

# Route Verte lets things roll around Quebec country

## If you go . . .

### How to get there

Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, Quebec, is about 290 miles or about five hours from Boston. Take Interstate 93 north into New Hampshire, then I-89 across Vermont to the Canadian border, where it becomes Route 133 north. Follow as it becomes Route 35 north/Route 104 west. Take exit 7 south, turn right on Route 223 south/Boulevard du Séminaire north. Go left on Rue St-Jacques to the waterfront and downtown Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu.

### Where to stay

**Auberge Harris**  
576 Rue Champlain  
Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu  
800-668-3821; aubergeharris.com  
A 77-room hotel across from the bike path. Bicycling discovery package includes full breakfast \$40 per person, double occupancy. Suites include full kitchen \$136.

### Une Fleur Au Bord de l'Eau

90 Rue Drummond, Granby  
888-375-1747; une fleur.ca  
On Lake Boivin, minutes from Route Verte and downtown. Including breakfast, \$70-\$94.

### Camping Vélo 2000

1 Boulevard Bromont, Bromont  
450-776-3864  
campingvelo2000.ca  
Campground off Route Verte between Granby and Waterloo. Sleep in a tepee (with water and electricity) for \$47, a tent for \$21, or hook up your RV for \$23. Free showers.

### Where to eat

#### Crêperie Bretonne la Morgane

296 Rue Champlain  
Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu  
450-348-5550  
Taps at noon \$11-\$13, dinners \$7-\$22, crepes \$8-\$15.

#### Fourquet Fourchette

1887 de Bourgogne Ave., Chambly  
888-447-6370  
fourquet-fourchette.com  
Terrace overlooking the basin. Light meals \$6-\$13, dinner \$22-\$34.

#### Microbrasserie Le Grimoire

223 Rue Principale, Granby  
450-372-2209  
brasseriegrimoire.com  
Goth-inspired microbrewery with inventively named dishes like Le Sacrilege \$8.

#### Le Café de la Brûlerie

4 Rue de la Gare, Granby  
450-372-2200  
Pizzas, burgers, soups, steak and shrimp \$9-\$27.

### What to do

#### Fort Chambly

2 De Richelieu St., Chambly  
888-773-8888  
pc.gc.ca/lnh-nhs/qc/fortchambly/index\_e.asp  
Exhibits, tours \$2-\$5.70.

#### Granby Zoo

Route 139 and St. Hubert Street  
877-472-6299; zoodegranby.com  
Shark-petting tank, water park \$15-\$59.

### Information

routeverte.com

By Clare Innes  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

**SAINT-JEAN-SUR-RICHELIEU, Quebec** — A 2,700-mile network of bicycle trails winds through this province, forming glorious ribbons of hither and thither known as the Route Verte. This collection of pathways invites a different kind of exploration as the countryside unspools at an unhurried pace.

More than 12 years in the making, the Route Verte's international unveiling this month was marked by celebrations in 25 towns and a 2,000-person ride culminating in Quebec City.

Two of the participating towns in the southeastern corner of the province, Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu and Granby, make picturesque base camps for a variety of rides, from thigh-busting climbs to completely flat rambles through French Bordeaux-like countryside.

One of the sweetest routes begins in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, which lies halfway between the Vermont border and Montreal on the shores of the Richelieu River. The Canal-de-Chambly trail hugs the Chambly Canal, one of a series that linked Montreal to New York. This flat path follows that trod by townmen and their teams of horses as they drew boats along the watercourse from the mid-1800s into the early 1900s, skirting unpassable sections of the Richelieu.

The towns of Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu and Chambly grew up around two forts built in the 1660s, Fort Saint-Jean and Fort Chambly. Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu grew to become a transportation crossroads as canals, trains, and rivers converged to form a gateway to Canada from the United States. Chambly's more modest growth spurts occurred when a large British garrison occupied the fort during the War of 1812, and then again with the opening of the Canal-de-Chambly in 1843.

The 11-mile bikeway passes nine locks on the way to Chambly. Pleasure boats crowd like cattle into the watery corrals. The wood-and-wrought-iron gates are still cranked open and shut by hand.

