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Quebec's Best Kept Secret

Sledding Côte-Nord's Trail 3



Story and Photos by Craig Nicholson



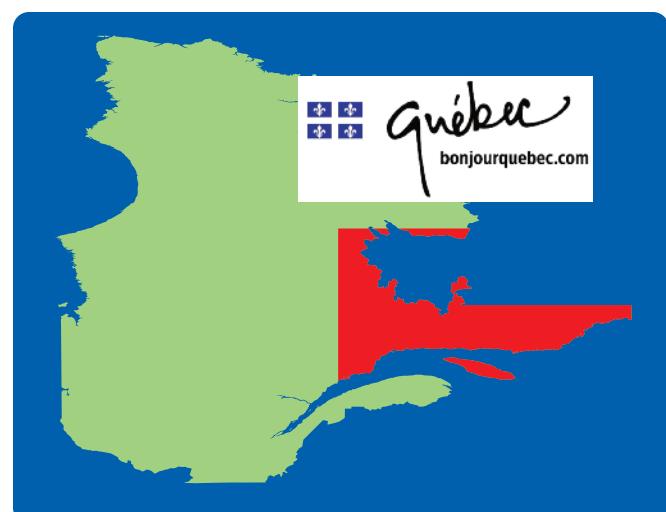
Okay, I admit it. I was wrong, wrong, wrong. Quebec's Côte-Nord region totally surprised me. It turned out to be a spectacular ride on to-die-for trails with scenery and terrain every bit as good as Gaspésie – and that wasn't what either our Snow Goer crew – Johnny Biasi, Dan Carty, Craig Irwin, Trish Robinson or I had expected.

Côte-Nord is a sub-region of Quebec Maritime situated along the north shore ("côte nord" in French) of the St. Lawrence River. It's an immense span of shoreline that starts at Tadoussac at the mouth of the Saguenay Fiord and continues east alongside the Gulf of St. Lawrence, ending at Blanc-Sablon, by the Strait of Belle Isle (which separates the mainland from Newfoundland). Along its length, a snowmobile trail runs for almost 1,700 kilometres.

Côte-Nord Trails

But it's not your normal snowmobile trail. Trans Quebec Trail 3, which starts near Montreal, continues through Côte-Nord paralleling the main Highway 138, and terminates just beyond the far-flung village of Havre-Saint-Pierre. From there, the "Route Blanche" snowmobile trail continues east. Remarkably, after Highway 138 ends at the village of Kegaska, this trail is the de facto connecting corridor in winter since the Lower North Shore is not linked to points west by road.

The Route Blanche is variously described as an "adventure" or "expert" trail, meaning it can be tenuous and only for hard-core, been-there-done-that, well-prepared sledders. On the other hand, the 665-kilometres of Trans Quebec Trail 3 that we rode between Tadoussac and Sept-Îles for our Snow Goer Canada tour was top quality all the way and fully up to the best of Quebec signage and staking stan-





Climbing out of a gorge.

dards. So I was wrong to consider that our ride would be anything but superb.

I was also mistaken in thinking that snowmobiling out and back on the same trail would be boring. First, Trans Quebec 3 was well groomed from start to finish and sledging a smooth trail is always exhilarating. Second, there are so many panoramic views, lookouts and other vantage points that you can't possibly take them in on one pass through. Besides, going one way you see certain sights ahead, but miss others that are better observed from the other direction.

On our return trip along Trans Quebec 3, it was as if everything was new again, and I didn't for a moment regret taking this linear route. But if you're not convinced, you can jazz up your ride back by trying a couple of local loops. There's one north from Baie-Comeau and one north from Forestville. The latter is 100 kilometres of mind-blowing trails and scenery that will take your breath away, so don't miss it.

Getting There

I'd also doubted whether the almost 960-kilometre trailering distance from Toronto to our staging destination, Ferme 5 Étoiles in Sacré-Coeur, would be worth it. Wrong again. Our return on investment in terms of amazing trail riding was worth every minute in the trek. In fact, the drive's very comparable to the 11-hours to Rivière-du-Loup (staging for Gaspésie) or Saguenay (staging for Monts-Valin) and shorter than the trailer to Edmundston (staging for New Brunswick). Of course, if you're dismayed at these trailering distances, then you've probably never experienced some of Canada's best trail riding either.

Côte-Nord welcomes snowmobilers in a unique way. This north shore region is literally set apart from the rest of La Belle Province by the Saguenay Fiord. The asphalt of Highway 138 from Quebec City stops at the western shore at Baie-Sainte-Catherine and starts again at Tadoussac.



More hills ahead.

There's no bridge over the fiord – it's deep, too wide, too fast-flowing and the bottom is too unstable. So Transport Canada operates year-round, 24/7 ferry service across the Saguenay that is officially part of Highway 138. Through ice and waves and current, these huge vessels carry everything from full transport trucks and buses to passenger cars and yes, even snowmobiles. Near the end of a long drive, the Saguenay ferry crossing is a unique signal of your arrival in Côte-Nord.

