

CRAIG'S QUÉBEC TOUR

Québec Delivers The Goods!

March Riding At Its Best!



In some places, the trail could be seen winding its way for miles ahead.

Story and Photos By:
Craig Nicholson



From the shore, the stake line of Regional Trail 322 disappeared into the horizon across the massive Baskatong Reservoir. It looked like miles across — and it was glare ice all the way. Although the trails still had plenty of snow, little was left on Baskatong due to a recent rain. Some engineer must have recently opened the dam gates too, because the reservoir ice had fallen as its water level plunged a good 20', judging by the descent from shore to surface. So there we sat, about to burn off our sliders, less than 25 kilometres from launching our tour at Le Village Windigo. Thank goodness for Woody's studs!

We set off, picking our way from snow patch to snow parch, eager to complete this intimidating crossing. But first we had to traverse a long, narrow crack of open water, invisible from the shore, which ran perpendicular to our direction of travel, barring our way. I wondered whether or not

the ice was still safe; the answer appeared to be yes, given that the trail stakes were still solidly planted, and we could see ATV's on the ice dragging fishing huts. Even if they were being removed, at least the ice was still supporting them for now!

Several of us skipped over the crack, while others paralleled it to a click or so towards shore, rode around its end on land, and then back to out the stake line. We were on our way, but thanks to that mostly bare ice, most of us had to replace sliders two days later in Val-d'Or.

One Last Great Ride

These minor annoyances can be expected nearing the end of the season, when avid snowmobilers are looking for one more great ride. We found ours that March, when Jim Reavell, Don Webb, Glenn King, Dennis Burns, and I toured 2,800 kilometres in a giant loop through north central Québec. What an incredible last ride!

Although some would call this "northern" Québec, a quick check of Google Earth soon dispels that erroneous notion: a huge whack of La Belle Province is way up there above where we rode. As a matter of fact, we didn't even have to venture to the trails operated farthest north by the Québec Federation of Snowmobile Clubs: spring riding conditions prevailed in the upper sections of the tourism regions known as Outaouais, Laurentians and Mauricie, while Abitibi-Témiscamisque and Saguenay Lac-Saint-Jean, which we also visited, were still solidly locked into winter.

The purpose of our tour was simple: put on as many kilometres as possible before the snow disappeared. March is undoubtedly the best time to attempt this, because of its more moderate temperatures and longer days, which lasted even longer when we switched to daylight savings time on day two. Also by March, the trails are

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generally set up the best they will be all winter, and there's never as much traffic, so booking rooms is easy.

The only factor we encountered to limit our daily riding distance was the location of lodgings in the more remote areas: travelling Trans Quebec 83 eastbound from Senneterre to Roberval, the only logical stops for us were Clova (pop. 40) and Relais 22 (pop. even less). The trails were so good that we could easily have snowmobiled 50 or 75 klicks more each day, but the next available accommodation was even farther away than that, so we chose to pack it in early rather than riding after dark in the wilderness. Small price to pay.

One other point to note: this same tour could be shorter by two full days and about 600 kilometres if you choose to ride directly through both Abitibi-Témiscaminique and Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean. Instead, true to our mission, we decided to ride an extra day in each of these primo regions because we had the time and desired the distance. Besides, how could we ignore such top-notch trails!

Window of Opportunity

To start, we towed our Triton trailers to Ferme-Neuve, just north of Mont Laurier; about a three-hour drive north of Ottawa. The snow line was shifting gradually north and we hoped that conditions would hold so our return could be by snowmobile. As things transpired, we got skunked our last day anyways...by then, the temperature was so warm that we would have been more comfortable riding in our shirtsleeves; meanwhile, the snow underneath our tracks was slowly but surely turning to mush.



For our final day, the itinerary called for only a half day ride back to Ferme-Neuve from Club Mekoos; we decided, with 2,800 kilometres of superb riding already under our belts, that we didn't want our last memory of this terrific tour to be one of picking and scratching our way along soupy trails in the rain. So we hired a truck and trailer to transport us the short distance back to our starting point in warmth and style, with absolutely no regrets.

