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THE ROAD T

This Gravelly Route Leads to Spartan Adventures

Text by Thomas C. Jamrog,
photos by Alan Mackinnon

Your motorcycle fairing is protected by a layer of carpet padding, vinyl, and duct tape. Your camping gear is packed, your heavy-duty riding outfit laid out. You're ready for a rugged motorcycling adventure, and no, it's *not* Alaska.

Welcome to Labrador, one of the last great wilderness areas in North America. I rode there from Maine last summer with two other BMW riders, logging 2,200 miles over nine remarkable days. There was Alan, on his R80RT; Pete, on his road-warrior R100S; and myself, on my trusty R100GS.

Our goal was to reach the town of North West River, the northern-most point accessible by road in eastern North America. This is a demanding trip, both from a lack of easily accessible facilities, and from the strain of extensive travel on gravel roads.

What's the attraction? Labrador offers a wide expanse of rugged, demanding terrain, with hundreds of miles of gravel roads. Yes, it

is harsh, but we were riveted by its Spartan-like terrain. There are intermittent services, and while gas is available less than every 200 miles, it's a wise idea to carry along an extra two-gallon tank.

Our trip was made possible by the recent completion of the Trans Labrador Highway, which starts in Labrador City and links Churchill Falls and Goose Bay with the rest of Canada. Don't expect to cruise along smoothly on a super-slab multi-laner, because this highway is not paved.

Despite what some publications state, the highway is open year-round. Also, you *can* get gas between Baie-Comeau, Quebec and Labrador City.

The Great Wilds

Labrador has a population of 30,000 people over 180,000 square miles, so even a good-sized town here is small, and the small hamlets are very small indeed.

Our trip started on Route 389 in Baie-Comeau on the north shore of the St. Lawrence River. From Quebec, there

*Below: Buildings are rare on this tour.
Below right: Pack what you need because you won't find a convenience store around the next bend.*



O LABRADOR

are several small ferries you can take to get to the river. We rode 360 miles north from Baie-Comeau to Labrador City. The road, partially paved, is in fairly good shape, and you can get there without having to be a motocross champ.

Labrador City is a decent-sized town, but it's once you get beyond it that the *real* excitement begins. Expect an adventure.

From Labrador City, it's approximately 175 miles to Churchill Falls. My "Destination Labrador" booklet describes this road as "good gravel construction," and lists it as a Class A maintenance grade. Approximate travel time is three hours. Not! In fact, it was on this section of road that Pete went down on a newly graded section of road that had three to four inches of loose rock coating. He was only going 30 mph at the time. These roads are great to ride on, but cautious riding is a must.

This is amazing land, much of it barren and beautiful. You can stop just about anywhere the land isn't too boggy and pitch your tent. Lash that fishing pole down, because there's lots of places you can go angling. For \$5, you can get a permit that allows you to go after huge trout. Call (800) 563-6353 for info.

A Spartan Approach

Our touring style is decidedly Spartan, and for this tour it was very practical. Alan, Pete

and I carried tents, sleeping bags and ground pads in waterproof canoe bags. Camping in Labrador was "au sauvage" — free and unserved. In this part of the world, it is wise to pack ready-to-prepare meals. Pitching a tent for the night is much easier when you don't have to shop for food — especially when there may not be any stores for another 50 miles.

It's a good idea to top off a canteen of water at your last gas stop so you can boil water for supper. We spent most of our nights cooking over small backpacking stoves.

Once you get to Churchill Falls, visit the hydroelectric project there. Once said to be "half-again as high as Niagara Falls," the falls is no more; today the waters are diverted to the hydroelectric plant. The plant at one time was the largest civil engineering project in North America, employing a work force of 30,000. The tours are free, but you should call ahead for reservations (709) 925-3211.

