

HEAVEN ON EARTH

Quebec's Gaspésie Has it All!

Story and photos by Craig Nicholson



As anyone who read John Baglerei's article, "Weather Trumps All" last March in Snow Goer Canada now knows, touring in any unfamiliar territory without proper knowledge and preparation can be dangerous. That's why I write these touring stories: to ensure that you have what you need before you go. No one in their right mind would want to replicate John's tour. On the other hand, here's my story about how to have a safe and enjoyable ride...

To find heaven on earth, go snowmobiling in Gaspésie. Most winters, their northerly maritime location and high elevations ensure a long season with an unbelievable amount of snow. So much so, that I highly recommend tacking one or two back up days onto the end of your tour schedule just in case a storm buries you and causes a lay over.

I know you're thinking that no amount of snow will stop you from riding. Think again. On this March tour, we had 20 centimetres of snow during our first day of sledding, but we were able to ride 430 kilometres as it was falling. Then overnight, more snow accumulated. Next day, we barely managed 160 clicks, instead of our planned 400. That's including three major burials of my Ski-Doo GSX SE 1200 4-TEC in waist high drifts while I was leading. I do have to say that despite it's 4-stroke weight, once we got the snow packed and the back end shifted, that Ski-Doo came right out of the hole first time every time with its long track and great engine power. But the weather made for slow going.

Then, as we left to drive home at tour's end, another 60 centimetres dumped across the region. That's a major whack of white, typical of Gaspésie. What's also normal is the strong prevailing winds that can almost knock you off your feet. That wind can certainly send sharp chills through any unprotected or open areas of your snowmobile gear.

But my BRP BV2S Helmet and windproof FXR Adrenalin suit withstood any such penetration, keeping me warm and cocooned.

Those icy blasts body-slammed us continually while piling the fresh snow up in humongous drifts that can often obliterate trails in the blink of an eye. Think five, six or even eight-foot drifts and more! We met some locals with Ski-Doo Summit mountain sleds with super long tracks and big paddles who couldn't get through on one trail, so how could anyone else?

Three of the guys on our tour had never been to Gaspésie before (see First Impressions sidebars). Avid and experienced riders all, they were dumb-founded by the amount of snow everywhere. It was as close to heaven on earth as they've ever come. Now don't get me wrong. In my book, there's no such thing as too much snow. Just too little time – and that's why you should allow a couple of spare days on your Gaspésie tour.

FIRST IMPRESSION



"If you're a sledder with a bucket list of things to do before you die, Gaspésie got be on it. Now I've done it, but Gaspésie's back on my list because once is not enough - I'm definitely going back!"

D'Arcy Ball, Lindsay, ON.

ON TOUR

D'Arcy Ball, Dan Carty, Craig Irwin, Glenn King, Don Webb and Marsha & I towed our Triton trailers to Gaspésie in early March for a planned 2,000 kilometre jaunt. Heavy snow reduced our total distance to just less than 1,700 kilometres, and we had to add an extra day to the itinerary. Believe me, no

one was complaining about having that additional day to ride in Gaspésie!

The drive there along Highway 20 on the south side of the St. Lawrence was like a shift change. Westbound trucks and trailers were headed home after their week's ride, while our Snow Goer Canada crew and many others travelled eastbound to take their places. Even though there wasn't much snow along the way, once we entered Bas-Saint-Laurent (Gaspésie's adjacent tourism region to the west) everything got much whiter.

We started our snowmobiling from the Hotel Universel in Rivière-du-Loup (Bas-Saint-Laurent), for many reasons the best staging location for any Gaspésie tour (see Our Itinerary). I wanted to ride the scenic north shore, but also to experience the three main interior trails (Regional Trails 595 & 597, plus a Murdochville Chamber of Commerce trail that links them – see dotted orange line on a Gaspésie trail map). These amazing interior trails cut through the heart of the Notre-Dame and Chic-Choc Mountains that are part of the Appalachian Range, which backbones the Gaspé Peninsula. They offer many panoramic views of mountains as far as you can see and are also excellent alternative routes for spring riders when snow coverage along the south coast of Gaspésie starts to recede. For the more adventurous, off-trail powder tours are available through the mountains, but a guide is a must.



All that snow makes Gaspésie heaven on earth!


TRANS QUEBEC 5

The main Trans Quebec (TQ) trail around the Gaspésie is #5. By staying on it, you will eventually circle back to where you started. Depending on your preference and time, that journey can take from five to eight days on trails that are consistently well-groomed and feature many sections on forestry roads, utility corridors, farm fields and unopened roads where you can make pretty good time. We rode a mix of freshly and previously groomed trails, all in good to great shape. Lucky thing, because on three days, we were either riding these trails with loose snow on top of their smooth



We rode for several days in heavy snow and near whiteouts.

