



Cycling Infrastructure in Quebec

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Riding La Route Verte



This month's article was submitted by Rick Howell who, with his wife Julie, toured a section of La Route Verte, a 5,300-km cycling network easily accessible to everyone and linking all the regions of Québec. Thanks to well-marked, standardized bike paths, cycling enthusiasts can tour the province comfortably and safely. This experience left Rick with these thoughts: When travelling abroad on infrastructure that provides safe, scenic routes for bicycles, we often ponder why we cannot do the same in B.C., especially on Vancouver Island. Sadly, here at home, we ride piecemeal bike trails or busy highways with no shoulders, yet like a growing number of others, we continue to ride despite the limitations.

The potential for cycling on Vancouver Island remains relatively untapped. We are blessed with a landscape of stunning vistas with minimal elevation change and a climate that promotes year round cycling. We could be a cycling tourist destination like so many other progressive regions in North America. Québec's Route Verte, in one year alone (2003), generated \$95 million in economic growth. Not bad for an \$88 million investment! What will it take to convince our political leaders that bicycles can and will make a difference to the health and economy of our communities?

Conceived in the 60s, planned in the 80s, and built in the 90s, Québec's Route Verte provides over 5000 km of cycling infrastructure for bicycling enthusiasts the world over. National Geographic ranked La Route Verte in the top ten cycling destinations in 2009. Having experienced cycle paths in Europe and Asia, we felt it was about time we rode the world class trails in our own country. As well, in the light of MP Gord Johns' drive to design a national plan for cycling, we wanted to know how Québec was able to realize a vision of cycle travel that many dream of here in the Comox Valley.

With the Route Verte network so extensive and varied where does one spend three weeks at the end of the summer season? After consultation with other coalition members who have cycled extensively in the belle province and studying the Cycling in Quebec guide book, 9th edition (\$25.00 online) we decided on a figure 8 loop through the Eastern Townships, beginning and ending in Québec City. We allowed for 3 days in the capital to cycle the city and environs at the end of our tour.

We depart from the ferry pier in the Old City. The bike path runs right into the ticket booth and the short crossing provides stunning vistas of the bastion of French Canada hanging on the cliffs of the St. Lawrence river. Route Vert 1 follows the river west, up through the Parc des Chutes Chaudiere, across the suspension bridge and on to the rail bed of the Grand Trunk railway. I recalled the importance of this north-south link in the 19th century from my years teaching Canadian history. Today there are numerous sign boards recalling the days of farms, mills and mines and the need to move product to market. The trail is dead straight, walled with high bush and trees with little opportunity to glimpse the surrounding countryside. However, the small towns along the route provide quaint stops at old train stations now housing tourist information, craft boutiques and cafes. Plessisville, Princeville, Victoriaville and Warwick for the most part are beautifully maintained and operated by students who are eager to speak English and share the history of their respective communities.

Along the route, we are continually amazed at the size of this undertaking. We observe maintenance crews complete with trail packing machines. We meet bike enthusiasts on the trail, in coffee shops and at the counters of the info centres. How did this occur in a province that many of us in the west view as being behind the times?

The driving spirit behind the cycling movement is Velo Québec, a non-profit organization founded in 1967. The fledgling group framed a mandate to shape recreation, tourism and ultimately lifestyle with a plan for

linking the province with bicycle paths. In 1992 they convinced the provincial government to invest 88.5 million dollars over ten years and with the help of regional partners, municipal governments, tourist associations and sport/leisure agencies the project was launched. Unprecedented collaboration that continues today has led to the addition of further routes in tandem with a host of regional loops. The Quebec government provides 2.8 million dollars for maintenance annually.

After following the Sainte Francois River to Sherbrooke we head west along the Magog River, through a pretty waterside trail that morphs into a share the road section through residential streets. Most of the time these routes are packed gravel that transition to pavement as we hit the outskirts of a town. A night at Mt Orford National Park with a hike of Mt Baldy reveals the scope of waterways in this part of Quebec. Lakes abound and large rivers running north from the Appalachians are frequently crossed, Sainte Francois, Becancour, Nicolet and Richelieu to name a few.

