

# A Trip on the Charlevoix "Massif" Tour Train

Article by David Page; Photographs by Carol and David Page

In August 2014, my wife Carol and I decided to book an all-day trip on Le Train du Massif de Charlevoix (reporting mark LMCX) operating on the former CN Murray Bay Sub. east of Quebec City. It turned out to be an incredible experience, and worth the 575 km drive from hometown Kingston, Ontario.

The train is part of a very new recreation complex which also includes a skiing site and a modern, unusual hotel, all centred in the artistic and cultural town of Baie St. Paul, Quebec, about 60 mi/100 km east of Quebec City. It is the creation of one of developers of "Cirque de Soleil", the world-class entertainment organisation. This background provides a clue to the innovative operation that we saw and enjoyed.

A word on the word "massif": it does not mean the train was enormous but rather is a geological term for a type of mountain formation that is not connected to any other mountain range or chain. In this case it correctly describes the topography found in Charlevoix County, in and around Baie St. Paul. The word has been incorporated into the company name accordingly.

Our "Daytripper's Delight" excursion began at 09.00 when the train emerged through the rain, at the foot of Montmorency Falls, the western terminus of the operation.



*Ex-CP RS-18u 1821 heads our train as we prepare to board at Montmorency Falls. Behind it are two sets of equipment, each including a HEP/Baggage Car, three double-decker passenger cars and one double-decker passenger car with control cab, trailed by ex-CP RS-18u 1858. The units could use a logo and decoration to fancy them up.*

The station is very modern and is shared by the double cable-car service to the Duke of Kent's former country house at the brow of the escarpment. This is about mp 6 on the Murray Bay Sub, now called the Chemin de Fer Charlevoix, reported and signed as "CFC".

I was surprised to see that the train consisted of two identical trains back-to-back: an ex-CP RS-18u, followed by a HEP/baggage car and four double-decker passenger cars (built as Chicago & Northwestern gallery cars). I later learned that the two centre cars were also control cabs, meaning no wye-ing or runarounds. Now I knew how the LMCX could provide several combinations of service in a given day, all on a single-track line. Details of the rolling stock are provided in the *Canadian Trackside Guide 2014*, Page 3-107.

We were told that we would board car no.1 and find our assigned seats then. This is when the innovative ideas began to show up, starting with an iPad on a stand on each table, indicating the names and seat numbers of each passenger. Once the train got underway, so did the iPad, showing our progress along the line and providing commentary (and songs!) about each passing village.



*This is what greeted us at our table! Not all passengers knew how an iPad worked so Carol pitched in and helped explain. The iPad showed a moving trip map and gave short stories about villages passing by.*

The car design itself also showed what can be done to turn a plain double-decker (gallery) commuter car into a fascinating and attractive touring vehicle. The inside upper deck has been removed, creating a cathedral-ceiling effect, large side windows installed, with European-style two-plus-two table seating. Painting, decoration and lighting complete the transformation. We paid a little extra to get water-side seats, a good idea.



*A view of the car's interior, with the author contemplating the passing scene, and our cheerful "serveuse" in the background. Removal of the upper deck has given the car a spacious feel. The side windows are very large, offering good views.*

One of the many aspects of this trip that made it so enjoyable was the on-board staff. Each car had three crew: a chef, a maitre-d'/chef de voiture, and a server. They were dressed very smartly in what might be termed a "Euro-modern" style. The chef kept busy in his galley area, while the other two attended to the food and drink service, and passenger questions about the trip. Out of the perhaps 35 or so people in car no.1, I believe we were the only Anglos. Announcements were made in both languages nonetheless and we were treated with exceptional *courtoisie et service*.

Before more about the trip, I must say that the food served on board was one of the key features of this train. Nearly all of the ingredients and recipes are local to Charlevoix County, right down to the mayonnaise. The on-board catering service comes from the former Canada Steamship Lines hotel, the Manoir Richelieu, situated at Murray Bay. Starting with a breakfast and finishing with a four-course dinner, with snacks and appetisers in between, we were treated to the best of Quebec cuisine throughout the day.

