

Au Revoir to the Rupert River

Version for MacPac
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Ken Bruce had been suggesting an adventure ride to northern Quebec for over a year. The reason, or rather excuse, was that the magnificent Rupert River was about to be “turned off” forever, to be diverted into the massive hydro-electric system of Hydro Quebec. The final diversion was scheduled for October of 2009.

The Rupert River flows west into James Bay, the southern-most part of Hudson Bay, over powerful rapids and through scenic rocky gorges.

The Goal

So as the summer was drawing to a close, the “now or never” feeling began to circulate among the adventurous members of our Mac Pac BMW club (MOA #289) in southeastern Pennsylvania. Five of us were able to get leave, from the boss at work or at home. We began to investigate through excellent websites the strange, remote and isolated world of northern Quebec (google “James Bay Road” for a good start). We found many fascinating secondary reasons for choosing this as destination for an adventure ride:

- The James Bay Road: A paved highway of 385 miles built for Quebec’s huge hydroelectric project, it starts in Matagami and takes you as far north as you can go by road in eastern Canada.
- The Cree Indian village of Chisasibi: at the end of a dirt road near the edge of James Bay.
- A tour of the La Grande-2 hydroelectric dam and turbine room, one of the largest in the world.
- The North Road (“La Route du Nord”): A 250 mile gravel road in upper Quebec that has challenged previous riders.

The Plan

The distance to James Bay was about 1300 miles, including some stretches on dirt and gravel. Clearly the bikes of choice would be the GS variety. We expected cold weather and possibly snow in September, at this latitude near 54N. And riding at night in the wilderness was not an option. So we figured that 8 days would give us time to boogey up to Matagami and then spend a few days camping and viewing the sights of the far north. On the ADVRider website we read thrilling, white-knuckle stories of riding the 250-mile gravel stretch of La Route du Nord, and decided we could optionally return on this famous road if weather, bikes and riders were still in good shape.



Ambler PA to Ottawa to Radisson; then back to Nemiscau to Chibougamau to Montreal to Ambler PA

A big concern was the availability of gasoline in this wilderness. The James Bay Road was reported to have a stretch of 237 miles without gas stations or any settlement, and the gravel North Road has another empty stretch of 190 miles. The bears are interesting to watch, but not if you've run out of gas.

The Riders

The bikes and their riders were:

R1150GS Adventure, Ken Bruce, instigator and fearless leader of the ride

R1200GS Adventure, Gary Christman, steady long distance rider and always-ready photographer

R1200GS, Corey Lyba, new to dirt riding but game to try anything

K100RT, Rick Cavaliere, bravely unaware that this fine street bike would be over-extended here

R1150RT, Doug Raymond, also willing to risk his street bike on any adventure

Additionally two amazing riders from NYC (Citibeemers MC Club of NY, MOA # 276) joined us:

R1200GS, Alberto Arelle, at home on the race track and not afraid of dirt, unflappably looking for fun

R1200GS, Tim Weiss, of whom Alberto says “where he rides, you should avoid”

The Preparations

Figuring that we might have to depend on the goodwill of the locals (did we ever!), Doug brushed up on his French and made some superficial studies into Cree culture.

The extra gas problem was solved in different ways. Tim rashly relied on his 1-qt fuel container for his stove. Alberto strapped on a 1-gal container for himself, and a second one with which to rescue Tim. Corey took no chances and packed a 2-gal gas container. Rick used an old 2-gal Dromedary backpack water carrier, for its collapsibility. He was happy to see it didn't leak although there was a strong, slightly rank, odor of gas about it. Corey called it “the farting camel” and the name stuck. Ken, Gary and Doug decided they could rely on the GSA and RT bikes' range of more than 250 miles.

We all packed camping gear, hopefully suitable for bad weather near freezing.

We reserved a guided tour of the hydroelectric installation near Radisson. Tours are usually in French and stop at the end of August, but Hydro Quebec kindly obliged us and reserved an English tour just for our group of seven.

The Ride North

In a driving rain, the five riders from PA converged on the New Smithville Diner north of Reading.



Leah and Gary Christman, Corey Lyba, Rick Cavaliere, Ken Bruce and Doug Raymond

From there we slabbed it north on I-81, headed for the Dinosaur BBQ in Syracuse, a mandatory biker stop known for its attractive waitresses and baby back ribs that even a cardiologist couldn't resist.



The Dinosaur BBQ in Syracuse, NY



The hardy Mac-Pac adventurers fuel up at Dinosaur BBQ

Riding north of Watertown, we took the scenic Rte 11 along the New York side of the St Lawrence River, to the bridge at Ogdensburg. Along the way we took a quick sidetrip on a windy road to Blind Bay, to admire the lovely view over the seaway and the miniature marina in the shelter of boulders and pine trees.