FIRST IMPRESSION



"I've never seen so much snow in one place – piled along the trails, on the trees, beside the roads — and when you add in the incredible mountain scenery, great trails and warm hospitality, Gaspésie is simply the best I've seen!"


Glenn King, Pickering, ON.

surfaces, or breaking fresh powder up to almost a foot deep. Great fun, but tough on time, fuel and energy!

Generally, TQ5 is located slightly inland from the coast of Gaspésie, up in the highlands. That means descending to the coast for most services and amenities, either by TQ5 itself or one of many local trails into various towns and villages. Watch your gas gauge, because in some sectors, the only fuel is down on the coast, so you don't want to miss a turn off and find that the next one is a few litres too far!

My only complaint about TQ5 is that in some locations, it also doubles as an ATV route. Too often, there are more ATV trail numbers evident than TQ5 markers. On two occasions, we inadvertently got off on the ATV trail where it split off because the TQ5 signs

FIRST IMPRESSION



"Trail for trail, Gaspésie delivers better riding overall than any other destination I've been. It's a really fun place to snowmobile with lots of wow-factor trails and outstanding scenery at every turn. It's impossible to fully appreciate it all in just one trip."

Dan Carty, Bracebridge, ON.

were absent. Just remember: red stakes are for sleds; blue stakes are for ATVs – but sometimes they are mixed together!

Speaking of stakes, Gaspésie snowmobile clubs do a phenomenal job of staking their trails. With the prevalence of snow dust, white-outs, falling snow and piling drifts, the stakes are absolutely essential to navigating your way in many places when the weather deteriorates. Also, most (but not all) intersections have at least town names and services signs so you always have a fairly good idea about where you are on the map.

UNIQUE CHARACTERISTICS

While there are many spectacular views in Gaspésie, you may miss some of them. On this tour, visibility was so bad along parts of the north coast that we couldn't see anything from the scenic outlooks. Both fog and blowing snow can be the culprits. Other days, the clarity is astounding and you can see for miles, as we did on one day in the interior on this tour.

Acrophobics may want to avoid Gaspésie. The numerous sheer drop-offs, steep climbs and precipitous descents may trigger your fear of heights, and certainly make heart-in-the-throat riding for everyone. As I swallowed frequently to pop my ears, I just kept telling myself over and over that the trail only seemed narrower on steep descents. Heck, if the groomers could make it, so could I, especially with Woody's studs in my track. But



Suspension bridges make the few river crossings easy

those Gaspésie groomer operators must have brass cajones, because there's not much margin for error!

Gaspésie offers many valuable resources for visiting snowmobilers. Dale & Louise at Info Motoneigiste Gaspésie (see Who to Contact) are both bilingual and receive daily reports from Gaspésie snowmobile clubs. Go to their website to plan your route and then call them before you leave home to find out if there are any trail changes you need to know about. For example, I discovered that the southern portions of Regional Trail 587s and TQ 5 coming into Point-à-la-Croix were both closed and had to re-route at the last minute (which is why our first day was 430 kilometres, instead of about 390).

I'd also recommend doing your Gaspésie tour with no fewer than four riders. That way, if you do run into heavy going snow-wise, you'll have enough muscle power to get through. Oh, and take a towrope that can double to help pull a sled out of the deep snow if needed.

By now, you may be thinking that touring Gaspésie sounds kind of scary and somewhat arduous. My intent certainly isn't to turn anyone off Gaspésie, but rather to ensure you're properly prepared and go in with your eyes wide open,

because if so, you're bound to have the ride of your life. The plain fact is that there is no place in the eastern half of this continent that can come close to all that Gaspésie has to offer snowmobilers. If you hit it right weather-wise, as I have on several occasions, you'll have a fantastic tour, better than you even dreamed possible. If you run into some weather, you'll still have an incredible adventure, especially if you're prepared, flexible and willing to roll with any punches Old Man Winter throws your way. And that's a small price to pay to find heaven on earth!

Special thanks to Zoé Ross-Lévesque and Marie-Pier Mercier for assistance with this tour. Craig's tours are made possible by BRP (Ski-Doo), Gateway Powersports & Marine, FXR Racing, Murphy Insurance, Shell Advance Snow Ultra Oil, Triton Trailers and Woody's.

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 Snowmobile Television. For more info, click www.intrepidsnowmobiler.com

2012 - PLAN YOUR TOUR

Who To Contact

- Le Québec Maritime: www.quebecmaritime.ca or 1.800.463.0323
- Snowmobile Info Gaspésie: www.quebectrails.com or 1.877.202.4636

Maps Needed

- Gaspésie
- Bas-Saint-Laurent
- FCMQ Provincial Trail Guide

Our Tour Itinerary

1,696 kilometres in 6 days of riding

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.
3. Ski-Doo sleds on this tour in order of fuel economy: 1 MXZ TNT 600 ACE (about 425 kilometres to a tank: 36% better than 600 E-TEC; 52% better than GSX SE 1200 4-TEC); 1 MXZ Renegade 800 E-TEC (3% better than 600 E-TEC; 16% better than GSX SE 1200 4-TEC); 1 GSX SE 1200 4-TEC (about 200 kilometres to a tank).

