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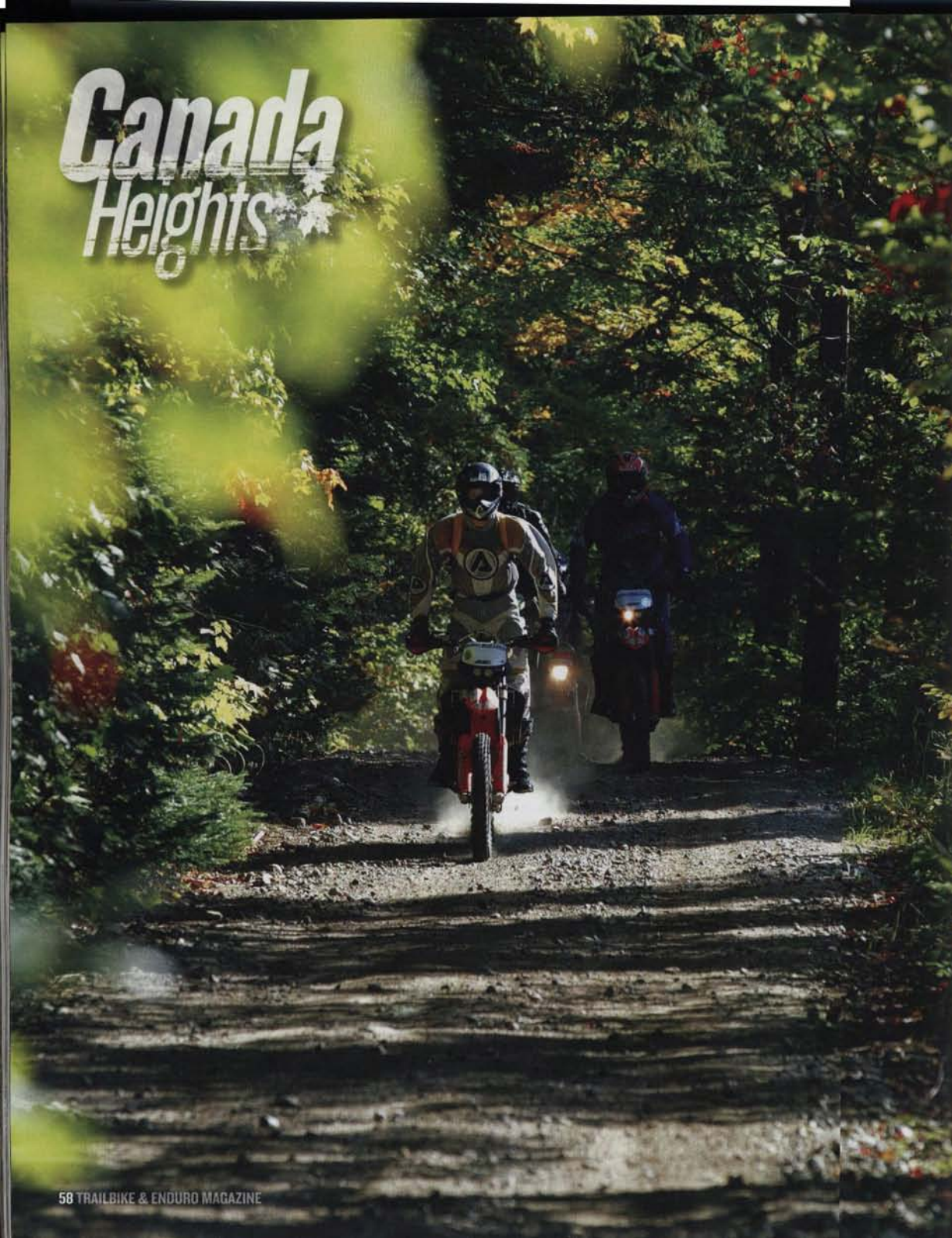
Canada Heights

A person is riding a mountain bike on a dirt trail that winds through a dense forest. The trees are in various stages of autumn, with some showing vibrant reds and oranges alongside the evergreens. The rider is in the lower-left quadrant of the frame, moving away from the viewer. The overall scene is bright and scenic, capturing the essence of a fall riding experience in the Canadian Rockies.

