

# 5-STAR CHARLEVOIX SLEDDING

## Day Rides from Quebec's Castle On A Cliff

STORY BY CRAIG NICHOLSON, THE INTREPID SNOWMOBILER



LEFT: Charlevoix Region's 405-room castle on a cliff.

ABOVE: Le Manoir Richelieu lies just around the corner on Local Trail 124.

RIGHT: Charlevoix highlands provide eye candy scenery on every ride.



*Last winter, our Supertax crew shared a surprising experience. As rider Craig Irwin exclaimed afterwards, "Nothing I'd seen or heard about it prepared me for what a spectacular sight this place really is." Then Al Fletcher added, "I've snowmobiled for many years, but never stayed anywhere that's so amazing it almost made me forget to go snowmobiling the next day." So what's the big deal? Read on...*

### Destination Snowmobiling

Most snowmobile touring is about destinations. These include popular areas like Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Wisconsin's Northwoods or Quebec's Gaspésie. Sometimes, destinations are well known towns like Cochrane Ontario, Tug Hill New York, or Mont Laurier Quebec, that have become go-to locations in their own right.

But rarely does a specific hotel earn universal recognition as a must-visit snowmobiling destination - a place that draws trail riders like a magnet

because it's so remarkable, so unique, and so memorable.

Among this elite handful, the Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu is second to none. Perched on the heights of Pointe-au-Pic, overlooking the mighty St. Lawrence River at the town of La Malbaie, this indomitable edifice is the crown jewel of Quebec's Charlevoix Region. In fact, this one-of-a-kind hotel's pre-eminence is steeped in history. Its story began 121 years ago as a summer vacation getaway site for the rich and famous who sailed

to its dock aboard cruises ships. And now, it's only a 90-minute drive northwest of Quebec City as a bucket list snowmobiling destination.

### Special Kind of Place

I well remember my first visit to Le Manoir Richelieu by snowmobile. We cruised along a tabletop Local Trail 124 until we glimpsed the St. Lawrence. But our surroundings remained as wild and remote as if we were still riding Charlevoix's backcountry highlands. Then without warning, we turned a corner and were astonished to see a massive castle-like structure ahead, dominating the cliff ahead. This is my lasting, larger-than life impression of Le Manoir Richelieu, the world class hotel that's become a very special home-away-from-home for many snowmobilers.

Yes, it's not only a big hit with every group of riders, but also a sure-fire home run for family and couples rides. In fact, I'm still collecting brownie

points after making a surprise reservation for Le Manoir Richelieu's snowmobile package during a Quebec Valentine's Day ride a couple of years ago. The combination of luxury pampering and beautiful trails is simply unrivalled in my books.

### Getting There

As mentioned, the Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu is located in the heart of Charlevoix, a region equally impressive for its abundant snow, superb trails and long-lasting winters. What's more, eons ago a gigantic meteor-strike gave Charlevoix mountainous terrain whose panoramic views are the perfect backdrop for this stunning hotel. So even the drive from Quebec City to La Malbaie on Highway 138 is so dramatic that it's hard to keep your eyes on the road, especially along secondary Route 362 that hugs the shoreline from Baie-Saint-Paul to La Malbaie. It delivers





Charlevoix's 236" average annual snowfall delivers super snowmobiling on trails like Trans Quebec 3.



breathtaking scenery, and hills so steep that during each ascent, I half-expected to see my sleds slide out the back of the trailer.

Of course, the best way to get to the Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu is by snowmobile. Trans Quebec Trail 3 parallels the St. Lawrence and runs the length of the Charlevoix Region. As the halfway point, La Malbaie is surrounded by local trails that combine with Regional Trail 378 to make several good day loops for staging from this remarkable hotel. Meanwhile, the regions of Saguenay (to the north) and Quebec (to the southwest) offer extended riding opportunities connected to Charlevoix. So visiting snowmobilers have the option of basing out of Le Manoir Richelieu for multiple day rides, or stopping there overnight on a saddlebag tour. But don't short-change yourself...

