

TRIPLE PLAY

EXPLORING QUÉBEC'S 'SNOWMOBILE DESTINATION'

Story and Photos by:
Craig Nicholson



There's lots to like about sledding in Québec. Arguably the birthplace of snowmobiling, La Belle Province consistently delivers a fully integrated trail system, first class trail quality, 5-star hospitality and plenty of snow. But with groomed trails in 17 different tourism regions, where do you start?

If you're an experienced touring rider looking for new adventures, a good first choice is the self-proclaimed "Snowmobile Destination". That's the umbrella under which the tourism regions of Québec City & Area, Charlevoix and Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean go to market. But is that ambitious moniker hype or reality? Is its trail system cohesive and connected? And most important, is its snow good and long lasting?

My Snow Goer Canada mission was to assess this "Snowmobile Destination"

promise and the quality of the connector trails between its three participating regions. Our crew for this tour consisted of D'Arcy Ball, Dan Carty, Glenn King, Don Webb, my wife, Marsha, and myself. We drove our Triton Trailers to stage from the Hotel Roquement in Saint-Raymond, just northwest of Québec City. From there, we would zigzag back and forth among the three regions exploring its connector trails. You may not want to duplicate our ride for your own tour, but I hope the info provided here will help you decide which trails to ride and where to stay.

TRIPLE TRIANGLE

Picture the "Snowmobile Destination" as a right-angle triangle whose base is the St. Lawrence River running from Portneuf (just west of the City of Québec), east all the way through Charlevoix country to the Saguenay River (see sketch map). The

eastside of the triangle is a line north from the confluence of the St. Lawrence and Saguenay Rivers, to the triangle's tip at Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean. The west side runs north from Saint-Raymond to Lac-Saint-Jean.

Within this triangle is a vast wilderness anchored by the eastern sections of the Laurentian Mountains. Thanks to their elevation and "Snowmobile Destination's" northerly location relative to many of its neighbours and competitors, you can typically count on good snow conditions throughout a long winter. In fact, the Monts Valins area of Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean is normally the earliest opening (often in November) and latest closing (April) sector in Québec.

WHAT EACH REGION OFFERS

Each of Québec City & Area, Charlevoix and Saguenay-Lac-Saint-

Jean are self-contained regions that boast their own well-serviced trail networks where visiting snowmobilers can discover several days of great riding. Any riders looking for a more urban and laid back riding experience should consider sticking to the St. Lawrence lowlands of Québec City & Area. Here, you have the option of visiting the attractions of La Belle Province's capital city (check out the Québec Winter Carnival each February), staying in the ice hotel or doing some skiing or snowboarding at nearby Mont Sainte-Anne.

On Day Six, which happened to be a beautiful Sunday, we rode through the northern suburbs of Québec City on Trans Québec (TQ) 3 westbound. That utility corridor is a linear parkway alive with families getting outdoors to snowmobile, ATV, cross-country ski, snowshoe, dog walk and even horseback ride. It was amazing to see so many folks side by side each enjoying winter in so many different ways!

East of Mont Sainte-Anne, your tour group can ride through Charlevoix along TQ3 parallel to the St. Lawrence and stay, as we did, at Chez Laurent at Saint-Urbain and the Hotel-Pavillons Le Petit Manoir du Casino at La Malbaie, overlooking the Casino Charlevoix. Couples that really want a 5-star getaway should try the fabulously decadent Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu as a staging hotel for



Crossing the Lake Kénogami dam on RT383 near Laterrière.

day trips on the local Charlevoix trails. Or you can visit one of Québec's remote 5-star hostels, Auberge du Ravages & Pourvoirie du Lac Moreau, which offers an authentic wilderness experience and many off-trail powder riding opportunities from early December to mid-April.

Alternatively, you can trailer directly to the well-populated Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean region with its myriad of trails surrounding the lake of the same name. Here you will discover every possible sledding opportunity, from farmland and woodland trails to powder riding in Monts Valins (check out the new Summits Circuit), plus enjoy the charm of many

towns, villages and relais' along the way. Snowmobiling around Lac Saint-Jean is a great two to four-day sojourn, depending on your time and desire to explore local trails along the way. Be sure to check out the spectacular scenic outlooks along the Saguenay Fiord at La Baie, Saint-Rose-du-Nord, Rivière-Éternité and L'Anse-Saint-Jean.