Endless sweeping trails and all the maple syrup you can eat; Llewelyn Pavey heads to Quebec to sample trail riding the French-Canadian way...



Canada Heights



Quebec - a land where dirtbikers and bears roam freely through achingly picturesque scenery. The French-Canadian province might not be the first place you think about when it comes to trail riding trips, but when the chance to join one of Quebec Moto Loisirs' (QML) five-day tours reared its head I grabbed it like a Grizzly fishing for salmon.

With a hectic schedule before I left for Canada I arranged for a third party to organise my flights - a long haul over to Toronto then a quick hop into Quebec. Thirteen hours after leaving the UK I landed in Canada, and one short connecting flight later I touched-down at Quebec City airport, where I was expecting to be picked up, to find the terminal contained just six people... all of whom worked there! There was no sign of anyone who looked remotely like a dirtbiker and after a quick chat to one of the half-dozen staff it dawned on me that there'd been a terrible mix-up and the geographically-challenged travel agent had booked me onto the wrong plane. I should've been in Montreal! Following some frantic phone calls and a light wooing of the lady on the ticket desk, I was finally on my way to the right city...

Good Woods

Organised by Benoît Pelletier and his lovely wife Denise, the QML tour is based outside Saint Michel des Saints, the largest town in Matawinie County. Arriving at night, the scenery was covered in a cloak of darkness but when I stepped out of the accommodation the following morning I wandered sleepily into a beautiful view full of autumnal sunshine, deep blue sky and a glassy lake that stretched for miles.

Benoît informed me that on the tour we wouldn't be sleeping in the same place twice, and on days one and five it would just be myself and Englishman Neil riding with him, and for the three days in between we'd be joined by pair of French riders.

Rolling my bike for the trip, an immaculately prepped KTM 450EXC-R, out of Benoît's garage and into the early morning sun we rode immediately onto our first trail. Running parallel with a 'main' road (even the major routes around Saint Michel are mostly dirt) we dodged

Benoît Pelletier organises an 'oar-some' trail ride...



around bushes and trees, popping little wheelies and jumps over cross tracks, and I quickly began to settle into my riding.

Benoît explained that the day was to be quite easy, made up of flowing 'ATV' trails so that we could get settled and he could gauge our abilities. In my head this came across as dull featureless dirt roads but I couldn't have been more wrong! ATV trails in Canada are fantas-

tic fun! Some are almost singletrack, some are as wide as fire breaks, and some are seriously technical rocky climbs! But the majority are groomed sandy trails with gentle berms on every bend making for a fantastically flowing, fast ride.

We weaved in and out of woodland for around 40km before dropping down into Saint Michel des Saints. Saint Michel is a town that could only be described as 'typically Canadian.' Imagine what you've seen of Canadian on TV or in films and it really is just like that! Everyone lives in wooden houses with vast gardens, and wide streets are packed with six-litre Dodge 'trucks.

After a coffee at a local bar, we set off and really started to cover some ground, winding through the forest before we made a quick stop at an enormous lake to play in the sand. As we rode down the beach past RVs and tents it struck me that there was a total acceptance of off-road motor-vehicles of all descriptions - no NERC-like restrictions here, thank you very much.

Something else dawned on me at lunch that I hadn't really considered since I left the UK. Bears. Really big bears! Then Benoît casually dropped into the conversation that he had spied one beside the road earlier, but it was no bother as the bikes scare them. 'But they're bears!' I thought to myself, 'they eat people and stuff!' Lo and behold, as we returned to the bikes there in the trees stood an adult Black bear. I instantly froze but for-



"It struck me that here there was total acceptance of off-roaders of all descriptions..."

