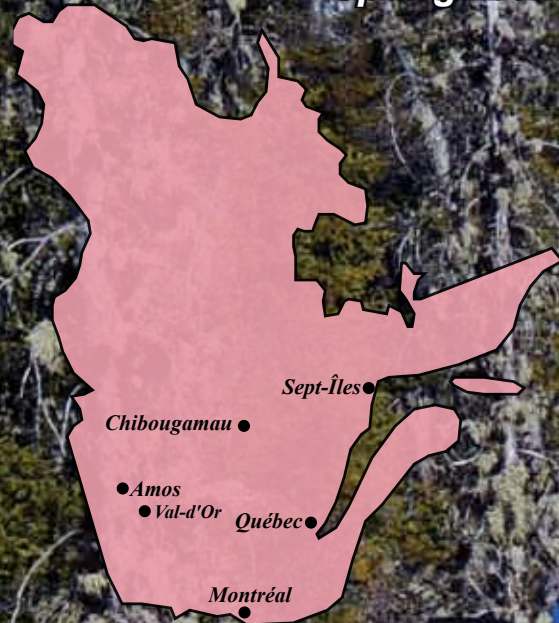


Winter Without End

Spring Riding in Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Baie-James

Story and Photos by
Craig Nicholson



Many trails cross agricultural land in Abitibi-Témiscamingue.

O kay, I confess. I'm a snowmobile-aholic. Even after one of the longest winters on record last season, by mid-March I still wanted more. But the options were becoming limited...I mean where could we ride until April with decent spring conditions? My choice: midwestern Québec, where the Abitibi-Témiscamingue Region is a pocket of many vibrant snowbelt communities, and just north, where the Baie-James (James Bay) Region is the last outpost for trail riding in a snowy wilderness frontier.

These very snowmobile-friendly regions are adjacent to Ontario's popular New Liskeard/Cochrane trail network. The southern boundary of Abitibi-Témiscamingue is less than 600 clicks north of Montréal. With good roads all the way, these two regions are easily accessible through either Québec or from Ontario...by snowmobile trail, too!

To be sure of good snow, Don Webb and I traileered nine hours north from Toronto to Amos, an Abitibi-Témiscamingue town that won the award for the best drinking water in the world earlier this decade. Dennis Burns and Jim Reavell met us there. By staging from the Hotel Amosphere, we figured that if conditions started to deteriorate, we'd more likely be able to ride back on snow than if we'd launched farther south.

As it turned out, instead of the

anticipated balmy temperatures and spring riding conditions, we ran smack into mercury readings as low as -35° Celsius, plus a major blizzard that kept winter in full force until the end of March and beyond! In hindsight, we could have launched from the most southerly population centre of Abitibi-Témiscamingue, the Town of Témiscaming, about a five-hour drive from the Greater Toronto Area. Also in hindsight, we wouldn't have dressed so lightly for spring...BRRRR!

Last Trail Ride

We snowmobiled just over 2,300 kilometres in seven days of mostly primo riding, circle touring southwest from Amos, then north through the Baie-James Region, before returning south to Abitibi-Témiscamingue and back to Amos. As you can see from 'Our Tour Itinerary' at the end of this article, our goal was to ride as many trails as possible: remember, this was our last trail ride of the season; we really wanted to rack up the kilometres, not necessarily take the most direct route. So if you plan to use this article as a template for your own tour, be advised that you can usually get from Point A to Point B much more directly than we did (but you'll miss some incredible secondary trails). Whatever you decide, here are a few impressions of the two regions from a touring perspective...

I've always found trails throughout

both regions to be uniformly smooth, in part because of ample snow, cold temperatures and low traffic, but also because the clubs take great pride in providing visitors with the best possible ride. However, as in many other Québec regions, trail numbering is only adequate for touring riders, compared to some other destinations...and sometimes, ATV signage can also be confusing. Thank goodness for their decent trail maps!