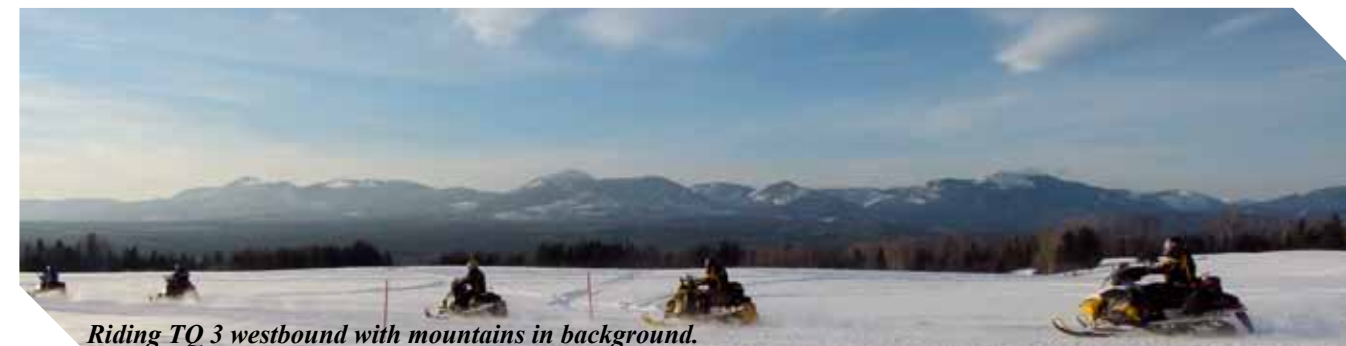
SNOWMOBILE DESTINATION

But touring snowmobilers who want to invest a week or more in some serious distance riding can experience another payoff of the "Snowmobile Destination" – riding back and forth among the three regions using the north-south connecting trails as we did. There are four of these and from west to east they are: TQ73/Regional Trail (RT) 355; TQ23; TQ83; and RT383. They offer diverse riding experiences and connect various sections of TQ3 (running parallel to the St. Lawrence) to different sectors of Saguenay-Lac-Saint-Jean.

For the most part, each trail is a remote wilderness corridor with limited but adequate services en route so that gas is not an issue, especially for the new generation of fuel-efficient engines such as the Ski-Doo E-TEC's and 4-TEC's we rode. These interior trails are not for the inexperienced, the faint of heart, those whose comfort zone is well-travelled trails or who have sleds of questionable



Most Québec trail intersections have major signboards with destinations and distances.



Riding TQ 3 westbound with mountains in background.

reliability or restricted fuel range. For security, I would also recommend groups of four or more riders who carry a SPOT Satellite GPS Messenger unit just in case anything goes awry (No cell service is available in many places). Here's what we thought about each trail...

Trans Québec 73/Regional Trail 355 (We rode these trails northbound):

TQ73 out of Saint-Raymond is a well-maintained rail-trail where we made good time on the 124 kilometres to the junction of RT355. From here, it's about 210 kilometres to the Chalets et Spa Lac Saint-Jean at Chambord where we stayed that night. The first part of RT355 is kind of squirrely and overall, it was our least favourite section of the four trails. There are four fuel stops along the way (see Tour Itinerary, Day Two).

Trans Québec 23 (We rode this trail northbound): Also accessed from Saint-Raymond, TQ23 runs 136 kilometres to the first gas (and food) at L'Étape, then

about 60 clicks to gas at Rélais Mont-Apica and 65 more to our overnight at Chalets Dubuc on Lac Kenogami. This wider than normal trail is like riding a two-lane highway that sweeps over hill and dale and around predictable corners for a more technical ride than TQ83 (below). The scenery was okay, but was often blocked by bush or marred by swathes of clear-cut logging. We met two Americans who had just completed this length of trail south into Saint-Raymond and raved that "it was the best single day of riding they'd ever had!"

