

Caribou Country

SLEDDING ADVENTURES IN WESTERN LABRADOR

Pssst. Wanna know a secret? Where do you think the best-groomed trails in North America may be? Think Western Labrador — an untamed frontier that most map-makers box off in a corner like an afterthought. A sub-arctic wilderness that shares its land borders with the Province of Québec and its heritage with Newfoundland. An unspoiled destination that's only the same driving distance from Toronto as Tampa, Florida. And yes, it is accessible by road, north on the Trans Québec-Labrador Highway (#389) from Baie Comeau, Québec.

So who would ever want to go snowmobiling in Labrador? My bet is that you will, sooner than later. Especially if I can convince you that Labrador West is an outstanding snowmobiling destination for the "Been There, Done That" crowd. And that it has snow, especially when no one else does.

Let's start with those magnificent trails. How good are they? Flat as a board. Hard-packed. Minimum sixteen and up to twenty-five feet wide. Well-signed and staked.



Lots of variety, including old roads, utility corridors, lakes, and hilly, forested terrain through the Wapuskatto Mountains. And a season that runs from Christmas into May!

Miraculously, as recently as 1997, there were no groomed snowmobile trails in Labrador. Today, Labrador West (as Labrador City and Wabush are now col-

longer, than any other trails in Canada.

But there were only 500 kilometres of them, you say — hardly worth so long a journey! And if that's all that Labrador had to offer, you might be right. Fortunately, there were numerous other attractions for the avid snowmobiler. First, the Labrador West trails connect to

hunting and ice fishing (speckled and lake trout, white fish, arctic char, northern pike and landlocked salmon). Labrador is truly an outdoorsman's paradise — especially in winter!

The Labrador West region is known as the Iron Ore Capital of North America. Incorporated in the sixties, the twin



lectively known) boasts over 500 kilometres of area trails. Essentially, they have leapfrogged from goat paths to snow highways almost overnight.

One indicator of the snowmobiling acceptance level in this northern community was evident at in-town snowmobile road crossings. The hard pack laid down by the groomer across the asphalt was often left intact — and cars slowed down to pass over these snowy speed bumps!

Best of all, Labrador has oodles of snow, temperatures that quickly set a fresh grooming into a virtually indestructible base, and comparatively minimal sled traffic — all factors integral to superior trail quality. Moreover, every trail was a main one, receiving priority treatment; there were no under-served secondary or local trails as can be found in most other provinces. So kilometre for kilometre, it is arguable that during March and April, these Labrador West snowmobile trails were consistently better, and better for

several hundred kilometres of groomed snowmobile trails around nearby Fermont, Québec. Next, the 1,500 kilometre Labrador Winter Snowmobile Trail is complete, enabling riders to snowmobile from Labrador West through Churchill Falls to Happy Valley/Goose Bay, and then down the east coast to L'Ans au Clair at the Québec border. Finally, and in my opinion the real bonus for adventure-seeking snowmobilers, the Labrador experience also includes virtually limitless backcountry riding opportunities through those beautiful Wapuskatto Mountains, rugged terrain laced with hidden lakes. There are even play areas where hardcore riders can hill-climb and side hill to their heart's content!

By March, the snow cover had settled sufficiently that one could ride almost anywhere with ease. I should also note that snowmobilers who are hunters and anglers can combine their riding with some of the continent's best caribou

towns of Labrador City and Wabush serviced the open pit mines owned by the Iron Ore Company of Canada and the Wabush Iron Company Ltd. Together with the Québec Cartier Mine in nearby Fermont, Québec, these mines produce an astounding 30 million tonnes of quality iron ore products annually, that are shipped around the world through Sept Isles, Québec.

With good wages, low unemployment, cheap hydro and modest property taxes, Labrador West boasts an average family income considerably higher than our national average. This frontier centre has a combined population of about 10,000, and offers a wide range of services and conveniences, including Labrador's only 18-hole golf course. When the Trans Québec-Labrador Highway opened in 1992, Labrador West became the main hub for movement of goods and products across the region.

In mid-March, Jean Leroux and I flew

into Wabush. I must have looked bizarre at the Toronto airport, with spring in full bloom. After one unfortunate experience several years ago, when my snowmobile gear failed to fly with me to my destination, I wasn't taking any chances with having to snowmobile Labrador in my skivvies! So I checked in wearing my irreplaceable snowmobile suit and boots, and carrying my helmet. But I felt right at home climbing off that plane in wintery Labrador.

After checking into the grand old Wabush Hotel, just steps from the airport, we headed to the office of Northern Lights Fishing Lodge where we were set up for the week with two new Ski-Doo touring sleds from their rental fleet.

