

# RIDING THE GREEN

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QUÉBEC'S ROUTE VERTE

Story



# GREEN ROAD

and photos by Graeme Green



The ferry pulled away from the banks of Québec City and Le Château Frontenac, the striking hilltop hotel where Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King met in World War II to draw up plans for the D-Day landings in France.

The building grew smaller as the boat chugged across the Saint Lawrence River to the south shore. Like those wartime strategists, my own time in Québec City had also involved maps, logistics, and detailed planning, although my mission was far smaller and of infinitely less importance to the future of civilization. I was just on a bike journey from Québec City out along the Saint Lawrence River and Saguenay Fjord to the scenic spot Lac Saint-Jean. I'd be covering around 530 kilometers by bike and ferry, riding along several sections of the recently completed Route Verte (Green

Road), more than 5,000 kilometers of connected bike trails across the Québec region. Along the way, there'd be a chance to spot whales, kayak on the fjord, and stay overnight in a zoo, a lighthouse, and a ghost town.

Cycling is popular in Québec, and there were several other cyclists alongside me on the Québec-Lévis ferry itching to get pedaling on the south shore. The ferry master wished me *"bon voyage"* as the heavy ramp clanked into place. I stepped on the pedals and my adventure began.

This wasn't my first trip on the Route Verte. I'd first come to Québec in October 2012 to ride a popular section called P'tit Train du Nord (Little Train of the North), an easy 200-kilometer trail through the Laurentian Mountains north of Montréal. I'd timed that trip to experience the autumn colors, which were spectacular. There were forests of deep crimson, fiery orange, gold, brown, and green, sometimes reflected in perfectly still lakes. I immediately starting planning a return visit.

**"MAYBE IT WAS THE GLASSES OF BEER, MAYBE THE SUNSHINE AND BLUE SKIES, BUT THE AFTERNOON FELT EXHILARATING."**

The Route Verte project started in 1995, inspired by bicycle-network projects in Europe. National Geographic has named it the world's best biking trail. Around 1,800 kilometers are dedicated bike paths, with 3,200 kilometers of on-road bike trails, ranging from the Laurentian Mountains to the remote Gaspé



The Brandy Pot Island Lighthouse stands guard on a flat rock outcrop in the Saint Lawrence estuary.

Peninsula. If my first taster session had a fault, it was that P'tit Train trail, which follows an old rail line from the 1890s, was quite flat and not very challenging. Cyclists I met in Québec told me about other diverse sections in the region. I wanted to come back to see more, to complete a journey that was grander and more adventurous.

just me and my bicycle.

Signs for Route des Navigateurs (Navigator's Route) led the way along the Saint Lawrence. Early French and English explorers traveled on this mighty river, settling and spreading out across the region. The river was also a vital route in the massive fur trade and wood industries. As long as I kept the muddy brown Saint Lawrence on my left and followed the Route Verte signs, I was heading in the right direction.

I picked up the Route 132 highway and quickly moved from the 'burbs to the sticks. An earthy smell pervaded the day as I cut through open stretches of countryside and farmland, the road lined with barns, silos, and storage towers. Small villages I passed through were little more than a few white wooden houses and churches with the region's distinctive silver-colored roofs and towers. I stopped at one roadside garden to take a look at tree trunks that had been sculpted into clowns, a

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vulture wearing cyclist's sunglasses, and what seemed to be the Three Stooges.

It felt good to be out here, my journey under way, panniers loaded up with everything I'd need for the eight days ahead. But it turned out not to be the most auspicious day of riding. Gloomy grey skies gathered, and a cold wind picked up early on. The road itself wasn't especially exciting with garages and industrial shops lining the way and a lot of traffic. This became a recurring problem on parts of my journey. The road out from Québec City through the Chaudière-Appalaches region, like many sections of Route Verte,

follows a well-used major road with three feet or more of space each side designated for bikes. Although that's a great thing, opening up the region for cyclists, it meant that for most of the 70 kilometers I covered on my first day, cars and noisy semi-trailer trucks were thundering by.

I stopped in Cap-Saint-Ignace, a quiet town with a large silver-towered church at its heart, and spent the night at an *auberge* (inn), loading up in the morning on a breakfast of granola, fruits from the region, a fluffy omelet, toast, and coffee. What a difference blue skies make — I had 84 kilometers

to cover and, although the road looked much the same as the previous day, following Route 132 east, the sun was out and the landscape felt more vibrant. I detoured into villages and at Saint-Jean-Port-Joli stopped to check out a cluster of art galleries.

If I'd been rather put off so far by the traffic, things started to change in the afternoon, somewhere around the town of Rivière-Ouelle. The farther east I rode, the more peaceful and remote the countryside became. Warm sun lit up fields of yellow canola and long green grass stretching to the hills to the south. The Saint Lawrence had changed from

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frothy ale-brown to a placid blue. These were the kind of wild landscapes I'd hoped La Route Verte would serve up.