Don't be fooled by our ignominious beginning and ending. These anomalies book-ended seven of the most glorious days of riding for this or any other winter. All trails had adequate to ample snow; most trails were either table top or close to it. Being mostly former logging or mining roads and utility corridors, the trails were wide, open, and exhilarating. We encountered very few other tour groups, but with the coming of spring, small wildlife like squirrels and partridges were

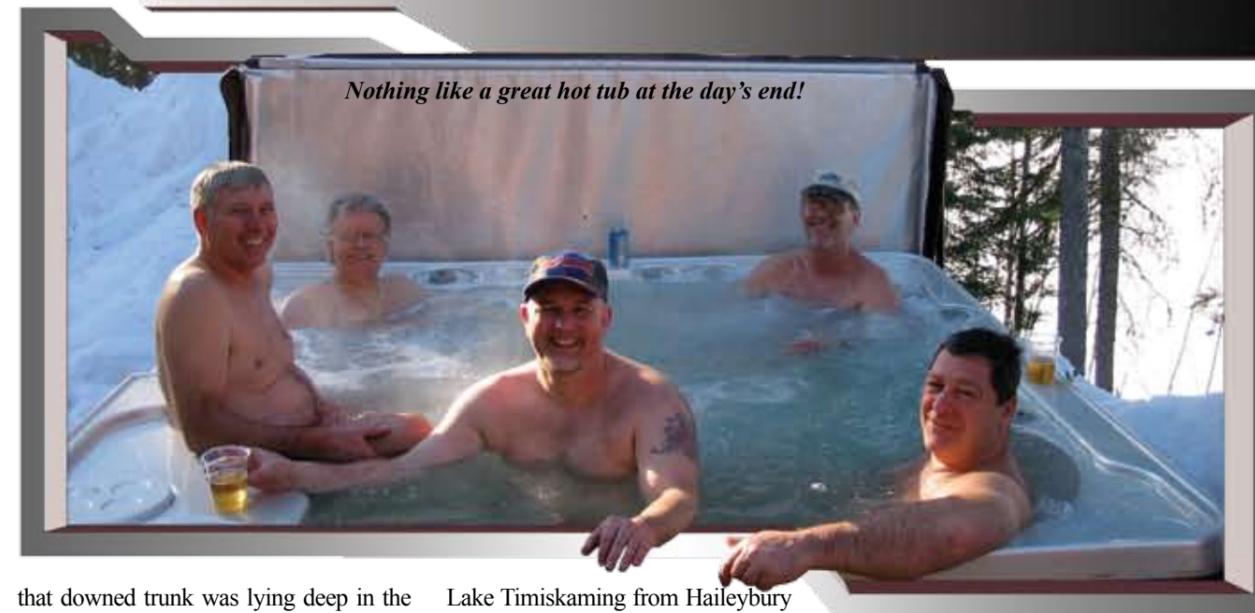
abundant. Most of the trails in these regions are land-based, and most water crossings are either bridged or with culverts. Then there were the trees...

We all had remarked on how well brushed most Quebec trails are, ensuring both that sight lines around corners are good, and that we really could keep right without getting whacked across the visor by errant branches. One night, I also pondered that it was unbelievable, with riding so many miles and passing so many trees, how none of them were ever down across the trail, blocking our way. Famous last words — that night a localized windstorm swept through...

Next day in the lead, I crested a small hill and caught a glimpse of a tree trunk horizontal on the trail mere feet ahead. Unable to stop in time, I steered sharply for the edge of the trail, where the trunk appeared to be lower to the snow than it was over the trail itself. Fortunately,



Great trails, great scenery!



Nothing like a great hot tub at the day's end!

that downed trunk was lying deep in the snow, so I scooted over as if it was a mere speed bump. I stopped out of the way and jumped off my sled to warn the others before they got into trouble. We all made it okay, but that was the first of many logs and branches we had to negotiate or remove that day. So much for "no trees ever blocking the trail"; if this is how my ponderings are destined to turn out, then next up I'll be exclaiming that I never see any naked women on the trail either! Keep your eyes peeled.

Pockets of Civilization

If you trace our tour on a Quebec provincial trail guide, you'll quickly see that it starts and ends in relatively populated regions of the Outaouais and Laurentians. From there, Trans Quebec 63 took us west through the wilderness to the farming communities along the Ontario border at Ville-Marie (across

Lake Timiskaming from Haileybury and New Liskeard). Another remote ride northwest on Regional Trail 309 led us to the agricultural towns of the Abitibi-Témiscamingue region. From there, we headed due east on Trans Quebec 83 through the wild and isolated heartland of Mauricie, a 640 kilometre trek from Senneterre to Roberval with only three very small villages — Clova, Parent and Wymontachie — to mark the way.