The St Lawrence River, at Blind Bay, NY

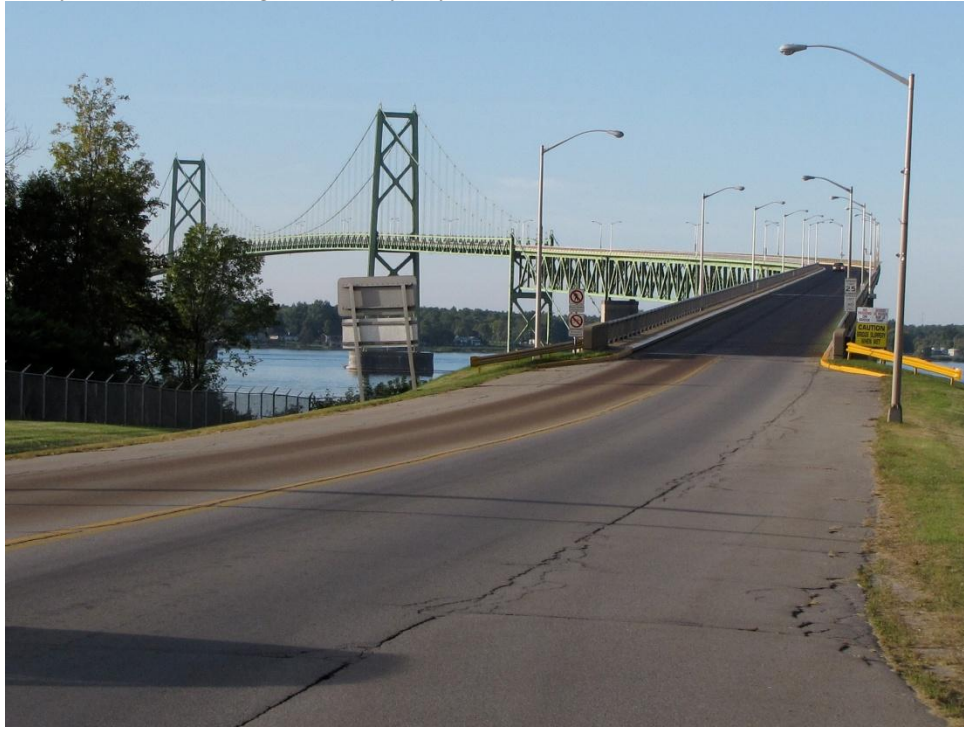


Doug goes in...

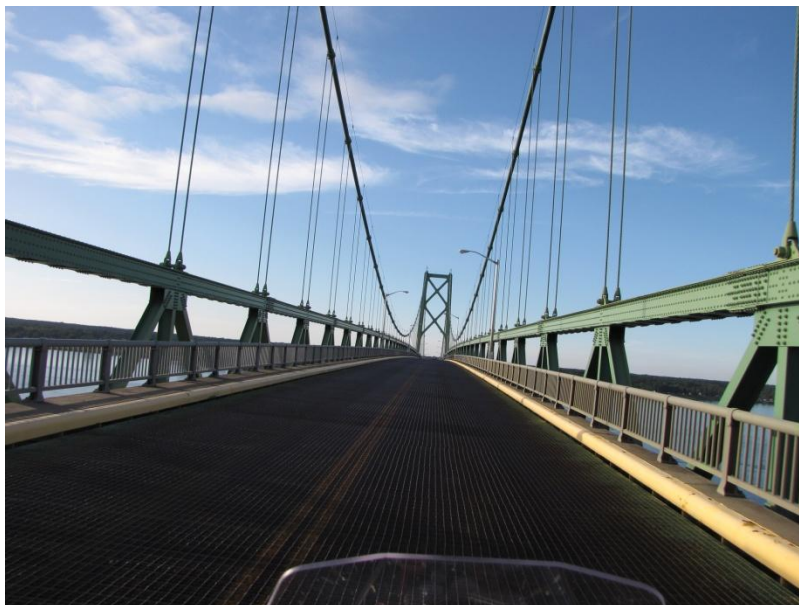


..and under

The suspension bridge to Canada had its own excitement: a curved and high stretch of open steel grating, about a mile long. We all know the wobbly traction here is not dangerous (at least when dry), but you can hear your heart beating louder anyway.



Bridge to Canada at Ogdensburg, NY



Steel grating on bridge



Ken is happy to arrive in Canada

In the sunny evening we rode into the West Ottawa Days Inn, where Ken had made reservations as a convenient meeting point for Tim and Alberto, who duly arrived from NYC. Over drinks in the bar we pretended to make ride plans for the morrow, and exchanged many good PA-NY insults.



The arrival at the Ottawa motel

Our goal for the next day was Matagami, where the James Bay Road begins, about 420 miles to the north. Our proud cavalcade of gleaming bikes, their riders prickling with excitement, rode off following Ken the fearless leader, whose Garmin GPS unfortunately decided to take us south. OK, we got that straightened out, and the adventure began.

Once across the Ottawa River into Quebec we knew we were in a foreign land, where the inhabitants didn't care much for our language. However, we had a friendly reception almost everywhere, and the basics of food and gas could be had with simple English, and some pointing.



We pass dozens of ponds and lakes in the “Canadian Shield”

We paused at Grand Remous (“the big eddy”) for lunch and a look at the impressive rapids and whirlpools below the bridge.



The big eddy at Grand Remous



Doug goes in..



..and under



The guys at Grand Remous: Rick, Alberto, Tim, Corey, Gary, Ken, Doug



Le Lunch Break at Grand Remous

We continued northwest through La Vendreye Reserve, a forest of rolling hills with a different lake every few miles, through Val d'Or and Amos. The settlements began to thin out as we approached Matagami in the evening. Rick had miscalculated the mileage and his K100RT ran out of gas in the dusk, with only 163 miles on the trip odometer. Doug, who had extra gas and a siphon, made a U-turn to assist but bogged down in deep sand down the steep shoulder. The back wheel spun and drifted downhill, until he pulled himself together and carefully rocked and rolled out of the hole, back up to the pavement. Tim also returned to the rescue after tanking up in Matagami; this was to cost him on the next day.



Road hazard north of Val d'Or, Quebec



Gary

Though we were glad to find gas, food and lodging, Matagami was a rather dreary town with two hotels that had seen better days, probably as hunting lodges during more prosperous times.



