

Riviere Jacques Cartier Nord Ouest

Vitals

Locale: Parc Jacques Cartier, Quebec

What It's Like: The Taureau's big brother - big gorges and big rapids in the wilderness.

Class: V (V+ to VI) at high water

Scouting/Portaging: Scouting is ok, portaging is difficult and arduous

Level: Jacques Cartier gauge - <http://www.cehq.gouv.qc.ca/Suivihydro/graphique.asp?NoStation=050801> and divide by 3 to get the Taureau flow, which correlates to the JCNO

Time: Two days in an ideal situation. One day if you charge hard.

When To Go: June - tail end of snowmelt

Info From: May 2008

Other Beta: None

Description

The Jacques Cartier River in Quebec is one of the most recognized in the province, and contains many sections of cool whitewater. Perhaps the most revered of these is the Taureau section in the upper reaches of the valley - it's a remote one day wilderness run full of fantastic whitewater. One of the best parts of the run is the paddle out through the Jacques Cartier gorge - an ancient cleft in the ground with towering walls on either side, blanketed with thick boreal forest. As the last of the whitewater on the Taureau all but disappears, a tributary of equal size enters from the right, obviously running through a huge canyon upstream of the confluence - this is the Jacques Cartier Northwest.

After a lot of planning and trying to gather information we set out to run the JCNW in May of 2008 - this trip report is ultimately based on those experiences. Consider this a disclaimer that what you find may not be what we found - do your homework, and most importantly go in there prepared. The water level on our trip was very high, and the description will reflect this. Check out the blog post for the story about our trip down.

The JCNW can best be described as the big brother of the Taureau. It has a monumental shuttle. There is a huge portage around a gorge that few, if anybody will ever run. The whitewater on our trip was hard class V the whole way, and portaging at river level is difficult. Do this trip for the adventure - it's a good one. Our trip through the JCNW gorge goes down as one of the most memorable kayaking trips I've taken and if you spend any time in that area at all, it will be worth the effort to get in there some day.

The JCNW actually has a bigger river bed than the Taureau section of the Jacques Cartier. The Taureau gauge is notoriously inaccurate (it's far downstream with many tributaries between the upper reaches and the gauge), and there are multiple arcane tricks to try and interpret how the reading correlates to actual flows in the river depending on the time of year, local rainfall and the phase of the moon. Lacking a lot of hard data, I would suggest that somewhere between 40-60 on the gauge would be a good flow range - this would typically mean high water on the Taureau. We did our trip at about 90 cms in mid May - it was too high, at least for us.

The shuttle on this river is not trivial. There is the option to drive to the put in, but it would be a long drive on roads where maps aren't readily available. The take out is the easiest to find, being the same one as that of the Taureau - head to the Jacques Cartier Valley in the Jacques Cartier Park, which you'll find on the highway heading north out of Quebec City. Drive to the end of the road up the valley and park there - check out the map linked at the top for more details. To access the top of the river, we decided to fly out of St. Raymond with Aviation Mauricie (www.aviationmauricie.com) to the lake on the northern branch of the river above the gorges - again, see the map linked above to get a feel for the lay of the land up there. From St. Raymond it was about a 25 minute flight to the lake. I *strongly* recommend running this river in 2 days - one, to make the cost of the flight a little more bearable and two, to assure you have enough time to get through the whole section.

The countryside here is very wild and scenic. It's typical of the area with dark water, dense brush and when we were there, lots of snow. Paddling out of the lake on to the river at first is mainly flat water with current, and some easy whitewater. Eventually another branch of the river (coming from the southern lake, which is also a possible landing destination) joins up, the volume jumps and you'll encounter some better rapids. There is only one big rapid in the section upstream of the JCNW canyon - it is waterfall, maybe 25 feet tall. We didn't run it because of a bad cave at the bottom on the right, but it might clean up at lower water levels.

The next section is similar to the section above the waterfall. When you get to an old bridge, get out of the river - downstream is the start of the meat of the JCNW, and first 500 meters is by far the burliest of the whole thing. The river drops into a major gorge containing a few big waterfalls, lots of big rapids and limited river level portage options. It is critical to scout this beforehand if you have aspirations to run it. It will need quite low water to actually make it runnable - it's likely the rest of the run will be too low when this initial gorge is runnable, if it is at all - it hasn't been run yet.

Because of this gorge, what's up next is a massive portage through very thick forest. You can try and stay close to the edge of the canyon - half way through there is a power line cut to give you a break from the thick woods. The better option is to walk north from the bridge along the road for a few hundred meters to a trail that will break right, heading for the power lines. Once at the power lines, head for the river on the downstream side of the clear cut. Try and stay along the rim of the gorge, trying to find a place to get to the river below the last of the big waterfalls. This might take some time to sort out. Also, we had beta that it was possible to scramble down to the water, but after a fruitless search it was necessary to rappel down to the edge of the water, so come prepared. Our portage took about 4 hours, but it would be much quicker without snow in the woods, and if you had a good sense of where to go. I would camp somewhere along the portage on a 2 day trip - maybe get the boats through on day 1 and get set up for getting down to the water, then camp on the road or under the power lines. Finding a good campsite in the gorge would be tough.

The trip up to this point is a lot of work, but that's all part of it. Once on the water, the action starts right away with a big rapid with several giant overlapping holes at the bottom. The first half of the river will be rapids similar to this one - it would probably be pool-drop at lower water, but it was a roaring mass of whitewater as far as you could see downstream during our visit. Everything is easy to scout - most things can be portaged, but there are a few gorged sections where walking would be difficult or impossible

I won't describe the whitewater in detail. As you continue downstream the intensity of the rapids will increase and the river becomes continuous as it plunges through long stretches of steep boulder piles. Scout carefully. Just when you've had enough, the river will suddenly dump into a still lake and you have time to soak up the mind blowing scenery of the JCNW canyon.

This lake arises from a big avalanche that at one point came off the river left wall of the canyon, plugging the river to form a lake. As you would expect, the lake ends at a rapid called Landslide, the largest rapid below the initial gorge - it's big, steep, full of ugly rock and it is very long. Believe it or not, as of 2008 it's been run - twice! Portage on either side.

After Landslide you're nearly at the end of the JCNW. There is a very fun section of continuous class III and one more bigger drop before the river flattens out as it joins the main stem of the Jacques Cartier - think of it as one last chance to soak in the beauty of the valley. Once on the Jacques Cartier it's a relatively quick paddle out the parking lot at Camp 3 in the Jacques Cartier Park, where food and drink is awaiting.

The JCNW is a mission. I would recommend doing it, however be aware it's a big effort not without its share of hardship, and hard whitewater. The shuttle is excessive for the length of the river (you only run about 6 km of whitewater on the JCNW below the waterfall gorges), but the experience of passing through a place where very few people have been, or will be, makes this trip more than worthwhile. Hopefully this report will give you enough information to get started on a trip in there - be prepared, and have fun!