At Roberval, we explored the Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region by circumnavigating its large lake, then exiting south on Regional Trail 355 to La Tuque, and riding north of two major reserves back to Ferme-Neuve. The flexibility of this loop is that, if the weather had not cooperated as long as it did, we could have bailed out on either Trans Quebec 13 or 73 to cut the tour short and head back to the trailers.

From the outset, I admit this tour was a

bit of a crapshoot because of the late date. But in earlier months of previous winters, I have snowmobiled all of these regions and never been let me down, regardless of the weather and conditions elsewhere. Our tour group knew that spring could arrive at any moment. So we kept an eagle eye on Météo Media (Quebec's Weather Channel) each night, ready to bail early if necessary. That we didn't have to do so until the very last day is testimony to the plentiful snow and outstanding trails in these regions of Quebec. Take my word for it: any time a winter thaw sets in elsewhere or if you are simply looking for an extraordinary ride through a vast hinterland, you'll always find primo snowmobiling in north central Quebec!

Special thanks to Jill Mimeault, Pascale Tremblay, Jacinthe Doucet, Nicole Gauhn and Nancy Donnelly for assistance with this tour; and to Beric Sport, Val-d'Or, and Roland Spence et Fils, Saguenay, for the great service. Craig's tours are made possible by BRP (Ski-Doo), Dunford's of Havelock, Woody's, Shell Advance Snow Ultra Oil, and Triton Trailers.

Craig Nicholson is the author of "Canada's Best Snowmobiling — Your Ultimate Ride Guide". His syndicated column "The Intrepid Snowmobiler" appears in newspapers throughout North America. He also hosts "The Intrepid Snowmobiler on Radio" and appears regularly on Snowmobiler Television. For more info, click www.intrepidsnowmobiler.com



Sloppy conditions = last day trailering!

PLAN YOUR TOUR

Who To Contact

- Tourism Abitibi-Témiscamingue—www.tourisme-abitibitemiscamingue.org or 1-800-808-0706
- Tourism Laurentians – www.laurentians.com or 1-800-561-6673
- Tourism Mauricie – www.outaouaistourism.com or 1-800-567-7603
- Tourism Outaouais – www.tourisme-outaouais.ca or 1-800-265-7822
- Tourism Saguenay/Lac-Saint-Jean - www.snowmobiledestination.com or 1-877-253-8387
- Quebec Federation of Snowmobile Clubs www.fcmq.qc.ca
- Quebec Tour Planner – www.bonjourquebec.com/snowmobile

Maps Needed (in order of use)

- Outaouais/Laurentians
- Abitibi-Témiscamingue
- Mauricie
- Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean
- Quebec Federation of Snowmobile Clubs

Our Tour Itinerary

Total distance: 2,861 kilometres. Total fuel cost for 2009 Ski-Doo GSX 600 H.O. ETEC: \$360.54. Total litres of oil consumed by ETEC: 9.25 (310 km/l) @ \$14 per = \$129.50; Total litres consumed by 2004 GSX Limited: 18.79 (152 km/l) @ \$14 per = \$263.06.

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. TQ = Trans Quebec; RT = Regional Trail; LT = Local Trail 3. We rode indirect routes between each destination to explore more trails and put on more miles. You may choose the direct route (distance indicated where different from our ride).

DAY ONE

Trailer to Ferme-Neuve (drive time from Greater Toronto Area: 9 - 10 hours via Ontario Highways 401, 416, 417 and Quebec highways 50, 309)

Where We Stayed: Le Village Windigo 1-866-946-3446 or www.lewindigo.com. (#35 on 2010 Outaouais/Laurentians map – direct trail access on RT322 near intersection of TQ13). This secluded community of fully equipped,

luxurious chalets and condo suites on the Baskatong Reservoir makes an ideal staging location. Five of us stayed in one chalet and all had our own bedrooms and bathrooms! Located on a well-marked secondary road 28 kilometres west of Highway 309 at the village of Ferme-Neuve, it's off the beaten track, so parked trucks and trailers are relatively secure. On-site restaurant and fuel.

