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cycle



Spinning wheels on the Jacques-Cartier/ Portneuf rail trail

Secondary roads take
cyclists past ancestral
homes in the village
of **Neuville**.

PHOTO: MATHIEU
LAMARRE

By Paul Glassman

Ah, the pleasures of European cycling. Pop your bike into the luggage car of the train, chug off to a scenic locale,

and start pedaling. The distances are anything but intimidating, there's a new historical sight to behold at every turn, and the terrain is flat or mildly rolling. Travel light. Wherever you go there's an

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intimate restaurant or an inn that exudes the charm of the region and its hosts. If only we had it so good on this side... Well, actually, we do. In

that most European part of our continent, in the region of Quebec City, villages centuries old cluster along rivers and below command-

ing mountains and a waterfall that tops Niagara. Conveniently, a network of cycling trails and lightly trafficked roads connect it all.

Our cycling tour began at Montreal's Central Station, on the three-times-a-week morning train that loops to the northwest of Quebec City on its way to Jonquière. We rolled through suburbs and the broad black-earth valley of the St. Lawrence River, past lumber towns marked by the steeples of landmark churches and along the edge of the densely forested Canadian Shield, a historical tour in itself of Quebec. After four hours, we detrained at Rivière-à-Pierre, population 600 souls.

In a car, you might rush through what sounds to be no more than "Pierre's River." But fresh off the train, with a bike, you stroll, stretch your legs, break out victuals to snack along the grassy riverbank, regard the rock formations and slow pace and spend a few minutes at the former firehouse that is a town museum. Here you learn that it's stone (the French word for stone is "pierre") that gave this place its name and fame, specifically the granite that composes the base of the Statue of Liberty.

For our purposes, Rivière-à-Pierre is the starting point of the Jacques-Cartier/Portneuf cycling trail that winds for 68 km (42 miles) along an ex-railway line to just past the town of Shannon. That's an easy day-long trip, or a starting point for excursions over several days. Grades are suited to trains and to leisurely cyclists: up a hundred metres, or so, in the first four km, then descending mildly.

Dense forest conceals any hint that your surroundings differ from what Jacques Cartier espied 400 years ago . . . until a stop on a former railway trestle opens views along the canyons of the Saint Anne and Portneuf rivers to distant cottages offering million-dollar views of forests, valleys and, in season, snow-clad peaks.

Turn off from a trestle about half-way along to cycle along the streets of St. Raymond, a summering place lined with restored wood and brick houses adorned with balconies that bring to

mind New Orleans. If your panniers are empty, several épiceries can supply crusty bread and local cheeses for your pique-nique at one of the stopping places farther down the trail

Three-quarters of the way along the former track is Lake St. Joseph and Station Touristique Duchesnay, a former forestry school offering accommodation ranging from family-style modest to a brand-new hotel – Auberge Duchesnay – with every modern convenience and signature dining including local game prepared in classic French style. Tyst Trädgård, a Scandinavian spa on the property, is a hillside village in itself with themed treatment rooms (King Tut massage, anyone?). Worth the trip, whether your muscles ache or not.

From here you can choose to poke around for as many days as you like, alternating canoeing and rowing with cycling to villages just off the railbed trail (véloroute), and natural sites reached along country roads. A loop along route 371 takes you to where the Jacques Cartier River gashes through the Canadian Shield. Continue to Lake Delage and the Marais du Nord, a marshy home to 159 bird species, beavers, otters, and occasional visitors hiking the quiet of its trails.

• Ah, the pleasures of Quebec cycling. ✦

Author and freelance writer Paul Glassman writes regularly about Quebec and Latin America.

Velopiste Jacques-Cartier/Portneuf connects to the Route Verte, ranked by National Geographic as one of the top 10 bike routes on the planet.

velopistejcp.com
routeverte.com

VIA Rail serves Rivière-à-Pierre three times a week from Montreal
viarail.ca

For more on cycling in Quebec
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