The Hotel Bell in Matagami, QC

However, we were charmed to find a little restaurant called Le Resto Pub still open, and we were starved. We had escargots, pizza, and our first taste of “Poutine”, the classic staple of French Quebec. This was a mystery to most of us. It turned out to be French fries soaked in hot gravy and melted cheese. Superb when you are most hungry, to be avoided at all other times.

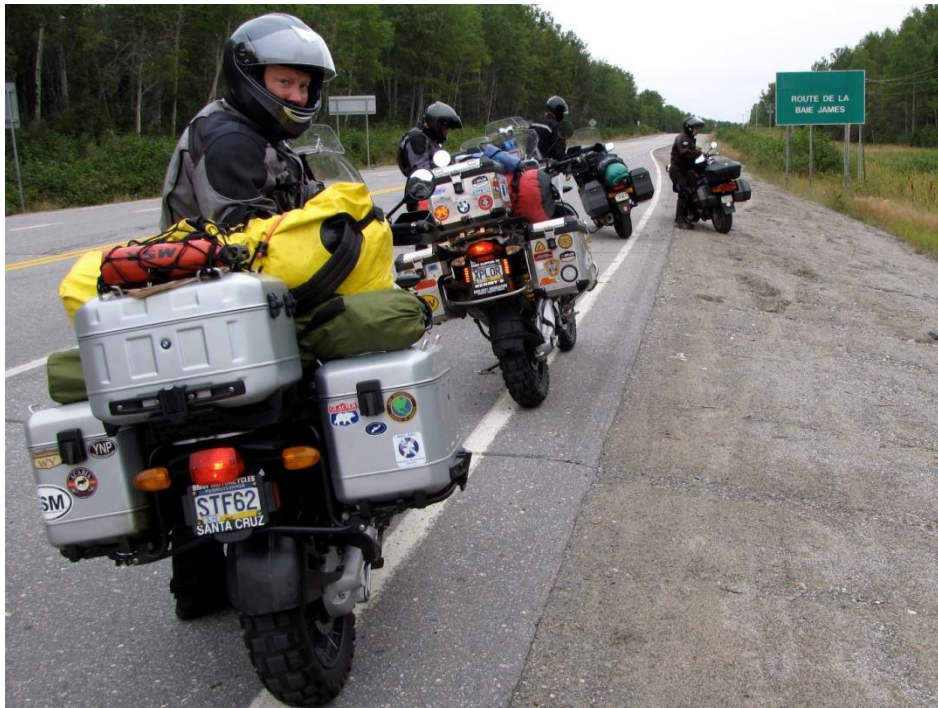


We enjoy our first great meal in Quebec at Le Resto Pub, Matagami QC



The long-anticipated “Poutine”

Monday morning found us at the start of the James Bay Road, just outside of town.



Start of “Route de la Baie-James”



Today's ride would be 385 miles to Radisson, with a stop at the Rupert River's most impressive sight, the Oatmeal Rapids. This was the first long stretch with no gas, about 237 miles. Rick figured the K100RT had a range of 180 miles, depending on speed, and had filled the farting camel with about two gallons of extra gas. Corey and Alberto filled their spare containers, two gallons each. Tim travelled light, figuring that even if he didn't make it Alberto would not be far away. The GS Adventure and RT bikes easily had a range of 250 miles, so Ken, Gary and Doug would be fine with topped off tanks.

We stopped at the checkpoint 5 miles up, where in previous years you needed to register yourself and get permission to use the road. To our surprise the lady at the info desk told us a brand new gas station had opened just a few days ago, only 150 miles up the road. The good news is that one of us riding ahead found it and tanked up for good measure. The bad news is that everyone else missed it because the two little pumps were completely hidden by a parked truck.

The James Bay Road was beautiful and relaxing. Excellent pavement and an unending sequence of gentle sweepers through the balsamy forest of short jack pines and black spruce, over gently rolling hills, made you never want to stop the ride. The weather was cloudy, in the mid 40's. A misty drizzle began as we arrived at the Rupert River but didn't last long. We paused a half hour to admire the roaring rapids, tannic-brown water churned to foam as it cascaded over the boulders. Good kayak spot? I don't think so. But the water was warm, probably in the 60's. We tried to soak in this impressive scene, knowing that it was about to be lost forever.



Oatmeal Rapids, Rupert River, Quebec (by Gary)



Gary at Oatmeal Rapids



Oatmeal Rapids (by Corey on return trip)

Back on the road, we tanked up at Relais Routier (=“truck stop”) at mile 237 as expected. Except poor Tim, whose tank ran dry about 10 miles short of the station. This was because he forgot that he had backtracked 10 miles to help Rick on the evening before. No matter, Alberto graciously rescued him. Rick and Corey just barely made it with their spare containers. We saw a handsome lost husky that we mistook for a wolf, but some of us briefly saw a real wolf crossing the road a half hour later.

The engine of Doug's R1150RT briefly shut down, while cruising in cool dry weather. This had happened several times since entering Canada. Cranking would not restart it at first, but after about two minutes of waiting the bike started right up on each of these occasions. This disturbing behavior was a premonition of worse things to come.

Camping at Radisson

Monday evening we arrived at Radisson, the town built at the northern end of the James Bay Road as the administrative center for Hydro Quebec's projects on the La Grande River. We immediately found the only campsite, on a beautiful hilltop overlooking the town. It was deserted and the little office was closed since the season had ended, so we could find no one to accept the modest camping fee. But to our amazement the bathroom trailer (most buildings in Radisson are hauled-in trailers) was open, clean, and had hot water showers. This little oversight was corrected the next day, but some of us showered in luxury before it was locked up.