As I rode toward Kamouraska, my stop for the night, I noticed a strange ghostly grey figure, a sculpture standing alone in a farmer's field. I saw another statue of an embracing couple in Kamouraska in the evening as I

the morning's 48 kilometers, not something I'd seen much of in the first two days.

I turned off the 132 to take the shoreline road through Notre Dame, bypassing a big hill en route to Rivière-du-Loup. At the ferry terminal, I stashed my bike in a shed and caught a boat across to Brandy Pot Island. "Some

previously kept traders' ships safe as they navigated the perilous river. There wasn't much to do but rest my legs and enjoy the feeling of being out in the middle of nowhere.

I woke to the sound of gulls, caught an early boat back to shore, picked up my bike, and boarded a ferry across the Saint Lawrence to Saint-Siméon. This next region of Charlevoix (Route Verte 5) greeted me straight away with a steep hill as I rushed off the ferry. Turning onto Route 138 and heading 40 kilometers east toward Baie-Sainte-Catherine, I was surprised just how different the terrain on the north shore was. It had long, tough climbs and fun, free-wheeling descents, compared to the south's gentle, mostly flat roads. The hills kept coming thick and fast. There wasn't a cloud in the pure blue skies and the afternoon sun was relentless as I sweated it out on the rising, falling road.

Day-trippers and gangs of Harley motorcyclists raced by on busy Route 138 as did oil tankers and trucks. But farther east, I had long sections almost to myself. The wind blew salty sea air and fragrant pine from the surrounding forests. From the high road that winds around the coast from Baie-Sainte-Catherine into the mouth of the Saguenay Fjord, I saw two white shapes out in the water, perhaps beluga whales.

There are times when it pays to be on a bike, like the ferry port, where I was directed to the front of the long line of cars and motorbikes. Québec clearly likes cyclists. I was first on and first off the ferry. Then, arriving at Hotel Tadoussac, just up another



Restored schoolhouse in the Village Historique de Val-Jalbert where 1920s life is re-enacted.

walked the riverfront. Summer sunsets in Québec seem to go on forever. I watched skies turn pink on the north side of the river over the Charlevoix Mountains where I was heading.

The morning air was crisp, cool, and filled with birdsong. I rode on, fueled by another hearty Québécois breakfast. To the right were pine-covered peaks; on the left were clear skies and the wide Saint Lawrence in harmonious blue. Horses grazed in flower-filled meadows. There were a few short uphill climbs and smooth-rolling descents through

people say the name comes from the time of prohibition in Canada when smugglers used the islands. But the name dates further back," Greg Gionet, a guide on the boat, told me. "When the first navigators came here, there were lots of holes and crevasses. Rainwater gathered there, and over time, it turned the color of brandy or whisky."

The black heads of guillemots and razorbills bobbed in the water, and I spotted a seal basking on a rock as we circled the island. I spent the night in the island's old lighthouse that had

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hill, I noticed a sign saying, “*Bienvenue Cyclistes.*”

Tadoussac is a hillside town overlooking a beach and harbor. I boarded a crowded Zodiac raft from the harbor the next morning and went out to look for the whales that feed in the area: belugas, humpbacks, blues, and minkes. We sped out of the bay but were quickly enveloped by fog. “In a fog like this, we stop the boat and listen,” the boat captain, Francois LaPointe, announced. “Humpbacks dive for up to 10 minutes sometimes so we have to be patient.” We heard the expelling of air through a blowhole and followed, watching the humpback’s broad back and dorsal fin — and sometimes the elegant tail — before she surfaced again right next to the boat. “This is a 12- to 15-meter-long humpback called Tic-Tac-Toe,” LaPointe said. “I recognize her from the cross on her tail. She’s been coming here since 2000.” The fog meant we only saw one humpback (usually there are more), but there were a few belugas too, crossing the fjord as we made our way back to shore.

I got back on my bike and followed signs for Route du Fjord (RV8), a daunting hill outside Tadoussac that started the ride off. I was delighted to turn off Route 138 onto 172 just as another beast of a hill loomed up ahead, although I was less happy about being hit by a powerful headwind that worked against me for the next 15 kilometers. Passing through Sacré Coeur, I saw a little trail maintenance in action: two men, one with a blower machine getting rid of dirt, dust, and glass, another using tar to fill cracks that had opened up from the expanding and contracting of the tarmac caused by the region’s extreme seasonal changes.

Happy to get out of the wind, I spent the afternoon at Ferme 5 Etoiles, a farm/zoo with moose, emu, wolf cubs, and cougars in enclosures and a field full of bison. In the evening, I met with Yannick Bouchard, a local guide, and we took a couple of kayaks out on the fjord. “I’ve kayaked a lot of places in the world, but this is the best playground,” Yannick told me as we paddled out. “And it’s really beautiful.”

