



Riding the Richelieu

MEMORABLE
BOATING IN QUEBEC

By Craig Nicholson, The Intrepid Cottager

MY QUEBEC SEA-DOO TOUR WAS A FANTASTIC EXPERIENCE THAT I'D HIGHLY RECOMMEND TO ANY BOATER. Cruiser, runabout and personal watercraft owners have much in common when it comes to selecting a good destination for a boating tour, so if you're looking for a new marine adventure, this one's for you...

Although I'm experienced with Sea-Doo touring, I hadn't done any prior Quebec cruising. I had lots of questions about where to go and what to expect. Like other boaters, I was looking for well-marked, navigable waters, good marina facilities, boat-friendly shore side lodgings and restaurants, and a scenic, safe voyage. I also needed to be able to converse in English.

I found all this and more on our 800-kilometre tour centred around Quebec's Richelieu River, with sojourns

into Lake Champlain and the St. Lawrence River. Riding Sea-Doo watercraft, Frank & Beth Crocco and Johnny Biasi & Trish Robinson joined my wife, Marsha, and I on this voyage. What we discovered and the advice I can offer are equally applicable to those who choose to do this tour (or any part of it) in other kinds of boats or at a more leisurely pace.

Located just east of Montreal, the Richelieu River flows about 170 kilometres from the north end of Lake Champlain downstream to the St. Lawrence River at the City of Sorel-Tracy. Throughout history, everyone from the Iroquois and French explorers to traders and military expeditions have navigated the Richelieu. Today, it's an important part of the international "Lakes to Locks" recreational route that enables boaters to cruise from the Montreal/St. Lawrence area down the Hudson River to New York City or to connect to the Erie or Oswego canals.

For those of us that want to spend each night ashore (not much sleeping room on a PWC or a runabout), the regional Tourisme Montréal suggested some of their finest waterfront

lodgings, in tour order—Auberge du Lac Champlain (Venise-en-Quebec), Manoir Rouville-Campbell (Mont-Saint-Hilaire), Auberge de la Rive (Sorel), and Auberge Hadfield (Saint-Marc-sur-Richelieu). Each either has its own docks or an adjacent marina, and offers excellent lodgings plus an on site restaurant (see lodging list following article).

“This tour has plentiful waterfront services that gave us peace of mind in an unfamiliar area and made us feel comfortable and confident on the ride.”

—Beth Crocco, Barrie, Ontario

CRUISING LAKE CHAMPLAIN

For many Quebecers, the Richelieu River provides direct access to the 201-kilometre long Lake Champlain. This boater's paradise is largely located in the United States—New York State on the west shore and Vermont on the east. To explore Lake Champlain on our first day, we launched from Venise-en-Quebec, positioned on Baie Mississiquoi at the northeast end of Lake Champlain.

This location presented us an interesting challenge in that the international Canada-U.S. border runs east-west through the middle of the bay and the nearest U.S. marine port of entry for Canadians entering the U.S. is about 47 km west by water at Rouse's Point, NY (the office located just north of the highway bridge on the west side of the river). But by making arrangements in advance, we were able to expedite our U.S. entry (see Other Resources following article). The launch at Venise-en-Quebec is equipped with a direct phone so returning Canadians can report to Canadian border authorities.

We rode our Sea-Doo watercraft about two-thirds of the way south toward the end of Lake Champlain. The lake is very scenic with many rocky shores and its 80 or so islands make for interesting exploration. New York's Adirondack Mountains dominate the west shore and Vermont's Green Mountains frame the eastern skyline. Lake Champlain provides navigable waters with an average depth of 19.5 metres, so we saw no rocks, shoals or obstacles. We could easily have spent another day there, travelling down to Ticonderoga or going ashore to visit various ports of call, such as Plattsburg, NY or Burlington, VT (home of Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream). Although we cruised along in relative calm, one heads up for small craft is that with Lake Champlain being long and narrow, big waves can be a serious consideration depending on wind speed and direction, so pick your day to cruise there.

DOWN THE RICHELIEU

We stayed a second night at Auberge du Lac Champlain, before steering our Sea-Doo watercraft to another quick U.S. border check the next day back at Rouse's Point. This was convenient because Rouse's Point also marks the start of the Richelieu River heading downstream toward the St. Lawrence. Barely a kilometre north of Rouse's Point, we spotted a floating sign in the middle of the channel, notifying boaters to check ▶



▶ Entering one of the Chambly Canal locks.

in with the clearly marked Canadian Border Services marine port of entry on the west shore.

From there, this upper section of the river is lazy and easy-going, its shores dotted by quaint villages, cottages and marinas. It's a laidback cruise of about 37 kilometres north to the southern entrance of the Chambly Canal, completed in 1843. Here, between the towns of Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu and Chambly, nine locks enable boaters to circumvent a stretch of river that is not navigable. Before entering the canal, we docked for lunch on the west shore just south of the Rue-Saint Jacques bridge. Fair warning—although our canal passage took only three hours, it can take up to five hours to go through the entire canal at busy times (there are also eight bridges to be opened). So don't enter any later than 12:30 if you want to make it out the other end before its summer closing time of 5:30 PM (see Other Resources).