DAY TWO

Ferme-Neuve to Joncas (about 7 hrs.) Ride 290 km via RT322 south/TQ63 west. Maps: Outaouais/Laurentians Fuel: Grand Remous, Le Domaine, Joncas. Lunch: Le Domaine

Where We Stayed: Aventure Joncas 1-866-303-2112 or www.aventurejoncas.com (#10 on 2010 Outaouais/Laurentians map – direct trail access on TQ63... just follow yellow Joncas signs from about 140 km out). Must-visit log inn is huge, impressive and caters to sledders. Located in the middle of nowhere on a scenic lake, it has all the amenities, including on-site restaurant and fuel. (Note: a fire during the past summer destroyed their two outdoor hot tubs, pool table, bar and games area, but these should be rebuilt by 2011.)

DAY THREE

Joncas to Val-d'Or (about 8 hrs.) Direct route distance: 204 km. Our ride: 285 km via TQ 63 west, LT north at Belleterre, RT 309 north/TQ83 east. Maps: Abitibi-Témiscamingue. Fuel: Belleterre, Val-d'Or. Lunch: roadside dinner 10 km east of La Force.

Where We Stayed: Gîte Lamaque 1-800-704-4852 or www.gite-lamaque.com. This is a bed & breakfast located in an old mansion at 119 Perry Drive at the east end of town. At Val-d'Or, take TQ 83 east (Tour de Ville loop) and make a right at the sign for Béric Sport (Ski-Doo dealer). Go to dealer, then cross highway 117 and take St. Jacques south (at traffic circle) four blocks and turn left on Perry (streets are normally snow covered). Individual bedrooms with en suite bathrooms, breakfast provided, plus sauna. Several restaurant choices within five minute walk for dinner. Fuel & convenience store: look for gas sign on Tour de Ville loop.

DAY FOUR

Val-d'Or to Senneterre (about 6 hrs - late start due to having new sliders installed in the a.m.) Direct route distance: 75 km. Our ride: 275 km via TQ83 west/RT309 north/TQ93 east/RT313 south/LT east/TQ 83 north (Other loops available up to about 400

km) Maps: Abitibi-Témiscamingue. Fuel: Amos, Senneterre. Lunch: none due to late start.

Where We Stayed: Motel Senabi 1-866-737-2327. Good roadside motel with bar, but no restaurant (taxi ride away). Sled parking in front of rooms. Direct trail access via local trail north from TQ83 stake line at river crossing (fuel & convenience store at 1st left; motel at 2nd left).

DAY FOUR

Senneterre to Clova (about 7 hrs.) Ride 269 km via TQ83 east. Maps: Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Mauricie. Fuel: Relais Lac Faillon, Balbuzard Sauvage, Clova. Lunch: Balbuzard Sauvage

Where We Stayed: Auberge Clova (819) 662-3327. (#1 on 2010 Mauricie map – direct trail access from TQ83). Cozy inn on the hill overlooking town is a converted school building that now has comfortable rooms on the main floor, and a TV and games downstairs. Restaurant and gas station within sight. Fixed menus with snowmobile package includes a steak dinner and a special breakfast!

DAY FIVE

Clova to Relais 22 (about 8 hrs) Ride 335 km via TQ83 east. Maps: Mauricie. Fuel: Parent, Wemotaci, Relais 22. Lunch: Relais Mistal, Wemotaci.

Where We Stayed: Relais 22 (819) 523-6222 (#22 on 2010 Mauricie map). Located at the junction of TQ 83 and 73, this basic motel has a TV and common room, on-site restaurant, bar and fuel, plus garage for repairs and some basic parts for sale. Direct trail access by following Relais 22 signs for at least 100 km to motel.

DAY SIX

Relais 22 to Dolbeau (about 9 hrs.) Direct route distance: 235 km. Our ride: 405 km via TQ83 east/RT373 west/LT north to La Doré/TQ93 west/LT east to RT 373 north/TQ93 west/LT south to Sain-Félicien & Dolbeau/TQ93 east to hotel. Maps: Abitibi-Témiscamingue. Fuel: La Prime, Girardville. Lunch: La Doré.

Where We Stayed: Auberge La Diligence (418) 276-6544 or www.unmotelaulacstjean.com (#6 on 2010 Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean map). Good roadside hotel with on-site restaurant, sled parking in front of room. Direct access from TQ93.

DAY SEVEN

Dolbeau to La Baie (about 9 hrs.) Direct route distance: 325 km. Our

ride: 350 km via TQ93 east/LT east from Sainte-Monique to RT 322/RT322 east/RT367 south/RT383 south/RT 368 east/RT383 south/TQ83 west/LT north to hotel. Maps: Abitibi-Témiscamingue. Fuel: Sainte-Jeanne-d'Arc, Shipshaw, Saint-Felix-d'Otis. Lunch: Shipshaw.

