



Mazda6 on the Chemin du Roy

Zoom-Zoom drives a Mazda6 along the timeless Chemin du Roy in search of history, culture and cakes

Founded on May 17, 1642, Montréal celebrates its 375th anniversary this year—an occasion that will be marked by a whole range of festivities throughout the year. Back in 2008, Montréal's older sister Québec City celebrated its 400th anniversary with an equally big jamboree, focusing on its poignant motto "Je me souviens" ("I remember"). And it's the ancient road that links these two cities that we'll be exploring on this journey. But first, some history.

Before Canada was a country, it was a colony, occupying a vast area along the north shore of the St. Lawrence River. Claimed by French explorer Jacques Cartier for King François I in 1534, this patchwork of seigneuries (feudal manors) was part of La Nouvelle France (New France).

Eventually, New France would land in the lap of luxury-loving, ballet-smitten King Louis XIV. Although the "Sun King" never set foot in the colony, he issued a decree in 1706 to increase its growth. The Chemin du Roy, a road stretching from Québec to Montréal along the St. Lawrence River, was part of that plan.

Despite the good intentions, the project waited many moons to come to fruition. Work only began on the road in 1731, long after the sun had set on the rule of the "Roi de Soleil." Instead it was during the era of his great-grandson, Louis XV, that the Chemin du Roy (King's Road) was finally built. Today, the historic spelling of the French word for "king" with a final letter "y" (and not the modern French roi that the Academie Française adopted in 1740) used in the road's name provides a reminder of the French monarch's part in its construction. When it was completed in 1737, the road measured 7.4 metres wide and 280 kilometres long. At the time, there was no longer road thoroughfare north of Mexico.

Of course, New France eventually changed ownership in 1763—we now say our allegiance to Queen Elizabeth II. But if you've ever driven along Highway 40 (the high-speed concrete carpet that connects Montréal and Québec City in under three hours), you've probably already seen the ubiquitous signage with a fleur-de-lis crown embossed on a royal blue background. On the signs, the three words "Chemin du Roy" invite you to exit and explore this parallel path. And, safely strapped into our Mazda6 as we leave Montréal, that's exactly what we're doing.



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THE RIVER GUIDES US

The Chemin du Roy is a winding path that piggybacks Route 138 in many parts. The reliable GPS keeps us on track, but in our feeble quest to channel Jacques Cartier, we basically follow the St. Lawrence River. There are several spots to stop and inhale the incredible views of the river. With a large terrace facing the water, Vignoble Lano d’Or is a choice destination for top views. A play on words l’anneau d’or (golden ring), Lanoraie (the name of the town) and Lanaudière (the region) sets the easygoing tone for this miniature vineyard, which you pass en route to the restaurant.



Also on the property is the winemaking facility. Director Jocelyn Lafortune gives us the tour. "We only produce about 5,000 bottles per year," he explains. His top juice is a fortified red wine, not something we'd recommend for driving, but we stick a bottle in the car for later.



With the weather distinctly un-alfresco, we have lunch at L'Auberge du Lac Saint-Pierre where Chef Alain Pénot whips up French cuisine using local produce. Here we are treated to a prime panoramic view of Lake Saint Pierre (a swelling of the St. Lawrence River between Sorel-Tracy and Trois-Rivières) that is framed by towering trees, complete with resident squirrels.



Our lunch at L'Auberge—and the "designer chalet" style of the dining room, with its reclaimed wood and rustic chandeliers—makes a sophisticated alternative to the predictable casse-croûte fare (read: greasy spoon) of poutine and pogos (corndogs on a stick) that might otherwise be encountered on the road.

Moving on, we take in the Moulin à vent des Grondines. An exhibition inside tells of its history as both a flour mill and lighthouse. There are a string of windmills that remain, 18 to be precise. But this one, dating back to 1674, is the oldest of the lot. If you like to take photographs, this is the place to be.

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SPIRITUAL ATTRACTIONS

Busloads of pilgrims unload every year at the Our Lady of the Cape shrine, including Pope John Paul II, who attracted more than 75,000 devotees in 1984 when he came by. The Lady of the Cape is Mary, the blessed mother of Jesus Christ, and the sartorial reference speaks directly to a statue of her in the Old Shrine. There are fascinating “miracles” related to this place (one connected with an ice bridge that formed in 1879 during a mild winter and another in 1888 about the statue of the Virgin opening her eyes), but even non-believers will be struck by the octagonal design of the basilica and stained-glass windows.