The towns out here are very small, and Churchill Falls in particular is unlike any town you have ever been in. It is made up of prefab buildings and resembles a college campus. Nearly everyone who lives there works in either the



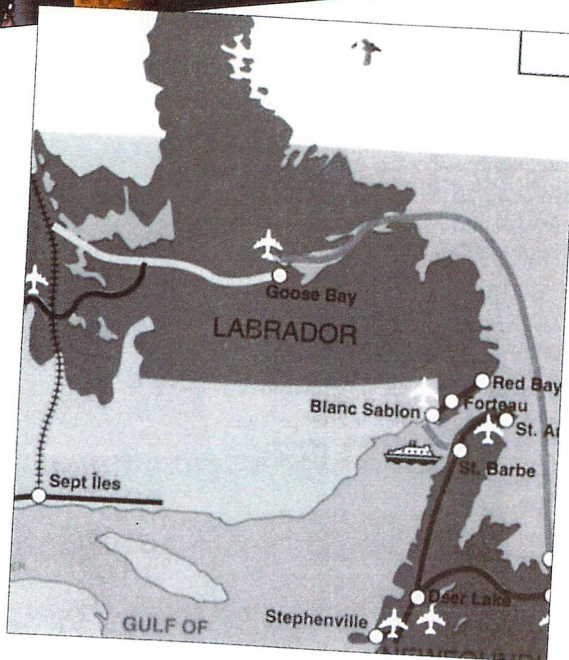
You've heard of speed bumps...well, here you'll find speed ponds.



The Trans Labrador Highway is fun and exciting, but it's not for the "where's the interstate?" touring crowd.



Alan Mackinnon, above, warns that a sense of adventure is a necessity for this demanding trip.



local mine or the hydroelectric plant. There is one hotel, but my buddies and I were determined to camp out this tour.

We asked folks about local camping sites, and drew a blank. Tourists don't come to Churchill Falls, because until the highway was completed, getting there was no small feat. A police officer finally told us that we could camp in the middle of town. An hour later, he came back and told us that we'd have to move on. The town manager, whose house was nearby, apparently didn't like our road-weathered looks. We assured the officer we'd be gone the next day, and finally were allowed to stay the night (after we promised not to start a fire).

With the road being open, more tourists will wander in Churchill Falls, but as of last summer the folks there had no idea what to do with visitors. For now, you're better off finding a place well outside of town that isn't too boggy and pitching your tent there.

The Road to Goose Bay

Even the authorities agree that the section from Churchill Falls to Goose Bay, about 190 miles, is one rugged stretch. Besides the potholes, we passed a carnage of caribou legs and heads that lined the road for 15 miles. Poachers? No, it was the remains of the winter Caribou hunt. Residents are allowed two legal kills from the herd, which numbers 400,000. It may be convenient for the locals to gut and prep game on the site, but it makes for an unusual sight for the uninitiated.

The closer we got to Goose Bay, the more treacherous the terrain became. The roadbed was very soft and sandy. Some craters were a foot deep and 10-feet wide. We lurched and wobbled through, sticking our legs out to help our balance. Undoubtedly, it would turn to a mud-sucking quagmire in a heavy rain.

Both Goose Bay, and its nearby sister city, Happy Valley, are much more tourist-friendly than Churchill Falls, yet I am sure we would not have met many of the friends we made if we were in a four-wheeler. All we had to do was stop our bikes, and people would gather. We finally reached Goose Bay after a dusty stretch of riding. A couple came over, observed that we looked awful tired, and offered us a hot shower at their home. They later gave us a huge caribou steak. I'd go back to this place in a minute.

The center of activity and employment in Goose Bay is the Canadian air base, a jet flight training center for military pilots from Germany, The Netherlands and Great Britain. It's an open base, with no guard at the gate, so you are free to explore most of the area, and watch the parade of jets lifting off all day long. There is a great deal of pressure from the native Inuit tribes to end the practice of flying jets a mere 50 feet over the treetops.

Nailed in Goose Bay

The next day, still in Goose Bay, I picked up a nail in my tire. We brought it to Frenchies' Polaris-Yamaha, and even though this was only our second day in town, the men who worked there had already heard about the trio of BMW riders. Not only did they take care of the tire, we were able to clean our bikes off and

were given another caribou steak.