Where We Stayed: Auberge des Battures 1-800-668-8234 or www.battures.ca (#28 on 2010 Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean map). Overlooking the spectacular Saguenay fiord, this magnificent inn offers luxurious lodgings and on-site restaurant, plus secure sled parking. Access via local trail with about 2 km of running on snow along roadside.

DAY EIGHT

La Baie to Lac-Edouard (about 8 hrs.) Ride 326 km via TQ83 west/LT west to Saint-André and Saint-Francois-de-Sales to RT533/RT355 south. Maps: Abitibi-Témiscamingue, Mauricie. Fuel: Jonquière, Lac-Bouchette, Lac-Edouard.

Lunch: Saint-André.

Where We Stayed: Pourvoirie le Goéland (819) 653-2006 or www.pourvoirielegoeland.ca (#90 on 2010 Mauricie map). Motel rooms or fully-equipped housekeeping cabins overlooking Lac-Edouard with restaurant and bar in main lodge and on-site fuel. Fixed dinner and breakfast menu for snowmobile packages.

DAY NINE:

Lac-Edouard to Club Mekoos (about 10 hrs.) Ride 326 km via RT355 spoth/TQ73 west/RT355 south/RT360 west/RT345 north/TQ33 west/LT south from Lac Beauregard to RT 319/RT319west to lodgings. Maps: Mauricie, Outaouais/Laurentians. Fuel: Mattawin, Lac du Repos, Mekoos. Lunch: Pourvoirie Lac du Repos.

Where We Stayed: Club Mekoos (819) 623-2336 or www.mekoos.ca (#40

on 2010 Outaouais/Laurentians map). Remarkable log lodge with all the amenities for snowmobilers, including on-site restaurant and bar, fuel, outdoor hot tub (with bar service), sauna and lobby internet computer. Great food and exceptional hospitality with direct trail access on RT 319.

DAY TEN

Club Mekoos to Le Village Windigo (We trailered 1.5 hrs by road direct to Windigo due to meltdown conditions, but our planned ride was about 300 km and 8 hrs via RT 319 west/TQ13 north to Private Trail/Private Trail south to RT322 south and back to Windigo. Maps: Outaouais/Laurentians. Proposed Fuel & lunch: Club Notawissi or Club Gatineau.

Where We Stayed: Le Village Windigo (same as Day One). Trailer home.

TESTED ON TOUR

By Craig Nicholson



Block Out The Cold

Combine Mother Nature's wind chill with the airflow rush of a moving sled and it's no wonder the cold sometimes cuts like a knife to seep inside our suits. The vulnerable neck area is especially hard to protect, in the gap where jacket collar and helmet don't meet and even a balaclava may not do the job. Besides, I find a balaclava too hot under my helmet on all but the coldest days, so I was delighted to find a neck warmer called Aero Block from Vortex Sport. Now I can warm my neck, without overheating my head.

Essentially a high neck dickey that also covers the upper chest and back areas, Aero Block neck warmers are made from a special 3-layer fabric that is windproof and waterproof, yet breathable to allow perspiration to evaporate and keep me dry. What's more, the neck sheath comes in sizes S to XL for as close to a custom fit as possible, thereby preventing sag or fold down. The sheath itself is high enough to tuck up into my helmet at the back and under my chinstrap at the front. The result is zero air leakage and that's key to staying warm. Aero Block is also extremely soft and flexible for unbeatable comfort. Check out part number V4509-N (S, M, L, XL) at: www.vortex-sport.com/en/products.php?cat=10



Bumper Protection

Five years ago, I discovered Hitch Docker and it's still one of the best devices on the market to protect your tow vehicle's bumper and licence plate. If you've ever over driven the hitch ball while backing on to your trailer, you know what I mean — and your bumper has the scars to prove it.

This simple yet strong metal shield installs in seconds and sits between your hitch ball and bumper. Hitchdocker can be left in place year round for all your trailering needs. It comes in black metal or chromed aluminium and there's even a bright orange one with the Harley-Davidson logo. Check out their YouTube video by entering "hitch docker commercial" or go to www.hitchdocker.com Also available at many trailer specialty shops.