Our camp at Radisson, QC



Alberto and Tim from NYC add style to any camp

We pitched our tents before the 7:00PM sundown. It was clear and calm, with temperature in the low 40's. Now all seven of us were famished. We hiked down the hill to find Jo's and Mike's Restaurant, the local eatery we had read good reports about on the various websites. The café was open and cozy inside, and the French-only waitress quickly brought us poutine, pizza and their famous "sous-marin" (submarine, get it?) sandwich with sausage, ham and all trimmings in a French roll.



Jo's and Mike's in Radisson, QC



Corey gets no satisfaction from the French-only waitress

A heavy-set young Cree man, who had had a few drinks, befriended us for a while and was eager to be our guide for hunting or fishing. We were discovering that the Cree people speak English but very little French, though many of them work for and with the French Quebecois. Our would-be guide made some rude remarks about Hydro Quebec, which he said had forced him to relocate and had upset the way of life of his people.

Back on our hilltop, we built a fire and talked and joked late into the starry night, recalling the little adventures and various charming French girls we encountered during the day.



Also there was much useful conversation about off-road riding technique, a combination of bravado, bragging and mentoring about how to handle dangerous riding situations, that was to prove vital to Doug a few days later. In the background were the reliable parked motorcycles, now gathering frost, that brought us here to the extreme north and would take us home. It doesn't get much better than this, we thought, as we finally rolled into our tents.

Chisasibi and James Bay

Tuesday morning we rode west to the Cree village of Chisasibi (“chee-SA-see-bee”, the great river, or La Grande Riviere as Quebec knows it). It was an easy 60 miles on pavement, with sweeping curves through endless scrub pine. Some of us spotted a bear crossing the road ahead. This new village was built by Hydro Quebec only 20 years ago, when they tried to relocate the inhabitants of the original Chisasibi from its island in the river, closer to James Bay. The engineers explained that if any of the upstream dams failed this island would be swept away. Even so, many elderly Cree still refuse to leave the old place. They travel to the new town for supplies by ferry-barge and truck.

We made an effort to do sightseeing in the new town, but it was rather sterile. For a while we were surrounded by smiley Cree school kids who were just released. Their English was very basic and they said only one child was learning some French. The few Cree words I had learned on the web turned out to be a totally different dialect and just brought puzzled stares.



Cree school kids imprinting on the brand



Cree school kids with Gary



Took us a while to figure what the signs say in Chisasibi

We were eager to ride on to the edge of James Bay, which should be an easy ride of about 10 miles on a gravel road. A local information official sketched us a confusing map with many little roads, saying to turn here but not there as he pointed to various unmarked crossings. Sure enough, we were lost by the second turn, as we attempted to follow the river's edge. This led us into sandy tracks through the thickets, where we started to bog down. We backtracked and eventually found the correct gravel road, but not before a sandtrap took one of us down.



Corey rides into the thickets, following Doug's wrong turn



And takes a soft fall

We finally reached the shore line in the afternoon of this cool, sunny day. Only a row of Cree fishing boats was there to greet us. The water was clear and only slightly salty, and we could see the pebbly bottom only gradually dropping off with distance from the waterline.



Approach to James Bay



Arrival

It had been my determination to swim there at any cost, so I changed into my suit and made myself wade out and dive in. The water temperature was probably 48F, making you miserable for about 10 seconds, then wonderfully numb. Not to be outdone, Ken and Rick also took the plunge.



Rick, Doug and Ken have a refreshing dip



Mac Pac arrives at James Bay, Quebec

In the village I had asked a Cree man if any of the locals ever swam in James Bay. The answer was, "I have a boat, why would I want to swim?" And later that evening I bragged to an older Cree woman from the original Chisasibi that we had been swimming in James Bay. "Yes", she said sadly, "all the Americans do that."

Tim and Alberto crossed by barge over to old Chisasibi on Fort George island, and explored the sandy streets of this town frozen in time.



Tim and Alberto awaiting the ferry

Radisson

We had a pleasant 80-mile ride east, back to our campsite on the hill above Radisson.

For dinner we selected the upscale Auberge Radisson, to see how the “other half” enjoyed French cuisine here. It turned out that WE were the other half. Our table of seven had the full attention of the head waiter in the otherwise empty large dining room. And yes, the pork medallions were good.



And we slept deeply in our snug tents on the hilltop after this long day.

Some campsite portraits by Gary:



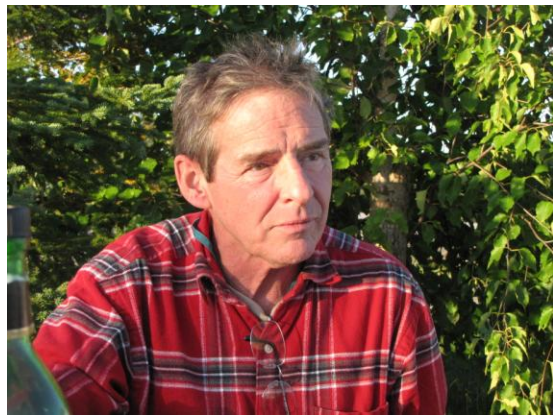
Ken



Rick



Corey



Doug



Intruder



Radisson sunset near the equinox (by Gary)

Wednesday morning was reserved for our tour of the hydro installation at La Grande-2, the second and largest of the dams on the La Grande Riviere. We packed everything but our dew-soaked tents, leaving them empty to dry on the hilltop.

We arrived at the Hydro Quebec main office at 8:00AM to find our guide Eric expecting us. First we were shown an impressive slideshow about the construction of this truly massive project, that consumes a large part of the watershed of northern Quebec. Much of the power is produced for export, and one of the transmission lines is a 450KV DC line running 1200 miles to Boston. Then we were driven in a little bus along miles of dams and dikes.



