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CRAIG NICHOLSON TOURS

GASPÉ, QUÉBEC



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\$4.99 Winter Issue 2008



GO Gaspé!

Story and photos by
Craig Nicholson



One of many great views from Trail 5 overlooking the St. Lawrence River.

If day after day of smooth trail snowmobiling is your idea of a great tour, look no farther than Gaspésie. Now add in spectacular scenery, mountainous terrain and a multitude of wide trails on logging roads, utility corridors and rolling fields...and you will quickly understand why this region of Québec is a must-visit for any touring rider.

In late January, Jim Reavell, Don Webb, Jim Heintzman, Marsha and I trailered 11 hours from the Greater Toronto Area to the Hotel Universel, Rivière-du-Loup, for what ended up being a 2,000 kilometre, 8-day tour (not including a day to drive there and a second one back). Actually, we were "on tour" for 10 days, but a fierce storm stranded us in Percé for two unrideable

days...

It started Friday night. By next morning, the tempest had dumped about 20 centimetres. No problem, except more was yet to come. Another 25 centimetres fell throughout that day, whipped constantly by ripping winds. The ensuing whiteouts reduced visibility to zero, so we snuggled into our refuge, the Hotel Fleur de Lys.

Sunday dawned bright and sunny; we were quick to roll under clear blue skies. Not so fast...within a thousand yards of the hotel, we were stuck in drifts six feet deep. We took to the roads, hoping to bisect Trans Québec Trail 5 (TQ5). I think we did, but it was only recognizable by virtue of a road sign indicating a trail crossing existed somewhere nearby. Otherwise, the trail was totally obliterated...and there, across the field where it was supposed to be, a sea of humongous drifts just waited to embrace unwary sledders. Being totally wary, we were fated to sit out another day, enjoying more Fleur de Lys hospitality.

elevations. On a few past tours there, I've also had to sit out a day here and there. One time, I rode the whole scenic north shore in total fog...and we certainly ran into diverse weather on this tour, too!

Freezing mist beset our first riding day from Rivière-du-Loup to Sainte-Flavie. Day two, we snowmobiled in plain old drizzle, followed by a dash of freezing rain. Fortunately, the field staking en route was impeccable, so despite reduced visibility, we never had any concern about staying on the trail. Day three, it flurried all day. We were happy to finally have clear visors, although blowing snow obscured our sight from time to time. Day four was sunny, then that storm hit...

They say that any day of snowmobiling is better than a day at the office, and



Leaving Percé with the famous Rock in the background.

Weather Challenges

That's snowmobiling in the Gaspé... changeable weather and massive snowfalls, thanks to its maritime climate, northerly positioning and high



Snowed in at Percé.



Québec
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I agree. With waterproof gear on our bodies and smooth trails under our tracks, nothing that Mother Nature threw at us could wipe away our grins after each exceptional day of riding. Knowing Gaspésie, I'd even planned a couple of contingency days into our itinerary. We had hoped to ride the interior mountain trails (Regional Trails 595 and 597) for two days, but when the weather scrubbed that side trip, we were back on schedule, albeit down a couple of hundred clicks from our original target distance.

In case you missed them, that's two rules for riding in the Gaspé: be waterproof (see sidebar) and plan a flexible day or two...the best case is that you will have a tour totally free of weather events (as I have had 60% of the time), so you'll have more time for exploration. Worst case, you'll have primo riding immediately after a snowstorm, as we did.

Full points to the local snowmobile clubs and volunteers. They had the trails broken and open so we could move from Percé on the second morning after the aforementioned storm. In most cases, they left their drags at home; the going was simply too soft and deep to pull that weight of snow behind a tractor. So their mission was to clear the way and pack the snow so touring snowmobilers could ride...and that's exactly what we did for the rest of this outstanding tour. It snowed again lightly several times over the next few days, so we always skimmed powder on that packed base, the best of both worlds!

Riding the Trails

If your goal is to circumnavigate the Gaspé Peninsula, you hardly need a map



Riding past one of several windmill installations.

to find the trail. Just get on TQ5 east at Rivière-du-Loup (Bas-Saint-Laurent region) and follow it until it becomes TQ5 west at the town of Gaspé, then stay on it until you see Rivière-du-Loup again. Note that you switch from the Bas-Saint-Laurent region trail map to the Gaspésie region trail map at Mont-Joli. (But be careful, the map scales are different, and some trail positions and distances aren't exact.)

