



Charlevoix trail overlooking St. Lawrence River. Photo Credit: Martin Lortz



# LOOPING THE LAWRENCE

## New Quebec Tour Circles Historic River

By Craig Nicholson, *The Intrepid Snowmobiler* (International Snowmobile Hall of Fame Journalist)

A remarkable ride debuted last winter, destined to become one of Quebec's premier snowmobiling attractions. This epic new loop takes in both shores of a mighty waterway, known for 9,000 years by indigenous peoples as "Kaniatarowanenneh" (River of the Iroquois). Then in 1534, French explorer Jacques Cartier renamed it the "St. Lawrence" while trying to discover a route to Asia. Cartier would be surprised to discover that almost five centuries later, snowmobilers are embarking on their own explorations along his route – but looking for fun, not the Orient.

Aptly named the Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour, this circle tour takes six days of riding to cover its minimum distance of 1,355 kilometres (840 miles) between Lévis and Baie-Comeau. But the Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour didn't happen overnight or by chance. From an idea that took seed almost a decade ago, this impressive ride blossomed into the first officially named, multi-region loop in La Belle Province.

### Participating Tourism Regions

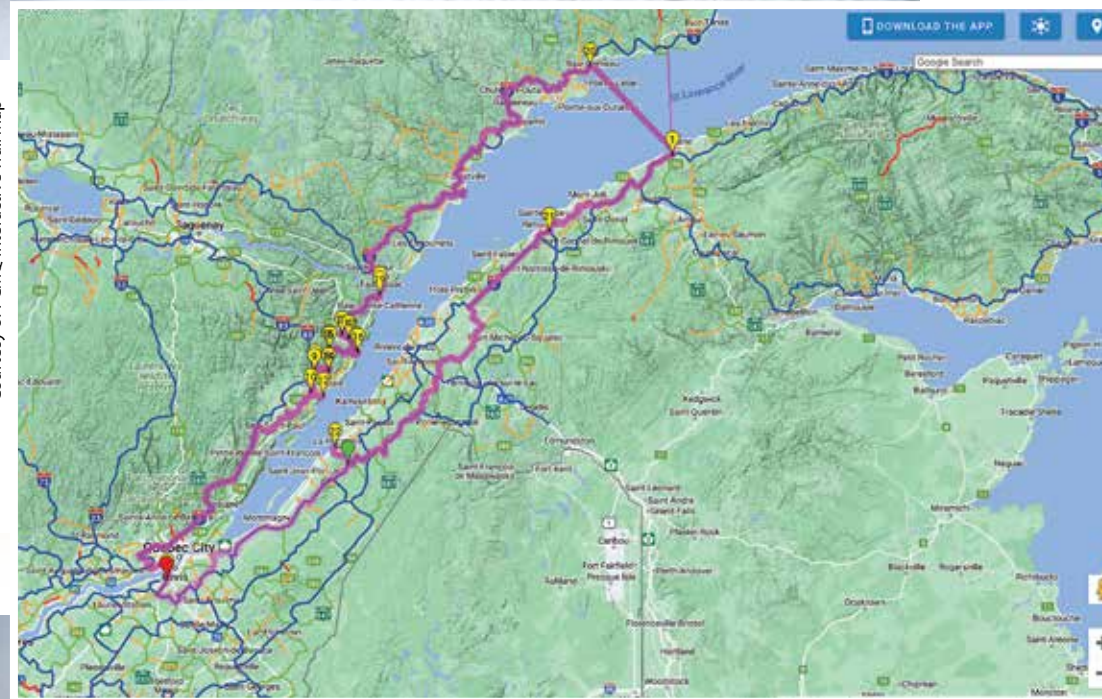
Whereas other Quebec loops are all within one tourism region, organizing the Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour required the collaboration of several neighbouring regions – Charlevoix, Chaudière-Appalaches and Quebec Maritime (which includes Bas-Saint-Laurent, Cote-Nord and Gaspésie). Their idea is to provide snowmobilers with a must-do loop that samples some of the best sledding available in each of their regions. This unique circuit stages from Lévis, a convenient location for many riders trailering to Quebec to access snow sooner with more trail time.

