



EARLY and LATE

Sledding Saguenay's Monts Valin Region

Story and Photos
by Craig Nicholson



Sometimes as early as November, snowmobilers begin flocking to Monts Valin. Often, they continue riding there when everything else is closed in April or later. Typically, Monts Valin provides a reliable and consistent, six-month sledding season, among the very best in eastern North America. As we found out that first week of January, this is why Monts Valin has become such a popular first, last and in-between riding destination.

Monts Valin is located in the Saguenay-Lac-St-Jean Region of Quebec. It's an easy three-hour drive north of The City of Quebec on the newly four-lane Highway 175. From the major population centres of the Saguenay heartland, Dan Carty, Darren Clissold, Glenn King, Don Webb and I towed our Triton trailers to the north side of the Saguenay Fiord. The elevation almost immediately began climbing to our staging destination, l'Auberge Carcajou near Saint-David-de-Falardeau.

"Climbing" is the operative word. Many parts of Monts Valin range up to and over 900 metres above sea level. That elevation, along with Saguenay's northerly geographic location, generates the colossal amounts of snow that make Monts Valin such a snowmobiler's paradise. That term, "Snowmobiler's Paradise", applies to the entire Saguenay Region, but the south side of the Fiord is lower ground that is usually later opening and earlier closer than Monts Valin itself. The altitude on Monts Valin also accounts for one of the area's new attractions for snowmobilers – the Summits Circuit.

There are five of them: Pic du Mont Victor-Tremblay (780 m), Pic du lac du Syndicat (800 m), Pic du lac Boivin (900 m), Pic du Le Dos de Cheval (900 m) and Pic des Monts Sainte-Marguerite (920 m). Each summit is clearly marked on the Saguenay trail map and easily accessible by snowmobile from a main trail, with a parking place at the top for sightseeing.

Part of our mission was to do the five summits, and we did – except that as the luck of the draw would have it on that day, the very low clouds that were delivering fresh snow also socked in the summits obscuring all the spectacular views. Oh well, that's something to go back for, and forced to choose, I'll take snow over sights any time!

In a balmy -22° C, we devoted our first day of riding to exploring Monts Valin Est (East). Accessed by Trans Quebec Trail 93, which runs all the way east to Tadoussac on the St. Lawrence River, Monts Valin Est also includes Parc National des Monts-Valin, a no-go sector for sleds. But that's okay, because there is plenty of other territory to ride...

The main services (and fuel) of Monts Valin Est are located along TQ 93 – Passion Quebec at the Valinquet ski hill, plus the more remote Relais Auberge 31 and Relais La Chapelle. But there's also an extensive network of local club trails to explore.





Winter wonderland on top of the Summits.

Monts Valin has countless trails like this.

Two tips for riding this wilderness area of Monts Valin: one, have cash on hand to pay at any remote relais; and two, navigation is easier using the Club de motoneige Caribou-Consrats trail map, available at most lodgings, and at restaurants and relais' as a placemat. Unlike the main 2012 Saguenay trail map, this one shows the local trails *and their trail numbers*. These correspond with the actual numbers you will see on trail signs.

On Days One and Six, we rode all of TQ 93. Despite the constant traffic from being the main artery, continual grooming always kept it in good shape. TQ 93 provides a phenomenal ride that really opens up to some truly panoramic views (see the opening spread of this article), especially between Relais La Chapelle and Local Trail 252. TQ 93 was also the scene of our only tour setback...

We pulled into Relais La Chapelle about 11 AM on Day One. Suddenly, we heard a

bang from Darren's sled. Part of the clutch had popped off and his machine wasn't repairable or rideable. Glenn hooked up to tow Darren and his sled 44 clicks west back to Relais Passion Quebec, located only a half-hour ride from our base at Auberge Carcajou. Meanwhile, Don, Dan and I headed east on TQ 93 to continue our sojourn another 35 kilometres or so to the farthest summit, Pic des Monts Sainte-Marguerite.

Over two hours later, we headed back west on TQ 93, fully expecting Glenn and Darren to be loading up far to the west by then. So imagine my surprise when I caught up to them on the trail just five clicks east of Relais La Chapelle, that is to say on the wrong side from where they had started!