The only sector where sticking to TQ5 became confusing was east of Matane (to about Saint-Jean-de-Cherbourg), where TQ5 signs mysteriously disappeared for quite a stretch. All we spotted were blue and white ATV Trail 30 signs. The two activities share the route at this point,

but we didn't know that until later. The same thing happened to a lesser degree with ATV Trail 10 on our way to New Richmond on Day Eight. Maybe this is a sign of the times with the newfound popularity of ATV's, but if these are first and foremost snowmobile trails during winter, they should be so marked.

We only had to leave TQ5 on local trails leading to services (fuel, food and lodgings), which are sufficiently frequent and well marked. Given that TQ5 primarily runs through the highlands, accessing services most often involves scenic descents to coastal villages and towns. The return ascents can be steep (but if a groomer can handle it, so could we!)...and occasionally icy, as can other

carry an adult diaper to keep your butt dry. (Please wear it under your suit!)

For riding in rain, I recommend gloves with a built in wiper on the finger for clearing your visor. Alternatively, go on line at www.eztraxx.com and order a Hyper Swipe™ (a wiper that velcros around your wrist). However, in freezing rain, neither a wiper nor an electric shield will help clear the icy build

up from your face shield. I've found that frequent scrapes of a plastic hotel room key works wonders.

For any kind of rain, a set of handle bar muffs (pre-treated with a water proofing spray) also helps keep your hands dryer. And oh, don't forget to pack all the essentials in your saddlebags in plastic so you'll have dry clothes to change into after that rainy ride.

parts of these mountain trails. For that reason, I recommend studs for touring the Gaspé, especially in March.

Gaspésie has only a few major water crossings where the trail actually crosses on ice. The whole system emphasizes land-based trails, with no lakes to cross. Most rivers are either spanned (often with ubiquitous suspension bridges) or crossed via a nearby highway bridge. Even at the few where no bridge exists, an alternate route is usually possible in the unlikely event that an ice crossing is dicey. And with their trails on so many logging roads, utility corridors and unopened road allowances, the surfaces (and temperatures) hold a groom very well...so even a not recently groomed Gaspésie trail is still relatively smooth.

Sightseeing

Gaspésie is an eye-candy tour. It seemed that one breathtaking view after another vied for our attention at every turn of the trail. Watch out for the scenic viewpoint signs on the trail. Certainly, the mountains from Cap-Chat to Petite-Vallée are magnificent. This stretch is especially susceptible to drifting from blowing snow and even a few centimetres of fresh snow can pile up and block it until the groomers roll again. One narrow ridge above Grand-Vallée drops off precipitously on both sides...that also took our breath away, because our hearts were in our throats! Don't miss the viewpoint above Percé overlooking the famous rock or the one just east of Pointe-à-la-Croix, overlooking Baie des Chaleurs, with a grand view of Campbellton, N.B. on the far shore.

Those prevailing Gaspésie winds, which can body-slam a rider crossing open fields, also generate raw power. We passed three major windmill installations along the north shore, two near Matane and one near Rivière-au-Renard. I'm talking hundreds of majestic windmills, far too many to count. A good trail for getting up close and personal with these massive structures is Regional Trail 591, running south from TQ5, west of Matane.

On each tour of the Gaspé, I make a new discovery. For this one, it was the Matapédia Valley, stretching from



Crossing a suspension bridge.

Pointe-à-la-Croix in the south to Matane on the St. Lawrence River. TQ 5 through this region is an excellent ride, but for a different perspective, I highly recommend taking the time to ride RT587 and 591, plus the local trails between Amqui and Matane. It's a much-overlooked part of Gaspésie!

Go There, Do That

Gaspésie is one of those rare places where the riding is so consistently incredible that you can't wait to get going again next morning. It's also a region where snowmobiling is such a part of daily life that visiting riders are always welcomed with warm hospitality. Not everyone speaks English, but it doesn't matter, because there's bound to be someone else who does...and besides, friendly smiles and gestures go a long way!

Best of all, every visiting snowmobiler has a secret weapon. Her name is Patsy Babin. She runs the "Snowmobile Info Gaspésie" hot line and website out of a trailside relais near Chandler (see Who To Contact). Whatever you want to know or need, just call Patsy!

