

Big Country Riding

TOURING LABRADOR'S
EAST COAST FRONTIER



Labrador is big country, wild and empty. Its total population of 27,864 lives in an area that's 294,330 square kilometres – about two and half times the size of Newfoundland.

Snowmobiling is a way of life here, with sleds parked beside most every home and many schools and workplaces too. For touring riders from out-of-province in search of hard-core adventure, it's an exotic destination, well worth visiting.

Labrador is a singular snowmobiling experience. Most "Come-From-Aways" (as anyone from elsewhere is called) love its variety, vibrancy and vastness. But remember, when asking a local how far it is from here to there, a "Not far" answer is relative to its vast distances!

Labrador is still an unspoiled frontier. It's easy to see why so many outdoors enthusiasts call it home or return frequently for some of Canada's best fishing, hunting — and snowmobiling. However, like living there, touring by snowmobile in Labrador is not for the novice or faint of heart.

It's a life much closer to the edge than most visitors are accustomed to at home or on tour. Unless touring riders are thoroughly prepared and constantly aware, survival can quickly become precarious. Maybe that's why most Labrador snowmobilers still



ride locally: only a few explore farther afield or travel from community to community by sled. Apparently these include the faithful: we met a group of traveling evangelists on the trail spreading the Word by snowmobile!

Remote villages cling to Labrador's shores and to the perimeters of its immense wilderness, their very existence dependant on a fragile accommodation with Mother Nature. It's a self-sufficient, tenuous, pioneering existence — for instance, it was only shortly after the turn of this century that the first road was built to link Labrador's east coast communities. Even so, parts of it were closed due to heavy snow during our stay.

Dennis Burns and I had started our late March tour from L'Anse Au Clair. It's Labrador's southernmost town, near the boundary with Québec's North Shore, and across the Strait of Belle Isle from the tip of Newfoundland's Great Northern Peninsula. Our aim was to ride Trans Labrador Trail 2 north to Cartwright and back over five days, a total distance of about 800 kilometres. If that doesn't sound like much of a ride, you've never snowmobiled in Labrador!

The Trans Labrador Trail 2 is the eastern most section of the new system developed by Labrador Winter Trails, through recent multi-million dollar funding from the provincial government. Having already toured its well-developed counterpart trails around Labrador City to the west, I wanted to ride those east coast trails too...

Our outbound journey was more difficult than expected, largely due to a recent spell of Labrador's unpredictable weather. In fact, the timing of our departure from L'Anse Au Clair was determined only after a call ahead to confirm that conditions were passable to our first destinations, Mary's Harbour and Port Hope Simpson. Checking ahead to avoid deteriorating or bad conditions is a must for safe touring in Labrador.

Luckily, we got the green light. The previous week's storms were petering out. The worst we could expect was overcast skies for a couple of days. However, the trail hadn't been groomed for a week

or more. Although not bumpy from moguls, it was snow-covered and often blown in or drifted over, which slowed our progress considerably.

Fortunately, the Labrador Snowmobile Trail Map provided good guidance and the way was decently marked by frequent signage. Even the villages had large "Welcome" signs posted on the trail so that riders wouldn't inadvertently bypass services (although these were not identified on any signs). I was also pleased to see numerous signs counting down the distance to each of the ten warm-up shelters we passed between L'Anse Au Clair and Cartwright. These cozy, well-constructed buildings are convenient pit stops and would be a godsend to riders in an emergency.

Best of all was the staking. The passage across almost every open area or ice crossing was clearly designated by repainted 2 by 4s, each 12 feet long and spaced only 50 feet apart. It was like riding along a picket fence!

Placement that frequent may seem like overkill, but thanks to the Labrador winter, occasionally we could hardly see from stake to stake, or only spot the top 6 inches sticking above the snow. Without our two experienced guides, Chad Letto and Harvey Jones, it would have been difficult navigating our own way to Mary's Harbour — especially across the Barrens...

The Barrens, an elevated, 30-kilometre stretch of nothingness, is located midway between Red Bay and Lodge Bay. It was downright spooky. As its name implies, the Barrens was like a snow desert, with few discernable landmarks, flora or distinguishing features. An unsettling feeling descended on me as opaque whiteness suddenly played havoc with our depth perception and horizons. A fierce wind lashed sideways into our bodies while a waist-high whiteout, which we could see over but not through, blanked out the trail ahead. I couldn't see my own ski tips, but I could spot the head of the rider in front! With little shelter from that howling, pounding wind, I began to get slightly creeped out!

We traveled slowly and carefully, bumper to bumper, searching constantly

for the next marker. So you can appreciate our relief when we finally descend out of the Barrens. As we rode on, I imagined how less experienced riders, especially ones without guides, might get panicky groping their way through that eerie void! Getting lost or second-guessing the choice of direction would be easy — the Barrens is not a place to get caught in a real storm or to be forced to stay overnight!

I much preferred the places we did stay.



Each hotel was comparable to good trail-side lodgings at most snowmobile destinations. There's definitely something comforting about knowing, remote as the ride may be, that a hot shower, good meal and comfortable bed await each night.

My advice is never pass gas in Labrador. While fuel stops were adequately spaced, other variables can interfere. Unexpected snow or a wrong turn can mean unexpected consumption. And when you arrive at a village, gas isn't always easy to obtain. First, the pumps weren't well marked (there aren't any stand alone, name-brand gas stations en route). Instead, they were

usually hidden inside small sheds to protect them from the elements. Two different stations we visited had temporarily run out of gas, but as in most towns, other fuel was nearby.

