

Tickle Your Fancy

Worry-Free Sledding in Quebec's Bas-Saint-Laurent and Gaspésie



Over the years, I've visited many different snowmobiling destinations. It's hard to surprise me anymore. But the Bas-Saint-Laurent and western Gaspésie regions of Quebec certainly tickled my fancy last winter. We snowmobiled over 1,700 kilometres on terrific trails. They took us from ice riding on the mighty St. Lawrence River to breathtaking peaks in the high backcountry. Our Snow Goer Crew - Don Webb, Craig Irwin, Johnny Biasi, Jim Heintzman, plus Marsha and I - agreed that every rider should experience this appealing, accessible and oft-overlooked snowmobiling destination.

Where It's At

Translated as "below St. Lawrence", Bas-Saint-Laurent is located on the south side of that river. Rivière-du-

*Story and Photos By Craig Nicholson,
The Intrepid Snowmobiler*



Loup, Rimouski and Mont-Joli are its major shoreline towns. As indicated on the accompanying sketch map, Bas-Saint-Laurent extends south to New Brunswick and also abuts the State of Maine. It's sandwiched between the adjacent Quebec regions of Chaudière-Appalaches to the west and Gaspésie to the east. Like these neighbours, Bas-Saint-Laurent comprises flat farmland along the St. Lawrence shore. In the interior, farms are characterized by rolling hills where the high

country is part of the Appalachian Mountain range.

The Bas-Saint-Laurent and western Gaspésie regions really have their snowmobiling act together. The trails are well groomed and uncrowded. Accessible lodgings, restaurants and gas stations are plentiful enough for worry-free riding. Best of all, the regions can usually count on abundant snowfall throughout the winter. But pick your day to ride along St. Lawrence shore because prevailing winds can sometimes leave these exposed trails drifted over or with skimpy snow.

About Our Tour

For this tour, we rode three days in the Bas-Saint-Laurent and three more in western Gaspésie. Both are part of the

larger tourism region known as Le Québec Maritime. Most snowmobilers have heard of Gaspésie. Many have made the popular trek to ride around its famous peninsula, but the name Bas-Saint-Laurent may not be as familiar. Yet when riders start their Gaspésie tours at Rivière-du-Loup, they're actually in Bas-Saint-Laurent. And that's where we stayed for three nights, staging out of the very snowmobile-friendly Hotel Universel. But instead of deadheading east on Trans Québec 5 for Gaspésie, we had other explorations in mind...

Three Loops

I'd noticed previously that the Bas-Saint-Laurent snowmobile trail map shows three loops anchored by Rivière-du-Loup – Circuit du Kamouraska (224 km), Circuit du Témiscouata (267 km) and Circuit Monts-Notre-



Dame (427). Our plan was to do the first two as day rides out of the Hotel Universel. Then we would ride the Circuit Monts-Notre-Dame as part of a four-day saddlebag ride. We would extend this loop by swinging into western Gaspésie and south almost to New Brunswick.

You'll notice that our day ride distances for the Circuit du Kamouraska (300 km) and the Circuit du Témiscouata (330 km) are higher than those listed above as shown on their map, for reasons explained below. Interestingly, each loop is highlighted on their

map face. But there are no signs for any of the loops on the trails. Instead, we found our way around by trail number signs. In case you're wondering, many of the trails we rode on this tour were old logging roads or utility corridors, where we well and truly tested Québec's 70-kph speed limit.

Circuit du Kamouraska: The Circuit du Kamouraska runs west from Rivière-du-Loup on Trans Québec 5. We rode this loop counter-clockwise. Along the way, we side-tripped on Regional Trail 559. Here, we discovered two scenic outlooks with views of the St. Lawrence lowlands and the river itself. At the west end of the Circuit as highlighted on the map, we journeyed farther west to circle back via Trans Québec 50 and 35. This detour ex-

Mountain lookout tower near Saint-Irene.





tended the length of our trip by an extra 66 kilometres, which better suited our riding pace.

You can extend your Circuit du Kamouraska ride even more by using Regional Trail 557. But watch your gas, because stations along this south side of the Circuit are few and far between. The return trail, Trans Quebec 35, is also known as "Le Monk". It's an aban-

doned rail line, so we made really good time heading back towards Rivière-du-Loup and the Hotel Universel's hot tub.