Without much fanfare, these regional partners introduced the Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour for the 2024 season. This lowkey debut provided an opportunity for their new product to be tried, tested and assessed in a real world situation, before being widely promoted to snowmobilers everywhere.

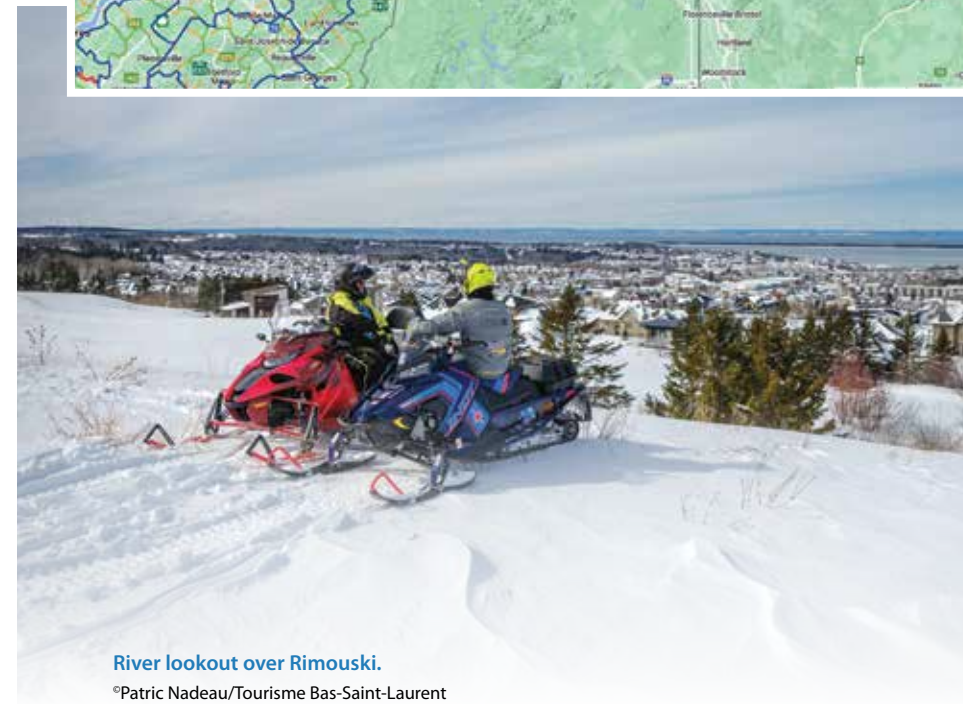


World's Highest Snowmobile Bridge over Manicouagan River in Cote-Nord

Martin Lortz



Courtesy of FCMQ Interactive Trail Map



River lookout over Rimouski.

©Patric Nadeau/Tourisme Bas-Saint-Laurent

### Getting Ready

As the first snowmobiling media to experience the new loop, our mission was to give snowmobilers the scoop on how to do it, what to expect, and to provide valuable feedback for tour organizers to help make it even better. Effectively, we were the guinea pigs for the tour's soft launch – and test riders for you!

With that goal in mind, we spent many hours studying, pre-planning, and reviewing our proposed tour itinerary to nail down the details that can make or break a good ride. Afterwards, we fine-tuned the itinerary again, so that snowmobilers would have the most complete template possible to plan their own Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour.

Of course, it helps that I've previously snowmobiled in each one of the regions

participating in the Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour on other fondly remembered tours. So, I quickly agreed that this new loop brings some of La Belle Province's best riding and scenery together in one outstanding tour...

### Both Sides Now

The Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour is also the first and only Quebec loop routed on both sides of the St. Lawrence. Making this happen involved overcoming an immutable fact of Quebec geography: this mighty river divides La Belle Province in two: north and south of the St. Lawrence.