On this tour, we deliberately chose to stay at a few places a little off the beaten

path. Relais Chic-Chocs, Le Maison Lebevre and Auberge La Coulée Douce each gave us a more colloquial flavour. When planning your own Gaspésie tour, I'd recommend any of them, as well as the more mainstream, very snowmobile-friendly hotels that welcomed us (see Our Tour Itinerary).

So that's my take on Gaspésie 2008. Beautiful region...top notch trails...oodles of snow...and by the way, did I mention no crowded trails? Their season runs from late December through at least mid-March, so there's plenty of choice for your own Gaspésie tour this winter. It may well be the best ride of your life!

Special Thanks to: Marie-Pier Mercier, Patsy Babin, Ken Cahill and the snowmobile clubs of Gaspésie.

Craig's tours are made possible by BRP, Dunford's of Havelock, Fast-Trac Traction, Shell Advance Snow Ultra Oil, and Triton Trailers.

Craig Nicholson is the author of "Canada's Best Snowmobiling — Your Ultimate Ride Guide". (To order: www.snowgoercanada.com). His syndicated column "The Intrepid Snowmobiler" appears in newspapers throughout North America. He also hosts "The Intrepid Snowmobiler on Radio" and appears regularly on Snowmobiler Television. For more info, click www.intrepidssnowmobiler.com

Keep Out the Wet

Staying warm and dry in any conditions isn't difficult anymore thanks to a variety of waterproof fabrics in many snowmobile suits and gloves. Just be sure it says "waterproof" not just "water resistant"...and look for waterproof zippers too. Take particular care to get pants with extra treatment or thickness in the seat. Failing that,

Who to Contact

- Le Québec Maritime Tourism: www.snowmobilequebecmaritime.ca
- Gaspésie Snowmobiling Info: 1-877-202-4636; www.quebectrails.com
- Québec Tourism: 1-877-266-5687; www.bonjourquebec.com
- Québec Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (FCMQ): www.fcmq.ca; (514) 252-3076

Maps Needed

- Québec Snowmobile Trails (FCMQ map)
- Bas-Saint-Laurent Region
- Gaspésie Region

Our Tour Itinerary

Total distance: 2,038 kilometres; Total fuel cost for 2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI: \$396.13

Notes: Toll free numbers are included only when they connect directly to the hotel (as opposed to an off site reservation system). TQ = Trans Québec Trail (blue on maps); RT = Regional Trail (green on maps); LT = Local Trail (orange on maps).

DAY ONE

Trailer to Rivière-du-Loup – Québec Maritime region (drive time from Toronto: 11 hours)

Where We Stayed: Hotel Universel (#30 on Bas-Saint-Laurent region map) 1-800-265-0072 or www.hoteluniverselrdl.com. Very popular with snowmobilers as jumping off point for tours of Gaspésie, this full service hotel has two on site restaurants, plus bar, indoor pool, whirlpool, sauna & health spa. Secure compounds for trucks & trailers, and also for sleds. Plus, lockable sled garages at rear. Direct trail access via RT526. Fuel & convenience store next door. Ask for an even-numbered ground floor room for easy sled access through sliding door to parking lot.

DAY TWO

Rivière-du-Loup to Sainte-Flavie (about 7 hrs.) Ride 240 km via TQ5 east and RT587 to Sainte-Flavie (use Bas-Saint-Laurent region map). We made good time on mostly rolling fields, hydro corridor and logging roads. Fuel Stops: Rimouski. 2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$62

Where We Stayed: Motel Le Gaspésiana (#2 on Gaspésie region map) 1-800-404-8233 or www.gaspesiana.com. Located just across the road from the trail, this two-story motel offers a restaurant and bar, plus a sled shelter and ample parking for trucks and trailers. Fuel nearby.

DAY THREE

Sainte-Flavie to St-Octave de l'Avenir (about 7 hrs.) Ride 230 km via TQ5 east and LT south (use Gaspésie region map). More logging roads and rolling fields. Fuel Stops: Mont Joli,

Cap-Chat. 2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$49.66.

Where We Stayed: Relais Chic-Chocs (#13 on Gaspésie region map) 1-800-530-2349 or www.relaischic-chocs.com. Choose either a well-appointed room in the main building or one of several chalets at this wilderness resort complete with restaurant and bar, hot tub and exercise room. No phones in rooms or cell service, but landline available in lobby. Located in the heart of the Chic-Choc Mountains, it's directly trail accessible and offers great scenery. Fuel up in Cap-Chat before taking the local trail to the relais.

