

THREE EASY 50-MILE TRIPS YOU CAN TAKE ALONG CANADA'S NEWLY OPENED LA ROUTE VERTE

BY ALISON GREGOR

Special to Newsday

When Wolfgang Schivelbusch, a contemporary German philosopher with a catchy name, theorized that the railroad effectively collapsed the distance between cities and isolated people from nature, he didn't envision a time when bicyclists would reclaim abandoned railways in order to recapture an antiquated leisureliness.

But that is exactly what they are doing throughout North America, and the most extensive pathway system is in Canada's bike-crazy province of Quebec. There, about 2,500 miles of bike paths, under development since 1995, are being inaugurated this summer as La Route Verte. The trails, linking 16 of Quebec's 17 regions, also touch 320 cities and towns, many of which have their own municipal systems of bikeways.

The paths wind by vineyards, fromageries and chocolatiers, not to mention the colorful "maison québécoise," charming cottages that date to the 18th century and often are shaded by apple orchards and cherry trees. But Quebec, known in the past for its insularity and Francophone steadfastness, has not as yet done a great job of promoting the trails system to travelers coming from outside the province.

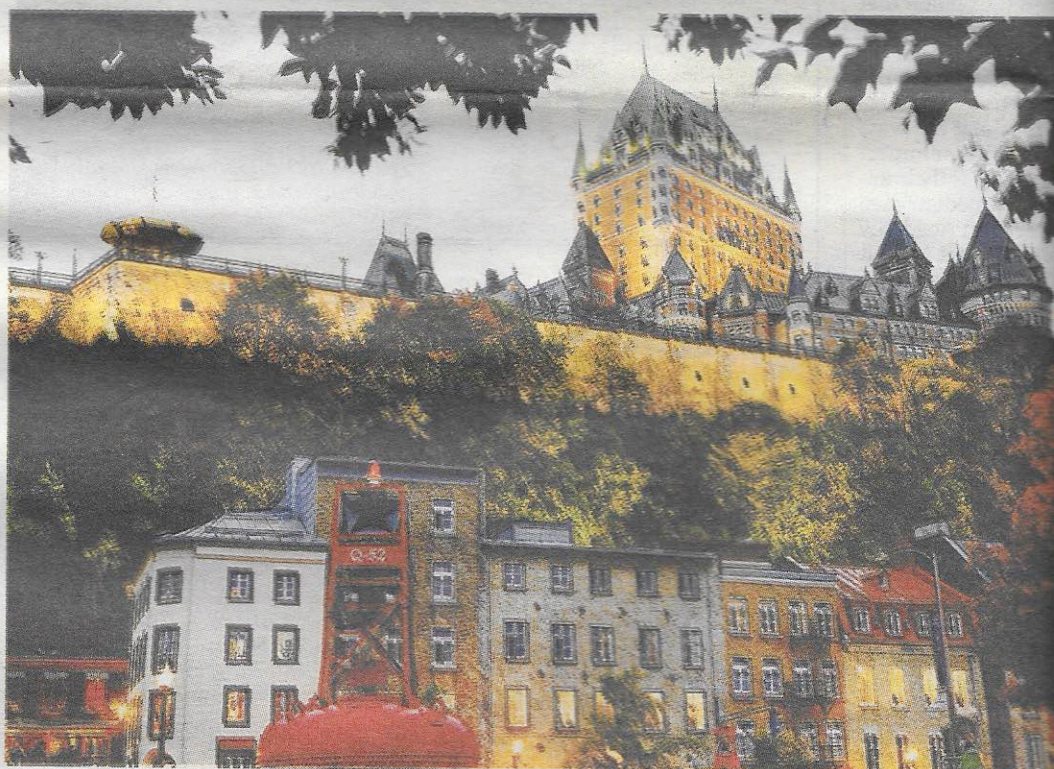
But knowing that Quebec City is a mere 8½-hour drive on easy highways from New York City, we decided to take a long weekend to explore the bike trails. (Montreal is six hours from the city and is also a good place to catch the paths.) We didn't take our bikes, because a hallmark of La Route Verte is conveniently located bicycle shops.

