



CYCLING THROUGH CANADA'S LAURENTIANS

BY KATHY ARNOLD

Québec's Rivière du Nord is a river of many moods. As we pedal alongside, it rushes noisily through a narrow gorge and then, around a corner, changes pace. "Pure Zen," my husband reckons, as we stop, look across the calm pool and listen to birdsong.

ON THE FAR BANK, FLAT SLABS OF ROCK are backed by birch and pine trees. We imagine the voyageurs, French fur traders of old, pulling up their canoes and making camp. The sky is deep blue; the air is as refreshing as cold cider; the autumn leaves are changing to yellow, gold and scarlet. Experiences don't come better than this – and it is 100 per cent Canadian.

Across North America, former railway lines have been converted to cycle trails. This one, Le P'tit Train du Nord Linear Park, is car-free, well-maintained and runs for about 140 miles/232 km through the Laurentian Mountains. What were

once stations have been converted into bistros, cafés and B&Bs. And, in early October, this route cuts through Québec's renowned fall foliage scenery.

An hour north-west of Montréal is the small town of Saint-Jérôme. This is Kilometre 0, where we collect our bikes and board the navette (shuttle bus). Although the beginning of the park is farther to the north, at Kilometre 200 in Mont-Laurier, we are taking the shorter, three-day, two-night tour. So, we are dropped off in L'Annonciation, Kilometre 128. Waving us on our way, our driver

ABOVE
There are beautiful views of Québec's Rivière du Nord all along the way

RIGHT
The gentle Laurentian biking trails are ideal for family cycling



calls out: "Happy cycling; from here, it's downhill all the way!"

In minutes, we are cruising past meadows and woods. The path is 8 feet wide, so there is no chance of getting lost as we follow the Rouge River, lined with aspen, beech, maple and poplar. Before we know it, we reach Labelle (Kilometre 107), where the train station is now La Gare (www.lagare-labelle.com), a welcoming combination of bar, restaurant and auberge. After a panaché, the Francophone version of a shandy, we order lunch – cauliflower and dried tomato soup, perfectly-cooked hamburgers and thick chips that we dip into garlicky mayonnaise.

With no tour leader, we can set our own pace, so we spend time in the small museum that tells the story of the P'tit Train du Nord. "In the late 19th century, a priest called Curé Antoine Labelle campaigned for a railway line to link Montréal with the poor forest communities," explains the museum's exhibition. "By the 1920s and 30s, what had been built to transport timber, milk and mail was transformed. Skiing had become popular, with thousands travelling every weekend to resorts like Mont Tremblant." By the 1960s, cars had become the transport of choice, the main road was built and the train was eventually abandoned. "Luckily, the old tracks were converted into a cycle path. It opened in 1996 and is one of the longest in Canada!"

EN ROUTE ARE LAKES, SUMMER COTTAGES AND WILDLIFE

Signposts every kilometre register our progress and we enjoy the serendipity, from trees speckled with mysterious red-and-yellow mushrooms to chipmunks scuttling through the leaves. The cycleway curves around lakes, where canoes and kayaks are tied up to the docks of summer cottages. It passes wetlands, where the information panels have an eco-message.

On one of the many trail-side boards, we read about the urubus à tête rouge, turkey vultures – and look up to see six of them, riding the thermals high above the meadows. Placards advertise horse rides; nesting boxes for birds sit high on poles; children pick

wild raspberries. The occasional cottage has a deck for summer barbecuing and a neatly-stacked pile of logs for those cold, clear-sky winters. Back in the woods, l'Achillée Millefeuille (www.millefeuille.ca) is an eco-conscious resort, where city people rent rustic cabins, learn how to cook healthy meals, relax with yoga and have massages in the spa.

By late afternoon, we are close to the four-season resort that is Mont Tremblant (www.tremblant.ca), with its 968-metre summit. Clustered around the former railway station – now an information centre and art

CYCLING + CUISINE = BIKING BLISS

The province of Québec is famous for good food. Only an hour west of Montréal, the 140-mile/226km Chemin du Terroir (www.laurentides.com/en/le-chemin-du-terroir) links restaurants, shops and producers in the rural region called the Lower Laurentians. Getting there is easy – take the century-old, family-run ferry across the Ottawa River, from Hudson to Oka (www.traverseoka.ca; C\$10 per car). Autumn is the perfect time to sample what's on offer. Here are a few places to stop and taste the bounty.

OKA ABBEY SHOP: Cheeses, pâtés and sausages still made the way the monks once made them. <http://magasin-abbayeoka.com/>

TARTERIE DU VERGER DES MUSIQUES: A bakery with heady smells of cinnamon, apple fritters and bread. www.tarterieduvergerdesmusiques.com



LES VERGERS LAFRANCE FARM AND SHOP: Taste their cider and see how they make it and sample the Tomme de Brebis, a sheep's cheese washed in apple juice. www.lesvergerslafrance.com

LA ROCHE DES BRISES: A vineyard offering tastings of ten red, white and rosé wines for C\$7/£5. www.rochedesbrises.com

LA ROUTE DES GERBES D'ANGELICA: This series of whimsical gardens is a labour of love. Only six years old, it is unlike any other garden you have ever seen and is developing all the time. The bread, cookies, jellies and vinegars sold in the shop are all made there. www.gerbesdangelica.com

studio – the little community includes a few shops and a deli, where we pick up cold drinks.

At the end of the day, the Gîte le Voyageur B&B Inn (www.bbvoyageur.com) at Kilometre 82 is a welcome sight. Our package includes luggage transfers, so our bags are waiting for us in our comfy room. It also includes dinner in the nearby village of Saint-Jovite and a fresh fruit and Eggs Benedict breakfast the following morning, when we swap tips with fellow cyclists.

Back in the saddle, we pull on baseball caps and sunglasses and head east into the low September sun. On-comers greet us with a cheerful "Bonne journée; Have a nice day!" A deer bounces in front of us, stops, stares and bounds off into the woods. At Saint-Faustin Lac-Carré's former station, we find the unusual

Arbre de l'Amour, a tree-shaped metal sculpture, covered with red and silver heart-shaped padlocks. Unlike the 'love locks' that garland bridges around the world, these hand-made coeur messenger padlocks raise money for heart and stroke research (www.coeurmessenger.com).

CLEAN AIR, LEVEL TERRAIN AND EASY PEDALLING

The clean Québec air provides an olfactory detox; breathing deeply, we can identify scents such as marshmallow and sweet pine. As for exercise, the pedalling is easy enough, with rises here and there providing interest. Today, the map shows a

BELOW The gardens at Gerbes d'Angelica

