



TRAVEL BY LINDA AKSOMITIS

SCENIC VIEWS are plentiful as you head through the Chic-Chocs Mountains in Maritime Quebec. Here snowmobilers get great views into the sprawling inland forests of the Matane Wildlife Reserve.

Syrupy Spring Snowmobiling

Maritime Quebec offers pleasant trails with great views and tasty traditional foods

From the shores of the St. Lawrence River, to the top of the Chic-Chocs, to the forests of the Matane Wildlife Reserve (Reserve faunique de Matane), Maritime Quebec's snowmobile trails twist, turn and wander through one of Canada's top winter destinations.

The hardest part of planning a snowmobile trip to Quebec is figuring out how to pack in everything you want to do. What started as five days away soon turned into 10 for us, since as well as snowmobiling we attended the Grand Prix Ski-Doo de Valcourt, visited the J. Armand Bombardier Museum and toured the BRP factory. By the end of those four days, it was hard to imagine things could get more exciting, but they did.

Cloudless rides

Our adventure began near the village of Saint-Donat at the Domaine Valga Inn.

Our guide, Steve Gaudreau, owner of Panda Aventures, arrived with our sleds—a 2010 Polaris IQ Touring, and a 2010 Ski-Doo MXZ Renegade. Dan Gould, the fourth member of our group, rode another of Steve's sleds, a Ski-Doo GSX. Packing everything we'd need for three nights on the trails was easier than I'd expected! After sandwiching my laptop between a few necessities, I was ready to hit the trail.

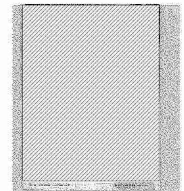
It seems our March rides always take place a day or two ahead of spring, and our Quebec trip was right on schedule, as temperatures hit 35 degrees or higher every day. It was easy to make some excellent time on the Trans-Quebec snowmobile trail No. 5, on about a 175-mile ride to Cap-Chat, where we'd spend our first two nights. Snow conditions were generally great, although the warm weather made fuel stops in some towns challenging.

While we'd started our first day in fog

and cloud, checking out one of the numerous "wind farms" in rural Quebec, the sky soon cleared. The well-groomed trail rolled up and down through hills and plains, often thick with evergreen, maple, beech and birch forests. And it seemed that every time we turned there was another bridge to cross - short wooden bridges that shot over frozen streams, long bridges with ski tracks so the sled thumped over churning open water, the Passerelle suspension bridge where I held my breath the whole time, even the 1918 Pierre-Carrier red covered bridge over the Blanche River.

At the edge

Our first two nights were spent at Village Grande Nature Chic-Chocs in Saint-Octave, nestled in a valley. There they told us fog had shrouded the Chic-Chocs Mountains around us for three weeks, but





for our stay the sky was cloudless.

Snowmobiler packages here include fine dining, and there's nothing better than traditional Quebec cooking, from crepes and maple syrup for breakfast to filet mignon with shrimp and scallops for dinner.

From the Village Grande Nature we explored our way through La Haute Gaspésie, the region where southern Quebec's highest peaks lay across 80 miles of coastline. Heavily eroded over time, these mountains have flat tops and steep sides, which I'd dreaded. While twisting and turning up the side of a mountain trail through the forest was fun, my speed slowed to a crawl when I could see clear to the St. Lawrence River over the edge!

The view was worth the climb!

Mont St. Pierre was our lunch stop and turnaround point. By the second time over the mountains on the Trans-Quebec trail No. 5 I was less nervous and the trails seemed less narrow! We finished the 185-mile ride in the dark, so were glad to have our guide Steve leading the way.

Maple meals and trails

After our two nights in the Chic-Chocs, we loaded the gear on the sled and set off again, this time headed toward the city of Amqui. We headed west on some local snowmobile trails out of Saint-Octave, through the inland forests of the Matane Wildlife Reserve, reaching our chosen lunch spot of Sainte-Paule to see a sugar-shack.

Due to the early warm weather, maple sap was already running at the Auberge La Pente Abrupte, so we not only had a great meal, but a tour. The restaurant serves its own products, so I chose the traditional sugar-shack Maple Meal of baked beans and cocktail sausages in maple syrup, plus maple sugar cured ham. Delicious for those who have a sweet tooth!

