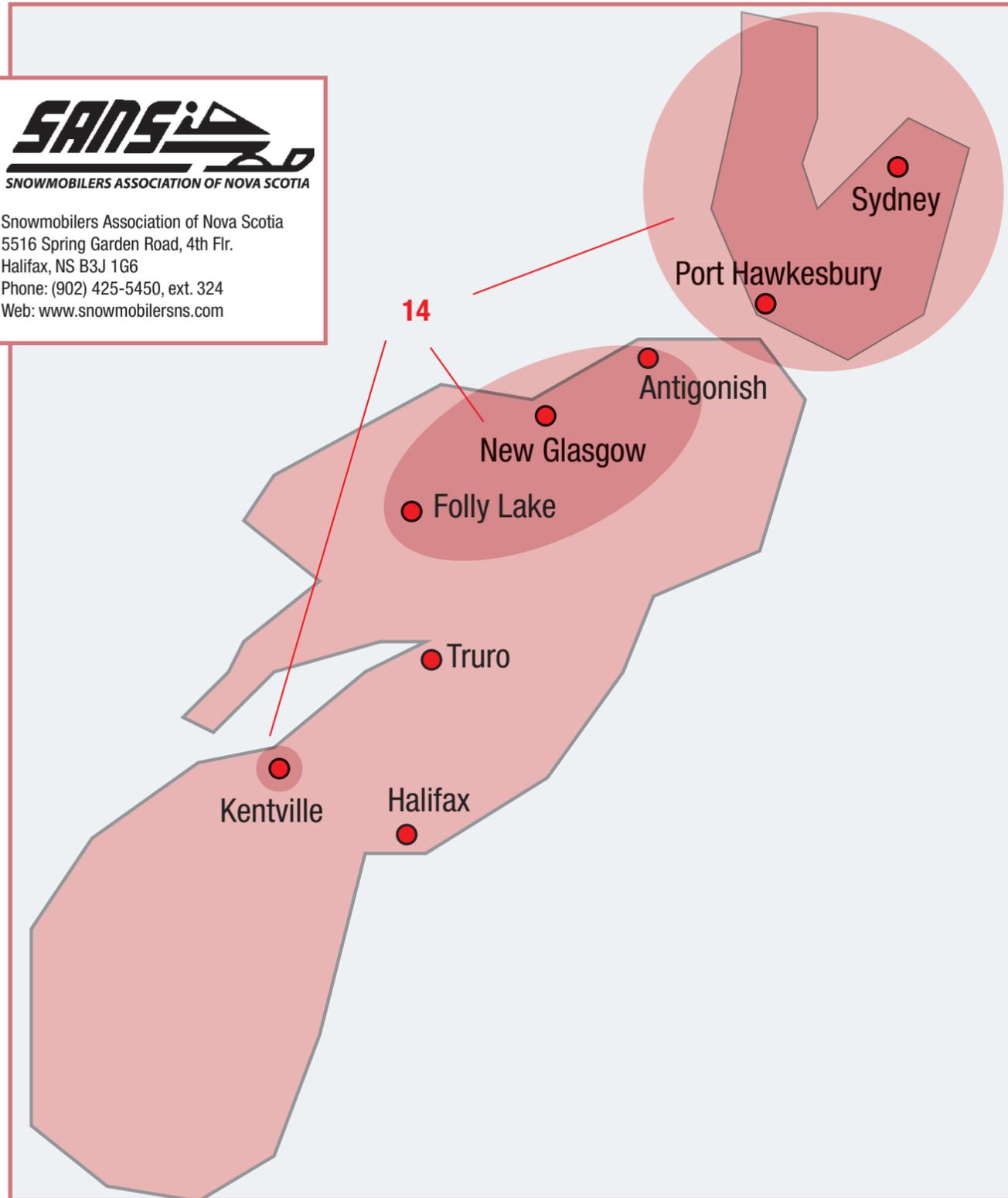


Nova Scotia



Snowmobilers Association of Nova Scotia
5516 Spring Garden Road, 4th Flr.
Halifax, NS B3J 1G6
Phone: (902) 425-5450, ext. 324
Web: www.snowmobilersns.com



Tour of Discovery

NOVA SCOTIA'S THREE DISTINCT RIDING REGIONS

I had no idea what to expect. I knew that Nova Scotia snowmobiling might not compete with the provincial networks offered in New Brunswick, Québec or Ontario. I also suspected it must have some great trail riding — and I wasn't disappointed. The grooming was state of the art, despite so much snow that I almost caught a ski on the top edge of a buried sign! So I thoroughly enjoyed my 933-kilometre Nova Scotia tour of discovery, which included meeting a bunch of very helpful, friendly snowmobilers.

