

Riding 'Round The PEG

A Circle Tour of Manitoba's Capitol

Sometimes, the best measure of a destination is how it fares through adversity. I scheduled our Manitoba tour for early last February as the most likely time for the weather gods to look upon us kindly. Fat chance!

For trailering tours, the scheduling is more flexible; but flying in and borrowing sleds, as we did in Manitoba, (*2009 Ski-Doo MX Z Renegades – see sidebar*) pretty much locked us in to that chosen time frame. Unfortunately, it rained for a day and half of our five proposed riding days, so you'd think this article would be a washout. On the contrary, our tour clearly demonstrates that Manitoba snowmobiling is capable of delivering great trails even when conditions are less than ideal.

Dennis Burns and I set out with locals Allen Cuthbert, Perry Knight and Dave Amey on a mission to ride a 1,500-kilometre loop around

Winnipeg. Thanks to Mother Nature, we snowmobiled only 900 klicks of that distance with one day cancelled and three days shortened due to a major re-route necessitated by the downpour. We were still able to circumnavigate Winnipeg, albeit in a smaller circle. Best of all, our 900 kilometres included exceptionally good trail riding...and for trails to be like that after a rain means that beforehand, they had lots of snow and were in absolutely primo shape!



One of many frozen Marshes we rode through.



Story and photos by
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**the
intrepid
Snowmobiler**



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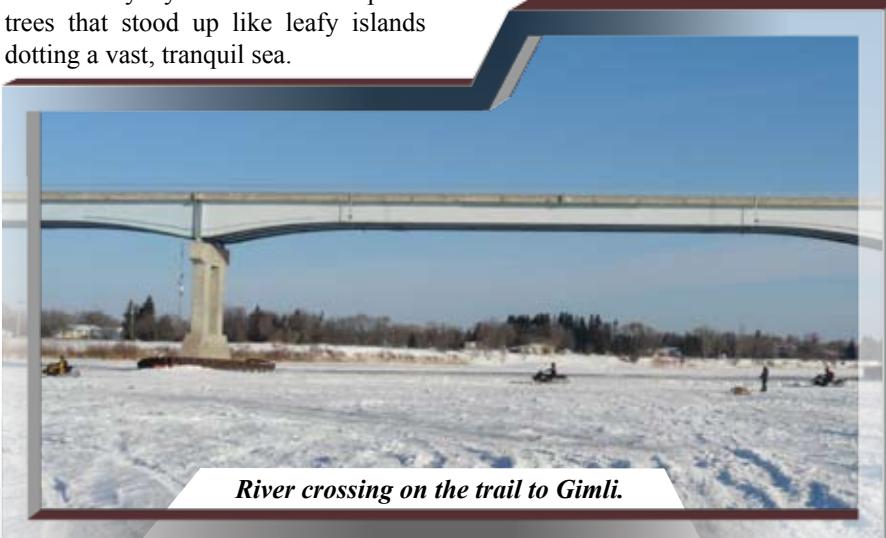
CRAIG'S MANITOBA TOUR



Following the stake line on Lake Winnipeg.

Before The Rain

We experienced many examples of top-notch trails on our first and second day of riding. Launching on a sunny Sunday from Bird's Hill, just north of Winnipeg, we were braced for the possibility of a rough ride following a full Saturday of trail use. Instead, the trails north to Gimli and then southwest to Portage La Prairie were uniformly smooth with only a few drifted spots where prevailing winds swept some fields. This area between lakes Winnipeg (to the east) and Manitoba (to the west) is mostly prairie, with trails running through bush, along fence lines and abandoned railways, through frozen marshes and in roadside ditches. Nearing Portage, we rode across seemingly endless fields stretching from one horizon to the other, the vista broken only by occasional clumps of trees that stood up like leafy islands dotting a vast, tranquil sea.



River crossing on the trail to Gimli.

That was our only sunny day. Day two, we set out south to the Assiniboine and Pembina River Valleys and the Town of Swan Lake in a sporadic freezing rain, and then rode east to Morden. The flat terrain gave way to picturesque hills and valleys, home to numerous deer, one of whom I met personally...

I was leading on a trail through a marsh, bounded by high grass on both sides. Suddenly, this deer popped up on my right front as if it had been lying just off the edge in the grass. With a whooshing impact signalling an indirect hit, my Ski-Doo Renegade sideswiped the animal as yellow parts flew off behind me. It happened so fast that I was several yards down the trail before I could even grab the brake, much less get stopped; the deer was long gone. I didn't even have time to be scared, but the

guys riding behind had conniptions from witnessing the whole thing unfold. There was no blood anywhere, just a few brown tufts decorating my sled...and best of all, nothing was broken, only dislodged, so we were on our way again in a few moments. Lucky me, I could have ended up wearing Bambi!