Apparently, they'd taken a incorrect turn and towed almost 80 kilometres the wrong way before realizing their mistake. Only now at 2 PM, were they headed in the right

direction. Worse, Darren's track had also frozen up, making it impossible to tow the sled any more. Fortunately, a huge groomer arrived heading to La Chapelle, so we heaved the dead sled onto its drag and got it to La Chapelle by 3 PM.

Time for Plan B. Darren would stay at La Chapelle with his sled, while the rest of us snowmobiled west back to Carcajou. Then Dan, Don and Glenn would trailer by road to La Chapelle to make the pick up. They departed Carcajou at 6:30 PM, but what should have been a three-hour round road trip turned into a five-hour odyssey.

It took them over two hours to find Relais La Chapelle in the dark, so it was 11:30 that night when they finally made it back to Carcajou. However, this whole episode ended positively next morning when the local Ski-Doo dealer, Équipements Villeneuve, quickly fixed Darren's sled and got us riding again by 11 AM. Moral of the story: make sure everyone has very good directions before they start towing!

Throughout this tour, trails were 75% good to great, 20% choppy and 5% rough. Later in the season, the mix would be closer to 90% great, but heavier than usual traffic (this first week of January was still school holiday break) made it more difficult to maintain an smooth early season surface when the base was not yet solidly packed and frozen hard.

And all the mountain sleds with their deep lug paddle tracks didn't help trail conditions either. Their riders were at Monts Valin to take advantage of

exceptional off trail, powder riding and hill climbing opportunities. In fact, so prevalent were these long-track, big-paddle sleds that hardly any snow was untracked as riders played on the multitude of snow-laden hills, bowls and meadows. I haven't seen so many mountain sleds and riders geared up for powder riding in one place since my last visit to Revelstoke, BC! So if you are into or want to try off-trail riding, Monts Valin is an unbeatable place to visit for that too.

But our forte is trails and we found some mighty good ones. On Day Four, we rode west from our next lodgings at Brise du Lac Tchitogama on a beautiful Local Trail through the woods to Saint-Ludger-de-Milot. Then we hooked up to TQ 93 west and then Regional Trail 367 east. This area is less rugged. Closer to Lac-St-Jean, the terrain flattens out to rolling farmland. These trails were in primo shape and provided us with one of those fantastic days of riding that reconfirms why we love snowmobiling. For mile-wide smiles, I particularly recommend the RT 367/TQ 93 combo from Relais Vauvert to Alma and RT 367 along the Peribonka River! And that's not all...

The trails we rode on Day Five were equally good. At -28°C, we departed Brise du Lac Tchitogama northbound on LT 484, an old logging road, and were quickly back in the mountains. We followed it through Monts Valins Ouest (West) to Relais Onatchiway and then continued onwards on LT's 267 & 264 south to RT 328 to our next stay-over at Pourvoirie Cap

au Leste near Sainte-Rose-du-Nord. All of these trails delivered exceptional riding and ear to ear grins. So much so that on Day Six, we repeated most of these trail again, plus our favourite parts of TQ 93. By the way, another highly recommended trail is LT 252 in Monts Valin Est.

So what's the bottom line for you? Monts Valin is a must-visit destination any time. Early in the season, the provisos are: one, that the trails won't be as hard packed and resilient as they are later. Two, daylight is shorter in December and January, so your riding days won't be as long as in March or April. With the exception of that repair day, we rode from 9 AM and tried to be in by 4 PM, when the sun starts to set (Being farther north, it goes down fast, getting pretty dark by 4:30.) This limits the distances you can comfortably travel each day if you prefer not to ride after dark in unfamiliar places as we do.

Proviso three is that you have to keep an eye on the fuel gauge. While gas is available and marked on the Saguenay Region trail map, you don't want to miss a fill up, especially heading onto the more remote trails in Monts Valin. Four, as visitors, I would recommend riding in a minimum group size of four, as a safety net for breakdowns or getting stuck. And finally, I didn't find the trail signage to be especially good, but by consulting my map frequently and stopping to check carefully at each intersection, we made very few wrong turns and generally knew where we were and wanted to go.

OTHER RIDING OPTIONS

Onatchiway Trails: Located north of Monts Valin and accessed from Relais Onatchiway, the independent Le Club Motoneige de Onatchiway operates 200 kilometres of private trails. Entering these trails requires a separate trail pass (FCMQ permit not valid there), purchasable at the Relais for \$25 for one day or \$50 for three (2012 prices). Adding these trails to your early or late Monts Valin visit can extend your riding opportunities by a day or two.