My Nova Scotia snowmobiling occurred in three distinct regions that were not linked to each other by trails: Cape Breton Highlands from Cheticamp in the north to Port Hastings at the island's southern tip; the northern mainland from Antigonish in the east to Amherst at the boundary of New Brunswick; and the Annapolis Valley from Kentville southwest. Each of these areas offers several days of good riding to those willing to trailer in. Certainly snowmobilers from Halifax and other parts of the province can easily satiate their riding desires close to home.

After flying into Sydney, Jean Leroux and I started our tour at Cape Breton's Margaree Centre. There, we met our guides for the week, Laurie Cranton, then President of the Snowmobilers Association of Nova Scotia, and their General Manager, Jamie Wolverton (then Vice-President Linda Wyllie joined our tour the next day). Our objective was to ride in each of the three regions, trailering from one to the other.

That first day, we snowmobiled north to Cheticamp through picturesque hills and valleys. In several places, we encountered steep, drift-prone slopes. To keep trails open and smooth, groomers worked from top to bottom, often having to drop the drag above and do some fancy blade work to clear and grade the snow before resuming their perilous descent.

The Cape Breton Highlands gets a whack of snow most winters. The height of land (up to 1,800 feet) and prevailing winds off the surrounding water often cause heavy drifting, which makes unprotected trails a whoopsy-doo ride. In many places, those towering snowdrifts were so high I couldn't reach the top, even standing on my sled!

During our two days on Cape Breton, the deep snow was hard-packed, so there was little chance of getting stuck as we skimmed over huge humps covered with fresh powder. Powder playing is half the fun on Cape Breton; the other half is hundreds of old unmaintained logging roads that branch off the marked trails. But getting lost would be easy and so would be running out of gas — which I did about a mile from a station. Without our guides, I wouldn't have been even that close!

We saw one of our tour highlights that day. Laurie suggested going to Cape Clear, which I assumed would overlook the sea. We made several turns on a series of old log-



ging roads. Finally, we came to a place where bushes grew up and the trail appeared to come to an abrupt end. Lucky thing that no one bashed on through, because on the other side of the foliage was an incredible, Grand Canyon-like gorge! Part of its impact was its total unexpectedness — there was no other formation like it on the trip.

It had been a long day. So after eating a home-cooked supper at a charming spot called Big Intervale Fishing Lodge, we took a shortcut home in the dark. Unfortunately, a recent thaw had undermined the trail surface, and even though it was cold again, washouts were numerous. We'd gun it across each one, then check our mirrors to make sure the guy behind was okay.

In one especially boggy hole, someone had laid numerous branches in as fill. Two of us made it across, but Jamie's headlight stopped suddenly, pointing askew. Laurie and I turned off our sleds, and I walked back to help. Sure enough, Jamie had caught one ski beneath a log, which was jammed under the edge of the ice. When he finally found it, his ski tip was about 8 inches under the muck. Yuck! It took about half an hour of vigorous pulling, pushing, rewing, tugging, groping and shifting to work that sled free. By then, we were so tired and hot that we couldn't wait for a shower and bed.

But wait we did, because neither Laurie's nor my sled would restart, no matter who pulled them over or how often. Now I was really exhausted! It wasn't until we changed sparkplugs that those recalcitrant engines reluctantly kicked over. We didn't get back until after 10 p.m., and you know what? We didn't have another problem with either of those sleds during the rest of the tour, so who knows what went wrong!

The second day, we rode south to Port Hastings. Our inland route ran parallel to Cape Breton's west coast. The trails were excellent — a good mix of logging roads, abandoned rail lines and narrower bush trails. At one point we stopped at an old wooden church near the trail. The guides informed us that this is the