Abitibi-Témiscamingue

Three main towns, founded on mining and forestry, anchor Abitibi-Témiscamingue: Rouyn-Noranda (pop. 39,404); Val-d'Or (32,089); and Amos (13,000). Snowmobiling is a way of life in Abitibi-Témiscamingue, which boasts 3,700 kilometres of groomed trails. In terms of signage and access to services and amenities, Val-d'Or is the area showcase. It welcomes visitors with an exceptionally well-marked trail loop around town, from which signed spokes lead to fuel, lodgings, food and sled dealers. We also found everything needed in Amos with no hassles, but despite Rouyn-Noranda's loop trail around town, services and amenities there are poorly marked and difficult to find. Fortunately, the rest of the Abitibi-Témiscamingue towns offer many other easily accessible, on-trail services and amenities.

Abitibi-Témiscamingue trails get top



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Visiting riders find their way easily with good signage on the Val-d'Or trail loop.

marks for the sheer enjoyment of just going snowmobiling. I highly recommend spending several days exploring all the region has to offer. Only one loop had us scratching our heads about where to go: Regional Trail (RT) 386 east from Louvicourt, connecting to Trans Québec (TQ) 83 west to Senneterre. We found our way, but the signage was both minimal and confusing, thanks to random ATV signs.

I should also note that Abitibi-Témiscamingue snowmobile clubs do an amazing job of brushing, cutting everything back to the trail's edge. So you really can stay to the right all the time, with very few branches to duck, swerve to avoid or have bash unexpectedly into your visor. Best of all, this makes sightlines clear around most corners. All in all, their remarkable brushing, plus outstanding grooming, makes for top notch riding in Abitibi-Témiscamingue.

Baie-James

With 2,137 kilometres of groomed trails, Baie-James sits immediately north of Abitibi-Témiscamingue. The two regions are connected by trails at Villebois in the west (RT396), a local trail running north from Saint-Dominique-du-Rosaire that intersects with RT396 midway, and in the east, by TQ93 at Lebel-sur-Quévillon. Farther east, Baie-James also connects via TQ93 to the Saguenay-Lac St-Jean tourism region, and for those with the time to spare, a much larger loop can be circumnavigated through this region back to Abitibi-Témiscamingue via TQ83.

The Baie-James Region's primary centres — Chibougamau (pop. 7,922), Mistissini (3,461), Lebel-sur-Quévillon (3,195), Matagami (1,939) and Chapais (1,800) — are smaller and more remote, with fewer secondary trail choices. This allows local clubs to focus their grooming efforts on the primary thoroughfares, so trail quality is uniformly good. With today's fuel-efficient sleds, getting around Baie-James is a breeze; just be sure to gas up at every opportunity (see Our Tour Itinerary for fuel stops).

Baie-James trails are primarily on logging roads, utility corridors and an abandoned rail line (locally known as "Piston Alley", between Lebel-sur-Quévillon and Chibougamau), so the running is normally easy and smooth. Just be sure to readjust your perspective when switching between the Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Baie-James trail maps so their differing scales won't throw off your tour and distance planning. Baie-James is ideal for touring snowmobilers looking for new adventures (and to rack up more kilometres); it's worth conquering this vast frontier just for the bragging rights!

More Winter

As we rode our clockwise loop through these two regions, Mother Nature did her best to make it truly a winter without end. By day two, La Sarre to Matagami, we rode at -20° Celsius, and each day dropped from there. We scavenged our saddlebags for every extra layer and put on the handlebar mufflers intended for

protection from possible spring rain. No chance of that...with wind chill and forward momentum factored in, we were in a January-style deep freeze! That made us grateful for our Gore-Tex™ outerwear with a windstopper layer underneath, plus fully cranked hand and thumb warmers. At least it was too cold to snow...

Wanna bet? A major blizzard swept through the Baie-James Region just ahead of us, so we rode much of the distance into Chapais on fresh powder. Overnight, the storm dumped about 12 more inches, which soon started to drift. We arrived in Chibougamau the next morning by the rail-trail (Chapais to Chibougamau – 32 km), so we checked into our hotel early and headed off for a 200-kilometre day trip to Mistissini and back for lunch...and promptly dropped off the edge of the universe!

