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FINDING GEMS IN QUEBEC'S VAST CYCLING NETWORK

By CALVIN WOODWARD — Sep. 5 2:54 PM EDT

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In this Aug. 11, 2013 photo, paddlers move through placid waters from the P'tit Train du Nord rail trail outside Montreal, Quebec. The rail trail cuts through stands of hardwood and softwood forests, along lakes and rushing rivers, with inns and cafes along the way. (AP Photo/Calvin Woodward)

SAINT-JEROME, Quebec (AP) — Cyclists who want to experience Quebec's vibrant autumn have a wealth of choices, maybe too many. Deciding where to go is like standing at the counter at Les Chocolats Favoris in the town of Levis, where you have to pick from a dozen pots of fine melted chocolate for your ice-cream dip.

All the offerings look sweet. But you can't have them all.

Quebec's 3,000-mile (5,000-kilometer) bicycle network, La Route Verte, has attracted plenty of buzz since National Geographic named it the world's top cycling destination in 2007. But who's got time for 3,000 miles? Most cyclists will want to plan a trip for a few days or a week, and that takes, well, legwork.

My legwork unfolded over months, scrolling through goofily translated French-to-English web pages in search of useful information. It culminated with rides on two distinct routes in late summer: the P'tit Train du Nord (Little Train of the North) rail trail, running for more than 100 miles (160 kilometers) north of Montreal; and a staggeringly beautiful stretch along the St. Lawrence River from Quebec City east

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toward the Gaspé Peninsula. This route is also a compelling trip by car.

Route Verte, or green way, is a carefully managed network of off-road trails, dedicated bike lanes and quiet country roads, sometimes linked by moderately busy roadways with decent shoulders — nothing too hair-raising in my experience. Its routes have shuttle services, and accredited establishments are obliged to offer healthy, hearty food, safe storage for bikes and access to repairs and shelter. Inspectors come around to check on that. It's about as close to being coddled as self-supported cycling gets.

The P'tit Train du Nord journey went down smooth and easy — call it the milk chocolate dip. About half is paved, the rest fine-crushed stone. Towns pop up where you need them as you sweep past placid lakes, rushing waters and mixed stands of hardwood and softwood forest.

The St. Lawrence is more intense, an explosion of garden flowers, wildflowers, dramatic river vistas, commanding churches in storybook villages and gastronomic adventures. Call it the Classique Noir dip of the ice cream shop.

In both areas, it's hit and miss trying to converse in English in small towns or rural areas, though easier in cities and at tourist attractions. But efforts by visitors to try even a bit of tortured French are welcomed. A look at the two routes:

P'TIT TRAIN du NORD (designated Route Verte 2)

Organic produce and gourmet cheese are a mission in Quebec bordering on obsession in some parts. This may be a form of atonement for the ubiquitous French-Canadian dish, poutine, consisting of fries, gravy and cheese curd, sometimes cooked in lard and altogether known as a heart attack in a bowl — though I survived my taste of it on the eve of my departure from Saint-Jerome, outside Montreal at the southern end of the trail.

The typical way to cycle the entire P'tit Train du Nord is to take a three-hour shuttle from Saint-Jerome on the southern end to Mont Laurier at the northern end and bike back over three days. I got off the shuttle at Lac-Saguay, 20 miles (32 kilometers) short of Mont Laurier, so I could do the trail in two days.

A gentle downhill slope, pavement and well-spaced amenities — notably cafes and craft shops in restored former railway stations — made for an easy 40-plus miles (65 kilometers) on the first day. The route is lined with pristine wooden outhouses.

That's right, I said pristine outhouses. Fresh as a daisy.

I stopped at a B&B in La Conception, called L'Achillée Millefeuille, where for \$5 each the proprietor will drive cycling guests to the nearby resort town of Mont Tremblant, drop them by some fine restaurants and retrieve them a few hours later. Guests who want to remain on the charming grounds of the B&B can purchase a locally made meat or vegetable pie and heat it up on site. The B&B also serves a spectacular breakfast.