Finally through a massive security door we entered an enormous tunnel carved out of the granite bedrock, looking like the final scene from many a James Bond movie. A mile of tunnel later we were let off the bus to enter the turbine room, deep below the base of the main dam. We were wearing hard hats and earphones to hear the guide's voice above the roar of turbines and generators. The scale is hard to grasp. The turbine room houses 16 turbines, each of which could power a small town of 80,000 inhabitants. We walked down two flights of metal stairs at one turbine unit, into a deafening room that vibrated and stank of burned out motors or brimstone. In the middle was the exposed drive shaft from the turbine sealed below, spinning at precisely 133 1/3 RPM. The shaft was over 6 ft in diameter, of solid stainless steel. It drove the rotor above our heads, 36 ft in diameter and 12 ft high. We were awed and just gaped at the raw power we could feel, hear and smell. Unfortunately, no photos are allowed here ever since some investigative journalists did an "exposé", and spoiled it for everyone else.



Gary is impressed by the "Giant's Staircase" spillway



The New Yorkers are hard to impress

The Ride South

We returned to camp still dazed and a little tired. We packed up the tents, and started to plan the return ride south. Who was up for returning via the 250 miles of gravel on Route du Nord? “We are”, said Tim and Alberto, and roared off immediately on their GS’s to experience as much of this rough ride as possible with a, “see you later”.

For Corey and Rick it was a harder decision. The gravel and sand near Chisasibi was a first time for them. Rick didn’t think his K100RT would take the vibration. Corey figured he shouldn’t try more gravel unless we could assure him that it was in better condition than the Chisasibi roads, which of course we couldn’t. And we all knew that we would have to cover the 250 miles at a pretty good clip because there were few places even for camping, let alone for food and fuel.



Ken departs from Radisson, QC

So the five of us rode south 200 miles to the junction with the North Road. One of us watched a large black bear that lingered on the pavement for a while. From there, Rick and Corey continued south on the James Bay Road to Matagami whence we came. Again they made a long pause at the Rupert River to enjoy the soon-to-disappear view. As dark approached, they made a quick decision to ride all the way to

Matagami instead of camping. They kicked up the speed, and this caused Rick's K100RT to run out of gas once again, just short of the destination. But the spare gas in the farting camel got him going again, and they made it to the other run-down Matagami hotel for the night. From there they rode comfortably home during the next two days.

La Route du Nord

Meanwhile Ken, Gary and I turned left onto the gravel of La Route du Nord, with some trepidation. It was 5PM as we entered the North Road, and we knew we had only two hours before dark to cover over 70 miles to reach the Nemiscau fuel stop and 40 more to a camping place.



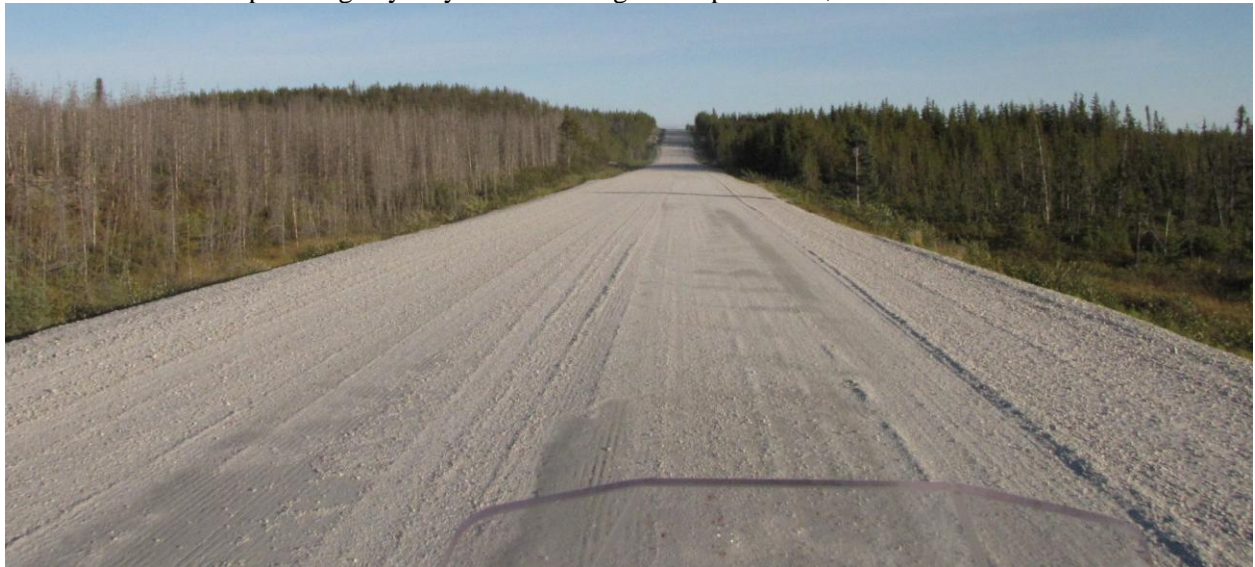
The North Road



Gary points out an “Inukshuk”, an ancient Cree trail marker in shape of a little man

The road was delightful, a beige band twisting over the green pine-covered hills to the horizon. The weather was cool and clear, with the sun low behind our backs.

We found right away that the gravel was smooth and consistent in the straight sections, and some of the tire tracks were hard packed gritty clay that were as good as pavement, for a half mile at a time.



Straight sections of North Road are nice...

But of course there were washboard segments, stones and a few ruts to watch for. The worst was the turns, where loose sand and gravel rolled to the outside of the curves, in ruts and furrows. Ken warned us to always slow up for the curves, and took off leading us at a good clip.