Less conspicuous is the charming Chapelle des Cuthbert, the oldest Protestant church in Québec. Having no Protestant cemetery to bury the remains of his wife, James Cuthbert, a former British army officer, built the chapel in her honour. It was initially called Saint Andrew’s Chapel, a nod to the patron saint of Scotland where Cuthbert was born.

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OLDIES, BUT GOODIES

The Magasin Général Le Brun is off the beaten track, but worth the short detour. Owners Richard Vienneau and Isabelle Thibeault run the multi-purpose attraction that’s one part café, one part museum, one part store, one part theatre and equal parts historic wonderland. The building, which is straight out of Little House on the Prairie, is actually an amalgamation of three separate general stores, dating from 1803, 1827 and 1915. The former store was displaced onto logs and pulled by horses to its present location in 1862.



Vienneau, an agreeable sort, quickly guides us to the second floor to show off his “pianola aéolien,” a kind of music box that is powered by pedals. On the ground floor, the shelves heave with more than 7,000 antiques, such as retro bottles of Sorelloise bière d’épinette (an old-timer’s pine soda).

In the centre and along the counters are items for sale. While I waded through old-fashioned hand-knit pantoufles and hockey-themed Habs and Bruins socks, my partner in crime loads up on Gold Mine nugget bubble gum and chewy caramels. We leave, laden with the irresistible goodies.

After a night at the Hôtel-Motel Coconut—a Polynesian-themed inn halfway between Québec City and Montréal—we get back in the Mazda6, ready for the second part of the journey.

The day’s first port of call is Cap Rouge, the first unofficial settlement by Europeans in North America. The area is framed by the sky-high Tracel railroad bridge, named after the English word “trestle,” that was built in 1908 and crosses the mighty Cap Rouge Valley River. The bridge is reserved for freight trains, which move at a very slow pace, and its claim to international fame is that Gustave Eiffel may have been involved in its design.



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GASTRONOMIC DELIGHTS

It would be a crime to drive along the Chemin du Roy and not sample the local food. You'd be missing out on a real-life application of the philosophy of terroir (land) upon which French gourmet culture is built. First and foremost, if you see any roadside stalls for fruits and vegetables, or better yet, for jams or pies, don't hesitate to pull over and indulge. In many cases, the produce was picked within metres of point of sale and baked by the same hands selling it to you.

The motto at Bistro La Ferme proudly states, “From our farm to your table” and that's no exaggeration. All the beef that it serves—steaks, burgers and smoked meats—comes from its own ranch just a few kilometres away.

Down the road from this meat haven, we discover Fromagerie des Grondines, a chalet-style boutique with cheese-making facilities in the basement. You can hear their cows mooing in the distance. Try the Gruyère-inspired Clos des Roches or Le Grand 2, a blend of cow and goat milks.

Not far from the Vieux Presbytère Deschambault we find Le Soleil Levain boulangerie, home of various types of pain (bread). Owner Bruno Piché gives thoughtful names to his breads, such as the “Zorba,” which is packed with Greek ingredients like kalamata olives, feta, sundried tomatoes, thyme and rosemary. I picked up a loaf of Le sudiste (the Southerner), featuring delicious dark chocolate and orange peel.

Speaking of sugary things, our coup de coeur (affair of the heart) along the Chemin du Roy is a visit to Julie Vachon Chocolats, not only for the selection of treats, but also for the hospitality and youthful exuberance of Julie Vachon. Vachon shares her modest space with Mélanie Gagné, the Third Wave bio coffee roaster behind La p'tite Brûlerie. Among Vachon's bestsellers is the chocolate hazelnut spread—think homemade Nutella—that comes in quaint 250g jars, or a more practical 1,200g bucket.

The last stop of our trip completed, we arrive in Québec City, sated, not just by the incredible food we've eaten, but by the huge variety of culture we've encountered. In terms of distance it's not been a long trip, but we've learned a lot about what makes this corner of Canada so unique.

Words Patricia Gajo / Photography Daphné Caron