The water was flat and calm and looked oily black in the slow-burning

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evening light. We paddled up fjord toward Baie-Sainte-Catherine, a good spot for seeing belugas. "Belugas come so close sometimes you can touch them," Bouchard told me. "They're very curious. They play with you like you're a plastic toy." We didn't see any, but it was peaceful and cool out on the water. "You know the best thing about kayaking?" Yannick laughed. "No hills."

I started out early next morning to beat some of the day's heat. There are no towns, shops, or gas stations in the 70 kilometers between Sacré Coeur and Sainte-Rose-du-Nord so I loaded up with extra water. This turned out to be one of the best days of the trip. The roads were the quietest they'd been so far with few trucks or cars. There were some hills but none that were very demanding. The long, sweeping, undulating road cut a corridor through pine forests with big granite cliffs along the way and women fishing for salmon by the rushing Saint-Marguerite River. Friendly motorcyclists sounded their horns and raised their thumbs to me. The god of cycling even put a few clouds in the sky, breaking up the blazing heat with refreshing sections of shade.

I ate lunch alone by deserted Lac de la Roche, then soared downhill into Saite-Rose-du-Nord, a picturesque town that reminded me of Switzerland or Norway. I'd arrived in good time so I relaxed on the pier, watching sailboats come in and out of the glistening bay before I boarded the ferry down to La Baie for the night.

The air was thick and humid as I set off in the morning along the fjord. Ominous grey clouds meant my chances of completing the day's 84 kilometers without getting caught in rain were slim. There was more consulting of maps and navigating on this day than on all the other days of the trip combined. From the fjord, I passed through rolling farmland, then linked up with sections of a major road, Route 170, heading west through junction towns and industrial zones. Each time I took a turn, a green Route Verte sign showed up reassuringly to confirm I was heading the right way. The same signs guided me through the backstreets of Chicoutimi. It became

like a cycling version of *Where's Waldo?*, as I studied each new scene to find the sign so I could "turn the page" to the next one. Halfway through the day, I merged onto the Le Horst de Kénogami biking trail whose red and white signs kept me from getting lost through complex turns. Much of the Horst Trail is off-road, a solid bike path through fir trees and along rivers, crossing dams and bridges.

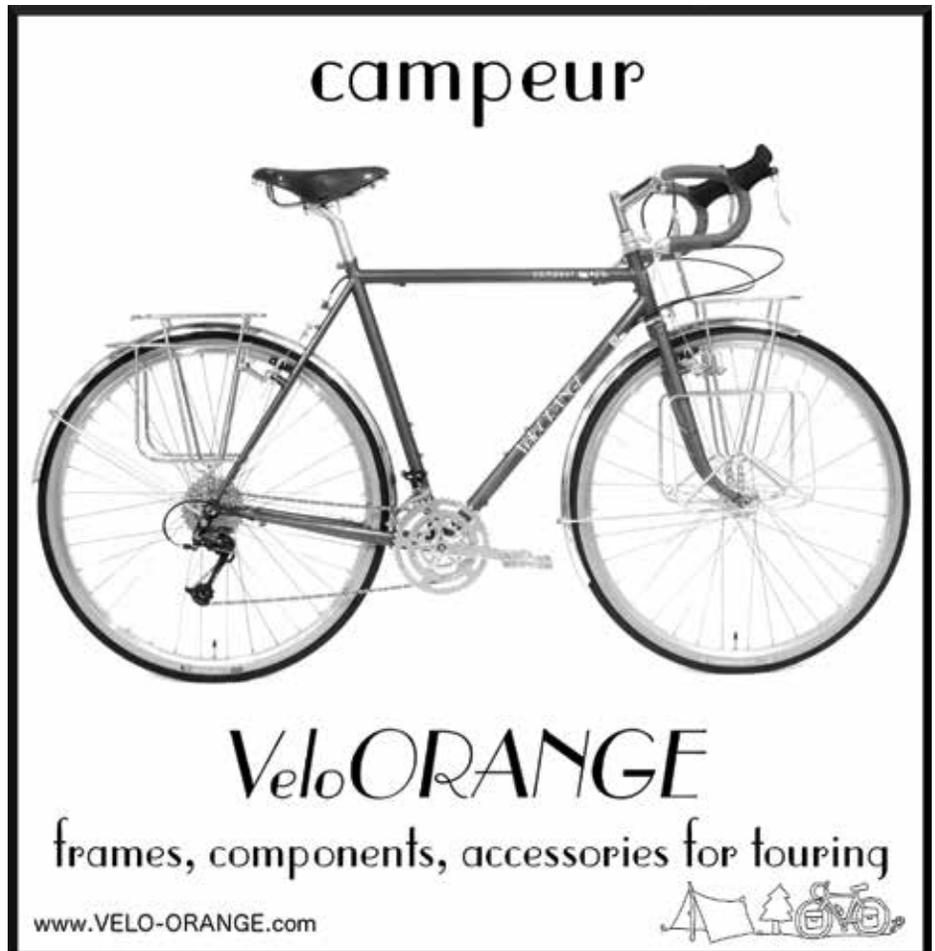
The sun was still shining in Jonquière when I paused to photograph another silver church, but thunder sounded in the distance. Minutes later, heavy rain began falling. It lasted most of the afternoon. With less than ideal timing, I felt a wobble in my back tire, looked down, and saw it was fat and flat. I flipped the bike over by the roadside and changed the inner tube.