But watch out for soft stuff in the curves

After a lively ride with some thrilling skids we reached the fuel stop at twilight. Tim and Alberto had waited there to greet us and hoped that we could all make it the next 40 miles to a campground where the Rupert River crosses the North Road. They figured the more the merrier, because the locals had told them a bear was known to frequent this campsite. But during the minutes we talked, the gas pumps shut down and the operator disappeared for the night!

What a predicament. The three of us couldn't go ahead without getting gas, and now it was almost dark. Luckily we learned that gas could still be had in the Cree village of Nemiscau, if we backtracked 5 miles and then turned north on a side road. So Tim and Alberto bravely rode forward to reach their campsite in the dark, and we were to see them no more. But we heard later they had good riding and bear-free camping, and the northern lights were active. The following day they reached the paved roads before the rains started, and the rest of their ride to NYC went fast.



Tim and Alberto at Rupert River on North Road, northern lights in background

Meanwhile Ken, Gary and I rode back to Nemiscau village. It was completely dark when we reached the lone gas station, which fortunately was still open. But now we were convinced we had to stay in the village since we were not eager to tackle the dirt roads at night, especially since the Cree people were still out in their pickups, driving at high speed and kicking up clouds of dust.

We asked some locals, who are all Cree, where we might stay.



Doug chats with Cree ladies

The only choice, it turned out, was the nearby road workers' lodge, outside the village. However, only the proprietor Sam Cheezo could let us in, and he was thought to be "somewhere" in the village that evening. We started riding the streets of Nemiscau, to the Cree Nation Admin building, to the sports building, and finally to Sam's private house. While following clues from the Cree natives, we found some of the young ones rather rude, but most did their best to help us. Sam's wife reached him by phone and arranged for him to meet us back at the lodge. Sure enough, he rolled up in his large pickup about 40 minutes later and let us into the simple and clean building. The vestibule was filled with boots, which had to be taken off there to keep the dust down within.



Gary, Sam the Cree landlord, Doug

The lodge was mostly filled with “Frenchies” who worked on various road projects and parked their expensive road equipment here. One of the workers explained, in good English, that their vehicles would be vandalized if parked nearer the village center, since the Cree youth mostly disrespect the Frenchies. I asked Sam’s cousin Jake, an older Cree man about this. Jake was embarrassed but explained that ‘the French’ acted like they were better than his people, were always in a hurry and had no patience. So the young Crees would ‘test’ them with little provocations, just to see if they would pause and talk, or show some sense of humor.



Doug, cousin Jake and Ken

Sam and Jake then suggested our bikes would be much safer parked behind the lodge. “Is there a gravel parking area there?”, we asked. “Sure!”, said Sam and walked around the side to lead us, as we rode behind. The “parking area” turned out to be a 2-ft wide sandy shoulder at the base of the building, dropping off like a sand dune from there. It was exciting to maneuver around the corner. My front wheel

dropped into a sandy washout and stuck there. But Ken and Gary pulled me back, while Sam kicked more sand into the washout. I made it through on the next try, and Ken and Gary also got their bikes safely to the narrow sandy strip behind the building.



Doug maneuvers through sand to the 'parking area'

Exhausted from this long day of riding, and a little grungy after two nights of camping out, we really enjoyed the hot showers and got a wonderful sleep here in Nemiscau village.



The bikes were still parked there in the morning

We were back on the dirt road south early the next morning, in bright sunshine. We should be able to complete riding the North Road and return to pavement easily today. But after 6 miles my R1150RT quit running, just as we reached the intersection at the North Road.

It was a bad spot for a breakdown, at a sweeping curve in the road. Very large hauling trucks roared around the bend every 10 minutes or so, and came close to our three parked bikes.



Trying to jump Doug's bike from Ken's battery, on the North Road

My battery quickly went dead cranking, without getting the slightest cough from the engine. We spent another hour, using a jumper cable from Ken's GS bike to mine, without success. We could smell gas, but pulling both plugs proved that there was no spark. Now we just had to get out of here. Our gutsy solution was to have Ken tow me, using a 1/4" nylon rope that I had packed on a hunch that it might be useful. We tied it to the nose piece of the RT's front fairing, and off we went at a steady clip of about 20 mph. As the towing seemed stable, Ken kicked it up to 4th gear after a while. We covered the 5 miles with no trouble and rolled into the fuel station we had left the night before.



Ken tows Doug 5 miles..



..and they arrive safely at Nemiscau truck stop

By now the day was half over, and we could see a bad weather front coming in from the West. There was a road maintenance garage here, and the foreman kindly allowed me to park outside and loaned me a large battery charger. Still no spark. I stripped off the fairings of the R1150RT and removed the gas tank to expose the high voltage coil under it. With my small voltmeter I verified that 12V power was getting to the coil, so it was probably bad. Though I realized the Hall Effect Sensor might also be the cause, this seemed unlikely since I believed a bad HES would also stop the fuel injection, and I could still smell gas.



Preliminary bike diagnosis at Nemiscau

At any rate, the bike wasn't going anywhere without new parts. Ken and Gary had patiently waited and helped with the troubleshooting, but now there was nothing they could do for me. The rain was just about to start, and would make their long ride on the North Road very unpredictable. So I gave them my thanks and my blessing for them to continue the ride, while I hunkered down here in Nemiscau to fix my bike. We waved forlorn good-byes, then Ken and Gary rode out on the North Road in the cold gray early afternoon, as light rain began to fall.



