

NEVER GIVE UP!

OUTAOUAIS AND LAURENTIANS DELIVER GREAT RIDING

STORY AND PHOTOS BY
CRAIG NICHOLSON

The **Intrepid**
Snowmobiler



From a hilltop, I gunned my Ski-Doo GSX SE 1200 4TEC down toward the football field of slush covering the valley floor and separating me from the trail on the far side. A cursory reconnaissance indicated the morass wasn't more than a couple of feet deep, but that darker outline of a squiggly creek down the centre was unsettling, even though trail stakes still stood in the ice to mark the crossing.

My heart was in my throat as my 4-stroker flew over the slush like a Sea-Doo cutting through the waves. My ears filled with the dreaded whoosh of a track trying to fight

through that soupy mess. I had visions of going down with my ship and could almost feel cold tentacles reaching up to engulf me. Then in a flash, the track sound changed to normal and I sensed hard pack underneath me again. Thank goodness for that that 137" track and Woody's studs! Now it was the next guy's turn to make that precipitous crossing on this day after the rain.

RAINY DAYS AND MONDAYS

Monday, January 24. That's the date that Mother Nature stopped

snowmobiling in its tracks last winter. Sixteen hours of steady rain and daytime temperatures up to 9° Celsius played havoc with trails and snow conditions from Ontario to Nova Scotia. I know firsthand because we were trying to start our 1,800-kilometre tour from Le Viceroy Auberge & Spa in Montpellier, Quebec that morning. Good luck, Charlie Brown...now our choices were to turn our Triton trailers back home or trailer to our second night's destination, Club Mekoos, in the hope of riding the rest of our itinerary after the rain ended.

Snow Goer Canada riders Jim Reavell, Don Webb, Glenn King, Jim Heintzman, Dan Carty and I choose Mekoos, a remote outfitter located a somewhat convoluted three-hour drive north of Montpellier. And believe me, the last 30 kilometres of that drive on a tertiary road from Lac Saint-Paul into Club Mekoos was a scary treat — white-knuckling on a hilly, icy, slippery, and rutted surface, wondering all the while whether my trailer was going to break loose behind and swing past the cab of my SUV. Way too much excitement!

It was raining at Mekoos too. Next

morning, we were five minutes away from throwing in the towel because of trails that were either icy or flooded. The only question was if we could get back out that slick road. Then it started snowing. A check of both the Environment Canada and Weather Network web sites revealed a hopeful new regional forecast of fresh snow and plunging mercury.

SAVED BY SNOW

Suddenly, we were back in business. In fact, riding conditions steadily improved during the next two days, so that by the

end of our tour, we could hardly imagine that a rainy Monday had ever happened. Especially when a localized blizzard enveloped us near Grand Remous, reducing visibility to less than ten feet for about half an hour with blowing snow!

As an experienced Quebec rider, I guess I shouldn't have been surprised by this positive outcome. But it always blows me away how quickly La Belle Province can recover from apparent weather disasters — and the Outaouais and Laurentians regions are among its most resilient. Their predisposition to snow is a combination

of northerly positioning and higher elevation that starts near the Ottawa River with the Gatineau Hills, and morphs into the Laurentian Mountains. Moreover, the regions' snowmobile clubs do a superb job of grooming, so that trails in great shape prior to the meltdown survived decently, only needing a little new snow to recover fully. As we were quickly reminded, you can usually snowmobile here even if many other destinations are closed, as they were that last week in January.

Not that all was perfect. We had to re-route our tour somewhat because many intended trails were impassable. Thanks to the rain, we lost two riding days and repeated more trails than we ever would on a normal tour. We were supposed to ride from Montpellier to Mekoos; and at the end, into Duhamel (See Tour Itinerary section at the end of this article.) Also, our actual sledding distance was half what we had planned.