Our first two days, we rode trails around Labrador West groomed by the White Wolf Snowmobile Club and sampled the Fermont system too. The temperature in this sub-arctic climate ranged from -30 degrees Celsius in early morning to a very ridable -10 by afternoon. If that sounds too chilly, remember that Labrador's dry cold is nowhere near as uncomfortable as the humidity-laden deep freezes of central Canada. As I've already indicated, the trail riding was superb, with many scenic lookouts over the expansive panorama of Labrador mountains.

We soon learned that snowmobiles are as endemic to Labradorians as trucks. For years, wide track machines such as the Bombardier Skandic had seen traditional use by the local hunters and fishermen who frequently travel to their camps and cottages north of town. Not only are these excellent back country sleds, they are also capable of pulling the ubiquitous qamutiks ("ka-moo-teeks") — large, high-sided toboggans — that haul gas and supplies in, and caribou carcasses and other bounty out. Groomed trails have brought change and challenge to Labrador. Some traditional users still have not succumbed to peer pressure to join the club by paying the annual user fee. But many locals not only anteed up gladly, they also bought new sleds specifically for trail riding, thus opening up a new market for snowmobile sales. For

GETTING THERE

However you choose to get to Labrador, I highly recommend that you make contact well in advance to arrange your tour, including a guide and gas if you intend to travel further away than the White Wolf trail system. This is truly the Great White North, so don't take anything for granted.

By Road: Labrador West is 581 kilometres north of Baie Comeau, Québec via Trans Québec-Labrador Highway 389. About two thirds of this corridor was paved while the remainder was a hard-pack, gravel surface. During the winter, it was regularly maintained and ploughed by the Québec Ministry of Transportation into a very serviceable road that normally allows an 8.5-hour drive to Labrador West. Services, including gas, were available at Manic 5 (a large hydro dam well worth viewing) and near Gagnon, but given the wilderness locale, it's wise to carry survival gear, food and water for several days in case of problems. As spring thaw sets in, a few parts of the road can turn muddy, making driving a challenge. If you are trailering from the Atlantic Provinces, Baie Comeau is best accessed by regular ferry service from Matane, Québec. (*Update: a large bus and trailer combo out of Labrador City can be booked to transport groups.*)

By Rail: It may be possible to ship sleds north from Sept Isles on the Québec North Shore and Labrador Railway. Contact Labrador tourism for more information.

By Sled: If you have the time and are prepared for a real backwoods adventure, you can snowmobile to Labrador West. There was an ungroomed wilderness trail north from Sept Isles, but it requires a savvy guide, not only to navigate the way, but also to arrange a gas stash en route (there are no stations). Be prepared to spend at least one night in a bush camp, longer if it snows during the journey. I wouldn't recommend this option without at least four able-bodied men, preferably on long track sleds.

By Air: The easiest way is to fly into Wabush on the daily Air Canada flights originating from either Montreal or Québec City. You can rent a machine from Northern Lights Fishing Lodge. Remember to label all checked luggage with the address/phone number of your Labrador destination and the dates you will be there, as well as your home address and phone number. There are car rentals at the Wabush airport, but everything is so close and trail accessible that once you get your sleds, my guess is that you won't need one.



the first time, recreational snowmobilers were going riding for its own sake, instead of using their snowmobile only as a mode of transport for some other activity. Both new riders and those who have taken it up again were part of those eager to partake of Labrador's groomed trails. Most of these snowmobilers had even taken to wearing helmets, though it was

trail pit stops and gas depots necessary for a full service, touring network. But in my observations, these outfitters were weekend operators at best, which left too much to chance when touring the Labrador wilderness. Thus, the availability of gas must be the prime consideration for any snowmobiler bent on serious touring in Labrador. The best solution is



n't mandatory under Newfoundland law.

Outside of town, there are no gas stations. That's one reason qamutiks are an integral part of Labrador snowmobiling. It may well have the highest per capita ownership of red jerry cans in Canada!

Ride duration is restricted by fuel supply. For instance, I spotted one group of eight sleds from Vermont, on their way to Churchill Falls, pulling four qamutiks, each with ten full jerry cans. That's 40 cans plus their snowmobile tanks! It certainly pays to know your sled's gas mileage and the distance to be traveled before setting out in Labrador!

It's likely that the current pace of trail development will outstrip the establishment of trailside gas depots for the foreseeable future. Certainly, a smattering of outfitter locations north of Labrador West could become the backbone for the

to phone ahead and arrange your tour through a local operator who will take care of lodgings, gas and guiding in the outback.

The necessity of carrying gas creates an additional problem. Most of the sleighs and toboggans I observed didn't have runners or carbides, so when cornering, they were often all over the trail. Not only was this a serious safety concern for oncoming snowmobilers, it also was likely the single factor most responsible for damaging groomed trails.

By day four we were ready for new adventures. The Northern Lights Fishing Lodge is located on Shaw Lake, almost 300 kilometres north of Labrador West. It was a very successful hunting and fishing outfit, before launching a snowmobile operation too. It acquired the afore-

mentioned rental fleet, and had a crew cut a new trail 70 kilometres through the wilderness to link up with the nearest White Wolf groomed trail. Not one given to half measures, the lodge even purchased an old groomer with blade and packer plate to start making the trail rideable too.