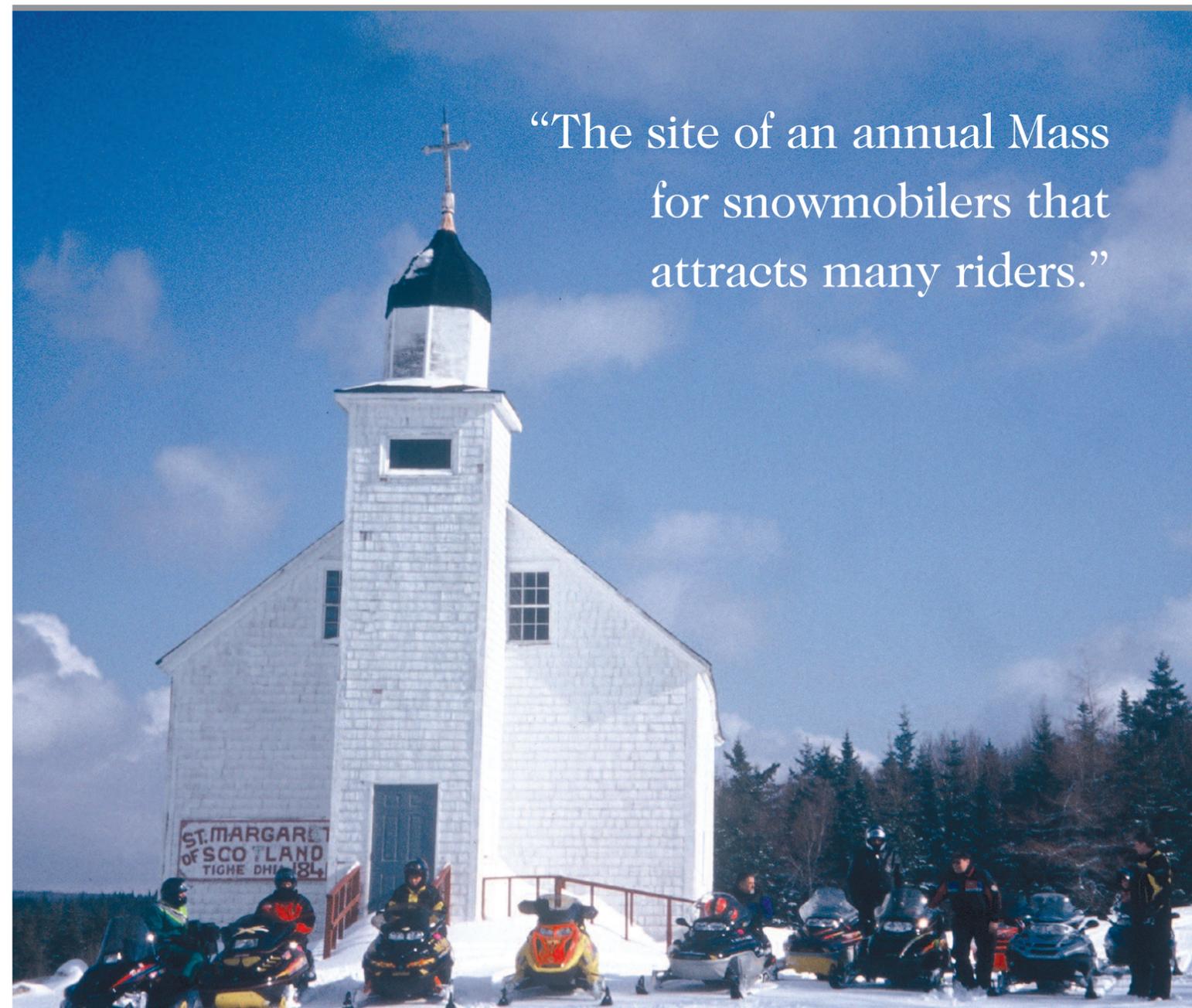
site of an annual Mass for Snowmobilers that attracts many riders.

We rode past Inverness for lunch at Mabou, where we stopped at The Mall restaurant. My only concern was the interminable length of bare pavement we had to run to access the place. Over lunch, I kibitzed with our waitress, jokingly inviting her along. It wasn't until later, when we all took off our helmets at a rest stop, that I realized she had taken me up on the offer, calling her son to bring her snowmobile gear, and taking

off from work! I'll have to be more careful what I say from now on or there will be no employees left in restaurants after we depart!

Just before arriving at Port Hastings, where we would load the sleds for trailering across the Canso Causeway to the mainland at Antigonish, our guides brought us out to another impressive lookout. This one looked south over the causeway to the mainland, with Port Hastings off to the east. We stood at a 500-foot precipice, below which was the

main highway, a mile or so from the sea. Several of the guides swore up and down that seals have been found on the height of land back of us, apparently having slithered their way up from the water. I figured they were pulling my leg, but when we arrived at Port Hastings, one of our trailer drivers reported that a seal was crossing the highway, heading inland, so who knows for sure. Maybe I witnessed the next stage of evolution! We launched from Antigonish on day three, sledding west toward New



“The site of an annual Mass for snowmobilers that attracts many riders.”

Brunswick. If there's one fact that snowmobiling frequently reaffirms to me, it's how big and empty much of Canada really is. Even in a smaller province like Nova Scotia, where you are never more than 56 kilometres from the sea, the best snowmobiling occurs in the more rural and remote regions, like the Trail 104

pleted that day's ride.