Perhaps nothing speaks better to this geographic reality than the designation of FCMQ Trans Quebec (TQ) and Regional

Trails (RT). From their trail numbers, snowmobilers know automatically which side of the river they're on, because trails on the north side include a "3" in their number, while those on the south side are indicated by a "5". It's almost like having two distinct trail networks across the waterway from each another – in fact, no FCMQ trails continue from one side of St. Lawrence to the other with the same number.

On the north side of the St. Lawrence, this tour takes in the elevations of the Charlevoix Mountains (part of the Laurentian chain) and panoramic lookouts at Montagne de la Croix (Local Trail 64), Mont à Peine (TQ 3), Mont Thérèse-Casgrain (Local Trail 54) and Lac-Gravel (RT 378) all located between La Malbaie and the mouth of the Saguenay River. Then, it's on to the rugged ups and downs of TQ 3 through Canadian Shield terrain in Cote-Nord, from Tadoussac to Baie-Comeau. On the south side regions of Gaspésie, Bas-Saint-Laurent and



## LOOP CONTACTS

- **Tourisme Chaudière-Appalaches:** [www.chaudiereappalaches.com/en/snowmobile/](http://www.chaudiereappalaches.com/en/snowmobile/)
- **Tourisme Charlevoix:** [www.tourisme-charlevoix.com/en/our-essentials/snowmobiling/](http://www.tourisme-charlevoix.com/en/our-essentials/snowmobiling/)
- **Le Quebec Maritime (Regions - Côte-Nord, Gaspésie & Bas-Saint-Laurent):** [www.quebecmaritime.ca/en/snowmobile/](http://www.quebecmaritime.ca/en/snowmobile/)
- **Trail Permits & Interactive Trail Map:** [www.fcmq.qc.ca](http://www.fcmq.qc.ca)

## CLOCKWISE LOOP LODGINGS

- **Chaudière-Appalaches Region:** Hotel & Suites Normandin, Lévis (418) 831-3119 or 1-800-749-3119.
- **Charlevoix Region:** Fairmont Le Manoir Richelieu, La Malbaie (418) 665-7303 or 1-800-441-1414.
- **Le Quebec Maritime - Cote-Nord Region:**
  - Complexe hôtelier Escoumins, Les Escoumins (418) 233-2401 or 1-888-225-3463.
  - Hotel Le Manoir, Baie-Comeau (418) 296-1435 or 1-866-996-3391.
- **Le Quebec Maritime - Bas-Saint-Laurent Region:**
  - Hôtel Rimouski, Rimouski (418) 725-5000 or 1-800-463-0755
  - Auberge Cap Martin, La Pocatière (418) 856-4450 or 1-866-995-6922.

## RIVER CROSSING INFO

- **Lévis to Quebec City: Enclosed Trailer Shuttle:** (418) 872-2848. Runs between Hotel & Suites Normandin Lévis (TQ75) and Hotel-Motel Colibri, Quebec City (TQ73); 7 days/wk 7am-9pm. \$32/sled (max 4 sleds per shuttle). Crossing time: 4 sleds = 1 hr; 8 sleds = 2hrs.
- **Saguenay Ferry:** (418) 235-4395. Free. Runs 24/7. No reservations needed. Crossing time: 15 min.
- **Baie-Comeau to Matane Ferry:** Advance reservations recommended by calling 1-877-787-7483. Arrive for boarding at least 45 min. prior to ferry departure time. Cost: #38.05/sled. Refreshments & indoors lounge available on board. Crossing time: 2 hours + embarking & disembarking time. [www.traversiers.com/en/our-ferries/matane-baie-comeau-godbout-ferry/schedule-and-fares](http://www.traversiers.com/en/our-ferries/matane-baie-comeau-godbout-ferry/schedule-and-fares)

### Approaching the Saguenay River ferry crossing.

Photo Credit: Martin Lortz

Chaudière-Appalaches, you can either ride closer to the river on TQ 5 to enjoy the St. Lawrence lowlands, or head inland to travel TQ 35 through the foothills of the Appalachians.