Canada Heights



Canada Heights



tunately my previous apprehensions seemed misplaced as the bear turned its back and ambled away.

After the 'close encounter' we rode solidly for the rest of the day, finishing up at around 19:00. And arriving at the 'Central Motel' for the night, I realised we were in for more 'Canuck culture'...

Maple Leaves

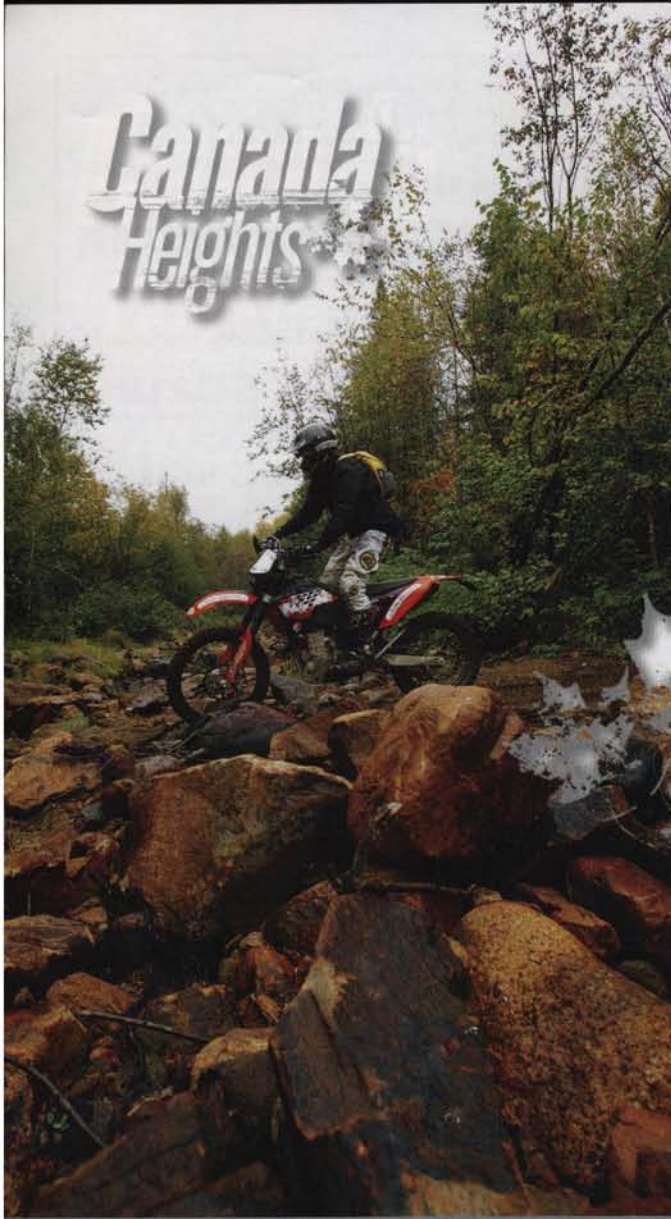
Getting up at a rather lazy nine o'clock I headed to breakfast and my first taste of real Canadian maple syrup. I think it's fair to say that day two started very well indeed.

Benoît then arrived with the French riders and we headed straight off into the hills the way we'd come down the day before. The previous night at dinner Benoît had explained the structure of each day's riding and how he alternates the more technical days with the faster days to give people a bit of a breather. That meant today was to be a 'technical' day, something that got me quite excited.



Very early on we turned onto a rather technical ATV track, which caught me a little unawares and resulted in me crashing like a total squiddy just a few minutes into the ride. Feeling somewhat shell-shocked it took a good 45 minutes to relax and get back to enjoying the riding.