A word regarding accommodations. A first glance at the Bienvenue Cyclistes and the summer rates for hotels or B & Bs, convinced us that camping would be our budget choice. The campgrounds, however, resemble RV resorts with minimal space for cyclists, even the recommended venues in the travel guide. (A regional camping book proved to be more helpful.) An unserviced piece of grass in a field averaged \$40.00 a night (\$2.00 extra for showers). These sites boast water slides, restaurants, playing fields, swimming pools and in some cases artificial lakes. For the most part these are closed communities where we were treated as outsiders and sometimes felt like an inconvenience to the management. All we really wanted was a patch of grass with a picnic table!

The bustling city of Granby marks the centre of our figure 8 loop and one of many Eastern Townships we will visit. The landscape on this journey reflects our history. The French settlements of the 17th century follow the seigneurial system, long strips of land fronting on rivers, convenient for irrigation, travel and trade. When the United Empire Loyalists came north following the American Revolution, they settled here using the township models of the British Isles. Even today each of the townships reflects its ancestral founders. Some remain British, others Scottish while others blend the qualities of French and English. Waterloo, Bromont, Sutton, Brome, Farnham, each portray a unique character.

In Chambly, at the end of the Richelieu rapids, stands the fortress of the same name. From here the Indian wars were fought, & later the American Wars. The route south to New York State follows the Chambly canal. We ride a strip of land with the rushing Richelieu on our left and the calm waters of the canal on our right. At St Jean sur Richelieu we take a scenic regional route through farmlands to Fort Lennox, the island bastion against southern aggression. This section is aptly called the Vallee des Forts.

We turn north east at St Jean sur Richelieu where we participate in a food festival and sample the best poutine to date. We pass through Granby again without losing direction this time and night in Yamaska National Park. These



park stops resemble our BC park experiences where rustic designated cycling sites are more to our liking. Reservoir Choiniere is a flooded valley, where the Yamaska river is held back by a large earthen dam. During our visit here ancestors of the flooded families search the large model in the visitor's centre tracing the property lines of their family farms etched on the diagrammed floor of the lake. Some, we are told, take boats out on the water and bob above homes, schools and fence lines.

The ride from here to Drummondville (Route Verte 4) is picturesque but getting in and out of big cities remains a hassle for us. Usually the problem is too many bike paths ó (ah! to have the luxury of such a problem.) Most of them are local commuter routes that can take the unwary cyclist to unwanted destinations.

We have arrived once again at the Sainte Francois river and the 40 km ride to the crossing at Pierreville takes us through lush, treed paths along the waterway. Many are sugar maples connected by blue plastic tubing interlacing the forest like a giant spider's web. In February these will run rich with maple sap that eventually drain into the sugar shacks that are barely visible through the leaves. From Pierreville we ride country roads making our way around farm perimeters. Villages with names like St Elphege , La Visitation de Yamaska, and Sainte Monique remind us of Quebec's Catholic roots. Many of the old country churches and their presbyteres stand empty, paint peeling from their walls, "For Sale" signs in their yards: The Catholic Church is selling off its rural real estate. The renovated presbytere in Magog, where we spent a pleasant evening earlier in our journey, is operated by an efficient hostel association.

At Nicolet we front the St. Lawrence, much wider here than at Quebec City and still tidal. Its "share the road" Route Verte 3 from here to Charny, a busy artery, is la route des navigateurs-one of the oldest roads in Quebec. The shoulder is ample and the drivers respectful. We are encouraged by the signage that shows the 1 meter allowance for bicycles. Here motorists are fined for violating this buffer zone.

Once again the rolling countryside high above the St. Lawrence is ideal for cycling with plenty of small towns to break up the distances. We join a farmers market in Leclercville, visit a seigneurial estate at Lotbiniere and view a wedding at St. Antoine.

We recross the St. Lawrence 20 km up river from Quebec City on the old Quebec bridge, the last crossing before the river enters the gulf. The rusty bridge carries trains, cars and bicycles and looks tired, the narrow bike lane paved with metal flakes from the super structure above. We discover later that this bridge has collapsed twice in its history since 1897 and now sits high on the endangered historic sites list. Safely on the other side the Corridor du Littoral leads us towards Quebec City, the oldest incorporated city in Canada. There we were offered ample opportunities for cycling day trips in and around the city including a circuit of Ile d'Orleans.

Our taste of the Route Verte was over 1000 km and entices us to return.

ó Submitted by Rick Howell