Drift Busters

Our first clue about the conditions ahead came only 14 kilometres down the trail. Abandoned rail lines can be deceiving, because the constant view from the driver's seat is two forested trail edges that merge into a white horizon, which always stays far, far away. I was leading when this perspective started to change... that white horizon appeared to be getting closer and closer, as if a huge white cloud was approaching. I blinked a couple of times, shook my head, and started to slow down, holding my arm up for the STOP signal. Suddenly, my brain made sense of what my eyes had been seeing. The entire trail width ahead was blocked, tree wall to tree wall, by a humongous drift — at least ten feet high and 20 feet across...as if a giant steam shovel had scooped up several tonnes of snow and dumped it across our path.

We broke through with our bodies first, like kids frolicking in snow, and then, after beating a narrow path, climbed over with our Ski-Doo Renegade snowmobiles leading, all the while wondering what else lay ahead...

The snow got deeper, although it was still relatively smooth, having fallen on a groomed trail. We had a blast playing in it, each breaking our own powder pathway. But some sections of the route were unprotected and open to strong crosswinds. Here, the trail surface drifted

irregularly, sometimes over five feet high for several hundred yards, and we would have to bust our way over and through each time. Mostly, it was great fun, but in an unfamiliar region with minimal trail signage, I always had that uncomfortable niggling doubt in the back of my mind, wondering about still being on the right course and what distance remained to Mistissini.

Although we had expected to arrive around noonish, by about 2 PM, we still hadn't seen our destination. Our trail had left the clearly defined railway right of way and now followed logging roads, often obliterated by snow and with more than one choice at intersections. We only managed to find the right way by following faint sled tracks where we could find them, and by feeling the hard pack of the groomed trail under us (Believe me, we soon knew when it wasn't, because our sleds would suddenly sink out of sight in deep powder!)

Snow Swimming

We spotted buildings that had to be Mistissini far ahead. Simultaneously, the trail disappeared. Dennis swung off into the powder, trying to follow what looked like an old path downhill to a nearby lake that the town was supposed to be on. About five hundred yards in, he got buried. Every one of us knew that any sled going to help would get stuck too, and with the snow more than five feet deep off trail, walking to him was out of the question. So Dennis went to Plan B...

First, he heaved his sled on to one side and scooped out the snow from under one running board so that the track could touch bottom freely. Then, he repeated



The entire trail width ahead was blocked by a humongous drift.

the process on the other side. Leaving that snow to settle a bit, he swam to the front of his sled and slithered on his belly like a seal in front of it for about 20 feet, to pack the snow down...and repeated this action to widen his freshly broken path. Next, he swam back to the front of his sled and packed the snow down under and around the belly pan. Then he sat down and rested...whew!

About half an hour later, he repeated the whole process once again, compacting the snow even more, then waiting for it to set again. Then, knowing that he had just one shot to break free without getting re-stuck, he fired up his sled, gave it constant throttle, and wiggle-wobbling his standing body from side to side, worked his way out of that morass.

The rest was easy. We found town (albeit not by any trail), got gas and a quick bite, then followed our own trail back to Chibougamau...four very satiated, but also very elated, trail riders.



Nothing beats full winter for late March riding!

The Moral of the Story

The ordeal in the snow helped make our adventure more memorable and reminded us how much we appreciate all those tabletop trails. Oh yes, these smooth corridors provided kilometre after endless kilometre of exciting snowmobiling... just what I've come to expect from winter in the Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Baie-James regions.

So what's the moral of my story? We went there in late March for our last trail ride of the season and discovered a winter without end. Yes you can count on Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Baie-James for exceptional spring riding in mid to late March...but no matter when you go, Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Baie-James are likely to deliver the very best trail riding of your entire winter!

Special Thanks to: Nicole Gaulin, Joanik Linteau and the snowmobile clubs of Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Baie-James.