Change of Plans

Immediately after lunch, it started raining and continued on and off for the next 36 hours. We made a beeline to Morden and spent the evening contemplating our dismal options. Despite being thoroughly clad in waterproof gear like my FXR Adrenalin X jacket, none of us relished the thought of riding in pouring rain next day. Besides, for the next day's ride from Morden east to Steinbach, the call for precipitation was 100%, so the fields would be icy and wet at best, likely with massive puddles to negotiate. Without the luxury of being able to lay over in Morden and still keep to some semblance of our original itinerary, we called for a trailer to transport us to La Broquerie on day three. This kept us roughly on track and with options to loop either south to the famous Can-Am Trail and on through Whiteshell Provincial Park as intended or to scoot directly north if we needed to short circuit.

That night in La Broquerie, the mercury dropped below zero, so things tightened up a bit. Day four dawned heavily overcast, with a chance of either freezing rain or snow forecast. Knowing that the region between Lake Winnipeg



Many trails were freshly groomed soon after the rain.

and the Whiteshell was farther north, somewhat higher and also more protected by forest, we opted to ride that way. Although shortening our route, this turned out to be the best choice: these trails had held up very well, tightened up overnight, and benefited from light snow all that day.

Many trails had remained smooth and snow covered, but a few were mushy with easily avoided bare spots. As often as possible, we also steered around low-lying areas where frozen ground held water in large puddles or ponds of soupy slush. The farther north we sledded, the better the snow and trails became, and by the Town of Lac du Bonnet (locally pronounced: "lac-du-bonnie") it was almost as if no rain had fallen. Except for that one ditch...

We arrived in Lac du Bonnet from the southwest on a rail trail. The riding had been excellent on fresh snow and we could see the town ahead in the distance, just across the next road. You know how sometimes what your eyes see

ahead doesn't jibe with what your mind expects?

Again, I was leading and that upcoming road crossing looked somewhat weird. I was slowing down to stop, when I realized what was strange: a gaping, raw slash in the earth separated us from the road! To my left, I spotted a large backhoe, in the process of deeply trenching out the existing shallow ditch to allow for run off from yesterday's rain. That new trench ran parallel to the road in both directions for hundred of yards, cutting off our trail. To get to town, we had to ride a ways over clumps of muddy, bare earth and then drop 15 feet into the ditch and straight up the far side...a true test of the Renegade's crossover ability!

Tour Completed

Our final day, we snowmobiled trails in the popular area on either side of the Winnipeg River as it meanders up into Lake Winnipeg (everything flows



Warm up shelters are located throughout Manitoba trails.

Special thanks to Collette Fontaine (Travel Manitoba), Darren Lukianchuk (BRP), Dave Amey (Enns Brothers Ski-Doo), and Allen Cuthbert, Perry Knight and Ernie Smelski (SNOMAN).

Craig's tours are made possible by BRP, 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

north to Hudson's Bay). Some were even freshly groomed! Then from the Town of Grand Marais, we deadheaded for about 30 kilometres due west across that lake, following a stake line. Despite the earlier rain, plenty of remaining snow made that crossing a breeze, although I admit to some trepidation any time I find myself on ice and unable to see land in any direction! We cruised into Gimli by mid-afternoon, our tour loop completed.

This was my third tour in Manitoba and the only one when Old Man Winter didn't cooperate fully. But each ride has been memorable and fun, sledding their provincial trail system that runs from Ontario to Saskatchewan and from Minnesota north to Flin Flon. Along with superb prairie riding, there's also a variety of large river valleys, woodlands and even small mountains to keep it interesting. The trails are decently mapped, but not numbered on the guide (although a few have names), so navigation on the snow is primarily by town name and direction, aided by some on-trail numbering. Services appear to be sufficient, although not especially well marked on the trail for visitors. However, most Manitoba towns provide at least fuel and food, while quite a few also offer lodging of one kind or another.

As for our stated mission, we demonstrated that it is possible to loop Winnipeg by a short route or a long one. So the next time you're looking for a great snowmobiling adventure, go to Manitoba and try riding 'round the Peg!

PLAN YOUR TOUR

Who To Contact

- Travel Manitoba – www.travelmanitoba.com or 1-800-665-0040
- Snowmobilers of Manitoba (SNOMAN) – www.snoman.mb.ca

Maps Needed

- SNOMAN's Official Snowmobile Trail Guide for Manitoba
- Eastern Manitoba Snowmobile Trails

Our Tour Itinerary

Total distance: Intended – 1,500 kilometres; Re-routed – 891 kilometres.
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. This itinerary includes both our intended tour and the re-routed tour we rode due to a day of meltdown.