Day Two called for 60 miles (97 kilometers) of cycling, with asphalt giving way to dirt, and an unexpected climb spanning 10 miles (17 kilometers), mild but persistent. Once over that hump, it was all pretty much downhill to the colorful arch marking the trail's terminus at the Saint-Jerome train station.

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QUEBEC CITY TO SAINT-JEAN-PORT-JOLI (part of Route Verte 1, along the St. Lawrence River)

A three-hour drive from Saint-Jerome put me in Levis, with time to visit Quebec City across the river. A \$5 ferry provides an efficient and scenic way to reach Old Quebec and its astonishing architecture, murals and shops — no car necessary.

Levis has a few charms of its own. A paved riverside path looking out on Quebec City provides two lanes for cyclists and one for pedestrians. In the testy world of biker-walker relations, this is the height of civilization. And Les Chocolats Favoris is the pulse of Levis, single-handedly transforming the town center into a swarm of chocolate-seeking socializers into the night.

From Levis east, Route Verte puts cyclists on Route 132, an intermittently busy road with good shoulders that parallels the Trans-Canada Highway, which soaks up most traffic. Route 132 is not particularly joyful to bike in this area, though it feels safe enough. It has some saving graces, however.

For one, it connects cyclists with a succession of quietly stunning villages hard by the river (look closely for the Route Verte signs taking you off 132 or you might miss them).

In places like Saint-Michel, Saint-Vallier and Berthier-sur-Mer, you are cycling on shady lanes past delightful homes in bright colors, not a scrap of litter anywhere. The pride of place and culture is powerful in Quebec. The ever-widening river — 12 or so miles (20 kilometers) across in these parts — opens up a vast horizon rimmed by shadowed mountains on the distant shore.

The other appeal of this route is its close proximity to a network of back roads in the high country farther from the river but still within sight of it. Here, you look out over meadows and farmland, with almost no cars, cycling past barns that are a form of folk art.

On a stretch outside Saint-Jean-Port-Joli, a lively town that is the heart of Quebec's wood-carving tradition 60 miles (97 kilometers) from Levis, the vistas are so arresting it can be hard to make progress on a bike. Every stretch seems to have something worth stopping for and savoring.

My ride ended at Joli. But Route Verte 1 goes on and on, into ever-wilder lands of Quebec's Gaspé region, where the river becomes impossibly wide, saltier, progressively more like the sea — until it becomes the sea.

SO IS IT THE BEST?

So is Quebec worthy of the world's best biking destination?

The Little Train of the North pulls its weight as an enticing bike trail, probably better than the St. Lawrence for families and anyone who doesn't want to mess with a single car while on the bike. For American cyclists, though, there are equally terrific rail trails that may be closer to home.

Route Verte 1, however, is surely in a league of its own. Its farther reaches will be what draw me back, with a pit stop, of course, for Levis ice cream, if the poutine doesn't put me away first.

If You Go...

LA ROUTE VERTE: 3,000-mile (5,000-kilometer) bike network in Quebec; <http://www.routeverte.com/rv/>

P'TIT TRAIN du NORD: Route Verte 2, running 100 miles-plus (160 kilometers) north of Montreal . Take Autobus Le P'tit Train du Nord from Saint-Jerome to the northern end at Mont Laurier (or points in between) and bike back, until mid- or late October, \$65, reservations required, 450-569-5596 or 888-893-8356, or <http://autobuslepetittraindunord.com/> . Bike rentals and luggage delivery to B&Bs along the way available for a fee. Saint-Jerome is reachable from Montreal by public transit, or drive to Saint-Jerome and leave your car at the train station for \$6 a day, free on weekends.

QUEBEC CITY TO SAINT-JEAN-PORT-JOLI: Part of Route Verte 1, running along the St. Lawrence River. For families or less experienced cyclists, consider a series of day trips by driving to various villages from Levis to Kamouraska and biking on quieter roads than Route 132. Long-distance cyclists can start in Quebec City, bike east along the river for days, and get back to the city on buses, which accept bicycles; <http://www.orleansexpress.com/Search.aspx>

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