When we emerged from the last lock at Chambly, the Richelieu changed dramatically. There's a 24-metre drop in elevation during the 19-kilometre length of the Chambly Canal, so that lazy-flowing river upstream is supplanted by a fast moving flow, as if the H₂O molecules were suddenly more determined to reach the St. Lawrence as quickly as possible. Going downstream, this current was a fuel saver, but made the return trip more costly. It also made docking at our next overnight stop, the Manoir Rouville-Campbell a bit of a challenge—I'd recommend having at least two people on the dock to help secure larger boats against the current.

"I really liked the variety on this tour, everything from wide open water to sheltered channels, so each day was a different kind of riding style and experience."

—Johnny Biasi, Thornhill, Ontario

RIDING THE ST. LAWRENCE

Riding with the flow again the next morning, we quickly made the 35 kilometres to the only other lock on the Richelieu at Saint-Ours. Then it was only 24 clicks more to Marina Saurel, adjacent to our next overnight stay at Auberge de la Rive, Sorel. It being only noon, we decided to ride northeast on the St. Lawrence River to Trois-Rivières via the main shipping channel, a 122-kilometre round trip. The route was well marked with buoys and we had a blast playing in the waves and passing gargantuan freighters. Fuel is available at the Trois-Rivières Marina just east of downtown.

Our fourth day on tour, we followed the St. Lawrence River from Sorel to Montreal. We discovered that this stretch of the river is narrower and has several good small craft channel options on more protected waters than the wider section between Sorel and Trois-Rivières. The 146-kilometre return journey took us along marked channels right into the city's waterfront. It was really neat to cruise into and see one of Canada's major cities from this perspective. We gassed up at Marina Port de Plasaince Real-Bovier in Longueuil before returning to Sorel.

So far on this tour, we'd been riding in very sunny, hot and muggy weather. But as we rode closer to Sorel, ominous storm clouds gathered overhead, so we nailed the throttles to outrun the coming rain—and almost made it. Five minutes from our next fuel stop back at Marina Saurel, the deluge struck. We were soaked in seconds and cringed from the



➤ Passing one of many churches along the Richelieu.

exquisite pain of heavy raindrops smashing into exposed flesh, like standing naked in a hailstorm. Fortunately, we made shelter at the marina as the downpour lasted another 15 minutes before the storm moved on. Then so did we, heading back up the Richelieu River to Saint-Marc-sur-Richelieu and the warm overnight hospitality of Auberge Handfield. Little did we know that we were toast...

WIPED OUT BY WEATHER

Next morning, our final day for the return ride to Venise-en-Quebec, we awoke to heavy rain and a 50% forecast of thunderstorms all day. Normally on tour, 50-50 is acceptable odds to keep on riding, but the forecast also called for all-day winds of up to 40 kmph, gusting to 65—and that means huge waves, especially on Lake Champlain.

Call us chicken, but our unanimous vote was not to ride that day. We are grateful to Pierre Handfield, owner of Auberge Handfield, for driving us to pick up our trucks and trailers at Venise-en-Quebec, about an hour away by road. As it turned out, our decision was right: during our drive home, the winds made it difficult to keep our trailers towing straight; we also drove through three major thunder storms protected in our tow vehicles, rather than exposed on our Sea-Doo watercraft.

Despite being a day short, our Richelieu River Sea-Doo Tour was exceptional and memorable. We went into it not knowing for certain what to expect and came out eager to go back for more. Whether you choose to visit the Richelieu, St. Lawrence and Lake Champlain by cruiser, runabout or PWC, you'll quickly appreciate why they attract so many mariners. So if you've never been boating in Quebec, this Richelieu tour is a great way to get started!

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INFO

Who To Contact

- Tourisme Quebec – www.bonjourquebec.com
- Tourism Montérégie – www.tourisme-monteregie.qc.ca

Other Resources

- NautiGuide Quebec – www.nautiguide.ca
- Quebec and Lake Champlain Marina Guide – www.quebecyachting.com
- Entering the U.S. – www.cbp.gov/xp/cgov/travel/pleasure_boats/boats/pleasure_boat_overview.xml
- Returning to Canada – www.cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/publications/pub/bsf5061-eng.html
- Chambly Canal – www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/qc/chambly/index.aspx
- Saint Ours Lock – www.pc.gc.ca/eng/lhn-nhs/qc/saintours/index.aspx

Legal Requirements

- Canadian Passport
- Pleasurecraft Operator's Licence
- Boat Registration
- Proof of Insurance
- Check in with U.S. border services to enter U.S.
- Check in with Canadian border services to return home.

Waterfront Lodgings

- Auberge du Lac Champlain, Venise-en-Quebec. [Website!](#)
- Manoir Rouville-Campbell, Mont-Saint-Hilaire. www.manoirrouville-campbell.com or 450-244-5244.
- Auberge de la Rive, Sorel. www.aubergedelarive.com or 450-742-5691.
- Auberge Handfield, Saint-Marc-sur-Richelieu. www.aubergehandfield.com or 450-584-2226.