Why? The going was considerably slower for two days after the rain. We really had to be very careful about picking our way through and around new water hazards. Ice crossings over major lakes and rivers were also a no-go: they were either open, bare and slippery, or slush covered. So we had to avoid any trails involving waterway crossings, at least until the temperatures dropped to -28° Celsius later in the week. Similarly, we encountered flooding, pooling, runoff and washouts on many trails and barrelled through many slushy sections. The good news is that the Outaouais and Laurentians regions have over 5,000 kilometres of great trails to choose from, so we had many good options to get us safe and dry to our various destinations, despite the challenges.

FOR OUR RIDING PLEASURE

We only had to turn back and retrace our tracks twice. Once was at Notre-Dame de-Pontmain, where a local informed us that the ice on the river crossing was not safe. The other was on a local trail south of L'Ascension, as described in the opening paragraph of this story. Our choice here was to forge ahead or go back. None of us wanted to turn around, so we gambled that a) we could cross okay and, b)



Cutting a slush trail through the slop.

that we would not meet an even more insurmountable obstacle farther down the trail and have to turn back. We won one bet and lost the other...

As you can see in the photo above, we made it across, each sled cutting its own slush trail. Our triumph was short-lived, however, because less than 15 minutes later, we were stymied at a hydro line trail flooded with water as far ahead as the eye could see. So we had no choice but to go back and plough across that same soupy mess again. Twice was one time too many for me!

Trails 53, 319 and 63 from Mekoos to Nominique more than made up for this setback. Even the day after the rain, they were tabletop smooth with adequate snow cover. We were very lucky how the recovery occurred: when the rain ended, the temperature only dropped to around zero Celsius, enough to stop the melt, but not enough to make the moisture-laden snow rock hard, so we had lube for sliders. Then, it snowed about 15 centimetres before the mercury really plunged to -30° Celsius that weekend, more than enough to cover most icy sections. Fresh snow also transformed the landscape back into the scenic winter wonderland captured in the rest of our tour photos. And the renewed freezing really tightened up most of the standing water and washouts left over from the rain, to say nothing of making most waterways passable again.

Within 24 hours, club groomers began to roll again throughout the region and this significantly improved both our trail options and our riding experience:

If a groomer had made it through, we could too. Their drags sheared the tops off any ice ridges or ruts, filled in or eliminated flooded areas, and of course, smoothed the entire surface for our riding pleasure. And believe me when I say "our pleasure", because in five days of riding, we passed less than 30 sleds total, mostly guided tour groups (see sidebar, next page).

That's a shame, because the rain was only a minor setback for this snowmobiler's paradise. The shared Outaouais/Laurentians trail map shows an extensive network offering more than enough excellent riding for a solid week of touring. The population centres cluster closer to the Ottawa River, between Gatineau and the Maniwaki-Mont Laurier axis. Lots of quaint little towns, hill and dale riding, transitions from woods to fields and back, plus countless lakes tucked in between various mountains.

North of Maniwaki and Mont Laurier, (see dark blue area on sketch map on 1st page of this article), the terrain shifts to a vast wilderness backcountry anchored by numerous outfitters, "pourvoirie" in French. Like Club Mekoos, these remote operations are generally family owned and operated, offering home cooked meals, warm welcomes, rustic lodgings and on site gas. The trails in this sector tend to be old logging or resource roads that are wide, sweeping and simply a blast to ride. If you have the inclination, you can loop all the way north to Clova and Parent, or sample the private trails (no additional permit needed) marked in red on the Outaouais/Laurentians trail map.



Trails held up well after the rain.

AN OUTSTANDING DESTINATION

Among many exceptional memories of the Outaouais and Laurentians regions, two stand out in my mind. If you want to see a whack of deer in one place, plan to ride through Duhamel on Trans Quebec (TQ) 43. We saw at least 100 in people's yards and in open areas right in the centre of town. The other must-do is to ride to the top of Devil's Mountain (La Montagne du Diable) just north of Mont Laurier. The second highest peak in the Laurentians after Mont Tremblant, Devil's Mountain is topped by a popular relais (restaurant) featuring panoramic views to the far horizon. At 783 metres, this height of land is noticeably colder and windier than lower elevations, and its evergreens remain frosted all winter. To get there, follow local trails 225 north from TQ 63 or 228 west from TQ13.