One Seamless Trail

I'd also had some concern that this less populated, more remote region of Quebec could deliver the goods. Boy oh boy, was I wrong about this. Every rider has snowmobiled a section of trail that's out of this world. You know, the kind where it doesn't get any better than this and you wish it would go on forever. But you also know full well that this exceptional section of trail is bound to come to an end at the next intersection, road crossing or around the next bend. Not in Côte-Nord. I can't remember the last time I rode 655 kilometres of such exceptional trail, back to back to back sections of logging roads, utility corridors and other access routes seamlessly assembled into one long, linear masterpiece. Imagine the best trail you've ever ridden going

on non-stop for your entire tour and that's what we experienced in Côte-Nord.

It's worthy of note that except for four shared highway bridge crossings, there is no road running on Trans Quebec 3 in Côte-Nord. Also, no lake crossings and only two river ice crossings. You also get to cross the Rivière Manicougan just west of Baie Comeau via what's touted as the "world's

View of Baie Comeau.



Riding through rugged hills.



highest snowmobile bridge" – a massive, single lane structure that's very impressive indeed, and certainly high enough for me!

For our tour, we chose to ride the well-serviced Trans Quebec 3 to Sept-Îles and back. Fuel was sufficient en route and well marked. Besides, going any farther would have added at least two more days to our planned five days of sledding, plus past Sept-Îles, towns are fewer and farther between. With a few side trips, we racked up a respectable 1,435 kilometres and could have done more (see Our Itinerary).

Compare to Gaspésie

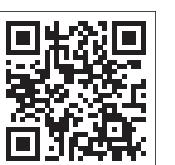
So how does Côte-Nord compare to Gaspésie's coastal trail route? Like its counterpart on the south side of the St. Lawrence, the Côte-Nord trail is generally set back in the high country above the coast with descents (and great views) into shoreline towns for services. But unlike Gaspésie, more of the high country trail in Côte-Nord tends to follow inland terrain that's more precipitous, abrupt and stunning, with deep gorges, huge valleys, rugged hills and steep slopes. The roller coaster ride sections between

Forestville and Baie Comeau, and between Baie Comeau and Godbout, are good examples. There's also a sudden gorge about 60 kilometres west of Forestville that's pretty amazing.

Yes, I was wrong in my preconceptions about Côte-Nord. As you have read, it's an outstanding snowmobiling destination, so be sure to put Côte-Nord on your bucket list to experience Quebec's best kept secret as soon as possible!

Special thanks to Suzie Loiselle (Tourisme Quebec Maritime) for assistance with this tour. Craig's tours are made possible by BRP (Ski-Doo), Gateway Powersport, FXR Racing, Split Rail Skis, Triton Trailers, and Woody's Traction Products.

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.intrepidsnowmobiler.com



Tour Info & Itinerary

Who to Contact

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

Maps Needed

Côte-Nord
Sentier Pelchat/Monts-Valin

DAY ONE: Trailer 960 kilometres from Toronto to Sacré-Coeur.



Where We Stayed: Hotel le Manoir.

www.manoirbc.com or (418) 296-3391. Perched on the St. Lawrence River's edge on the east side of Baie-Comeau, the 4-star

Hôtel le Manoir has all the charm of an historic colonial manor, plus the very best of

modern services and amenities (including

very comfortable beds). Accessible off Trans

Quebec Trail 3 by the same local trail lead-

ing to the ferry dock to cross to Matane, the

Hôtel le Manoir has an onsite gourmet

restaurant, sled parking in front of recep-

tion and gas/convenience store available

via the next local trail east of the hotel trail

turn off.

DAY THREE: Snowmobile 295 kilometres from Baie Comeau to Sept-Îles via Trans Quebec 3.



LE QUÉBEC MARITIME

Bas-Saint-Laurent, Gaspésie,
Côte-Nord, Îles de la Madeleine



Where We Stayed: Hôtel le Voyageur.

www.hotellevoyageur.com or
1-866-962-2228.

Located on the west side of Sept-Îles, the Hôtel le Voyageur is accessible via a local trail off Trans Quebec Trail 3 – look for a sign that says "Relais Club Ook-Pik" and follow the lodging symbol to their back door. Gas and convenience store is available via the next local trail west of the hotel trail turn off. Hôtel

le Voyageur offers hot breakfast and sled parking in front of rooms, and local restaurants are a quick taxi ride away for dinner.

DAY FOUR: Snowmobile 295 kilometres from Sept-Îles to Baie Comeau via Trans Quebec 3.



Where We Stayed: Hotel le Manoir.

DAY FIVE: Snowmobile 170 kilometres from Baie Comeau to Forestville via Trans Quebec 3. Add 100 kilometres with loop north of town.

Where We Stayed: Econo Lodge.

www.econolodgeforestville.com or 418 587-2278. Well marked with trail signs, the Econo Lodge Forestville is right beside Trans Quebec Trail 3. With sled parking in front of rooms or under a covered pavilion, the Econo Lodge provides a newly renovated, onsite restaurant and lively bar, with across the street access to fuel and convenience store.

DAY SIX: Snowmobile 225 kilometres from Forestville to Sacré-Coeur via Trans Quebec 3 and Trans Quebec 93, with side trip into Tadoussac.

368-km Alternate Route: Trans Quebec 3 for 126 km from Forestville to Les Escoumins (fuel), then Sentier Pelchat (152-km private trail) north to Trans Quebec 93 (fuel at Auberge 31) and then Trans Quebec 93 south for about 90 km to Sacré-Coeur. For more info 1-888-225-3463.

Where We Stayed: Auberge Ferme 5 Étoiles.

DAY SEVEN: Trailer home.