#### Hotel Amenities

I'd highly recommend at least a two-night stay for the full Manoir Richelieu experience - you simply can't take it all in during a single night! Amenities include a heated outdoor saltwater pool and hot tub, plus indoor pool, hot tub and sauna, part of the Wellness Centre and Moment Spa. Additionally, there's gourmet dining in several restaurants, ice skating, snowshoeing, acres of property to explore and, connected by a tunnel, the Casino

Charlevoix. And don't forget the direct trail access to heated and secure indoor sled parking! And, although there's no on site fuel, a gas station on Local Trail 64 at nearby Clermont is handy to all the rides we did.

Recently, the folks at Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu took another important step to cement their snowmobiling reputation. They partnered with BRP X, a new initiative to debut the world's first Ski-Doo Experience Centre. On site at Le Manoir Richelieu, this pilot project delivers hotel guests a range of current Ski-Doo snowmobile rentals and tours with or without guides.

#### Our Charlevoix Rides

Best of all, our 4-night stay at Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu included three primo Charlevoix day rides, each different, but all on incredibly easy-going trails. We planned each of these itineraries to get us back to Le Manoir Richelieu early enough each day to indulge fully in its decadent pleasures.

One counter-clockwise ride headed southwest to Baie-Saint-Paul for lunch and fuel. This is about a 200-km loop, travelling Trans Quebec Trail 3 outbound and Regional Trail 378 inbound. It includes several panoramic views riding through the hills above Baie-Saint-Paul down towards the St. Lawrence River.

#### WHERE WE STAYED

- Hotel Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu, La Malbaie - [fairmont.com/richelieu-charlevoix/](http://fairmont.com/richelieu-charlevoix/)

#### GET MORE INFO

- Snowmobile Quebec - [snowmobileinquebec.com/](http://snowmobileinquebec.com/)
- Tourism Charlevoix (region trail map) - [tourisme-charlevoix.com/en/inescapable/snowmobiling/](http://tourisme-charlevoix.com/en/inescapable/snowmobiling/)
- Quebec Snowmobile Federation (permits, interactive trail map) - [fcmq.qc.ca/en/](http://fcmq.qc.ca/en/)

Next, we swung north on a 260-km clockwise loop to L'Anse-Saint-Jean for lunch and fuel, then east along the Saguenay Fjord to Baie-Sainte-Catherine and back to La Malbaie. On this ride, Trans Quebec Trail 83 running north from Trans Quebec 3 is without a doubt one of the best sections of trail in Quebec. Plus, don't miss the Mont À Pein lookout along the way. Meanwhile, Regional Trail 383 travels parallel to the Saguenay through some steep hills and valleys. Just east of L'Anse-Saint-Jean, a couple of local

trails head north a short distance for views overlooking the fjord.

On the final day of our stay, we explored virtually every local trail surrounding La Malbaie for about 120 kilometres of riding. This trip included lookouts at Montagne de la Croix de Clermont, Mont Thérèse-Casgrain and Promontoir du Lac Gravel. We topped up at Saint-Fidèle on Local Trail 34, and for this shorter ride, we took snacks for lunch so as not to spoil our appetites for our dinner feast back at the hotel.

#### Last Word

They say a picture's worth a thousand words. No doubt those accompanying this article speak volumes about what makes Charlevoix a special place, and why the Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu has become its own snowmobiling destination. Fairmont also operates many other iconic luxury resorts in Canadian vacation destinations such as Jasper, Lake Louise, Banff Springs, Whistler and Tremblant, so achieving this status for Le Manoir Richelieu in Charlevoix is no accident.

As the hotel's mission statement, posted in the lobby says: "We always endeavour to turn fleeting moments into lasting memories." So for those in search of the ultimate snowmobiling destination, I'd say to the region and the resort: "Mission accomplished." ■