Trans Québec 83 (We rode this trail southbound): The first 90 kilometres or so from Chambord were pretty normal – regular width trails through the bush, then staked trails through farmland. The next 75 included a wider logging road that was easy and fun to navigate. The last 80 kilometres or so going south to TQ3 was like a four-lane highway and hands down the most scenic on our tour. This part of TQ83 is as good or better than TQ23 in terms of its overall rideability, but the added eye-candy of sweeping vistas, white capped mountains, meandering valleys and unrestricted views made this section number one in our minds. This was our best single day of riding. Fuel at La Baie & Saint-Félix-d'Otis.

Regional Trail 383 (We rode this trail southbound): The first 77 kilometres from Laterrière was a joyride on an old logging road with many easy corners and gentle hills. Fuel at Ferland. After RT383 swings north a bit to parallel the Saguenay River, it's about 90 clicks of roller coaster trail with tighter turns and

steep hills that make for a challenging and invigorating ride. This last section of the trail runs by three towns where fuel is available: Rivière-Éternité, L'Anse-Saint-Jean & Petit-Saguenay.

Whichever of these connector routes you may choose, you will have a great sledding adventure. You'll be on your own for many hours because the probability of meeting other sleds is low. Like us, you'll feel the immensity of the wilderness and the pleasure of being alone with Mother Nature. And like us, you'll also marvel at how you can ride so many hours in the backcountry without seeing any tracks, much less wildlife!

Each member of our crew thoroughly enjoyed this ride, and each night, we went to bed weary but more than eager to ride again. The "Snowmobile Destination" certainly lived up to its promise and now ranks high in our growing list for return visits.

Special thanks to Nancy Donnelly, Manon Hamel, Richard Séguin and Dion Moto (Saint-Raymond) for assistance with this tour. Craig's tours are made possible by BRP (Ski-Doo), Gateway Powersports, FXR Racing, Murphy Insurance, Launch Helmet Cams, Triton Trailers, Woody's and York Fire & Casualty.

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 Snowmobile Television. For more info, click www.intrepidsnowmobiler.com



GO LEGAL

Being a visitor is no excuse for ignorance of the law. Here's how to ride legally in Québec:

- Have a valid FCMQ Trail Permit (must be placed on the left side of your hood)
- Carry the permit slips (to show proof of purchase and insurance), plus sled registration and driver's licence
- Make sure your sled has this mandatory equipment: left side mirror (must be rigidly mounted to sled), speedometer, and original exhaust
- Always wear an approved helmet
- Obey the posted speed limits (70 km/h on most trails, 30 or 50 km/h in residential areas)

PLAN YOUR TOUR

Who To Contact

- The Snowmobile Destination: www.snowmobiledestination.com (destinationmotoneige.com) this is an excellent tour-planning site complete with tools for routing, distances and lodgings.
 - o Charlevoix - 1-866-667-2276
 - o Québec City & Region - 1-877-783-1608
 - o Saguenay Lac-Saint-Jean - 1-877-253-8387

Maps Needed

- Charlevoix
- Québec City & Region
- Saguenay Lac-Saint-Jean
- FCMQ Provincial Trail Guide

Our Tour Itinerary

- 1,725 kilometres in 5.5 days of riding

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. TQ = Trans Québec; RT = Regional Trail; LT = Local Trail 3.
3. Ski-Doo sleds on this tour in order of fuel economy: 1 MXZ TNT 600 ACE (38% better than 600 ETEC); 3 MXZ 600 ETEC (30% better than 4-TEC); 1 GSX SE 1200 4-TEC; 1 MXZ 800R.

DAY ONE

Trailer to Saint-Raymond (drive time from Greater Toronto Area: approx. 8 hours.)

Where To Stay: Hotel Roquemont 1.877.337.6734; www.roquemont.com. (#6 on 2012 Québec Region map – direct trail access at junction of TQ23 & TQ73.) An excellent location for staging a tour, this 28-room hotel is easy to find, has a massive parking lot and sleds can be parked outside the door of ground floor rooms. With restaurant and pub on site, plus fuel and an Arctic Cat/Yamaha dealer next door (Ski-Doo dealer located just minutes down the trail), the Roquemont really caters to snowmobilers.

