

No Need To Go To Alaska

In the late summer of 2013, I went on the motorcycle trip I had been intending to take since I bought my bike in 2009. Well it was actually plan B. Plan A was to explore the coast of Labrador via the recently opened Happy Valley to Cartwright Junction route but lack of space on ferries put that on the back burner. So plan B the Trans Tagia Road was my objective. The end of the Trans Tagia Road is the most northerly road accessible point in Eastern North America and nearly 750km from Radison, the nearest town, making it the furthest you can drive from a town in all of North America. I didn't get all the way to the end but that's all part of the story.

I knew the bike was ready having spent 4 years modifying, adding, tinkering and testing but the luggage and spare fuel hadn't received so much attention. The last frantic half day was spent trying different setups and shopping for suitable spare fuel cans. This is how it looked when I left home.



The nice Canadian border guard seemed genuinely concerned that I was going to get eaten by a bear or fall off the end of the world when I told him where I was going but eventually let me into his country. So considerate ☺

The first days ride was my first time using the GPS to navigate on the bike and I discovered a few of its short falls but after a few diversions I eventually found a camp site just outside Chicoutimi.

Up to this point I'd had little luck finding useful maps (anything north of Montreal was a mystery to US sources) and was relying on the travel guides from jamesbayroad.com, which were indispensable but still not as reassuring as a map. The lady at the tourist information center at the start of the Route du Nord was very helpful and she gave me some excellent free maps and also told me about the short cut that started at the Nemiscau work camp and intersected with the James Bay Road further north than the Route du Nord. The map however didn't cover that part of the area ☹

This was my first experience riding the fully loaded bike on gravel roads and I thought I was doing well keeping a minimum of 65mph on what felt like ball bearings on concrete. My ego was only slightly dented by the occasional huge logging truck or pickup full of local Cree passing me going much quicker, this was to become a regular feature of the trip. There wasn't much traffic but I was the slowest thing on the road and pulling over to the deeper looser gravel at the edge of the road to allow passing was type 2 fun to say the least. It was also the start of the fuel calculation game, I knew what MPG I got on paved roads and un laden but this was different and it was a long way between fuel stops. I was less concerned on this leg of the trip but wanted to get an accurate idea of fuel range for the later sections where it would be of paramount importance.

At kilometer 290, I filled up with fuel at the work camp and got what I was pretty sure was confirmation of the short cut from a truck driver who spoke even less English than I did French. After another 100 and some kilometers, I reached the James Bay Road, tarmac and a sign that said the road I had been on was for authorized personnel only.



And another sign saying it was a long way to the next available fuel.



Next stop was Radisson to fill up with fuel. Radisson is the northern termination of the James Bay Road and the northern hub of the hydro electric operations. At this point it is worth explaining why there are any roads this far north at all. The answer Hydro Electricity, without the Hydro Quebec James Bay Project the road would probably still stop in Matagami 620 kilometers to the south. There are obviously some major environmental concerns about damming huge rivers and all the other impact of the infrastructure over such a vast wilderness area but until humans learn to stop using electricity the conflict of interest is not going away and the engineering is nothing if not impressive. The James Bay Road is 620km long, paved for its entire length, was started in 1970, completed in only 420 days and built to handle a load of 500 tons in order to transport huge loads such as the turbines for the hydro electric plants. One benefit of this over engineering is more than 600 kilometers of smooth paved road with sweeping bends, almost no traffic and judging by the occasional local Cree in pickup trucks no speed limit.

As well as Radisson I visited the Cree towns of Chisasibi and Wemindji both about 100 kilometers from the paved road. This was partly just because they were there, villages in the middle of nowhere just doing their thing but also to see the shore of James Bay and do reconnaissance for a possible kayak trip in the future and partly to get more time on gravel roads before tackling the Tagia Road.

After gate crashing the community Sunday brunch in Wemindji , looking at dams, canoes, power lines and generally trying to be a tourist for a few days, it was time to head east on the Trans Tagia road.



From the James Bay Road, Trans Tagia Road web site;

Caniapiscou is located at the end of the Trans-Taiga Road, at km 666. Here you are 745 km from the nearest town (Radisson). The Caniapiscou reservoir and Duplanter water overflow structures are here. This is the farthest you can get from a town on a road anywhere in North America! There is no town here, and NO SERVICES. This is also the furthest north you can travel on a road in eastern North America.