DAY FOUR

St-Octave de l'Avenir to Petite-Vallée (about 7 hrs.) Ride 230 km via TQ5 east to LT into town and follow signs for lodgings. We spent some extra time riding through the mountains between Cap Chat and Mont-St-Pierre, with steep drop-offs and great panoramic views. Logging roads after that, with more good scenery at Grand-Vallée/Petite-Vallée. Fuel Stops: La Matre, Grande-Vallée. 2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$32.43

Where We Stayed: La Maison Lebreux (#17 on Gaspésie region map) 1-866-393-26621. With well-signed access, this friendly inn is located on the shore of the Gulf of the St. Lawrence and offers a restaurant with home cooked meals and a lounge area with TV. Shared bathrooms. No TV's or phones in rooms or cell service, but landline available in lobby. Fuel at Grande-Vallée.

DAY FIVE, SIX & SEVEN

Petite-Vallée to Percé (about 7 hrs.) Ride 220 km via TQ5 east, then west (the trail direction signs change from east to west at the town of Gaspé) to LT to Percé. Logging roads Petite-Vallée to Rivière-au-Renard, then tight and twisty to Gaspé, and logging roads from there to Percé. Fuel Stops: Rivière-au-Renard, Percé. 2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$44.55

Where We Stayed: Hôtel-Môtel Fleur de Lys (#23 on Gaspésie region map) 1-800-399-5380 or www.gaspesie.com/fleurdelys. Turn right at hotel sign from local trail. The main building includes four rooms with private baths and a restaurant with home cooked meals, while a two-story motel unit across the road sits right on the Atlantic Ocean shore. Direct trail access to both the hotel and fuel/convenience store just past the hotel.

DAY EIGHT

Percé to New Richmond (about 7 hrs.) Ride 235 km via TQ5 west. Mountains until Chandler...made good time on unopened road allowances, logging roads and utility corridors. Fuel Stops: Chandler, Pasbébiac,

New Richmond. 2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$50.45

Where We Stayed: Hôtel Le Francis (#29 on Gaspésie region map) 1-800-906-4485 or www.hotelfrancis.qc.ca. Turn left off of TQ5 on local trail beside railway tracks to cross highway overpass to 1st street and left again into hotel parking lot. Exceptionally well-appointed two-story motel with restaurant and pub. Ask to park sleds in front of a ground floor room. Rags provided to wipe off sleds. Fuel up at station on TQ5 before hotel.

DAY NINE

New Richmond to Causapsal (about 9 hrs.) Ride 311 km via TQ5 west and RT587 west to TQ5 east. Ride through more mountains near Carleton (lots of deer) and then Matapédia Valley on incredible logging roads...especially 587! Fuel Stops: Pointe-à-la-Croix, Matapédia, Albertville. 2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$58.42

Where We Stayed: Auberge La Coulée Douce (#41 on Gaspésie region map) 1-888-756-5270 or www.lacouleedouce.com. Turn off TQ5 at auberge sign and once on the street, take a left to this friendly inn. It offers a restaurant with home cooked meals and a lounge area. Large rooms with private bathrooms. No phones in rooms.

DAY TEN

Causapsal to Rimouski (about 9 hrs.) Ride 302 km via local trails north to Matane, then TQ5 west to RT591 south to RT587 west to RT579 west to RT578 west (back on Bas-Saint-Laurent region map) to TQ5 west to local trail into town. More scenic Matapédia Valley (many deer) with logging roads and rolling fields. Fuel Stops: Sayabec, Rimouski. 2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$50.07

Where We Stayed: Hôtel Rimouski (#18 on Bas-Saint-Laurent region map) 1-800-463-0755 or www.hotelrimouski.com. This full service, downtown hotel offers an on site restaurant, plus bar, indoor pool, whirlpool, sauna & health spa. Ample parking for trucks & trailers at rear. Fuel & convenience store before hotel on direct trail access.

DAY ELEVEN

Rimouski to Rivière-du-Loup (about 7 hrs.) Ride 270 km (only 130 km as the crow flies) via TQ5 east to RT548 south to RT569 south to TQ85 (rail line) north. Mostly logging roads through hilly backcountry. Fuel Stops: Auclair, Rivière-du-Loup. 2008 Ski-Doo GSX H.O. SDI Daily Fuel Cost: \$48.55

Where We Stayed: Hotel Universel

DAY TWELVE

trailer home