Panana Heights



Ducking into the local forest, Benoit led us down his 'secret trails', weaving slowly in and out of trees and boulders, over small logs and down gullies. Truly great riding! Coupled with the amazing autumnal colours of the native maple and birch, I didn't know whether to stop and bask in the warm sun and technicolour display, or to just carry on riding.

Flashes of light filtering down through the tree canopy soon gave way to open skies as the trails grew into more open tracks of lightly whooped, packed-down

sand. Fast and twisty, the only thing which stopped us was a puncture (which Benoit expertly repaired, using a small tree to prop the rear-wheel-less bike), and the two hours running up to lunch were some of the best times I've had on a dirtbike!

After lunch we were joined by Benoit's friend and Montreal native, Alex. Aboard his 20-litre tanked 'DR-ZEEE' Alex showed us the ropes by maintaining a crackling pace across terrain you shouldn't be able to tackle that fast on a DR! As it turned out he regularly rides

Canadian enduros (albeit not on his DR-Z) and certainly put my skills to shame.

Much of the afternoon was spent on sandy trails similar to that morning's route, with a few added bogs courtesy of some beavers and their dams!

Staying the night in traditional Canadian log Cabins, I figured that things would become a little less comfortable and somewhat 'adventurous', but to my surprise they were fully equipped and modern, with a fantastic shower - essential for good post-ride accommodation! The evening was spent lake-side, indulging in some good food and a few beers.

Canuck Chase

On day three we set off while the air was still sharp and the sun fresh in the sky. The day was more scheduled than the previous two - we had a lunch date and an evening's bear watching to attend!

The first few tracks set the tone for the day as faster and more open trails headed out towards a national park. Working our way along wide, perfectly groomed snowmobile tracks through the forest, we rode for 30km on fine compacted sand before popping out of the trees into an ATV gas station. Now I've seen some weird things before but this was right up there with the best of 'em. Seemingly miles from civilization a little old man in old paint-stained blue overalls was standing under his gas 'hut' just filling ATVs!

As we continued along wide undulating tracks with long sweeping corners, it surprised me just how much fun such 'easy' trails could be on an enduro bike. Every corner was 'drift-perfect' and we played at steering the bikes on the throttle corner after corner, mile after mile!

Working our way over the top of the national park on wide rocky tracks, the views were fantastic and the weather perfect. This trip was developing into something really special! Leaving the main routes for some more technical climbs and descents (but nothing daunting or unmanageable) even a pair of punctures failed to spoil the mood of a great day.

Bear Essentials

Arriving late at our accommodation meant we were given the briefest of safety talks on 'how to not set our Teepees on fire'. Given my track record of riotous dramas and calamities, I had a right to be nervous about unscheduled campfires! However, there was no time for worrying... we had a bear viewing to attend!

Having already seen three bears in three days I'd recovered a little from 'bear mania', but was still looking forward to being able to try to get some snaps. Unfortu-



nately my camera had other ideas and I could only stand by and watch as fellow tourists snapped away, filling their memory cards with bear.

As night drew in our Teepee's beckoned, and the experience was enhanced by the high quality sleeping bags provided on a raised sleeping area (no playing at Bear Grylls for us!)

Despite my fears of being roasted alive sleeping in a large piece of flammable canvas next to an open fire, I had the best night's sleep of the trip. A good shower and cooked breakfast saw us set off well refreshed the next morning.

We headed back to Saint Michel along the previous day's trails, maintaining a decent pace so that the French guys could catch their return flights. Making excellent time we were about halfway back when a rotund Franco-Canadian woman, her arms flailing madly, jumped into the middle of the track.

A 'discussion' ensued involving raised voices and plenty of arm waving, and it transpired that she was doing nothing more than warning us about a large hunt-



The sign says 'welcome' and lists out the length of trails ahead!



ing party in the area. The rednecks had decided that today was the day to 'go get some of that there moose' and as they were hunting by bow and arrow we'd never know where they were until we ran into them. Or worse...