From Sainte-Paule we took Regional

SNOWMOBILER PACKAGES and fine food are available at the Village Grande Nature Chic-Chocs in Saint-Octave nestled in a valley. **WE RODE JUST A FEW DAYS** before spring, and snow conditions were great on the Trans-Quebec snowmobile trail No. 5 where we ran 175 miles.

TOURING SKI-DOO'S HOMETOWN

VALCOURT IS a small town and the birthplace of Ski-Doo snowmobiles. Like many snowmobilers around the world, I'd always wanted to see Bombardier's first machine and the town, and finally I did.

While the original machine had been dismantled by J. Armand's father, Alfred, immediately after its first drive, the Bombardier Museum (Musée J. Armand Bombardier) is home to a rebuilt model. Who, but a pair of teenage boys, would have dared the snow-packed streets in a propeller driven machine without even benefit of a steering mechanism on New Year's Eve in 1922?

The museum is packed with many other of Bombardier's firsts. One of the most important is the 1935 prototype that was to revolutionize the way people travelled over snow-blocked winter roads, the first vehicle to feature the sprocket wheel/track system invented by Bombardier. And for me the prototypes that led from the wooden box-like machine Bombardier developed during 1957 and 1958, to the first Ski-Doos that rolled off the assembly line in 1959, were amazing.

While it takes hours to go completely through the museum, reading all of the information and exploring the many different types of machines that Bombardier applied his sprocket to, I had a few favorites.

I particularly enjoyed seeing the original Super Olympique Ski-Doo ridden by Jean-Luc Bombardier on the Plaisted Expedition to the North Pole in 1968. I couldn't imagine myself setting off at -61.60 F to sled about 800 miles over ice peaks, through snowstorms, and over frozen seas even on the best machine of the era!



THE BOMBARDIER MUSEUM offers a unique view into the history of the technology and milestones in the creation of Ski-Doo snowmobiles.

CANADIAN PRIDE is evident at the museum that displays sleds with historic significance like this Olympique Ski-Doo from the Plaisted Expedition to the North Pole in 1968.

TRAVEL

Trail No. 59 to reconnect with No. 5 outside Sayabec, and then on to Amqui.

In Amqui, we parked our sleds in the locked garage at Auberge L'Ambassadeur, next stop a bar stool in the hotel and relaxing after the day's 175 miles.

Our last ride was short, just a half day and 100 miles, following the 587N to the 579, back to our starting point and rental car at the Domaine Valga Inn.

Once again, Steve had a surprise for us. A local trail led to a surreal mist shrouded world on a hilltop, where a lookout tower stood amidst monstrous trees, their entwined white branches thick as many-armed medusas. A wind, icy and biting, whistled through, not strong enough to even shake them.

Heading Home

Saying goodbye is never easy when you've had a fantastic time.

There was so much to thank Steve for, from the great interpreting and French lessons, to his guiding along the trails. Leaving Saint-Donat, we overnighted in Rivière-du-Loup waiting for the Trans-Canada Highway to open at Quebec City,

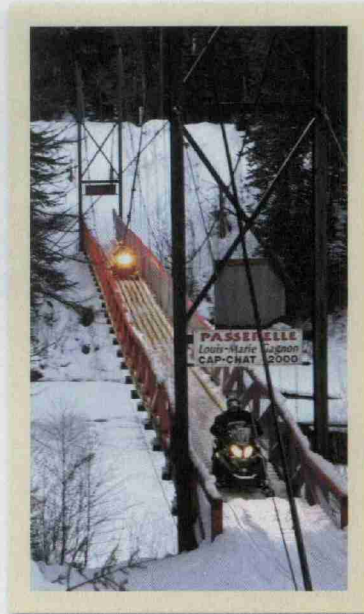


TRADITIONAL QUEBEC cooking from crepes and maple syrup for breakfast to a filet mignon with shrimp and scallops for dinner, calls to sledders.

as a storm had passed through. But once again, the weather favored us and the morning brought great driving to Montreal and on-time flights.

Without a glitch, our Quebec adventure was one of those perfect trips that you dream of, but never fully expect to happen!

More Info: Visit the Maritime Quebec snowmobile site at: [http://www.snowmobilequebecmaritime.ca/snowmobile/Rentals & Guiding](http://www.snowmobilequebecmaritime.ca/snowmobile/Rentals%20&%20Guiding) - Panda Adventures at <http://www.pandaadventures.com/>



BRIDGING THE GAPS throughout the Chic-Chocs mountain region are many structures, like the Passerelle Louis-Marie Gagnon suspension bridge.