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Seemingly endless trails are the norm throughout the Quebec Maritime.

French accent



Chantal and Eric Gagne of Domaine Valga offer hospitality and home-cooked meals.

Dining and riding in the Quebec Maritime

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY DAN GOULD

A trip to Europe may not be in the budget this year, but that hardly means such an escape is out of reach. Just a few miles north of the Maine border are the quaint villages of the Quebec Maritime where French is the native language and traditional cultural experiences abound. A little more than a day's drive will deliver most travelers from Central Massachusetts to Quebec, Canada's largest province.

The four-season resort of Pohénég-

mook Santé Plein Air in the Bas-Saint-Laurent region is a popular starting point for a weeklong trip in the Maritime. Late afternoon arrivals are often greeted by a herd of deer that hoof down the mountain toward the lake to feed. After checking in, many guests relax in the outdoor Nordic spas. The Scandinavian therapy consists of saunas and cool-water basins, complemented by a glowing fireplace and soothing multi-hued lights. An enchanting place, indeed.

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A country-style condo hotel at Pohénégamook Santé Plein Air offers a view of Pohénégamook Lake from the dining room.

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While a typical sightseer might tour the region behind the wheel, those who consider themselves even remotely adventurous should consider exploring the countryside in a style more conducive to the surroundings and culture —no, not in a Citroen, but on a snowmobile. Such a move will transform a simple vacation into an outright journey.

Thousands of kilometers of trails are

groomed to perfection, allowing travel by sled from December through late March. Touring by snowmobile directly connects the rider with winter's natural beauty, unlike any other mode of transportation. The view through a grime-covered windshield of the family SUV simply cannot deliver the all-encompassing sensation of the mighty Saint Lawrence River making its way to the Atlantic. That winter vista, on the Gaspésie shore, is reserved for those



The Table d'Hôte at the Village Grande Nature Chic-Chocs offers spectacular desserts in the French tradition.

riding snow machines on miles of spectacular mountain switchbacks to the top of Mont-Saint-Pierre.

Never snowmobiled before? Not a problem. With a map in hand, navigation is relatively simple. Trails are numbered much like highways and clearly point you in the direction of hotels, restaurants and key attractions, such as the giant windmill farms in the Matane region or picturesque lighthouses that dot the estuary.

Sleds can be rented at Panda Aventures, where proprietor Steve Gaudreau is available as a guide. His keen sense of conditions and vast knowledge of the area make the adventure far more enjoyable.

Trailside lodging and cuisine are plentiful, with styles ranging from formal to relaxed. The hand-built log inn Domaine

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Valga in Saint-Gabriel-de-Rimouski is warmed by a cast-iron woodstove; the family dog greets visitors upon arrival. The Gagne family serves traditional Canadian homemade meals, such as salmon baked in maple syrup, and dangerously delicious desserts. Conversation here is an entertaining mix of French and English.

Farther east, the white-capped Cap-Chat and Chic-Choc Mountains dominate a sude blue sky over Trans-Quebec Route 5, a 2,000-mile snowmobile route that crosses the province. Riders happily cruise at 40 mph atop the 50-foot-wide trail. The corridor flows like a river, seemingly with no end. Side trails lead into the mountains, and short evergreens encroach upon the narrowing path, each corner revealing one stunning view after another. Riders are parked along the edges, helmets off, taking snapshots of each other in front the majestic panoramas.

On these short winter days, dozens of yellow and red Ski-Doos are parked in front of Village Grande Nature Chic-Chocs just as the sun vanishes behind the tiny village of Cap-Chat.

The table d'hôte features a smoked salmon appetizer, perfumed with lime, followed by a surf and turf entrée of scallops and tenderloin. A French-born waitress dressed in a long black jacket hastily moves from table to table, somehow managing to hold an air of elegance while balancing a



Top photo, Mont-Saint-Pierre in the Gaspésie Region overlooks the St. Lawrence River. Above, deer greet visitors near a trail.

decorative dish of burgundy snails à la Provençal. The dining room at the hotel is packed. The background chatter is a mix of languages, not easily understood, but clearly everyone is excited, recalling the day that was and making plans for the next.

Ice crystals twinkle in dawn's first light, as riders make an early start on freshly groomed trails, which look more like poured concrete than snow. Pristine conditions allow quick, precise riding, a euphoric sensation that seasoned snowmobilers dream of all year long. Quebec has a long-standing reputation of superior trail conditions, allowing hundreds of miles of travel in a single day. This was one of those days, with only a single stop in the afternoon.

A large crowd almost blocks the trail outside a local clubhouse where lunch is served. Two-fisted club sandwiches and traditional servings of poutine — french fries

Quebec Maritime

- For general information on lodging, restaurants, activities and self-guided tours in the Quebec Maritime, visit www.quebecmaritime.ca/en.

- www.bonjourquebec.com/snowmobile has trail condition updates and information on rules, permits, destinations and lodging packages.

- Lodging information for Pohénégamook Santé Plein Air, Domaine Valga and Village Grande Nature Chic-Chocs is available at www.quebecmaritime.ca/en.

smothered in cheese and gravy — are standard fare. Hot, tasty and inexpensive. Locals know that the clubhouses offer some of the best trailside meals. Every traveler should know, too.

The lunch crowd disperses in a cloud of snow-dust. Some are out for a day's ride with the family, others are on a 1,500-mile weeklong expedition from Montreal.

The miles logged are not what this is all about. Snowmobiling rewards travelers with glimpses of coastal towns bathed in red, and blue skies and rock faces that climb hundreds of feet out of the evergreens. The memories are cast by the intimate connection of being outdoors. It's the difference between critiquing a painting versus actually putting oil to canvas; an experience delivered in vibrant colors while in the saddle of an "iron dog" in the Maritime. **W**