Each time a phalanx of boats makes its slow approach to the gates, an impromptu festival of sorts springs up at the busy lock. Cyclists, walkers, and in-line skaters stop to watch the slow process as the boats ease in and the gates close.

Once the water rises, the gates are cranked back open, the boats escape into the canal, and the festival, too, disperses — a veritable pulsation of tourists and Quebecois flowing through the heart of this lovely region.

The trail passes tidy backyards, postage-stamp gardens, and clusters of cottages mixed with architectural showcases. Marshy areas alternate with woodland along the way. In several places, crossroads hold lines of cars waiting for tiny drawbridges to swivel, lift, or slide back into place after boat traffic chugs by.



PHOTOS BY CLARE INNES/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Riders pedal or pause to refresh along the Canal-de-Chambly trail on Quebec's Route Verte.

Paved for most of the way, the trail is obsessively well marked with signs and dotted lines that direct the coming and going of human-powered traffic. Where it isn't paved, a thin layer of fine gravel keeps the trail well drained and more than suitable for bikes with narrow tires.

"Au revoir! Au revoir! Au revoir!" a toddler chants and waves to each oncoming rider from a child trailer towed behind his father's bike. Two riders roll past with camping gear bungee-corded to their bikes, out for the long haul. A man tricked out in flashy biking garb zooms by with the intense gleam of his own personal Tour de France shining in his face. A couple wheels by on vintage bikes streaming music from handlebar-mounted radios. Another minifestival gathers two locks down. And before you know it, you've reached Chambly.

Brunch at the Fourquet Fourchette awaits, with a table on the back patio serving up views of l'Eglise St-Joseph and Fort Chambly across the Chambly Basin. The center of town sprawls across the canal, with tiny shops, a light sprinkling of restaurants, and waterfront pathways on each side.

As the Route Verte came into being, its growing popularity changed the way accommodations along it offered their services.

"People weren't ready for it at first," says Francoise Boutin, owner of Auberge Harris, a hub of the Route Verte in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu. Her ever-present poodle yawns sleepily in her arms. "Then they saw that when you send a person off to other inns after just one night, they'll send two people back to you. Some B&Bs even started serving dinner!"

Boutin has long been an ambassador for the Route Verte, as well as for the Champlain Bikeway, which links the Route Verte to its sister network in the Champlain Valley of Vermont and New York.

"My passions are biking and arts," she says, a gesture encompassing paintings and sculptures that occupy every inch of wall space and surface area of the auberge. "When the cyclists are here,

it's like a big family. That's why I'm still here for 35 years!" She is also a welcome presence for those trying to limber up their high-school French for the first time in years. While a good number of Quebecois speak English, many don't. Boutin's eyes sparkle as she makes it fun to give your French a try.

About 32 miles to the east, the town of Granby curls partway round Lake Boivin. Granby was established in the late 1850s with textiles, tobacco, and milk driving its growth. The gorgeous lake, coupled with the transecting Route Verte, add tourism to the mix.

From here, a lovely 30-mile loop takes in marshes, forests, and farmland as it follows converted railway beds through the historic town of Waterloo. The route is quite flat and sprinkled with works of art: A 10-foot-long iron feather pierces a giant block of cement. An enormous ear fills a curved, phone-booth-sized structure. River stones are suspended in midair between two iron wings.

From Waterloo the route turns north into the thickly wooded Parc National de la Yamaska, which

presents the only hills; even so they are hardly enough to warrant shifting gears. Deer glide into the woods as you float past, and the Choinière Reservoir winds through the trees.

After we pop out of the forest and cross an enormous dam, the rolling layers of landscape take on the shape of a hundred sway-backed horses, shaggy with grasses and dusted with wildflowers.

Back in Granby at the end of the ride, a cluster of bikes leans against a railing in front of Le Café de la Brûlerie beside the Lac Boivin River. Sure enough, the food is artful, the coffee is très forte, and a table on the terrace is the perfect spot from which to watch the route and the river flow dreamily by.

Contact Clare Innes, a freelance writer in Vermont, at [indigoclare@yahoo.com](mailto:indigoclare@yahoo.com).

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