### Favourably Located

Location is also a special advantage of the Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour. Its northerly positioning and elevated terrain deliver a long riding season with abundant snow and cold for awesome trail riding. No wonder, because the eastern half of the Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour on both sides of the river is actually as far north as Monts-Valin!

What's more, the loop is positioned east of Quebec's main population centres. Thus, most trails on the loop avoid the wear & tear of daily traffic around the big cities. Instead, they run through more rural areas, where services are plentiful in snowmobile-friendly coastal towns and villages that really cater to winter lovers.

### The Scoop On River Crossings

All of this is possible because safe river crossings are an integrated part of the Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour. At its west end, this loop includes an enclosed snowmobile shuttle across the bridge between Lévis (south side) and Quebec City (north side). 535km (465mi) farther east, the widest crossing is via the winter ferry running 61km (38mi) between Baie-Comeau and Matane. In between, the Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour also includes a short ferry ride across the Saguenay River from Baie-Sainte-Catherine in the Charlevoix Region to Tadoussac in the Cote-Nord Region (see river crossing sidebar for more info).

I quickly realized that the Baie Comeau/Matane winter ferry schedule would actually determine our entire tour itinerary, and here's why: we'd decided to snowmobile the Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour clockwise, staging from Lévis to do the north side first. So, given the ferry schedule and the six days we had available to ride, our staging from Lévis had to start on a Sunday morning if we were going to make the Wednesday ferry from Baie-Comeau at 11am (departure time is 5pm on other days).

While the Baie-Comeau to Matane ferry is the primary, reliable and year-round connector between the two shores for locals, stormy weather occasionally disrupts its schedule. To account for this remote possibility, I added a "spare" day to the end of our itinerary, allowing us to move our drive home a day later if necessary. The key takeaway here is that regardless of whether you want to do this loop clockwise or counter-clockwise, be sure

to start your itinerary by checking the winter ferry schedule first and plan accordingly.

### Ferrying Tips

These ferry rides are a key part of what makes the Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour special. The whole ferry experience is extraordinary – where else can you find a ferry that transports sleds and offers lunch on board? Suddenly, you're briefly transformed from a landlubber to a seafarer with incomparable views of the river, the ice, the coasts – and if you're lucky, a seal or two. Plus, the Baie-Comeau-Matane ferry, with all its passenger amenities and comforts, is more like a cruise ship! Even the embarking and disembarking is memorable.

But ferries are made for cars and trucks, not sleds, so I recommend doing this loop with Rollerskis™ from QualiPieces on every sled. These easily installed ski wheels not only provide easier steering at gas stations, restaurants and lodgings. They also made traversing the many paved access areas and metal ramps/floors of ferries a breeze by lifting our runners above any damaging contact. And that meant a better ride overall thanks to our sharp carbides!

### Extend Your Loop

Want to ride more than the minimum loop distance? The Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour also offers snowmobilers routing options.

The 1,355 km (840 mi.) basic distance of the six-day loop can easily be extended by several hundred kilometres. Simply select alternative and more roundabout trails, especially in the Bas-Saint-Laurent and Chaudière-Appalaches south shore regions.

Riders who want to add days or distance can also consider taking the opportunity to go farther east than Baie-Comeau in Cote-Nord by adding the two-day return ride on TQ 3 to Sept-Iles (282km/175mi each way), or taking TQ 55 through the middle of Chaudière-Appalaches to check out incredible views around Massif South Park (RT 547), then returning to the Lévis staging point from the south via TQ 35.

Whatever your itinerary preference, the Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour is an epic bucket-list adventure that's also a great couples tour and will make many thumbs-up memories. So why not be among the first to give it a go by planning your own Grand St. Lawrence Snowmobile Tour loop ride this winter?



"Cruise ship" ferry crosses from Baie-Comeau to Matane. Photo ©Société des traversiers du Québec



Trail thru majestic wind turbines. ©Louis Chamberland/Tourisme Chaudière-Appalaches