The rain died out, but the grey skies hung around as I rode the last 25 kilometers through remote countryside. Wind whistled through the trees, but otherwise everything felt eerily still, the sky gray and foreboding. Another storm was on its way. I pedalled hard,

racing to arrive at the auberge before it hit. I managed to put my bike in the auberge's garage just as the first drops fell.

The gray clouds had yet to disappear as I rode out from Lac Vert the next day past a lumberyard and through the suburbs of Hébertville. I got my first blue glimpse of Lac-Saint-Jean as I rode into Métabetchouan. A freight train rumbled into town at the same time, the whistle fading as it passed into the distance. The lake is so large that it looks more like an ocean. A 256-kilometer trail runs around it. It's the popular Veloroute des Bluets (Blueberries Bike Route, the fruit the region is famous for). After days on often hilly roads, this smooth paved trail with long flat expanses and occasional steady inclines felt like a breeze.

I headed first anti-clockwise around the lake to Fromagerie Médard in Saint-Gédéon, one of the region's renowned cheesemakers, to sample their rich, creamy cheeses — worth every kilometer of the ride. Then I



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backtracked to Microbrasserie du Lac-Saint-Jean to have lunch with Marianne Laliberte and Hugues Quellet from Equinox, a local cycling company. “Microbreweries on the lake are all new,” Quellet told me. “All the new development in this area is because of the biking trails, the Veloroute des Bluets and the Route Verte.”

Annie Saint-Hilaire, one of the pub’s owners, gave me a quick tour. The beers had quirky names. She pointed to a bottle of Gros Mollet, which translates as “Big Calves.” “It’s a strong, hearty beer,” Saint-Hilaire told me. “It’s very popular with cyclists. It’s good after many hours of cycling.”

Other cyclists completing the Veloroute joined us for a lively lunch. I worked my way through a selection of the microbrewery’s “tastier” glasses of beer: IPA, blueberry, red, stout. With great food, fine beer, and Québec band Arcade Fire playing on the speakers, I could have stayed here all day, but I still had 35 kilometers to ride, back around the southern edge of the lake.

I took a bottle of Gros Mollet with

me in my panniers to toast the end of my trip and set off on the trail, zipping through fields of corn and rolled hay bales that curled high up around the lake’s shoreline. Maybe it was the glasses of beer, maybe the sunshine and blue skies, but the afternoon felt exhilarating, with the kind of big open landscapes and sense of freedom you ride hundreds of kilometers to experience. I could have ridden like this for another week.

Between Desbiens and Chambord, yellow canola fields and hills opened out onto the blue of the lake. I raced through Chambord where the next day I’d return to catch a bus back to Québec City. Seven fast kilometers beyond the town, I arrived at my final rest stop, Village Historique de Val-Jalbert, an old abandoned pulp town that’s now a historic village with actors playing the roles of 1920s townspeople. In the evening, when most of the tourists have left, it’s more of a ghost town. Away from the reconstructed main street are old decrepit houses showing signs of nearly a century of wear and weather.

The town’s “Mayor” drove past in a 1928 Dodge as I walked to the 72-meter-high Ouatouchouan Falls. A cable car carried me up to the hilltop for views out over Lac Saint-Jean.

The 1920s felt to me like as good a time as any to crack open my bottle of “big calves.” 500 kilometers down the road, it felt well earned. A few more of these and maybe I’d start promising myself another return trip to the Route Verte. 🍷🍷

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*Graeme Green is a British travel writer and photographer for publications including National Geographic Traveler, The Sunday Times, BBC, Wanderlust, The Independent, Vacations & Travel, and South China Morning Post. He’s a big fan of getting out on a bike to explore and photograph different parts of the world and has completed cycling assignments in Cambodia, Bolivia, Zambia, Burma, Italy, Vietnam, Switzerland, the U.S., the UK, and others. For more information or articles by Green, visit [graemegreen.org](http://graemegreen.org).*



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