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Craig Nicholson is the author of "Canada's Best Snowmobiling (To order: www.snowgoer-canada.com). — 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 www.intrepidssnowmobiler.com

WHO TO CONTACT

- Abitibi-Témiscamingue Tourism: 1-800-808-0706; www.tourisme-abitibi-temiscamingue.org
- Baie-James Tourism: 1-888-748-8140; www.tourismebaiejames.com
- Québec Tourism: 1-877-266-5687; www.bonjourquebec.com
- Québec Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (FCMQ): www.fcmq.ca; (514) 252-3076

MAPS NEEDED

- Québec Snowmobile Trails (FCMQ map)
- Abitibi-Témiscamingue Region
- Baie-James Region

OUR TOUR ITINERARY

Total distance: 2,306 kilometres.

Notes: Toll free numbers are included only when they connect directly to the hotel (as opposed to an off site reservation system). TQ = Trans Québec Trail (blue on maps); RT = Regional Trail (green on maps); LT = Local Trail (orange on maps).

DAY ONE:

Trailer to Amos – Abitibi-Témiscamingue region (drive time from Toronto: 9 hours)

Where We Stayed: Amosphere, complexe hôtelier (#18 on 2009 Abitibi-Témiscamingue region map) 1-800-567-7777 or www.amosphere.com. An exceptional family-run hotel with many extras such as heated bathroom floors and recliner lounge chairs, this full service hotel has an on site restaurant, plus bar, exercise room and two outdoor whirlpools. Ample parking for trucks & trailers, plus heated sled garage or park your sleds right outside your room. Direct trail access just north off TQ93. Fuel & convenience store about two clicks west of hotel just south of TQ93.

DAY TWO:

Amos to La Sarre (about 8 hrs.) Ride 330 km via TQ93 east to RT309 south to LT past La Motte and take RT307 south to TQ83 west to Rouyn-Noranda. Then TQ93 north to La Sarre (use Abitibi-Témiscamingue region map). Fuel Stops: Amos, Rouyn-Noranda, La Sarre. **2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$62**

Where We Stayed: Motel Villa Mon Repos (#36 on 2009 Abitibi-Témiscamingue region map) 1-888-417-3767 or www.motelvillamonrepos.qc.ca. This classy

motel offers a restaurant and bar, plus sled parking in front of your room and ample parking for trucks and trailers. Fuel and heated garage across the road. To get there by sled, follow trail signs into town, then cross main street and railway tracks and continue along the far side of the tracks for about two hundred yards, (see hotel map sign along this route) then right to next street and left a few yards to first street to the right. Proceed two blocks to hotel. Street edges were snow and ice covered.

DAY THREE:

La Sarre to Matagami (about 6 hrs.) Ride 280 km (less than shown on map) via Local Trails or RT396 north to Villebois, then RT396 north (use Abitibi-Témiscamingue or Baie-James region map). Fuel Stops: Beaucanton (Villebois station was out of fuel), Tembec, Matagami. **2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$49.66.**

Where We Stayed: Hôtel-Motel Matagami (#21 on Baie-James region map) 1-877-739-2501 or www.hotelmatagami.com. Roadside motel with restaurant and bar on site. Fuel and convenience store next door. Direct trail access from RT396. Sled parking in front of rooms.

DAY FOUR:

Matagami to Chapais (about 7 hrs.) Ride 345 km (less than shown on map) via TQ93 north (use Baie-James region map). Fuel Stops: Lebel-sur-Quévillon, Miquelon, Chapais. **2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$32.43**

Where We Stayed: Motel Le Routier (418) 745-2564. Roadside motel with restaurant and bar on site. Fuel nearby on same main street. Direct trail access by exiting TQ93 on local trail to go to east end of town. Sled parking in front of rooms.

DAY FIVE:

Chapais to Chibougamau (about 8 hrs.) Ride 250 km via TQ93 north to LT north to Mistissini and back to Chibougamau, then ride local loop around town (use Baie-James region map). Trails were covered with new snow and drifts for us, so your ride will take less time when trails are freshly groomed all the way. Fuel Stops: Chibougamau, Mistissini, Chibougamau. **2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$44.55**

Where We Stayed: Hôtel-Motel Nordic (#13 on Baie-James region map) 1-888-748-6673 or www.motelnordic.com.