Circuit du Témiscouata: Trans Quebec 85 runs on an abandoned rail line. It goes south from Rivière-du-Loup 150 kilometres to Edmunston, New Brunswick. It was also the trail access

for our second day-trip to the Circuit du Témiscouata, so called because it circumnavigates a 45-kilometre long lake by the same name. At the north end of this loop, there are several trail options for extending your riding distance. This is convenient if you ride the Circuit du Témiscouata counter-clock-

Windmills along the St. Lawrence.





Above: Back country trail through the hills above Rivière-du-Loup.



Logging road trail in the snowy high country.

wise as we did. Doing so delays the choice of adding extra distance or not into the afternoon, when you have a better sense of remaining time and energy level. Just remember that the Circuit du Témiscouata starts about 30 kilometres south of Rivière-du-Loup, so that the 60 clicks to and from Rivière-du-Loup (2 X 30 km) isn't in-

cluded in the 267-kilometre loop total shown on the map. That's why our ride came out to 332 km without extending the loop anymore. The ride back to Rivière-du-Loup and the Hotel Universel is on that same Trans Quebec 85 rail line, making for a quick and easy return.

Circuit Monts-Notre-Dame and Beyond: With two day trips under our belts, saddle bagging was next. After stopping at a stellar lookout over Rivière-du-Loup and the St. Lawrence, accessed via a local trail off of Trans Quebec 85, we caught Regional Trail 567 eastbound. This route led us down to the St. Lawrence River. Along its frozen shore we passed the Village of L'Isle Verte, scene of a deadly nursing home fire that made the news last year. From there, we swung south, upwards into the highlands on Regional Trail 571 to ride part of the Circuit Monts-Notre-Dame. Then we headed toward Rimouski, where another panoramic view of the St. Lawrence awaited, before crossing into the western side of the Gaspésie Region.

Into Western Gaspésie

That night we stayed at Domaine Valga on Regional Trail 579. This north-south trail is officially the eastern most route and turnaround point for those doing the Circuit Monts-Notre-Dame. However, our plan was to snowmobile an extended southern loop into western Gaspésie. We wanted to ride through the beautiful Matapédia Val-



Panoramic view of Rimouski and the St. Lawrence.

ley to the region's most southerly town of Pointe-à-la-Croix and our lodgings at the Restaurant-Motel Interprovincial. When doing this western Gaspésie ride, it's an absolute must to take Regional Trail 579 south from Domaine Valga to 587n and 587s. These stellar trails provide some incredibly breathtaking views. We checked out the mountain windmills and lookout tower near Saint-Irene. The overlook of the Restigouche River above Pointe-à-la-Croix, with Campbellton, NB spread in the background was also pretty awesome.

Our last two days, we rode Trans Quebec 5, familiar to many as the main trail around the Gaspé Peninsula. First we travelled north to Matane and the recently renovated Hotel Riotel. Here, gale force winds off the St. Lawrence treated us like punching bags and froze our butts getting to the out-

door hot tub – brrrr! On our final riding day, we rode west on Trans Quebec 5 on lots more hydro corridors and logging roads. We also crossed several major rivers, some by bridge and some by ice, before returning to our Hotel Universel home-away-from-home in Rivière-du-Loup.

Only after completing this tour did I realized how relaxing it had been. Even on the longer distance days, the sledding was easy and comfortable. I was quickly acclimatized into sitting back and watching the changing scenery. No concerns about trail quality, finding gas or which way to go. We just rolled on the kilometres, enjoying the variety of terrain, and looking forward to some of La Belle Province's finest meals and lodgings every night. No surprises. No hassles. Isn't that what a sledding vacation's supposed to be all about? So tickle your fancy this

winter by visiting Bas-Saint-Laurent and western Gaspésie...

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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



Tour Info & Itinerary

Who To Contact

Tourisme Quebec Maritime -
www.quebecmaritime.ca
Tourisme Quebec -
www.bonjourquebec.com
FCMQ (for permits and trail info) -
www.fcmq.qc.ca

Maps Needed

Bas-Saint-Laurent: Days 2, 3 and part of 4 (morning) and 7 (afternoon).

Gaspésie: Days 4 (afternoon), 5, 6 and 7 (morning)

Our Tour Itinerary

- 1,710 kilometres in 6 days of riding

Notes

TQ = Trans Quebec; RT = Regional Trail;
LT = Local Trail

DAY ONE: Trailer 920 km from Toronto to Rivière-du-Loup (drive time from Greater Toronto Area: about 11 hours)

Where To Stay: Hotel Universel -



www.hoteluniverselrdl.com/index_en.php or (418) 862-9520 (#23 on 2015 Bas-Saint-Laurent Trail Map). For touring riders heading east, the Hotel Universel is the best staging location on the south shore of the St. Lawrence River. Located on Highway 20 at Exit 503 and right on Regional Trail 526, it offers truck & trailer parking in a secure compound, as well as secure outdoor sled parking and indoor (heated) sled garages - and a gas station/convenience store next door. Very snowmobile-friendly, the Hotel Universel has a scrumptious on site restaurant and cozy bar, an indoor pool and hot tub, plus a new hotel wing with world-class rooms, including a new spa & health club.