The Medieval Moose Shoot meant we had to go round the mountain on the road, racking-up an extra 45km, but as Benoît explained we were simply unfortunate to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

After making it back to town in time, and bidding adieu to the French riders, we headed off to the lodge that would play host to us for the evening.

Situated on the shore of another lake, it was an incredibly tranquil and homely place! And it truly gave you the feeling that you were in the deepest Canadian backwoods, with an apparent lack of electricity, gas or mains water. Yet at the mere mention of such deprivation, our hostess piped up in her thick accent 'Oh, I've got internet.' I almost died of shock, but apparently everyone has the internet here via satellite. This is in a place where my phone hadn't even sniffed a signal for five days...

I convinced Neil and Benoît it would be a great idea to go rowing on the lake, so after spending five minutes going in circles and another five trying to row the boat after we broke our rowlocks(!), we finally found a craft that worked. It was a great way to top off the day and we followed this up with a fantastic meal eaten under paraffin lamps.

Having Reservations

We awoke the next morning to find that an eerie fog had descended during the darker hours, so we set off on our last day at a relaxed 10am.

Day five saw us heading out to a Native Canadian 'reservation'. The ride there was very different to what we'd experienced on previous days, mixing some technical trails, some fast wide trails, and a few mishaps with broken snowmobile bridges! Despite cracking on at a fair pace and trying to stem a very slow puncture with the occasional replenishment of air, we were still late for lunch and had to drop onto the 'main road' to Manawin.

Moto Masters

Quebec Moto Loisirs is the brainchild of French-born dirtbiker Benoît Pelletier and his wife Denise. Benoît had the idea for running the tour when he first started visiting Canada and then last year put together his first trip. An experienced rider himself, he's raced French Championship events for many years and won a Silver Medal at the ISDE in France. He's also a fully qualified off-road instructor.

Canadian-born Denise grew up in France and forms the support and logistics side of the tour. Looking after all the luggage and providing several of the lunches, she follows the tour in the pick-up truck and meets up with the riders several times each day.

A lot of time has clearly been put into making the five days very cohesive and enjoyable, with some great non-riding elements adding to the experience and really making it stand out in my memories.

Preparation and customer safety was clearly high on their list of priorities, which was extremely comforting riding in such remote areas, with Benoît and Denise both carrying GPS transceivers so that they can always contact each other and the emergency services should the need arise.

Canada Heights

Bloody travellers get everywhere...



The 'Indian Reserve' was miles from anywhere and relatively devoid of white Canadians, but almost exactly the same as any other Canadian suburb I'd encountered.

Back on the bikes and on the return journey we rode for miles on tracks that had seemingly been untouched for a long, long time. As we worked our way back along the 90km of trail to Saint Michel, we raced down an avenue of bright yellow trees, switching left and right, jumping logs and having an awesome time on what I think is the single best track I have ever ridden. Pure heaven!

Having said my goodbyes to Benoît and Denise at the airport all that was left for me to do was get home problem-free. Some hope! The airline put me on 'reserve' until they could give me a seat, though they eventually got me on the flight that evening. Which was almost a shame - I certainly wouldn't have minded a few more days out on those trails...

At Your Quebec and Call

The cost of the QML tour is based on the number of riders, and for a five-person group you can expect to pay €1990 each. If you can't drum up four mates to go with then Benoît can incorporate you into an existing group. This price covers meals, fuel, accommodation, airport transfer, bike damage, in fact just about everything apart from your flights, drinks bill, tips and other personal expenses.

QML are situated equidistant from Montreal and Quebec City, so getting yourself to the trip is not so hard. Benoît will collect you from the airport (though it helps if you fly to the same one he's expecting you at!) and drop you back there too. I flew with Air Canada at a cost of roughly £500 return whilst Neil, the English chap on the tour, paid around £450 return with BA.

The trips run from April/May until the end of September, dependant on snowfall and the dates of the hunting season.

To find out more visit quebecmotolouisirs.com