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Blazing BIKE



NEWSDAY / GUSTAVO PABON



QUEBEC CITY TOURISM P

Fairmont Le Château Frontenac, a famous if pricey hotel, was the logical starting point for a bike tour of Quebec City. Right, La Route Verte crisscrosses the Quebec countryside.

Vieux-Port market. Conventional bicycles are available for rent there, along with tandem and reclining bicycles, adult-size tricycles, bicycles with flip-on motors for the nasty hills, and other types of wheeled conveyances.

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The paths wind by vineyards, fromageries and chocolatiers, not to mention the colorful "maison québécoise," charming cottages that date to the 18th century and often are shaded by apple orchards and cherry trees. But Quebec, known in the past for its insularity and Francophone steadfastness, has not as yet done a great job of promoting the trails system to travelers coming from outside the province.

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Arriving in Quebec City late in the evening, we chose the imposing Fairmont Le Château Frontenac in old Quebec as a logical — if pricey — location from which to start the next day's exploration. Sinking into the beds is like burrowing into the swaddling clothes of infancy, and we speculated that it (along with a massage in the hotel spa) might also be a good way to ease the body aches after a long bike trip.

Rising early, we took a quick stroll to Cyclo Services in the

Vieux-Port market. Conventional bicycles are available for rent there, along with tandem and reclining bicycles, adult-size tricycles, bicycles with flip-on motors for the nasty hills, and other types of wheeled conveyances.

Danielle Brochu, a co-owner of the shop, said a growing number of travelers, especially families, are building cycling days into their vacations.

"We're starting to be what we call in French 'la maison de cyclistes,'" she said. "Many people are coming here, not only to rent bikes, but wanting to know what they can see,

where they can go, so we give them that information."

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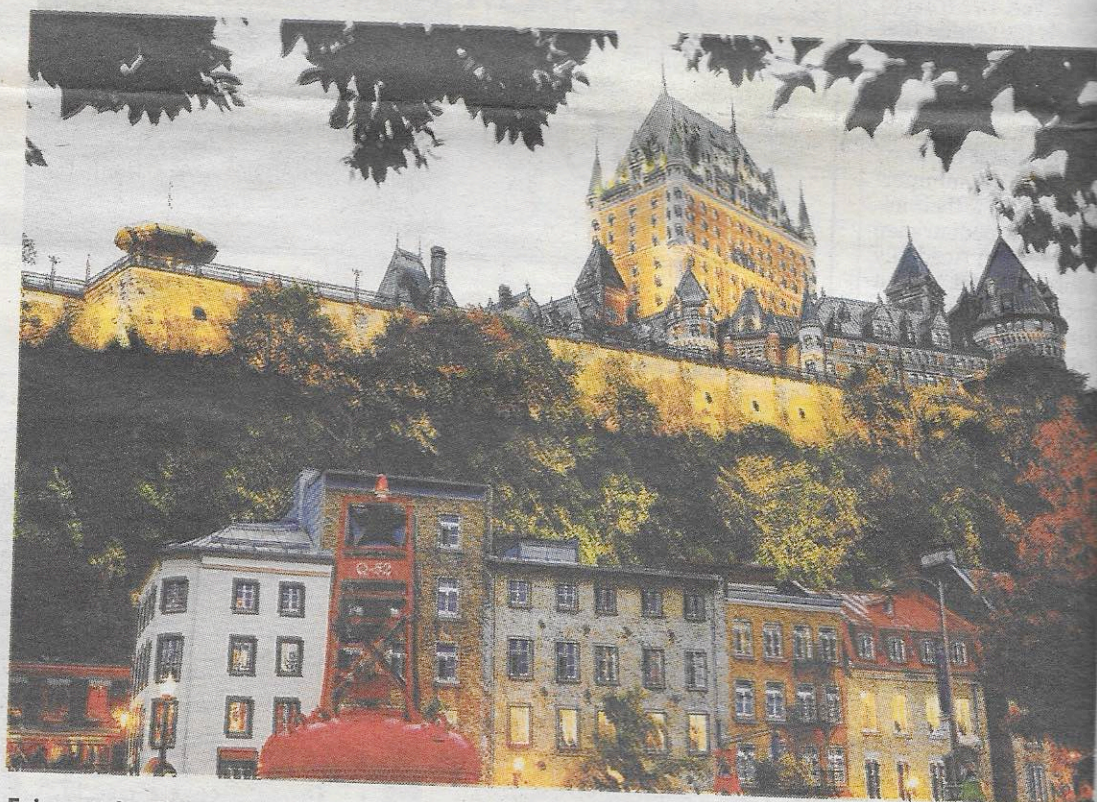
Chaudière Appalaches

