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Touring Canada's Gaspé peninsula on 2 wheels

By GLENN ADAMS

Aug. 23, 2017

GASPE, Quebec — Whether you take a clockwise or counter-clockwise route, and whether it's on motorcycle or bicycle, a two-wheeled tour of a loop around Quebec's Gaspé peninsula is certain to please. The sea is just to your side or in view for much of the route. Mountain vistas appear at turn after turn. The villages that dot the route delight and welcome riders.

Jutting into the Atlantic at the south side of the St. Lawrence Seaway, the Belgium-sized peninsula is a bucket-list destination for many bicyclists and motorcyclists. They're drawn by its sheer beauty, lack of congestion and welcoming local culture. It's the place to go if you want to gaze over the Atlantic from one of North America's eastern extremes: Bout du Monde (Land's End).

ATTRACTIONS

Along the way, you'll see one of the region's most famous landmarks: Rocher Perce (Pierced Rock), a rock formation rising 290 feet (88 meters) from the sea with an arched hole through it. Trips around the formation by boat are popular, as are cruises to nearby Bonaventure Island, which is populated by tens of thousands of gannet birds between April and October. The massive bird colony is a spectacle for the senses: You see, hear and smell them.

The Gaspé is also studded with reserves and parks that welcome hikers, and a number of sea kayaking outfitters are available. Among the many destination options, top of the list should be Forillon National Park at the peninsula's extreme eastern point. From the park's entrance, it's a few miles to the end of a paved road to the hiking trail that leads to Cap Gaspé. The region is also known for whale-watching.

THE ROUTE AND THE LOOP

For many visitors of the two-wheeled stripe, the launching point is just to the south of the Gaspé, from Campbellton, New Brunswick.

From there, you cross into Quebec along Route 132 and soon hit a fork where you must decide which way to go on a 500-mile (800-kilometer) loop.

Most bicycles first head north and inland about 140 miles (225 km), then take the coastal route clockwise the rest of the way to benefit from prevailing winds as they ride from the top of the peninsula east and then south, back to their starting point.

The other way is to go counterclockwise on the loop, staying on Route 132 and immediately heading east along the coast, saving the inland leg for the end.

Riding our BMW touring motorcycle, my wife and I chose the counterclockwise option, reasoning that the outer, right-side lane put us closer to the sea, if only by a travel lane. For much of the ride, the road hugged the coast of the sparkling Baie Chaleurs (Chaleur Bay), while occasionally dodging inland through valleys and along hillsides. Towns consistently offered well-appointed picnic areas, always in scenic spots.

We didn't make lodging reservations and mostly had no problem getting rooms for the night, except in one town where there was a festival.

THE RIDE

The ride brought one stunning vista after another, long mountainside grades and curves that made for one of the best rides I've experienced in 40 years of touring. Motorcycles (including many of the three-wheeled variety that is becoming increasingly popular) are common, although traffic, especially early in the day, was noticeably light in early summer.

But the bicyclists were out there. Denise Crowell and her partner Brian Bowker drove a little over 500 miles (800 km) from Maine before parking their vehicle at an inn in Sainte-Anne-des-Monts at the top of the loop along the St. Lawrence Seaway and heading clockwise on their road bikes during a trek last year.

"The first day, the wind was at our backs and propelled us down the seaway," said Crowell, 59, who works as a dental hygienist in Augusta, Maine. A lighthouse trail dots the outer perimeter of the peninsula, and Crowell and Bowker made nine stops at lighthouses along the way. "We stopped at as many as we could," she said.

Averaging roughly 60 miles (97 km) a day with their gear packed in panniers, Crowell and 62-year-old Bowker stayed in bed-and-breakfasts, hotels and in one case a cabin (\$40 U.S.) and broke up their rides into segments with frequent food breaks. They packed four spare tubes each and extra tires and researched elevation profiles of the mountains they would have to pedal up to make sure they were ready for the challenge. Going down, they reached motorcycle-worthy speeds: Brian hit 48 mph (77 kph) at one point, and Denise 38 mph (61 kph).

The final leg, northbound on Route 299 at Cascapedia-Saint-Jules, took them into the highlands. Crowell recalls seeing fly fishermen going for the salmon in the Cascapedia River along the way.

They also encountered kindnesses all along the way, such as a man who pointed out a shortcut across a railroad trestle that cut off several kilometers as they rounded the eastern edge of the peninsula.

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