But I'm glad we did, because that afternoon we took in two more scenic panoramas: one looking north over Northumberland Strait near Pictou, with Prince Edward Island nudging the horizon; and the other from the deck of Stonehame Lodge, our resting pace

of breakdown, no one is stranded. From Folly Lake, we loaded up again, trailering southeast around Cobequid Bay and the Minas Basin toward Halifax, and thence to Kentville on the Bay of Fundy, for a day of riding in the Annapolis Valley.

Unfortunately, it started raining that night. Although it let up enough the



west from Antigonish. It covered a lot of frontier, angling southwest, and then due west, south of the populated Northumberland Strait shoreline. Laid over old roads and logging routes, it was tabletop smooth most of the time, but once again, fuel was a concern.

The Willowdale station marked on my trail map had changed hands. The new owner only opened Tuesday and Thursday evenings and on Saturdays. If my guides hadn't known who to call for a special fill up, we couldn't have com-

pleted that night.

Our tour of the northern mainland ended at Folly Lake, about halfway to the New Brunswick boundary from Pictou. Along the way, we passed an oncoming groomer that caused me a double take: a snowmobile was sitting on top of the drag. The last time I saw one in this position, its driver hadn't stopped in time! Then I was reminded of seeing a similar occurrence in northern Ontario, where that drag-parked sled is the means by which operators switch off. And in case

next morning for we Gore-Tex™-clad optimists to begin riding, within 40 miles torrents curtailed our Annapolis Valley tour permanently. Jean and I spent that night at the Halifax airport hotel, flying back home the next morning as scheduled.

So how does Nova Scotia rate for snowmobiling? Excellent for local riders who can access the trails by snowmobile from home any time they want and know their way around. Good for Nova Scotians who



can familiarize themselves with an area by trailering for repeated weekends and holidays. But only fair for first-timers who have to trailer or fly in from out of province.

However, a direct comparison with Ontario, Québec or New Brunswick is unfair. Nova Scotia is at an earlier stage of development and has a charm all its own. It's a beautiful province, with a great diversity of terrain that makes for very scenic and enjoyable riding. It gets high marks for trail quantity and quality, active clubs, good clubhouses, a capable snowmobile association, and very committed volunteers. These folks are so involved in recreational snowmobiling that they think nothing of investing their own money to underwrite the purchase of grooming equipment or to fund a new clubhouse.

I believe that Nova Scotia snowmobiling was at a crossroads. There's a hard decision being made about keeping trails primarily for the recreational use of locals, or moving toward a system of trails for tourists — and all the new development that would entail, including improved signage, current trail maps and better access to services and amenities.

As a touring visitor, I would have had difficulty finding my own way in each region. Overall, signage was inconsistent

and insufficient. There was no provincial trail map. Most available local and regional maps were out of date, some by as much as a decade. As a result, touring riders would have difficulty finding gas, because its availability and locations may have changed over the years.

So what about those who want to experience Nova Scotia snowmobiling? My advice is to hook up with guides from a local club. Another alternative, snow conditions permitting, is to extend your New Brunswick tour by adding a side trip into Nova Scotia's northern mainland. The Trans Canadian Snowmobile Trail connects the two provinces near Amherst, so from there you could complete a large loop east as far as Pictou and back. Contact the Snowmobilers Association of Nova Scotia for assistance first, and then take a good road map, a compass, and a jerry can of gas. You won't be sorry, because great trails and Maritime hospitality will make great memories from your very own Nova Scotia tour of discovery!

OUR TOUR ITINERARY

Note: Due to the unavailability of current, accurate trail maps and a provincial trail numbered system, it was not possible to provide exact route info.

Where We Stayed

Cranton Cottages, Margaree Centre, Cape Breton, (902) 248-2985, (902) 248-2726 or www.crantoncottages.com

Greenway Claymore Inn, Antigonish, 1-888-863-1050, (902) 863-1050 or www.claymoreinn.com

Stonehame Lodge & Chalets, Scotsburn, 1-877-646-3468, (902) 485-3468 or www.stonehamechalets.com

Old Orchard Inn, Kentville, 1-800-561-8090, (902) 542-5751 or www.oldorchardinn.com

Wandlyn Coldbrook, Kentville, 1-800-561-0000, (902) 678-8311 or www.wandlyninns.com

Who To Contact

Nova Scotia Tourism, 1-800-565-0000, (902)-425-5781 or www.novascotia.com

Snowmobilers Association of Nova Scotia (SANS), (902) 425-5450, ext. 324 or www.snowmobilersns.com