DAY ONE

Trailer to Rivière-du-Loup (drive time from Greater Toronto Area: approx. 10 hrs.)



Where To Stay: Hotel Universel

1.800.265.0072 or www.hoteluniverselrdl.com (#23 on 2012 Bas-Saint-Laurent map – direct trail access from RT526.) Located in sight of Highway 20 at exit 503, this is the best staging location for any Gaspésie tour. This bilingual, full service hotel has on site restaurants, bar, indoor pool & hot tub and health spa, plus secure sled garages, an enclosed sled area with video surveillance, and a gated parking

compound for your vehicle and trailer. Fuel, convenience store and Ski-Doo dealer next door.

DAY TWO

Rivière-du-Loup to Pointe-à-la-Croix. 430 km (about 10 hours) via TQ5/RT579/RT587/TQ5. Fuel: Rimouski, Albertville. Lunch: Albertville

Where To Stay: Gîte La Maison Verte 1.866.788.2342 or www.gites-classifies.qc.ca/maiver.htm (#35 on 2012 Gaspésie map – direct trail access from TQ 5 on east side of town). Warm hospitality courtesy of André and Marie-Josée in their charming bed & breakfast with out of the way sled parking at the back. Restaurant one minute down the trail; fuel in town on local trail.

DAY THREE

Pointe-à-la-Croix to New Richmond. 160 km (About 7 hours – this stay-over was added unexpectedly to the tour due to an overnight storm that slowed down this day's riding.) via TQ5. Fuel & lunch: Carleton, New Richmond

Where To Stay: Hotel Francis 1.800.906.4485 or www.hotelfrancis.qc.ca (#28 on 2012 Gaspésie map – direct trail access from TQ 5 at junction of RT595). Newly renovated lobby, bar and restaurant areas and sled parking in front of ground floor rooms. Great rooms with comfortable beds. Fuel and convenience store on TQ5 one kilometre west of hotel.

DAY FOUR

New Richmond to Saint-Octave-de-l'Avenir (Cap-Chat). 240 km (about 6 hours) via RT595/TQ5/local trail. Fuel: Relais La Cache; Cap-Chat. Early snack: Relais La Cache

Where To Stay: Village Grande Nature Chic-Chocs 1.800.530.2349 or www.villagegrandenaturechic-chocs.com (#10 on 2012 Gaspésie map – access via local trail located east of Cap-Chat; watch for Village Grande Nature Chic-Chocs sign). With a fabulous panoramic view of the Chic-Choc Mountains, this contemporary facility consists of a main lodge with restaurant, bar & sauna, plus cottages (some with hot tubs available). No phones or TVs in rooms.

DAY FIVE

Saint-Octave-de-l'Avenir (Cap-Chat) to Rivière-au-Renaud. 297 km (about 8 hours) via TQ5. Fuel: Mont Louis, Rivière-au-Renard. Lunch: Rivière-Madeleine

Where To Stay: Auberge Le Caribou

1.877.260.3344 or www.lecaribou.ca (#20 on 2012 Gaspésie map). Accessed via a local trail off TQ5 (watch for hotel signs), this hotel has a central building with reception and restaurant/pub and two motel units with multiple rooms. Fuel and convenience store on same local trail.

DAY SIX

Rivière-au-Renard to Murdochville. 265 km (about 8 hours) via TQ5/RT597. Fuel: Gaspé, Grande-Rivière, Murdochville. Lunch: Grande-Rivière.

Where To Stay: Hotel Copper

1.888.511.2566 (#18 on 2012 Gaspésie map – turn west from TQ5 on snow-covered main street at Shell station and go to main intersection. Hotel Copper is building on southeast corner). This well preserved older hotel offers an on-site restaurant/bar and sled parking in front of building.

DAY SEVEN

Murdochville to Matane. 304 km (about 8 hours) via Chamber of Commerce trail, RT595/TQ5. Fuel: Relais La Cache, Les Méchins, Matane. Lunch: Les Méchins.

Where To Stay: Riotel Matane

1-877-566-2651 or www.riotel.com (#05 on 2012 Gaspésie map – follow hotel signs on local trail from TQ5). Full service hotel with on site restaurant & bar, outdoor hot tub, indoor sauna and the most comfortable beds on this tour. Ask for ground floor rooms at front to park sleds outside your door. Ample parking for trucks and trailers too.

DAY EIGHT

Matane to Rivière-du-Loup. 330 km (about 8 hours) via TQ5. Fuel: Rimouski, Trois-Pistoles. Lunch: Trois-Pistoles.

Where To Stay: Hotel Universel

1.800.265.0072 or www.hoteluniverselrdl.com

DAY NINE

Trailer home