We also learned that most pumps aren't operated at dinnertime (12 noon - 1 PM weekdays), when most everything shuts down. Similarly, most pumps were closed after 7 PM, and Sunday mornings can be chancy. So it's important to plan your fuel stops to avoid unnecessary delays and allow extra time just in case. I

think carrying extra is a must. That said, ask and ye shall find; every Labradorian (or is that Labradorite?) is more than willing to provide touring snowmobilers with directions, advice and assistance.

Between Mary's Harbour and Port Hope Simpson, we encountered five Caribou hunters, riding sleds and pulling qamutiks ("ka-moo-teeks" - large, high-sided toboggans) heavily loaded after a successful hunt. From there on, as the trail wound through forests and hills, we discovered that this group, travelling without trail permits, had really chewed up the surface. At most inclines, their tracks and footprints marked repeated struggles to reach the hillcrest, and their



OTHER TOUR INFORMATION

There are three ways to access this tour:

By Air: Fly Air Canada to St. John's, NFLD, then Provincial Airways to Blanc Sablon, Québec (nearby L'anse Au Clair), and rent sleds in Labrador.

By Road: Trailer to Sept. Isles, Québec, then snowmobile from there to L'anse Au Clair (remote, wilderness trail, guide needed)

By Sled: Snowmobile from home to L'anse Au Clair (If you have the time!)

The best time to tour Labrador by snowmobile is in March or April, when storms are less frequent and less fierce, temperatures more moderate, and the snow is packed, but still plentiful. Trail permits are required. To do this tour, it's preferable to allow six days from L'anse Au Clair to Cartwright return. If everything goes well, you'll have time for interesting side trips. With a limited number of hotel rooms in each village, it's wise to make advance reservations. Don't expect to see any caribou in this region; the herds are located either north of Lake Melville or in western Labrador.

If you decide to do the whole Trans Labrador Trail as a loop including Québec's North Shore trails, the circle tour would likely run either clockwise or counter clockwise from Baie Comeau, Québec. You will need three weeks to adequately allow for all contingencies and to carry gas with you in qamutiks. Phone ahead to ask advice about traveling these most remote and least developed sections of trail (clockwise from Baie Comeau): Sept Isles to Fremont, Churchill Falls to Goose Bay, and Goose Bay to Cartwright.

frequent, frozen ruts made our ride dangerous. Both Dennis and Harv flipped their sleds without warning when a ski suddenly caught in one of the holes left behind by these hunters. Fortunately, neither suffered injury, but we were even more wary afterwards.

The trail from Port Hope Simpson to Cartwright had not been recently groomed either. Chad, who was leading, got stuck at least three times in deep drifts. I was beginning to wonder when I would ever see a smooth trail. I also noticed that this section was not as well signed as yesterday's had been — fewer markers and some places that weren't staked at all. With good visibility and our guides, we had no concerns, but again I wondered about possible outcomes in the event of a storm or trying to make our own way.

After traversing 20 kilometres of empty terrain called "The Burn", resulting from a huge forest fire, we overnighted at Cartwright. From there, we made a brief

side trip to view the Atlantic Ocean, also visiting the (George) Cartwright Memorial. Various described as an "adventurer" or a "pirate", this chap founded the town in 1775. Nearby, at an Early Warning Radar Site on the Pine Tree line, abandoned in 1968, all that remained was a huge concrete octagon in the middle of nowhere. It's probably destined to be as much of a mystery for future generations as England's Druid stones or the Easter Island rocks are for us today.

I'm pleased to report that the return journey was a totally different experience — the outbound trip had consumed almost 15 riding hours, but getting back took only a little over 10! During our stay in Cartwright, every groomer between there and L'anse Au Clair had been out. As if in celebration, the skies cleared and the sun shone brightly. The change was unbelievable.

There wasn't a bump anywhere during those 400-plus return kilometres, on trails as well groomed as any in Canada. Which just goes to prove that local clubs have the capability to deliver topnotch trails whenever conditions cooperate and allow them to do their job properly. It also explains why their trails are so well

marked — so the groomer operators can find them after a storm! Even the Barrens were tamer by having a clearly defined, freshly groomed trail across it.

The difference in riding conditions out and back highlights the variable nature of Labrador trails. Since one never knows what will be encountered or when the weather may suddenly change, it's always a good idea to build an extra day or two into the tour itinerary in case of slow going or an unexpected layover. Then, if there are no delays, time will be available for the interesting side trips I wish we had done: visits by trail to isolated seaside villages such as St. Lewis, Williams Harbour, Norman Bay or Black Tickle, which are only land accessible in the winter.

If you're a dedicated trail rider who likes nothing but groomed trails and being close to civilization, don't go snowmobiling in Labrador. But if you are an experienced rider who thrives on new challenges and pioneering adventures — and know how to take care of yourself in the wilderness — then Labrador is a must-visit. I've been there twice and I'm already looking forward to my next big country tour. Maybe I'll see you there! ●

Where We Stayed

Northern Light Inn, L'anse Au Clair, 1-800-563-3188, (709) 931-2332 or www.northernlightinn.com

Alexis Hotel, Port Hope Simpson, (709) 960-0228 or burdencarol@yahoo.ca

Cartwright Hotel, Cartwright, (709) 938-7414 or www.cartwrighthotel.ca

Riverlodge Hotel, Mary's Harbour, (709) 921-6948 or www.riverlodgehotel.com

Who To Contact

Labrador Winter Trails, 1-877-884-SNOW (7669) or www.labradorwintertrails.com

Newfoundland & Labrador Tourism, 1-800-563-6353 or www.gov.nf.ca/tourism

Newfoundland & Labrador Snowmobile Federation, 1-877-635-4395, (709) 635-4395 or www.nlsf.org