Guided Off Trail: Judging by the multitude of tracks, there are countless off-trail riding opportunities at Monts Valin. But I would strongly recommend the assistance of a guide or at least a long track sled to attempt this. You can easily hire a guide and rent a sled for a day or two if you want to add powder riding and back country adventure to your Monts Valin experience. Contact Denis Gagnon at **Évasion Sport, (418) 678-2481 or www.evasion-sport.com.**

Yes, Monts Valin really shines early and late when most everything else is closed. There are three to five good days of riding available without much repetition. In season, when the whole Saguenay Region is open, you'll need as many more days to explore their entire 3,300-kilometres of snowmobile trails. No wonder so many riders are hooked on Monts Valin, jewel of the Saguenay Region!

Note to reader: *Unlike many of my other tour articles, this one names specific places and trails, so following along on a Saguenay trail map will be helpful if you choose to do this tour.*

Special thanks to Nancy Donnelly for assistance with this tour. Craig's tours are made possible by BRP (Ski-Doo), Gateway Powersports, FXR Racing, Murphy Insurance, Launch Heibnet Cams, Triton Trailers, Woody's and Unica Insurance.

Craig Nicholson is the author of "Canada's Best Snowmobiling — Your Ultimate Ride Guide". His snowmobile writing also appears in many newspapers, magazines and websites. He also hosts "The Intrepid Snowmobiler on Radio" and appears on Snowmobile Television. For more info, visit www.intrepidssnowmobiler.com



Relais La Chapelle where Darren waited for pick up

Who To Contact

- Tourisme Saguenay–Lac-St-Jean - www.snowmobilersparadise.com or 1-877-253-8387
- Tourisme Quebec – www.bonjourquebec.com or 1-877-266-5687
- FCMQ (for maps, permits and trail info) – www.fcmq.qc.ca

Maps Needed

- Saguenay–Lac-St-Jean
- Club de motoneige Caribou-Conscrits

Our Tour Itinerary

1,115 kilometres in 5 days of riding

Notes

1. TQ = Trans Quebec; RT = Regional Trail; LT = Local Trail 3.

DAY ONE

Trailer to Saint-David-de-Falardeau (drive time from Greater Toronto Area: approx. 12 hours)

Where To Stay: Auberge Carcajou (418) 673-1991 or aubergecarcajou.com. Your hosts, Lise, Marc André and Émy, provide exceptional hospitality at their Quebec-style inn with well-appointed rooms and indoor hot tub, on site restaurant with gourmet meals & downstairs bar. Ample space for trucks & trailers. Direct trail access off RT 328. Fuel at Saint-David to the west or Passion Quebec east on TQ 93.



Auberge Carcajou

DAY TWO

Ride Monts Valins Est. 250 km via RT 328 east/TQ 93 east as far as Pic des Monts Sainte-Marguerite (one of 5 summits). Fuel: Relais Passion Quebec, Relais La Chappelle. Lunch: Relais La Chappelle.

Where To Stay: Auberge Carcajou (418) 673-1991 or aubergecarcajou.com.

DAY THREE

Ride from Auberge Carcajou to Lamarche. 177 km via RT 328 west/RT 367 west, then local loop RT 367 west along Péribonka River and local trails to Bégin and Lamarche. Fuel: Lamarche. Lunch: Relais Scoobyraid (excellent sugar pie and carrot cake!)

Where To Stay: Brise du Lac Tchitogama (418) 481-1644 or www.brisedulac.com. An exceptional B&B where Reynald and Nicole Dupont welcome sledders to a private and separate part of their large house with three bedrooms, its own kitchen, a great indoor hot tub and a large dry room with heated floors to hang all your gear. Huge breakfast included and advance arrangements can be made for home-cooked dinners. Sled parking in front and fuel nearby in Larmarche.

DAY FOUR

Ride from loop from Brise du Lac Tchitogama. 268 km via RT 367 west/LT to Saint-Ludger-de-Milot/TQ 93 west/ RT 367 east/TQ 93 east/RT



Brise du Lac Tchitogama

367 north. Fuel: Sainte-Jeanne-d'Arc, Lamarche. Lunch: Relais Vauvert.