Once underway the train paralleled the highway for about 15 miles to Ste. Anne de Beaupre, navigating the many grade crossings along the way. At Ste. Anne the storage tracks once used by pilgrimage trains on either side of the main line are still in place. Our train made a brief stop to board two passengers who must have missed the departure.

Not long afterward, as we could see the approaching mountainous skyline, the track curved toward the St. Lawrence River. For much of the remaining trip, we had the water on one side and sheer, rocky cliffs rising straight up on the other side. We passed through small villages, saw the occasional passing siding (one with ballast cars in it, the only freight equipment seen during the day), and could look across the wide (20 mi/32 km) river. With the main ship channel very close to the north shore, we saw several ocean-going ships heading down river. Looking back to where we had passed, the rugged shoreline was quite striking.

By 11.30 we arrived at Baie St. Paul, the home of the "Le Massif" operation. The company has built their own siding, curving inward toward the town. It ends at the station and the "Hotel la Ferme", part of the company complex. All very new and European looking, with pricing to match. The station, complete with coffee shop and gift shop, is about a 10-minute walk to the centre of Baie St. Paul. The town, population c7,000, has been an artists' and tourist haven for years. Lots of investment by firms like Power Corporation is evident by the public decoration in the form of statues, busts and paintings by well-known Canadian artists. There are plenty of little shops and restaurants to check out along the main street.

We had a couple of hours to look around before heading back to the station. Once there we noticed the back half of our train had departed back to Quebec City on another service. In the meantime our RS-18u 1821 had been duly shut down to save fuel and reduce noise. I saw a sign referring to a "navette" (shuttle) service to Murray Bay/La Malbaie, about 25 mi/40 km distant, being available. Thinking it was bus service I enquired about it, only to find out that it too was a rail service ..... provided by two, 2-car sets of German DMUs! They are also used in winter, operating from the hotel to the company's "Massif" ski resort.

Soon our train left for Murray Bay / Pointe au Pic. On this segment of the trip along the shore we passed both DMU sets going back to Baie St. Paul, went through two tunnels, and thanks to clearing skies, had many great views. At Murray Bay (Pointe au Pic station) I thought we would have time to walk up to see the Manoir Richelieu hotel, but it was not to be. Carol had time to walk down to the former steamer docks and then we were off, heading back to Baie St. Paul and Montmorency. This was the stage of the trip when the food service came into full swing. To prepare us for the main meal, an appetiser was served. Despite the bright colours we were assured that it was a genuine Charlevoix creation!



*The food service was one of the main attractions: presentation and taste, all from local ingredients. This appetiser started off our 4-course dinner on the way back ... it was as good as it looks.*

In the meantime the passing scene also became colourful, with the setting sun shining on low clouds over the St Lawrence. Shortly thereafter the main course arrived ... "duck prepared three ways" we were told. It was incredibly delicious.



*Saving the best for last, here is our dinner main course ... duck prepared three ways we were told. It was delicious and makes my mouth water even now. Quebec cuisine is far more than poutine and les hot-dogs.*

Before long we were rattling through the level crossings approaching Montmorency, the end of the trip. Our cheerful "serveuse" broke into some pleasant song to signal the end of a long day (it was 9.15 pm by then) and a great experience. What a day!

**Footnote re station and place names at "Murray Bay":** "Murray Bay" was the English term for "La Malbaie" back when it was a tourist and steamer destination for Montrealers and other Anglo-Quebecers. The name became associated with the Canada Steamship Lines grand hotel "Manoir Richelieu", and became the subdivision name when CNR took over ownership of the line in 1951. The term has largely disappeared from use today.

The CNR 1956 timetable for trains 175/176 list Pointe au Pic as the station for Murray Bay, meaning the hotel, while "La Malbaie" two miles further along was then the stop for the town. Today's Charlevoix tour train terminates at Pointe-au-Pic.

References thanks to Bruce Chapman and John Lachance. ■