DAY ONE:

Fly to Winnipeg

Where We Stayed: Norwood Hotel
1-888-888-1878 or www.norwood-hotel.com. Full-service and well-appointed hotel located in east end near Enns Brothers Ski-Doo dealership, Lagimodiere.

DAY TWO:

Birds Hill to Portage La Prairie
(about 9.5 hours). Trailer from Winnipeg to Birds Hill and then trail ride 306 km via Gimli, Rembrandt,

Inwood, St Laurent & Ambroise. Fuel: Birds Hill, Gimli, St Laurent, Portage. Lunch: Gimli

Where We Stayed: Days Inn (204) 857-9791. Full-service hotel catering to snowmobilers with on-site restaurant and ample parking, plus swimming pool and hot tub. Direct trail access. Fuel nearby on trail.

DAY THREE:

Portage La Prairie to Morden. Re-routed ride due to afternoon rain: 188 km (about 6 hrs.) via Holland, Swan Lake & Manitou. Fuel: Holland, Morden. Lunch: Holland. Intended ride: 225 km via Holland, Swan Lake & Clearwater.

Where We Stayed: Super 8 Motel (204) 822-2003. Full-service hotel catering to snowmobilers with continental breakfast and ample parking, plus swimming pool and hot tub. Located at west end of town with direct trail access. Restaurant and fuel available in town.

DAY FOUR:

Morden to La Broquerie. Travel due to rain and ice: 0 km by sled, instead trailered 2 hrs. to La Broquerie. Intended Ride: Morden to Lake of the Woods About 300 km via Morris, Steinbach, Woodridge, Sprague & Moose Lake.

Where We Stayed: Hotel La Broquerie 1-866-424-5302 or www.labhotel.ca Roadside motel with on-site restaurant and bar, with ample



parking and direct trail access caters to snowmobilers. Intended Lodgings: Buffalo Point International Resort (204) 437-2557 or www.buffalopoint.mb.ca.

DAY FIVE:

La Broquerie to Lac du Bonnet (about 7 hrs.) Re-routed ride: 199 km via Marchand, Richer, Whitemouth, Seven Sisters, & Milner Ridge. Fuel: Whitemouth, Lac du Bonnet. Lunch: Whitemouth. Intended Ride: Lake of the Woods to Lac du Bonnet. Ride about 300 km. via Moose Lake, Falcon Lake, Whiteshell Park, Seven Sisters & Milner Ridge.

Where We Stayed: Drifter's Inn (204) 345-2915. Roadside motel with on-site restaurant, bar, fuel & convenience store with direct trail access caters to snowmobilers.

DAY SIX:

Lac du Bonnet to Gimli (about 7 hrs.) Re-routed ride: 198 km via Powerview, Victoria Beach, Grand Beach and Lake Winnipeg. Trailer back to Winnipeg. Fuel: Powerview. Lunch: Victoria Beach. Intended Ride: exploring trails thru Eastern Manitoba before looping back into Birds Hill.

Where We Stayed: Four Points Sheraton Airport Hotel, Winnipeg (204) 775-5222

DAY SEVEN:

Fly home

COMPARING RENEGADES

For this tour, Dennis and I rode and compared 2009 Ski-Doo MX Z Renegades – a 1200 4-TEC and a 600 H.O. E-TEC. Both were very impressive sleds and each handled differently. The Renegade 600 H.O. E-TEC behaved as expected from a top performing Ski-Doo 2-stroke, requiring a mix of hand braking and throttle to power through the corners. With a 45-KG weight advantage, the 600 felt and handled lighter. The Renegade 1200 delivered impressive power and once used to working the throttle properly, we were able to use engine braking rather than brakes for cornering and slowing. The weight of a 4-stroke also took some familiarization, not being quite as forgiving as the 2-stroke, but still very manoeuvrable in its own right. The E-TEC delivered on its fuel economy promise, doing slightly better at the pumps, offset a little by its need for more oil than the 4-stroke. My preference was the 600 H.O. E-TEC, but only because it had the ride I was used to back home. Dennis enjoyed the 1200 4-TEC and it was such a strong performer that I'm riding one this coming winter. My advice: If you're thinking about going 4-stroke, the Rotax 1200 engine in the REV-XR platform is an exceptional choice. But 4-strokes are a different ride (not better or worse, just different), so the ultimate comparison you make should be among the various 4-stroke models available for 2010 from each manufacturer, not between 4-strokes and 2-strokes.