The caribou steaks, which tasted a lot like lamb, were surprisingly good, but don't expect four-star cuisine out here. A hearty breakfast is your best bet; it tastes even better thanks to the Canadian-American exchange rate (27 percent at the time).

One place I'd advise you not to go to in Goose Bay is the Gosling Park campground. It's a grim place and tends to get quite boisterous. You are better off camping outside town.

We went on to North West River, a tiny hamlet where life has changed little over the years. We spent a few hours there, talking to villagers and answering questions about our motorcycles. If there was a road, we would have gone on to Rigolet, but the only access to the coastal port is by water.

Ferry On

Unless you want to ride back over the way you came, call for reservations for the ferry from Goose Bay to Lewisporte, Newfoundland. The ferry only makes two runs a week in summer. There is no ferry during winter, when most commuting is done on snowmobiles, often pulling large sleds called komatics.

The 36-hour ferry ride for one motorcycle and rider was \$108 (U.S.). It was foggy and cold on deck, and against the bare, stark shoreline we saw large icebergs floating south that likely had broken off larger glaciers in western Greenland. Some of the icebergs were the size of houses, streaked with hues of green and blue. They even generated their own mini-stratus clouds that you could see hundreds of yards away.

Forty Dramamine-laden hours later, we docked at Lewisporte. You must own a good rain suit if you plan to ride out here. The cold wind and rain can be quite grim, bordering on severe. The last 130 miles to Port-Aux-Basques was especially nasty, but we made it in time to secure tickets for the midnight ferry departure to Sydney, Nova Scotia. The six-hour ride cost \$32 each. We adopted a more leisurely pace as we meandered home for the next two days.

This tour is not for everyone, but if amenities are less important to you and a low-cost, high adventure escape appeals to you, I suggest you aim your bike north to Labrador. ❖

Thomas Jamrog, a school psychologist in Maine, says that a BMW R100GS and rugged roads make for great therapy.

Travel Tips

Insurance: Motorcycle helmets are mandatory. Vehicle insurance is compulsory. Ask your agent to provide you with a "Non-resident Inter-province Motor Vehicle Liability Insurance Card."

Black Flies and Mosquitos: During the summer months, these pests can be a major nuisance. Bring mosquito netting and wear your leathers.

Canadian Customs: American citizens can usually enter Canada without difficulty. Alcohol is expensive and you can bring into Canada duty-free up to 40 oz. liquor or wine, or 12 regular cans or bottles of beer. Tobacco products are expensive (up to \$8/pack of cigarettes), and you are allowed to bring in 200 cigarettes or up to 50 cigars. Visitors are not permitted handguns.

Gasoline: Regular unleaded gasoline was often the only choice. It's always best to fill up when near a pump. On rare occasions pumps are sometimes empty and you may await shipments.

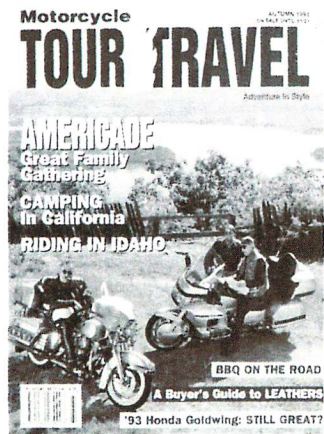
Currency: While you may be able to exchange currency in the U.S., better rates are available at Canadian banks. This past summer, the rate was very favorable (27%). Vendors will usually accept U.S. bills, but generally at unfavorable discounts.

For More Information

Tourism Quebec, Case Postale 20 000, Quebec, Canada. G1K 7X2. In U.S.A. (800) 363-777.

Ferry Reservations: Marine Atlantic, (709) 896-0041, (800) 341-7981.

Travel Literature, Maps: Destination Labrador, 118 Humphrey Rd., Dept. MT&T, Bruno Plaza, Labrador City, Newfoundland, Canada A2V 2J8. (709) 944-7788, fax (709) 944-7787.



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