We took the ferry from Quebec to Lévis, where the path is smooth, dotted by shady parks, some with staircases up the rocky cliffs that lead into the city of Lévis, once a formidable British redoubt that ominously eyed the French capital. The trails are heavily used by young and old, solo and in groups, on

everything from bikes and Rollerblades to power chairs.

We traveled to Montmagny, which offers an accordion museum. Cycling gives you the time to examine the fields of fruit trees and also makes you very hungry. We stopped at the Casse-Croûte & Bar Laitier l'Aller-Retour, a roadside stand for fried food and ice cream, where we inhaled a uniquely French-Canadian dish called "poutine," which is available in a greasy sleeve as well as on a bun. It consists of French fries topped with velvety cheese

Cycling the province



Fairmont Le Château Frontenac, a famous if pricey hotel, was the logical starting point for a bike tour of Quebec City. Right, La Route Verte crisscrosses the Quebec countryside.

QUEBEC CITY TOURISM PHOTO

QUEBEC from D8

curds doused in a smoky, brown gravy, and may well be the siren song of some cyclists.

We then cycled back into Quebec on the Pont de Quebec. We did not encounter one tourist or native English-speaker on the trail that day. We did meet Louise Parent, 67, a native of Quebec City, who said she cycles the 18.6-mile loop from her house, crossing on the ferry to Lévis and cycling back on the bridge, three to five times a week in summer and sees few tourists.

During Quebec's long winter, she uses the trails to cross-country ski.

La Route de la Nouvelle-France

This path runs east from the city through the Côte-de-Beaupré for about 30 miles, at least as far as Cap Tourmente, a wildlife preserve. Due to the byway's many temptations, we never made it that far.

The paved path from the city arrives at one of the region's busiest tourist attractions, Montmorency Falls, the only place outside Quebec City where we encountered foreign visitors: namely, hundreds of boys in Utica College T-shirts. The falls are double the height of Niagara and can be accessed by a cable car or an antique-feeling set of stairs. We watched two seemingly fearless Québécois take a swim well within the buoys roping off the cascade.

Running above the falls is the bucolic avenue Royale. Lined by some of the oldest homes in Quebec, including the 17th-century Maison Vézina, which also functions as a studio for visual artists, the route is a veritable smorgasbord of local produce. Besides wineries and farmers' markets, there is a traditional bakery and a sugar shack that produces maple sugar products. Some features are along Highway 138, including a bee museum, part of a provincewide network of "economuseums" that show local artisans at work.

We sipped various honey wines, called mead, and watched a hive of bees at work. There is also a copper museum nearby. We made it as far as the Basilique Sainte-Anne, an impressive cathedral famous for curing the sick. (There are hundreds of crutches of the formerly lame tacked up inside the cathedral arch as proof.)

Since the bike trails are dotted with inns, it's easy to find accommodation for the night. One lovely bed and breakfast is Le Royal Champêtre, recently purchased by Philippe and Corinne Gardy, who moved to Quebec from the south of France with their two young sons.

Though the inn is relatively new, Corinne Gardy cooks hearty breakfasts during the colder months on a restored cast-iron Belanger stove that will be 100 years old next year and dominates the kitchen.