DAY TWO: Ride 300 km day trip from Rivière-du-Loup and back on Kamouraska Loop via RT526, TQ85, TQ5, RT553, TQ35, RT526, TQ85, RT544, RT565, TQ5, TQ85,

RT526. **Fuel:** Saint-Bruno, Mont Carmel, Rivière-du-Loup. **Lunch:** Clubhouse at junction of TQ35 and RT526.

Where To Stay: Hotel Universel

DAY THREE: Ride 332 km day trip from Rivière-du-Loup and back on Témiscouata Loop via RT526, TQ85, RT544, TQ35, RT548, TQ35, RT569, RT548, TQ85, RT526. **Fuel:** Cabano, Squatec, Rivière-du-Loup.

Lunch: Squatec

Where To Stay: Hotel Universel

DAY FOUR: Ride 277 km on south trails of Monts-Notre-Dame Loop from Rivière-du-Loup to Saint-Gabriel de Rimouski via RT526, TQ85, RT567, TQ5, RT571, RT548, RT546, TQ5, RT578, RT579.

Fuel & Lunch: Squatec.

Where To Stay: Domaine Valga -



www.domainevalga.com or (418) 739-4200 (#16 on 2015 Bas-Saint-Laurent Trail Map). The Domaine Valga is an authentic Quebec log chalet with nine guest rooms, some with private bathrooms. Easy to find off Regional Trail 579 (about mid-way between Rimouski and Mont Joli) the atmosphere is casual and the meals home-cooked (go on-line to make your dinner choice when you make reservations). Fuel in Les Hauteurs about 5 klicks south.

DAY FIVE: Ride 256 km from Saint-Gabriel de Rimouski to Point-à-la-Croix via RT579, RT587n, TQ5, TQ587s, TQ5. **Fuel:** Les Hauteurs, Albertville, Saint-Francois-d'Assise, Point-à-la-Croix. **Lunch:** Albertville **Where To Stay:** Restaurant-Motel Inter-provincial - (Note: has been bought by the Sélecotel chain, so name may change) (418) 788-2070 (#33 on 2015 Gaspésie Trail Map). There's a huge sign out front that simply says: "Motel" - and it's the only one near the trail. Located just off Trans Quebec Trail 5 (turn south across railway tracks), there's also well marked gas about 2 klicks west of the motel by local trail. The on site

www.domainevalga.com or (418) 739-4200 (#16 on 2015 Bas-Saint-Laurent Trail Map). The Domaine Valga is an authentic Quebec log chalet with nine guest rooms, some with private bathrooms. Easy to find off Regional Trail 579 (about mid-way between Rimouski and Mont Joli) the atmosphere is casual and the meals home-cooked (go on-line to make your dinner choice when you make reservations). Fuel in Les Hauteurs about 5 klicks south.



Pastali Restaurant specializes in good Italian food and also offers a full menu. No convenience store accessible by sled, but the front desk will provide a phone number for one that delivers quickly to the motel for a modest \$2 service fee.

DAY SIX: Ride 240 km from Point-à-la-Croix to Matane via TQ5. **Fuel:** Caupuscal, Matane.

Lunch: Amqui.

Where To Stay: Riotel Matane - riotel.com



or (418) 566-2651 (#5 on 2015 Gaspésie Trail Map). Located on the east side of town right on the shore of the St. Lawrence River just off Trans Quebec Trail 5. The way to the Riotel along back lane ways and side streets is well-signed and goes right past a gas station/convenience store. The hotel offers some ground floor rooms where sleds can park in front and features an on site restaurant and bar, plus an outdoor hot tub and indoor sauna. A new wing is being built to expand the hotel.

DAY SEVEN: Ride 305 km on north trail of Monts-Notre-Dame Loop from Matane to Rivière-du-Loup via TQ5, TQ85, RT526. **Fuel:** Saint-Eugène, Rivière-du-Loup. **Lunch:** Clubhouse on TQ5 west of Saint-Eugène.

Where To Stay: Hotel Universel

DAY EIGHT: Trailer home.