DAY TWO

Saint-Raymond (Québec City & Region) to Chambord (Saguenay Lac-Saint-Jean). 340 km via TQ73 west/RT355 north/TQ83 north. Fuel: Rivière-à-Pierre; Lac-Edouard (Pouvoirie Le Goéland); Lac-Bouchette; Chambord. Fuel & Lunch: Auberge les Trappeurs on TQ73.

Where To Stay: Chalets et Spa Lac Saint-Jean 1.877.342.7933; www.chaletsetspa.com. (#1 on 2012 Saguenay Lac-Saint-Jean map – direct trail access from local trail off TQ83). Located on the shore of Lac-Saint-Jean on the north side of Chambord, this new facility features cathedral ceiling chalets with full kitchen facilities, plus a truly decadent outdoor spa replete with large hot pool, multiple saunas, a polar dip and many extras. No restaurant on site, but you can order refreshments, a fondue dinner and continental breakfast when you make your advance reservation. No phone in rooms. Fuel in town. Be sure to book a massage too!

DAY THREE

Chambord to Saint-Urbain (Charlevoix). 328 km via TQ83 east/RT383 east/TQ83 east/TQ3 south. Fuel: Lac Kenogami; Ferland; Saint-Urbain. Lunch: Relais La Bouleauinière on RT 383.

Where To Stay: Maison Chez Laurent 1-888-437-3895; www.maisonchezlaurent.com (#19 on 2012 Charlevoix map – take LT off TQ3). This roadside motel is ideally situated on Highway 138 with direct trail access from TQ3. Restaurant & variety store on site, with fuel across the road. No phone in room; cell service spotty due to local terrain. Sled parking in front of rooms.

DAY FOUR

Saint-Urbain to Lac Kenogami (Saguenay Lac-Saint-Jean). 336 km via TQ3 south/LT west (signed for L'Étape)/RT369 north/TQ23 north/RT368 north/RT383 west. Fuel & Lunch: L'Étape.

Where To Stay: Chalets Dubuc 418.678.3000; www.chaletcampingdubuc.com Located at the eastern tip of Lac Kenogami

directly on RT383 (huge RV park on site) near the intersection with RT368, this facility consists of a main lodge with multiple rooms and a separate chalet and the trail literally goes right past the back door. Pub on site and meals can be arranged with advance reservations. No phone in room. Fuel in nearby Laterrière on RT368 north.

DAY FIVE

Lac Kenogami to La Malbaie (Charlevoix). 326 km via RT383 east/RT 368 north/TQ83 east/RT383 east/TQ3 south/RT 378 south/LT 124. Fuel: Laterrière; Petit Saguenay; Clermont (LT 64). Lunch: Petit Saguenay.

Where To Stay: Le Petit Manoir du Casino 1 800 618-2112; www.petitmanoirducasino.ca (#3 on 2012 Charlevoix map). Accessed via LT 124, this premier facility consists of three separate, multi-story buildings (the main hotel and two pavilions) that overlook the Casino de Charlevoix and the St. Lawrence River. Ask for a room in the pavilion closest to sled parking. Free shuttle available to on-site restaurant. Pool, hot tub and sauna at main hotel building. Advise avoiding weekends when this place is packed!

DAY SIX

La Malbaie to Portneuf (Québec City & Region). 325 km via LT124/RT378 south/RT377 north/TQ3 south/TQ73 north/RT365 south/RT302 west. Fuel: Saint Urbain; Québec City; Portneuf. Lunch: Québec City.

Where To Stay: Restaurant Motel Le Chavigny 1 877-286-4959; www.lechavigny.ca (#3 on 2012 Québec Region map). Located with direct trail access at Highway 40 exit 354, this hotel has a 24-hour on-site restaurant and an adjacent gas station/convenience store. Sled parking in front of ground floor rooms.

DAY SEVEN

Portneuf to Saint-Raymond. 70 km by direct route (RT302 north/ TQ 3 east/ TQ 23 north) or ride a longer loop. Trailer home.