

# The Up and Coming Trails of Vallée Bras-du-Nord

A co-operative project creates singletrack for all abilities

by Tara Nolan

**"You must go to Vallée Bras-du-Nord. It's a mini Burke,"** says the bike store customer, running over after he overhears me asking the store's owner if he knows about the trails. The customer then excitedly grabs a map and points out where all the best trails are, which is basically all of them.

My husband had done a little research while planning a mountain biking trip to Mont-Sainte-Anne and found an article about this network of bike trails in Saint-Raymond, Que. After the random bike store customer's enthusiastic endorsement, we tack an extra night onto the end of our trip and head out from the auberge where we stayed in Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré. Saint-Raymond, a small city located about 50 km northwest of Quebec City, is firmly establishing itself as an adventure hub that not only features more than 100 km of singletrack, but also kayaking, canoeing, horse-back riding, hiking, canyoning and a via ferrata.

**"This remote forest in a valley carved out by glaciers features more fast flowy singletrack that weaves its way over rivers and rocks, and around waterfalls."**

With no accommodation or sense of where the trails may be, we head straight to the local tourism office where a helpful employee makes a couple of calls and books us a reasonably priced room at La Bastide, a local inn. Another employee highlights the best trails on a map for us. (Once again, basically all of them.) Recently, the rolling farmland we had been driving through got hit with a downpour. Our new friend makes a triangle shape with her arms to describe how the trails have been designed for quick drainage after a heavy rain.

The trails that run through Vallée Bras-du-Nord are actually in two different areas. The "Secteur Saint-Raymond" is easily accessible by bike from town, while the "Secteur Shannahan" is about a 30-minute drive away.

The sky is still threatening, but we're determined not to let the day go by without getting on our bikes, so we head to the welcome centre located in the Hôtel Roquemont, to buy trail passes. The ride to the trailhead is easy to find and short.

Having been to the Kingdom Trails in East Burke, Vt., a month prior, the trails are still fresh in our minds and these ones offer that same fast and flowy singletrack that





OPPOSITE AND RIGHT  
Riding the Neilson  
trail in Vallée  
Bras-du-Nord

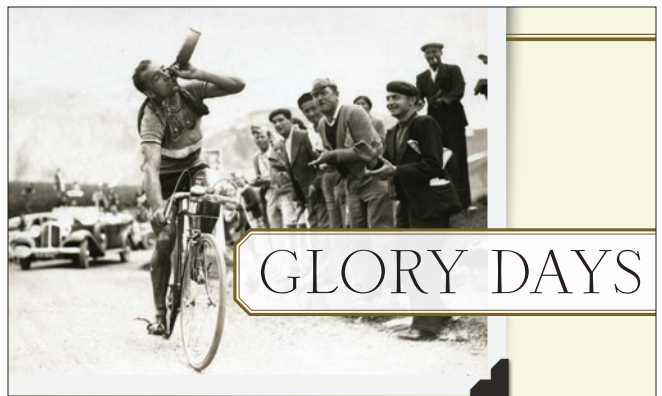
ABOVE  
Cycling the Rang  
Saguenay to  
Shannahan,  
where the bike  
trails start



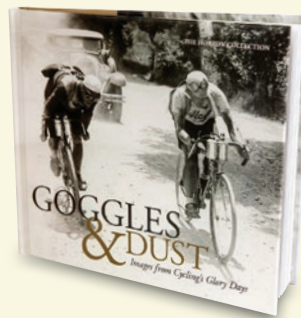
is earned after pedalling through a few climbs up the mountain. Vast swaths of surprisingly grippy Canadian Shield have been incorporated into the trails, as well as constructed bridges, low berms and tabletops. A trip down one of the black-diamond trails reveals more rocky obstacles – some that I grudgingly end up walking, but that my husband is happy to try a couple of times while I swat away mosquitoes and record him doing jumps with my iPhone.

Construction of these trails started in 2010, with the Shannahan section having a three-year lead. But it wasn't until two years ago that a \$900,000 development plan was put into motion to build more singletrack, explains Frédéric Asselin, general manager of the Vallée Bras-du-Nord Solidarity Co-op. This plan included hiring Sentier Boréals, a Magog, Que.-based company that specializes in trail building and that is a member of the Professional Trailbuilders Association.

