

GATEWAY

The race across Lac Saint-Jean draws swimmers — and partiers — from far and wide.



SWIMMING

Amazing race

IT'S HARD TO IMAGINE A MORE Canadian rite of passage than swimming across a lake on a hot July day. In Quebec, this arch-Canuck exploit has been raised to a communal art form called the *Traversée internationale du lac Saint-Jean*. A mix of sport and shindig, the 32-kilometre race across Lac Saint-Jean draws marathon swimmers from all over the world and gives locals a week-long excuse to party. For

visitors, there's no better time to make a deep-dive into the francophone heartland.

Lac Saint-Jean, about 50 kilometres west of Chicoutimi, is frequented by European holidayers but remains untapped by North Americans who balk at muddling along in French. Too bad, because this enclave overflows with family-friendly charm perfect for a week's holiday. The 1,000-square-kilometre lake is fringed by sandy beaches, blueberry fields, quaint towns with silver-spired churches, innumerable inns, eateries and unusual museums.

As elsewhere in Quebec, family business

still holds multinational blandness at bay. Best yet, you don't need a car — the lake is ringed by a paved bicycle trail, the *Véloroute des Bleuets* — though a boat is handy if you want to catch the *ouananiche*, or land-locked salmon, for which the lake is known. The biggest party prior to race day is *Le Souper dans les rues*, a noisy communal meal taken in the streets of Roberval. There's room for everyone — the rows of tables are more than a kilometre long.

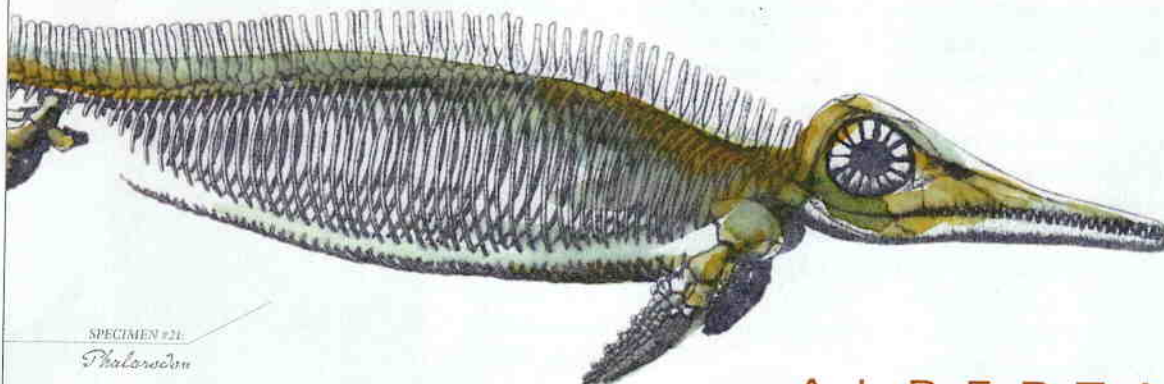
On race morning, the swimmers enter the water from the dock at Peribonka. Accompanied by a picturesque flotilla of small red support boats, the brave *nageurs* take a hypothermic 6:22 (the record) to 10:30 (last year's stragglers) to reach cheering crowds in Roberval. Two victors, one male and one female, emerge to bask in the glory of this unique Québécois spectacle.

This year's *Traversée* runs from July 24 to August 1. For more information, go to www.traversee.qc.ca.

— Allan Casey

TRAVERSÉE INTERNATIONALE DU LAC SAINT-JEAN

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