Gary crosses the upstream Rupert River, where it crosses the North Road

But they kept up a steady speed and except for a few drops managed to stay just ahead of the rain, all the way to the paved road at Chibougamu by evening time. After a night's sleep there, they rode through cold rain all the next day back to Ottawa, but still enjoyed the wilderness of rolling hills and a few small villages along the way. Later, they arrived at Syracuse drooling with hunger for more beef ribs at the Dinosaur BBQ. But this time the place was mobbed with college football fans, and they starved for an hour or so before getting anyone's attention. It would seem we were charmed with good luck on the ride north.

Stuck in Nemiscau

It was Thursday afternoon at the Nemiscau fuel stop, what should I do? Could I get a coil delivered by Fed Ex to this place? My cell phone had no service, and of course this was one of the remotest locations in eastern Canada. Luckily there was a room for rent in one of the trailer buildings that the fuel stop consisted of, and there was also a cheerful restaurant for truckers and Cree people from the village. I prepaid for two nights and got my gear out of the rain. Meanwhile the garage foreman Sylvain allowed me to push the bike into the garage, between the overhead door and a large disabled snowplow. What incredible luck, to have found a place like this for bike repair, in the midst of this northern wilderness.



Location of the high voltage coil on R1150RT



The RT is cozy between snow plow and garage door

My French isn't bad, and when I asked for help from the maintenance garage staff I always went as far as I could in French first. They met me halfway with English whenever necessary (often), but were very appreciative of my attempts at French.

To call my BMW dealer in Pennsylvania I first tried the pay phone at the restaurant, but couldn't figure out how to make it work. (Later I got a phone card and was able to use this phone to contact MacPac friends for advice). In desperation I brought my BMW Anonymous book back to the garage, where two of the office workers, Anna and Pascale, began to give me unbelievably kind support. Anna connected to my dealer on the phone. At first I hoped to get miraculous service, maybe even a new coil in the morning? But the parts counter guy slowly let me know they didn't have a coil, could only get one in a few days, and then could only ship to me via US mail, not FedEx. I was hugely disappointed and said "No, thanks", and hung up. I gradually realized this wasn't the dealer's fault and that it is time-consuming to ship parts across the Canadian border. Of course I was ruefully aware that I had gotten myself into this predicament by choosing to ride as far from civilization as I could in the first place. Anna and I returned to the Anon book, which listed all the Canadian BMW dealers as well. She turned out to be an expert at emergency parts procurement, and could speak the very quick French dialect used at most of the parts counters. Calling them one after the other, she finally located a coil at the Toronto dealer. I had been wondering what delivery instructions I might give: ship to me at a dirt road truck stop about 700 miles north of Montreal? Anna had an amazing solution for this, which I could hardly grasp until later. She paid for the part with my credit card, and told me that with luck it might be delivered to the nearby Nemiscau airport on Saturday, just two days away.

Anna had the part overnighted to a small motorcycle shop in Montreal that she knew. She herself was flying to Montreal later that evening, from the small airfield near Nemiscau. The next day she fetched the coil, and drove it to the Montreal airport, where she handed it to the pilot of her company's private shuttle plane. The pilot was flying back to Nemiscau on Saturday morning. Could all these connections be made?

I spent the rest of Thursday and working hours of Friday in the Nemiscau garage, while outside was cold, windy and steadily raining.



Coffee break in Nemiscau garage, for Doug and new mechanic friends

I needed to diagnose the bike thoroughly to see if it needed anything more than a coil. Luckily I always carry a Volt-Ohm meter with me. I was most concerned to verify whether or not my Hall Effect Sensor (HES) had failed, since many symptoms matched this known failure mode. By Friday I had discovered a public computer in the road workers' compound up the hill, so I was able to get access to Internet sites for BMW parts and tech articles. The most important of these was the user's guide to the HES, by fellow Mac-Pac member Dana Hager. This excellent guide gave me not only pinouts and wiring diagram of the HES, but it also included specs on the coil. Primary coil resistance should be 0.5 ohms max, and mine measured 140 ohms. Eureka! This could be the one and only problem! But just to be sure, I removed the HES from my bike to test it. It is under the crankshaft pulley at the front of the engine, and you must remove the alternator belt and pulley to get at it. My test was as follows: with the HES sitting on the seat of the bike, I plugged its connector back in and turned on the key. From Dana's wiring chart I identified the two signal wires (orange and black) and probed their voltages in turn, by sticking a sharp pin through the insulation. (You can always find a sharp pin by looking for a bulletin board). Each wire indicates +12V on my voltmeter. Then insert a screwdriver into one of the two HES "gaps", and watch the reading drop to 0V for one of the signals, and similarly when reading the other signal wire with the screwdriver in the other gap. This result was very gratifying since it gave me high hopes the HES was good and only the coil was bad.

Note that another diagnostic for HES was suggested by other MacPac friends on the telephone: rotate the engine by hand with the key on, and listen for activation of the fuel injectors once per revolution. A click from the injectors indicates good HES. I should have tried this first, since removal and replacement of the HES is hard work.

When the maintenance garage closed in the evenings, I enjoyed socializing with the locals. Pascale introduced me to her friends in the bar/restaurant in the workers' compound. I had fun and they were amused by an American trying to speak French. They don't get many visitors of any kind from the outside world up here in Nemiscau. Also I met several Cree workers and asked questions about the Cree written language that I had looked into. Many road signs are written in English, French and Cree. But I found again that my few Cree words were the wrong dialect, and hardly any of the Crees have learned the written language, which was actually invented by an English missionary in the 1830s. Still, it made an

interesting topic and a good way to meet the locals and hear their stories. The Eastern Cree of northern Quebec have been largely uprooted and resettled by the hydroelectric development of this area. For example, the original town of Nemiscau existed for centuries about 40 miles to the west. It depended on the Hudson Bay trading post for all its supplies, but the Hudson Bay Company shut down, and Hydro Quebec provided another supply store at the new location of Nemiscau, where they preferred the Cree people to relocate. The ones I talked to say they had no choice but to move. The new Nemiscau is only 20 years old, like Chisasibi.