These are just a few of the many incredible sights and scenes from Outaouais and the Laurentians. These very snowmobile-friendly regions saved us from the potential disaster of having to cancel a tour and sit out that week twiddling our thumbs. They also impressed us with the trail accessibility and availability of their many services, amenities and lodgings. With proximity to Ottawa and Montreal, and an easy trailer tow from the Greater Toronto Area, the Outaouais and Laurentians Regions are prime examples of Quebec snowmobiling at its best — and an outstanding destination for your next sledding getaway!

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And then it snowed!

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

RENT YOUR RIDE!

Quebec is the rental sled capital of Canada and guided tours are big business in Outaouais and the Laurentians. We saw many more groups on rental sleds than riders on private ones this tour, including many European visitors, mostly riding current Ski-Doo 600 ETEC models. At least nine different companies offer various tour packages, guided and self-guided, plus sled and gear rentals, so if you have friends or family who want to go snowmobiling with you but do not have sleds, this is an ideal way to make it happen. For a good list of tour and rental options, check out: www.laurentians.com/1572_an.html

A new Fly 'n' Ride Package is yet another neat offering. From December 19 to March 31, board a Porter Air flight at Toronto's Island Airport for the 1 hour and ten minute flight directly to the Mont Tremblant International Airport. Step off the plane and on to your rental sled, and your tour is underway! Check it out at: www.flyandride.ca

By Craig Nicholson



Protect Your Vehicle and Your season

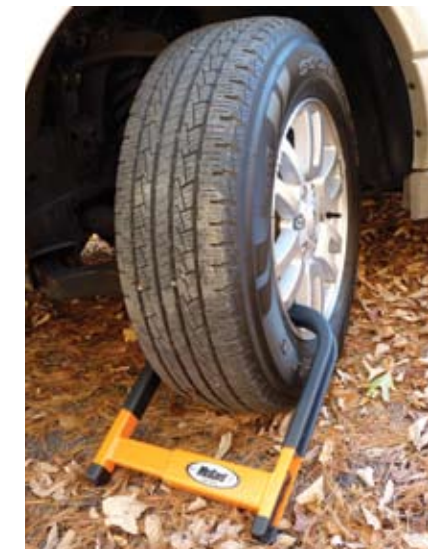
Auto thieves remain active across Canada. High-end vehicles left unattended in unsecured locations are easy targets. Most snowmobile tow vehicles fit this bill. Aside from the unexpected expense incurred to replace a stolen vehicle and a future of higher insurance premiums, if your tow vehicle goes missing, odds are so will the rest of your sledding season. Good luck finding a replacement tow vehicle, trailer and sled fast. So doesn't it make good sense to make your precious truck or SUV harder to steal than the next guy's? A few relatively inexpensive preventative measures can help.

For prevention, factory-provided smart keys and ignition immobilizers are a solid first line of defense. Personally, I'd avoid security alarms (factory or after market) that set off lights, horn or sirens, because what happens if they trip when your tow vehicle is sitting in some remote location with no one around? Either the thieves will bust in anyway, or if the alarm tripped accidentally, its commotion might attract unwanted attention to your obviously unattended auto. And if no one's present to shut it off, the alarm could drain your battery.