The co-op follows a unique business model, enlisting employees, landowners and tourism representatives to have input on and to run this massive outdoor adventure initiative. It has won 12 awards for what Asselin describes as a sustainable tourism model. There is even a strong connection to the Kingdom Trails. The organizations have partnered to market each



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other's strong tourism offerings to Quebec and New England. "We both deal with the same issues and I would say we both have the same spirit," says Asselin. "We are both really proud of this innovative partnership between two small organizations from two different countries who speak two different languages." The co-op also hired Knight Ide, who was instrumental in the creation of many of the Kingdom Trails. So far this arrangement seems to be working. The region saw about 3,000 riders hit the trails three years ago and by the end of last year that number had tripled to 9,000.

Certainly anyone we ran into in the area, from shopkeepers to a couple of dog owners we encountered on the trails, seemed to be very proud of what their region has to offer to outdoor adventure enthusiasts.

Muddy and exhilarated after our preview of the trails, we head back to the inn, leave our bikes on the car and dash upstairs to our room. Less than an hour later we're seated in the dining room eating the best meal of our entire trip.

A torrential evening downpour preceded the next morning's sunny and cool dawn. After a delicious breakfast, we make our way to the

"Accueil Shannahan," the trail centre that serves the second network of Vallée Bras-du-Nord trails. It's worth the drive. This remote forest in a valley carved out by glaciers features more fast flowy singletrack that weaves its way over rivers and rocks, and around waterfalls. It's worth noting that there are also swaths of easy green routes for families who fancy a more leisurely ride. This inclusiveness and accessibility for all riding levels is a key part of the development plan, says Asselin.

The entire trail network started here at Shannahan with Chute à Gilles, which Asselin includes in his list of epic trails that are unique to Vallée Bras-du-Nord. His favourite is the 10.2-km Neilson trail, because of the flow, the rocks and the scenery of the surrounding boreal forest. It's this type of trail that the co-op hopes will lure riders from around the world and really establish the area as a must-visit mountain biking destination.

With more trails in the works, my husband and I agree we'd like to return sometime soon. Next time, though, we will rent one of the yurts that's located at the edge of a nearby river and truly disconnect so we can just ride our bikes and enjoy the magic and solitude of the valley.

ABOVE  
Delaney Falls in Bras-Du-Nord Valley,  
Saint-Raymond, Que.

BELOW  
Wooden features on the Neilson trail

OPPOSITE  
Auberge  
La Bastide



Photos: First Light / AllCanadaPhotos.com, Philippe Jobin



## Details

### How to get there

Saint-Raymond is roughly a one-hour drive from Quebec City. Porter Airlines, Air Canada and WestJet all fly into Quebec City.


### Where to stay

Auberge La Bastide ([bastide.ca](http://bastide.ca)) offers quaint, comfortable rooms with a fantastic breakfast. You can rent a yurt or campsite from the Vallée Bras-du-Nord website ([valleebrasdunord.com](http://valleebrasdunord.com)), which is close to the Shannahan trails. Because of all the lakes in the area, it would also be worth renting a cottage for your stay.

### Where to eat

Hôtel Roquemont ([roquemont.com](http://roquemont.com)), which is conveniently where you buy your tickets for the secteur Saint-Raymond, has a substantial pub menu (and a microbrewery is in the works). La Bastide's dinner offering is more of a fine-dining experience; the food is fantastic. They have many options for gluten-free diners. If you're looking to pack a lunch, grab some cheese from World Cheese Award-winners Fromagerie Alexis Portneuf ([alexisdeportneuf.com](http://alexisdeportneuf.com)).

### Where to find support

Saint-Raymond doesn't currently have a bike shop, but both trail centres (Shannahan and Roquemont) have mechanics on site. There are two different Rocky Mountain bikes to rent at the Accueil Shannahan. The closest bike shop is Frenette Bicyclettes ([frenettebicyclettes.com](http://frenettebicyclettes.com)) in Saint-Basile, about a 20-minute drive from the Accueil Roquemont. Performance Bégin ([performancebegin.com](http://performancebegin.com)) is about 30 minutes away. 



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