Roadside motel with restaurant and bar on site. Sled parking in front of rooms. Fuel and convenience store within sight of motel. Take LT from TQ93 and follow signs.

DAY SIX:

Chibougamau to Lebel-sur-Quévillon (original destination, 270 km - about 6 hrs.). Final destination: **Barraute** (add about 3 hrs. and 120 km). Total ride: 390 km via TQ93 south (use Abitibi-Témiscamingue and Baie-James region maps). Fuel Stops: Chapais, Miquelon, Lebel-sur-Quévillon, Barraute. **2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$50.45**

Where We Stayed: Élite Motel, Barraute (819) 734-1303. Restaurant building with a suite of bedrooms in the basement, plus shared common room and bathrooms, is ideal for touring groups. Direct trail access south from TQ93. Fuel nearby.

DAY SEVEN:

Barraute to Val-d'Or (This is about 50 km as the crow flies, so we took a roundabout route for about 9 hrs.) Ride 386 km via RT313 south to LT east to TQ83 south to RT386 east to LT north to TQ83 west through Senneterre and Louvicourt past Val-d'Or to RT309 south to LT to TQ83 west to hotel. Fuel Stops: Louvicourt (twice), Val-d'Or. **2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$58.42**

Where We Stayed: Hôtel Forestel (#21 on 2009 Abitibi-Témiscamingue region map) 1-800-567-6599 or www.forestel.ca. Large, well-appointed, full service hotel with two restaurants and bar. Sled parking in front of main lobby with 24 hr. surveillance. Direct trail access off TQ83 at east end of town. Fuel closer to west end of town just off TQ83.

DAY EIGHT:

Val-d'Or to Amos (This is about 85 km as the crow flies, so we took a roundabout route for about 7.5 hrs.) Ride 325 km via RT 313 north to TQ 93 west to RT 309 south to LT to La Motte and Preissac, then RT 307 south to TQ 83 east to RT 309 north to TQ 93 west to Amos. Fuel Stops: La Motte, Landrienne. **2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$50.07**

Where We Stayed: Amosphere, complexe hôtelier.

DAY NINE:

trailer home

Tested on Tour

by Craig Nicholson



Ski-Doo Touring Accessories

Last winter, my primary sleds for trail riding were a 2008 Ski-Doo MXZ Renegade (137" track) and a 2008 GSX Limited (120" track). Both were equipped with 600 H.O. Rotax SDI engines that consistently delivered better fuel economy than any four-stroke from one gas stop to the next.

Knowing that I would likely ride these sleds for more than 10,000 kilometres in one season, I opted for a few accessory upgrades to enhance comfort, functionality and convenience. The 2009 versions of these items are available from your local Ski-Doo dealer, in the new Ski-Doo Riding Gear, Parts and Accessories catalogue, or on line at www.ski-doo.com. Check them out...they really improved my riding enjoyment!



My 2008 Ski-Doo MXZ Renegade 600 H.O. SDI



Fuel Caddy, Tunnel Bag

My Renegade's extra length provided me with greater peace of mind because it had more tunnel space to carry a fuel caddy and a tunnel bag containing emergency gear.



Woody's Studs

Studs made exclusively by Woody's for Ski-Doo sleds provided full traction underneath so that I could ride confidently and stop more easily in every surface condition. After 10,000 clicks, all studs were still present and doing their job.



Full Body Skid Plate, A-arm Protectors

This full body skid plate and these dual A-arm protectors helped reduce the chances that the underside of my sled would get damaged if I happened to hit an unexpected or hidden obstacle.



1. High Windshield
2. Mirrors
3. Dash bag,
4. Side Wind Deflectors
5. Handlebar Muffs
6. Knee Deflectors
7. Heated Handlebar Bag
8. Kneepads

I added a higher windshield with side wind deflectors and mirrors. Also, note my new kneepads and knee wind deflectors, plus these cushy handlebar muffs. I also installed a dash bag and a handlebar bag to keep often used necessities close at hand. The handlebar bag is heated so electronics such as a cell phone or GPS keep working in the cold.