The second line of defense is visible deterrents. Winner International, who makes the popular "Club®" steering wheel locks, has a special SUV/Truck Club with laser encrypted security keys. For added protection, you could also use The Shield®, which not only makes any cutting of your steering wheel more difficult, but also protects your air bag. The final component of Winner International's triple play is

the Club Auto Brake Lock. Essentially, this handy device prevents the brake (or clutch) pedal from being depressed. To avoid key ring confusion, keyed-alike locks are available online from the Winner International direct marketing department. Confronted by all three devices, I bet most thieves will look elsewhere for easier pickings. www.theclub.com



Your visible anti-theft security wouldn't be complete without a bright orange or yellow McGard Car Lock, the only one located outside your vehicle. This U-shaped immobilizer is a wheel boot that clamps around a front tire to stop it from rotating. It's very strong, but light weight, and comes in its own carrying case, which can be hung empty over the steering wheel as another visible warning to thieves. Complete with a patented Medeco cylinder lock that has a weather cap to keep out snow and ice, the McGard lock has a two-stage mechanism that's a breeze to install (also good for trailers). To prevent tire theft, you may also want to acquire McGard locking wheel nuts. www.mcgard.com

If a criminal hasn't moved on to an easier target by now, maybe Vanguard window stickers will provoke second



thoughts. Vanguard is a glass etching system that's very simple to use. It allows the owner to permanently inscribe the Vehicle Identification Number (VIN) on all the windows. This makes vehicle identification and police tracing easier, and selling off parts much more difficult. Visit www.vinetching.com



My third line of defense is not visible. Pros can break in by forcing a screwdriver under the door handle or punching the lock cylinder into the door, much less noisy than breaking a window. That's where the Jimmi-Jammer™ shines. It's a make/model specific, custom formed, steel plate that bolts to the backside of your door handle (inside of door) to strengthen and protect the lock assembly. Your vehicle may still suffer some exterior cosmetic damage, but Jimmi jammer helps keep thieves out. www.jimmijammer.com

Estimates are that having your vehicle disappear could set you back over \$2,500 in theft-related expenses, including lost deductibles, increased premium and rental car cost, to say nothing of the inconvenience or also losing your trailer and even sled(s). So why ruin a great winter, when a few relatively inexpensive precautions can make the difference?

Who To Contact

- Tourism Laurentians – www.laurentians.com or www.woodrunnertrail.ca or 1-800-561-6673
- Tourism Outaouais – www.outaouaistourism.com or 1-800-265-7822
- Quebec Federation of Snowmobile Clubs – www.fcmq.qc.ca
- Quebec Tour Planner – www.bonjourquebec.com/snowmobile

Maps Needed

- Outaouais/Laurentians
- Quebec Federation of Snowmobile Clubs

Our Tour Itinerary

Notes:

1. The itinerary listed below is the revised one shortened to 940 kilometres as described in the preceding article. In normal winter conditions, this would make an easy tour for couples and casual riders. To view our original and more ambitious 1,800-kilometre itinerary, please go to: www.snowgoercanada.com/plan-your-tours/66-ontario
2. Toll free phone numbers are included only when they connect directly to the hotel (as opposed to an off site reservation system).
3. TQ = Trans Quebec; RT = Regional Trail; LT = Local Trail 3.

Total Tour Distance: 940 kilometres. Average Fuel Economy for 2010 Ski-Doo GSX SE 1200 4TEC: 6.38 km/l. Average Fuel Economy for 2010 Ski-Doo 600 ETEC's (2010 models on this tour included 2 Renegades; 1 GSX LE, 1 MXZ, 1 MXZ RS): 9.52 km/l. Average oil consumption for ETEC sleds: 2.7 litres (348 km/l).

DAY ONE

Trailer to Montpellier (drive time from Greater Toronto Area: 7 - 8 hours via Ontario Highways 401, 416, 417 and Quebec highways 50, 321)

Where We Stayed: Le Viceroy Auberge & Spa 1-888-882-6666 or www.aubergeviceroy.com. (#2 on 2011 Outaouais/Laurentians map – direct trail access on RT323.) This award-winning inn

located on Highway 315 offers excellent food, well-appointed rooms, a charming, friendly atmosphere — plus a full service spa with hot tub and massage available. Limited vehicle parking.