By the time we arrived, the new trail was cut 10 to 12 feet wide, adequately marked, and rough-packed such that we rode over terrain contours, not moguls. It wasn't tabletop smooth, but it was a relatively comfortable two-hour ride from the main trail. Groomed regularly, this new trail has given many Labrador West riders their first real taste of destination touring.

The Northern Lights Lodge consisted of a main log building with a lounge, bar, and dining room, surrounded by free-standing sleeping cabins, each with its own wood stove, sink and toilet. A generator supplied the power. The lodge was a homey, frontiersy sort of place where the biggest concern each night was whether any of your cabin mates would get up to put more wood on the fire. If not, and you waited too long yourself (as I did), then you lay there interminably, teeth chattering, trying to out-wait the others, and wondering if maybe everyone else was already frozen to death and you're next.

It was one measure of the purity of the Labrador experience that everyone at Northern Lights drank the water brought up from the lake daily (*Update: running water is now available*). Another indicator is the stellar display of the Aurora Borealis that dances a spectacular light show across the clear northern sky on many nights. Or how about the constant presence of four red foxes, ever vigilant for a handout and always curious about what those crazy humans would do next. We never seemed to disappoint them...

Following our arrival in Labrador, we heard stories of the George River Caribou Herd, the world's largest — numbering in the hundreds of thousands — which roams freely in the hinterland. On our way in to Shaw Lake,

we'd witnessed several returning qamutiks loaded with fresh meat, so the next day our mission was to find caribou.

We saw two. On the way, our party of six traversed 135 cross country kilometres of glacial eskers, wind-swept mountains, forested valleys, and drifted lakes that extend as far as the eye can see. This far north, the trees are smallish and often give way to barren hillsides and mountaintops that sparkle white each winter. It's a huge, magnificent, and wild land that barely seems to tolerate human presence and makes a guy on a snowmobile feel very tiny indeed.

Most of the time, I had no idea where we were. I was thankful to our guides and to the GPS and contour maps they consulted frequently. At noon, we stopped to brew tea over an open fire and devour the sandwiches that the Northern Lights cook had provided. It was a savory precursor to the feast that night: a full roast turkey dinner with all the trimmings plus a pork roast and salt beef, with black forest cake for dessert. Yummy!

I admit to teasing my new Labrador friends about finding only those two lone caribou. Especially after a Northern Lights hunting crew brought them in, hooves up, on qamutiks! If there were nearly a million of the beasts, how come we'd seen only that hapless pair? My readers would be challenged to believe a winter hunt was worthwhile based on these measly pickings! So it was that on our final day of riding — the journey back to Labrador West — that our mission was finally accomplished...

We stopped at Esker, a collection of hunt camps half way back to Labrador West. An excited hunter told us that a herd of several thousand was fifteen miles away. He had the carcasses to prove it. Thus began a hundred-kilometre detour into the mountains where the hoof prints and droppings became increasingly plentiful. An hour later we spotted a hundred caribou running across a lake, but they were gone before we could get closer. We had turned around to head back when our guides, Gerard Rumbolt and Jerry Pelley, pointed down a lake we had crossed earlier, and there they were — or at least 500 of



them! We got close enough for photos before they bolted — straight off the lake and up our trail home! Fortunately, they ran off cross country, but at least I could leave Labrador convinced that anyone with time and serious intent can find caribou galore.

Our Labrador tour was a unique combination of riding adventures. But for all of its recent incursions into civilized snowmobiling, one doesn't have to travel far from Labrador West to be surrounded by a wilderness frontier where one wrong decision or foolish move can be life-threatening. That's why I'd recommend it only for experienced riders familiar with adventure snowmobiling. It's also why I think a guide is essential for travel beyond the White Wolf system, and why I would avoid visiting in January or February, when even many locals think it's too cold to venture far afield.

That said, Labrador West was an exceptional place to visit, a pioneer locale characterized by the innocence of unlocked doors and open-armed hospitality. It was one place where you could leave the key in your sled overnight and be assured of finding it there next morning. It was also a winter place where snowmobiling is as much a way of life as enjoying that special season is — and for my money, that's a good enough reason to include it in your touring plans as soon as possible!

Who To Contact

Destination Labrador, 1-800-563-6353 or (709) 944-7788

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

White Wolf Snowmobile Club, (709) 944-7401 or www.white-wolf.net

Northern Lights Snowmobile Adventures, (709) 944-7475 or www.labrador-frontier.com

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

Where We Stayed

Wabush Hotel, (709) 282-3221 or www.wabushhotel.com

Rentals/Tours

Northern Lights Snowmobile Adventures, (709) 944-7475 or www.labrador-frontier.com