Where To Stay: Brise du Lac Tchitogama (418) 481-1644 or www.brisedulac.com.

DAY FIVE

Ride from Lamarche to Sainte-Rose-du-Nord. 210 km via RT 367 west/LT 484 north/LT 477 east/LT 267 east/TQ 93 west/LT 264 south/RT 328 east. Fuel: Relais Onatchiway, Relais Restaurant La Jonction. Lunch: Relais Onatchiway.

Where To Stay: Pourvoirie Cap au Leste (418) 675-2000 or www.capauleste.com. A central dining room, bar and games room serves guest who stay in secluded, cozy chalets with multiple bedrooms and large living areas that overlook the mighty Saguenay Fiord. Sled parking in front of chalets. Fuel at Relais Restaurant La Jonction on RT 328 before you arrive at lodgings.

DAY SIX

Ride from Cap au Leste to Auberge Carcajou. 210 km via RT 328 west/LT264 north/ LT 262 east/ TQ 93 east/LT 251 north/ LT 252/TQ 93 west/LT 267 north/LT 472 west/LT 476 south/RT 328 east.

Where To Stay: Auberge Carcajou (418) 673-1991 or aubergecarcajou.com.

DAY SEVEN

Trailer home.



Pourvoirie Cap au Leste



**Tested on Tour
FUEL CARRIERS**

More fuel-efficient 4-stroke and 2-stroke engines have improved gas range and lowered operating costs. But even as the fuel economy of our sleds improves, in many regions it's getting more difficult to find gas. Certainly, mountain and other off-trail riders can't head out without enough gas to play and make it back okay. And the day may even be fast approaching when long distance trail riders have to carry extra gas just to be safe. That's why I decided to try out two systems for transporting spare fuel...

Port Tack Racks

This powder-coated aluminium rack is lightweight, corrosion resistant and designed to fit on the back of most makes and models. I had one on a long track sled and another on a short track. They were easy to install, didn't interfere with the sled, and are rock solid once in place. Look great too. For most sledding use, a Port Tack Rack comes in two sizes. Standard (\$199) holds up to two 19-litre jerry cans standing upright, while the Compact (\$179) fits either one 19-litre or two 9.4-litre ones (There is also a larger utility size rack available.)

I travelled 3,000 kilometres with full jerry cans and never lost a drop or a can thanks to how snugly Port Tack Racks hold them in place – and to their unique adjustable strap system.

Made of rugged webbing and a heavy-duty composite, the ends of this easy but strong fastener ratchet tight so that nothing moves until you want it to. Depending on how much fuel you choose to carry, there's enough space for other gear too. When not carrying fuel, Port Tack Racks is ideal for holding a small bag of necessities. Check out Port Tack Racks at: www.portackracks.com.



Port Tack Racks

Powder Keg, LLC

Made to fit on Arctic Cat, Polaris and Ski-Doo snowmobiles, a Powder Keg Combo PAK provides both fuel and gear storage on the back of your sled at a cost ranging from \$149 for one to \$385 for a Combo PAK. A fuel keg, constructed of a heavy duty, black composite material and holding between 10 and 12 litres, lies flat in the top of the sled tunnel. Depending on your model, you maybe able to piggyback another fuel keg above that. Either way, you can top it off with a



Powder Keg, LLC

storage keg that will keep your contents secure and dry all day.

These various "kegs" are moulded to fit your sled and each other as one integrated, unobtrusive and streamlined-looking package. Best of all, each keg is fastened in place and to each other with four stainless draw latches and a unique swivel locking system. Again, I rode umpteen kilometres in all kinds of trail conditions and nothing ever came loose or fell off.

Initially, I had a little difficulty removing the cap of my fuel keg, but that's probably a good thing since it lies on its side all the time and never leaked. Check out Powder Keg LLC at: powderkegllc.com.

Both systems are excellent choices depending on your usage. Port Tack Racks can carry more fuel, while Powder Keg has a more integrated look on a sled. Mountain and off-trail riders may go for the most fuel, while trail riders may opt for a little less, with protected storage and a lower profile. If you're getting concerned about where the next gas is and want to carry extra with you securely, you can't go wrong either way.



Text | Craig Nicholson