

Weekender: Missisquoi Valley Rail Trail and Sutton, Quebec.

The town of St. Albans, Vermont, is in the northwestern corner of the state, about a 4-1/4 hour drive from downtown Hartford via Interstates 91 and 89. For more than a century, the town was a thriving rail center. The historic Central Vermont Railroad headquarters building is a concrete reminder of this heritage. In 1867, rail service connecting St. Albans with Richford to the northeast was initiated, operating under several names and owners between the two towns until 1984. In its heyday, it connected to the Central Vermont Railroad in St. Albans and the Canadian Pacific Railway in Richford.



The historic Central Vermont Railroad headquarters in St. Albans.

Following in the footsteps of many defunct railroads, the rail's former route is now a multi-use rail trail, the [Missisquoi Valley Rail Trail](#) (MVRT). I had ridden the trail last year with a friend as part of a tour in the area and thought it would make for a nice leisurely weekend trip with my wife. We decided to start in St. Albans and continue beyond Richford to the resort town of Sutton, Quebec, about 38 miles each way. After an overnight in Sutton, we would return via the same route to St. Albans.



The current rail trail is a ribbon of smoothly-packed stone dust that roughly follows the route of the Missisquoi River. The trail surface is ideally negotiated on hybrid bikes with mid-width tires (we had 35mm/1.5 in.) but we did notice some riders with skinny tires who seemed to be doing just fine. As is usually the case with rail trails, the route is mostly flat (as much as that adjective can be applied in Vermont), with no difficult grades.

Having heard about this beautiful trail, you might think that St. Albans would proudly advertise its presence, but in fact it takes some investigation to locate the trailhead here (and in Richford as well). The first mile or two feels like many suburban rail trails, and here we saw a smattering of locals out for a quick Friday morning ride or jog. Soon though, we were riding through the dairy country that dominates this part of Vermont. We had obtained guides at the trailhead (or online at <http://www.mvrailtrail.com>) that are a treasure-trove of information about the towns along the trail and loop rides you can take from various points. Given my love of history I thought I would want to stop and explore, but once we started riding, the trail drew us into its rhythms and I found myself just wanting to ride at an easy pace and enjoy the trail's scenic beauty. As the trail winds its way through the Missisquoi Valley, the view regularly changes. The trail's namesake river periodically comes into view or runs right along the trail. Other stretches take you through woods festooned with wildflowers, or the trail opens up to reveal the broader landscape of river and mountain.



Mountains and dairy farms are frequent scenery along the trail. We found that we never exceeded the posted speed limit.

We had eaten only a light breakfast at the motel so a full breakfast stop in Enosburg Falls, at the 16-mile mark, was in order. Leon's Diner is the classic small-town eatery, and an excellent breakfast and friendly service put us in the right frame of mind for the second half of the ride. The town of Enosburg Falls seemed to be emblematic of the struggling economies in the region and also of the lack of connection between the local communities and the MVRT. There were few signs for the trail, or any apparent interest in publicizing the trail or in the tourism potential it might possess. At one level, it was great that we often had the trail to ourselves for long stretches, but it would have been gratifying to see more riders along the way and an embrace of the trail by the adjacent communities.

After arriving in Richford we picked up beverages at the excellent food market and headed north, soon passing the quiet border station into Canada and the bike-friendly confines of Quebec. The stretch of highway leading to Sutton is part of the Route Verte, Quebec's extensive network of bike trails and bike-friendly roads, and motorists were reminded upon entering the province to "Partageons la route". Although we were now on road, the wide shoulder and moderate traffic made this a pleasant stretch, a bit hillier than the rail trail but not difficult.



The town of Sutton is best known for its ski resort, but has also become something of a cycling mecca due to the Route Verte, and also as the host of the "Coupe des Ameriques" bike race. In fact, there is a monument to the importance of cycling in the center of town! On my previous visit to Sutton, I had savored the incredible wares of the Chocolaterie Belge Muriel, located on the main drag next to the tourist information office. The bar was set high by the expectations I had created but we were not disappointed. The chocolates represented both culinary and visual artistry.

"Share the Road" Quebec Style.



A monument to cyclists in Sutton.

After renewing the body and soul with chocolate, and the mind with information about Sutton, we proceeded to the Auberge Le St. Amour, a bed-and-breakfast in a beautiful, historic home located near the center of town. The inn displayed the “Bienvenue Cyclistes” (“Cyclists Welcome”) sign that appears at accommodations throughout the Route Verte. Our bikes were conveniently and safely racked in the inn’s dining room (its restaurant was not open that night) and we were free to explore town on foot. Even had we not been cycling, the Auberge Le St. Amour would be one of the top-ranked B & B’s of the many at which I’ve stayed. The innkeeper found that perfect balance: friendly and helpful but not intrusive or pompous. The breakfast was delicious and sumptuous without being so heavy that we felt like we had a 2nd set of panniers!



The Missisquoi River in Richford.

I normally prefer a loop to a return by the same route, but in this instance I appreciated the difference in the views presented by riding the trail the opposite way. It was early afternoon when we arrived back in St. Albans and we both felt a “creamy” would be the perfect punctuation to the day’s ride. We stopped a woman on the street for a recommendation and in addition to providing the location of a stand, she filled us in on St. Albans’ history as a railroad town. The railroads were so prominent there that the town even prospered during the Great Depression. The later decline of the railroads left the town without any trains for a period of time but Amtrak has since restored passenger service.



The Missisquoi River flowing slowly through dairy country.

Overall, this was a very relaxing weekend getaway. If you have time, a stop in Burlington is worthwhile as well. The city center is restaurant- and pub-rich and includes a pedestrian mall. The city is one of New England's most bike-friendly locales and there is a bike path right along Lake Champlain that is one piece of the larger Lake Champlain Bikeways route. Information about that route, cycling in Burlington, and the MVRT are available at the lakefront headquarters of [Local Motion](#), an advocacy group. Downtown hosts an excellent farmer's market on Saturday mornings in season.

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