access follows O'Donnell's signs on RT585 north from PT42, then RT586 south. Homey and spacious log cabins with housekeeping facilities and wood-burning fireplaces, plus home-cooked breakfast (other meals available by prior arrangement). Cell service available.

DAY SIX

Ride from Doaktown to Popple Depot (about 7 hrs) Ride 285 km via LT586 north/LT585 south/PT42 east/PT58 north/PT23 east. Fuel: Blackville, Serpentine Lake, Popple Depot. Trail lunch.

Where To Stay: **Governor's Wilderness Lodge** 506-545-5413 (cell messages only) 413-340-0006 (lodge) or www.governorsresort.ca. Located directly on PT23 at Popple Depot (there is no actual town), this lodge offers a main building with a pub fare and a bar, plus on site fuel and four newly renovated 2-bedroom units in rustic log chalets. Ample parking for vehicles and sleds. No cell service available.

DAY SEVEN

Ride from Popple Depot to Saint-Quentin (about 8 hrs) Ride 327 km via PT23 east/PT22 north/LT259 west/LT250 west/PT17 west/PT28 south/PT19 west. Fuel: Island Lake, Saint Quentin. Trail lunch.

Where To Stay: **Auberge Évasion de Rêves** 506-235-3551 or www.aubergeevasion.com. With direct trail access from PT19 on the west side of Saint-Quentin, this new inn offers modern hotel rooms, an indoor pool and hot tub, plus continental breakfast and garage for overnight sled parking. Ample parking for vehicles and sleds. Cell service available.

DAY EIGHT

Ride from Saint-Quentin to Moose Valley (about 3 hrs) Ride 125 km via PT19 east/PT28 north/PT17 west. Fuel & lunch: Moose Valley. Back country ride for 180 km, then trailer from Moose Valley to Rivière-du-Loup (about 3 hours). Note: Ride option from Moose Valley to Rivière-du-Loup (183 km): LT135 north/RT548 west/RT571 north/RT544 west/RT565 north/TQ5 west/TQ85 north/RT526 west.

Where To Stay: **Hotel Universel** 1-800-265-0072 or www.hoteluniverselrld.com.

DAY NINE

Riding Bas-Saint-Laurent Region around Rivière-du-Loup (about 8 hours) Ride about 380 km via RT 526 east/TQ85 south/TQ5 west/RT553 south/TQ35 east/RT526 north/TQ85 south/RT544 east/RT571 north/TQ5 west/TQ85 north/RT526 west.

Where To Stay: **Hotel Universel** 1-800-265-0072 or www.hoteluniverselrld.com.

DAY TEN

trailer home