DAY TWO

Trailer from Montpellier to Club Mekoos (about 3 hrs. by road; 250 km by trail – see web itinerary)

Where We Stayed: Club Mekoos 819.623.2336 or www.mekoos.com (#34 on 2011 Outaouais/Laurentians map – direct trail access on RT319, 5 clicks west of junction with TQ53. Follow Mekoos trail signs.) Award-winning facility with log main lodge and chalets with all the amenities for snowmobilers, including on-site restaurant/bar, fuel, outdoor hot tub (with bar service), sauna, games room and lobby internet computer. No cell service, but lobby phone available using credit, calling or phone cards.

DAY THREE

Mekoos to Nominigüe (about 6 hrs.) 115 km via TQ53 east, RT 319 south (after backtracking on local trail) and TQ63 west. Fuel: Sainte-Véronique. Lunch: L'Ascension.

Where We Stayed: Hôtel du Golf Nominigüe 1-877-530-4653 or www.hotelgolfnominigüe.qc.ca. (#50 on 2011 Outaouais/Laurentians map – direct trail access via TQ63; turn south at private entrance off the rail trail (name: Le P'tite-Train-du-Nord) when you see the golf course. 19 luxurious rooms with on site restaurant/bar. Fuel/convenience store across the road.

DAY FOUR

Nominigüe to Club Fontbrune (about 6.5 hrs) 186 km via TQ63 west/TQ53 north/RT319 west/TQ13 south/RT322 north/Private Trail north. Fuel: Mekoos, Fontbrune. Lunch: Mekoos.

Where We Stayed: Club Fontbrune 1-866-737-2327 or www.club-fontbrune.qc.ca. (#33 on 2011 Outaouais/Laurentians map – direct trail access via private trail off RT322. Follow Fontbrune trail signs.) Award winning outfitter offers a main lodge with restaurant/bar and sauna/outdoor hot tub, with fuel on site. 11 winterized cottages with all the amenities. No cell service, but outdoor phone booth available using credit,

calling or phone cards.

DAY FOUR

Fontbrune to Maniwaki (about 8 hrs.) Ride 293 km via RT322 east/TQ13 north/Private Trails/TQ63 east/TQ63/13 south. Fuel & Lunch: Club Gatineau. Other Fuel: Grand Remous, Maniwaki

Where We Stayed: Château Logue 1-877-474-4848 or www.chateaulogue.com (#8 on 2011 Outaouais/Laurentians map – direct trail access via TQ13/63.) 51 room, full service hotel with indoor pool, sauna & hot tub, and on site restaurant/bar, plus massage available! Ample parking for sleds in well-lit area at front of hotel. Fuel/convenience store less than a kilometre away on TQ13 north, 1st right after crossing the bridge.

DAY FIVE

Maniwaki to Mont Laurier (about 8 hrs) Ride 225 km via TQ13/63 north/RT324 east/TQ53 north/RT 322 west/TQ 13 south/LT228 (to Devil's Mountain & back)/TQ 13 south. Fuel: Notre-Dame-de-Pontmain, Ferme-Neuve. Lunch: Saint-Aimé-du-Lac-des-Iles.

Where We Stayed: Comfort Inn 1-888-355-6465 or comfortinn-ml.ca (#41 on 2011 Outaouais/Laurentians map – direct trail access via TQ 63 then local in-town trail. Follow hotel signs.) This full service, 49-room hotel offers hot tub and sauna, plus on site La Cage aux Sports restaurant/bar. Ample parking, with sled access from ground floor rooms. 24-hour video surveillance and electronic security system for sleds. Fuel and convenience store across the street.

DAY SIX

Ride from **Mont Laurier to Mekoos** (about 3 hours), then trailer to **Duhamel** (about 3 hrs.) Morning Ride: 115 km via TQ 13 north/RT 319 east.

Where We Stayed: Pourvoirie Gagné & Filles 819-325-2230 or www.gagnefilles.com (#6 on 2011 Outaouais/Laurentians map – direct trail access via RT322). Outfitter offers 20 homey rooms in 3-story building overlooking the lake. Family-style hospitality in restaurant/bar with home cooked meals in main lodge and on site fuel.

DAY SEVEN

trailer home