Philippe Gardy recommended we investigate the Île d'Orléans, so we did, but a note to cyclists: Although the island is utterly bewitching, with charming, centuries-old homes and churches tucked among caves de vin and cider makers, and signs proclaiming "Bienvenue cyclistes!" automobiles are recommended, at least for now. The two-lane bridge requires steady maneuvering on a 3-foot-wide sidewalk while the island's 41-mile loop is on twisty, sometimes shoulderless road that can get precarious with

heavy traffic.

Despite the fear of developing gout after a day of gourmandizing, we rewarded ourselves with a savory dinner of Canadian pike on creamy polenta and bison steak in juniper berries at Restaurant Les Ancêtres in the village of Saint-Pierre on the island. We wolfed down a slice of traditional Canadian sugar pie.

Corridor des Cheminots

On our last day, we went up the Corridor des Cheminots, chosen principally because it runs by the famed ice hotel at Duchesnay, which also has a Scandinavian-inspired health center. This trail was quite different from the previous day's; there were longer distances between towns and knowledge of village trails was necessary to take advantage of the many offerings.

While the ice hotel — the only one in North America — is crafted of ice each year by artists and open January through March, it was a bit of a let-down in spring. However, we enjoyed the ride through thickening conifer forests, past waterfalls and rocky hills as we headed toward the village of Saint-Raymond de Portneuf, about 40 miles from Quebec.

We found a horde of cyclists enjoying lunch alfresco at the Fromagerie Alexis de Portneuf, a cheese shop more than 150 years old that makes about 30 varieties of succulent cheeses from both goat's milk and cow's milk and carries an extensive range of imports. The staff bakes fresh bread and offers wines, such as Muscadet, which goes well with goat cheeses.

After veering off our trail by many miles (and steep hills) to find a rustic mountainside chocolatier that was not yet open for the season, we stumbled upon a great place to rest weary legs at La Bastide, a small inn and restaurant inside what was formerly the Saint-Raymond mayor's house, built in 1903.

Seven rooms are decorated country-style by chef-owner Pascal Cothet, all wood and wicker with plaid accents, and at least one has a restored claw-foot tub. Cothet said he is bringing an upscale touch to a region that is sylvan and unsophisticated, and his menu includes scallops and parrot fish. But the restaurant also serves wapiti (the Shawnee word for elk) raised on a local ranch.

As we toasted each other with a glass of local rosé on our last evening, we realized that just about the only healthy way to tour Quebec, where it's quite possible to consume 5,000 calories a day, is by bicycle.



QUEBEC CITY TOURISM PHOTO

Taking an evening break on Saint-Louis Street in Old Quebec

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VELO QUEBEC PHOTO

A sign for La Route Verte; below, a sidewalk cafe on Petit-Champlain Street, Quebec City

IF YOU GO

If you are headed to Quebec for some bicycling on **La Route Verte**, you can check out the Web site for the trails system at routeverte.com/ang/ or contact **Vélo Québec**, the group that developed the trails, at 800-567-8356, for more information. In the next couple months, plenty of events planned throughout the province to celebrate the inauguration of the pathways. There are maps online for each of the regions crossed by La Route Verte that show some lodging and campgrounds. Bike shops are also listed. And there is a link to the Web page of the tourism bureau for each region, which may be helpful.

Stopping in at **Cyclo Services** (160 St-André, Quebec, 418-692-4052, cycloservices.net) is recommended, whether you're renting bicycles or not. The shop has several different types of pathway maps, including the latest editions of the Guide vélo maps for many of the regions, which include local trails that are linked to — but are not part of — La Route Verte. The quality of the trails, whether paved or dirt, is indicated. These maps show some stopping places, indicating bathrooms and drinking water sources, picnic areas and scenic vistas. They also have lists of lodging, restaurants and tourist attractions, though these are not mapped.

Cyclo Services co-owner Danielle Brochu leads tours throughout the province and can recommend bicycle trails as well.

— ALISON GREGOR