The plan was to fill up with fuel at one of the hunting camps around the half way point which in theory should just give me enough fuel to get to Caniapiscou and back to the camp. If the camp didn't have fuel I would have just enough to get back to Radison. I had plenty of camping gear and food, if something went wrong someone was sure to stop and help sooner or later. Right?

End of day one on the Tagia road, somewhere beyond Kilometer 200 I made camp in the rain for the first time on the trip, the wind was gusting at around 25 knots and not much in the way of natural shelter. My Nemo BugOut tarp/bug room which had been the ideal shelter up to this point had reached and exceeded the limit of what it could protect me from and the dropping barometer didn't promise any

improvement. More important my daily bike maintenance revealed a real no go situation, the rear tire on the bike, it was new at the start of the trip but the gravel roads had done a number on it. The canvas wasn't quite showing but it would be soon and if I carried on it would not make it to the end of the road, never mind back. The next morning I turned around and started the ride home.

The ride south. Rain and gusty wind made the 200 kilometers back to paved roads a little more challenging than the previous day. However this made the tarmac on the James Bay Road seem amazingly grippy despite the rain and I even kept up with one of the local pickup trucks for a while. This is when I discovered the GPS made a functional rally co-driver letting me know how sharp the bends would be and allowing me to adjust my speed accordingly, as I said smooth, fast, sweeping bends a great riding road. Stopped for fuel at the Relais Routier at Kilometer 381, the "Gas Boy" appeared to be at least ninety twelve but maybe that's just the hard northern winters.



The rain eased as I headed south and I wanted one more night under canvas before the start of regular towns and gas stations. This would be the second night I shared a camp site, both times my neighbors were Canadians in an RV up for some fishing. What I couldn't figure out was why both groups felt the need to run a generator ALL night. Am I missing something? What were they doing in there? Did the silence of nature worry them so much? Did they need the sound of an internal combustion engine to feel comfortable? Were they afraid of the dark?

There is a check point at the southern end of the James Bay Road, just outside Matagami. The official manning it was a little confused as to how I had not checked in on my way north but with my limited French I think I got him to understand that I had gone north via the North Road. Unfortunately they had sold out of tee shirts in my size so I had to settle for a hat instead and a plate of French Fries in town.



260 kilometers later the first hotel I tried in Val d'Or obviously didn't like the look of me as they were suddenly full, fortunately the Quality Inn across the road was less fussy. First shower for 7 days, restaurant meal and a beer. I even switched on the TV in the room but turned it off again almost immediately.

Approaching Montreal the black water system of the RV I was following emptied its self while traveling at around 60mph. A good reminder to keep a safe following distance, which I was but still got a light misting. I arrived in Montreal just in time for rush hour. It took over an hour to cover the mile to get across the bridge. This was made even more "enjoyable" by being dressed for the north while the local temperature was probably over 90f, plus I was still carrying remnants of the black water incident.

US boarder didn't seem overly pleased to see me but that's normal and they let me in anyway. A quick blast down the North Way and I was home and already planning the next trip. Different rear tire or drop ship a spare to Radison or maybe just take a lesson from the locals and use a pickup ;) Or maybe back to plan A and visit Labrador.

Trying to describe Northern Quebec is a challenge, from a scenery point of view it doesn't have much that is spectacular like pointy topped mountains or grand canyons. It is much more subtle, maybe closer to looking at the ocean, initially it all looks the same but you can look at it for a long time without getting bored. It is big and remote, in most of the lower US states it is very difficult to get more than 10 miles from a road, the most remote point in the lower US is only 32 miles from the nearest road and there is a ranger station there! That doesn't even begin to compare to the vast expanse a short drive north of the border. It's hard to explain why but that sense of space is very special. Socially it's all about the hydro electric, without the hydro nothing would be here, the engineering is impressive and seems to give everyone a sense of purpose. Culturally, I just like remote communities, people have a different and more primal set of priorities and a very real sense of community.



I've deliberately kept technical details to a minimum but if anyone is interested in what worked and what didn't, what modifications I made to the bike, what camping equipment I used etc. drop me an email and I'll try to answer.