On Saturday morning Pascale drove me 5 miles up the road to the Nemiscau airport in her pickup. It was a working day for her, but she brushed it off saying she was on her break time. Would the coil be there? Would it solve my problem?



Pascale helped me getting the new coil

The plane landed, and the packet with the coil was handed to me. Back at the garage I connected it with trembling hands. With one spark plug pulled out and grounded, I cranked the engine and got a spark! Then I re-installed the gas tank and inserted the spark plugs, cranked the engine and by golly it ran great!

By early afternoon I had re-assembled the bike and loaded my gear and bags. The morning had been clear but light rain was starting. I rolled the bike out and waved good-bye to Pascale and some of the mechanics who came with smiles to see me off. The engine cranked but wouldn't start, and the battery soon went dead. I was crestfallen, but at this point there could be only one thing wrong: the quick-disconnect coupling on the fuel line. This under-designed component had bitten me before. The plastic male parts are delicate and brittle, but it takes real force to click the two parts together. I pulled off the right side fairing to expose the connector and sure enough, when I carefully squeezed the mating parts together about 1/32" more, I heard a tiny click that indicated flow was now possible. The bike started immediately then, after I

had sheepishly borrowed the battery charger once more. After getting home I knew I would upgrade to the currently available metallic quick-disconnects.

I re-assembled the fairing and reloaded the bike. With a final wave to my new friends and benefactors, I rode out onto the North Road in a light drizzle in mid-afternoon. I knew there was no time to spare if I was to cover the 190 miles to Chibougamu before nightfall, and I also wanted to outrun the coming rain as I hoped Ken and Gary had two days before.



Only about 200 miles of gravel left

Riding the North Road

I rode as fast as I could on the hard gravel. Even when damp, the gritty clay still felt like good traction, and I was getting used to my street tires wandering on the gravel. I had just put on new Battlax BT020's before this ride. But I did not feel as brave as when following Ken's confident lead a few days ago. Though I like dirt roads and have ridden this bike on many of them, I grew up without the dirt bike experience and don't have the skill to react when a bike starts to go down. I kept rehearsing the advice and bravado we shared around the campfire, and which I had heard many times before: when your bike starts to drift in deep sand or gravel, you have to give more power, not less, to the rear wheel, put your weight on the pegs, and turn the front wheel towards where you want to go. In such situations in the past I just chopped the throttle and tried to ride it out, but usually went down after uncontrollable oscillations.

While musing on this and other things in an unfocussed way, I came out of a hardpacked straightaway at about 65mph into a turn with dreaded soft stuff on the outside. The bike drifted wide and sideways, down toward the really soft and deep shoulder. I knew I was a goner if I just tried to ride it out, so there was nothing to lose by trying the theoretical technique. So I opened the throttle, got my weight up on the pegs, squeezed the tank with my knees, and pointed the front wheel slightly uphill back to the roadway. Like

magic, the bike climbed back into the lane! It straightened up! As my thumping heart pumped raw adrenaline, I yelled “Wow!!” and many unprintable things, hurting my ears in the tight helmet but laughing out loud. But it was sickening to think of the consequences if the bike had snapped down and rolled us into the scrub trees, out of sight.

I still kept my speed up wherever possible because the rain was right behind me, and because I had to reach the paved road by dark. Another hazard we had heard of from the Cree drivers was the many miles with large sharp stones in the gravel. Two of them said their tires were sliced and went flat. I was on the lookout for this section, but it was not as bad as expected.

Though I resolved to pay attention and slow down for the curves, one more time I got distracted in a long smooth straightaway and entered the turn too hot. Once again I drifted sideways into deeper stuff, and once again I was miraculously rescued by that unnatural technique of powering out of it. From then on I also made sure that I had plenty of torque available for emergencies, by staying in the middle rpm range of whatever gear I was in.

Finally I reached the paved road after a 4-hour ride, and rode into Chibougamu a half hour before dark on this Saturday evening. I looked for a pay phone to call my friendly helper Pascale back in Nemiscau. She was not so sure my troubled bike was going to make it through the North Road and asked for a callback. While looking, I ran into Sam Cheezo, our lodge-keeper from the Nemiscau Cree village, what a small world up here!

I decided to push on another 145 miles to Lac St Jean, a favorite vacation spot in Quebec. The pavement was good, the night was clear, the temp was low 40's. I just hoped not to meet a moose. In St Félicien on the scenic lakeside I found a small French hotel, and after a great meal down the street I fell into bed just before midnight.

All Sunday I rode south through hills of pine forest and country villages, reaching Montreal by late afternoon. As I chose this route I was thinking of Anna, who had helped to get my coil to Nemiscau. There was a chance I could find her and express my gratitude once more. She was surprised when I called, and came to meet me at a coffee shop. While waiting for her I bought a large bouquet of flowers and a bottle of Chateau Neuf du Pape, which made a big hit when she arrived.



Thanking Anna in Montreal

We chatted for a long time over coffee and I heard many more stories of the problems of hydro development in Quebec, and the different cultures that met there. But it was time to ride home. With a final good-bye to Anna I rode off south on my now-reliable BMW. I crossed the border at sundown and rode the NY State Thruway with no problem, reaching home near Philadelphia not long after midnight.

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