Arnaud Samson coroner

are you tired
of your
old

'Ferry fever' a road killer

DAVID JOHNSTON
The Gazette

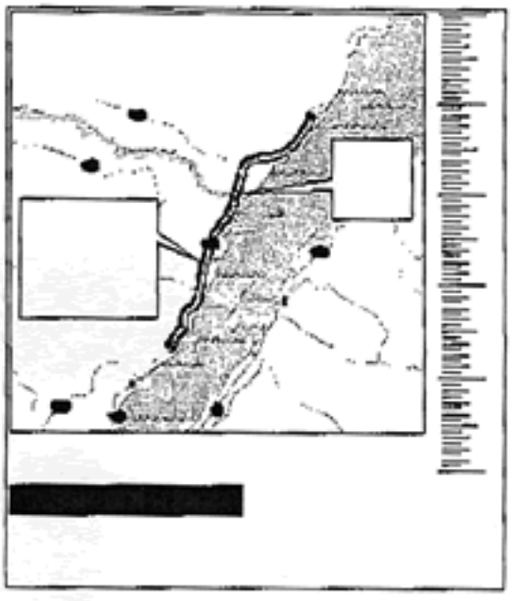
The approaches to this historic village are so breath-taking - majestic fjords and whales at the intersection of two great rivers - that you quickly forget you're in what's being called the "Saguenay Rectangle," Quebec's answer to the deadly Bermuda Triangle.

People say you should consider yourself lucky if you drive away from here - alive and in one piece.



GERMAINE BERTHIAUME, GAZETTE / Vehicles line up to board the Tadoussac ferry, which is the only way to get across the Saguenay River.

Over the last five years, this stretch of highway has been the scene of 1,062 automobile accidents, 338 injuries, 75 serious injuries, and 27 deaths, astonishingly high numbers for such an isolated area.



Coroner Arnaud Samson has an unusual explanation for this carnage.

He says when people come through here, they undergo a "psychosocial" change in personalty that erases their ability to drive properly.

The idea that a road can control the minds of people who drive on it sounds like the stuff of a Stephen King novel.

But that's precisely what Samson said about the section of provincial Highway 138 stretching from St. Fidele, 60 kilometres west of Tadoussac, to Les Escoumins, 30 kilometres east of it.

The coroner dug a little deeper and concluded that the underlying cause of the psychosocial change is a phenomenon he termed "ferry fever."

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Highway 138, which runs along the north shore of the St. Lawrence, comes to a stop at the Saguenay River. There's no bridge over the river where it intersects with the St. Lawrence, and for motorists the crossing can only be accomplished by ferry.

Tadoussac sits on the east bank of the crossing, Baie Ste. Catherine on the west side. Three ferries operate in summer months, two the rest of the year. Crossings are every 20 minutes by day in summertime and every 40 minutes by night. There's no charge; the provincial government picks up the tab.

Ferry fever, said Samson, is a road condition that describes the impatience of drivers trying to get to the next scheduled ferry crossing on time. As they approach the ferry, they tend to speed up, or try to overtake vehicles in front of them, even in zones where passing is prohibited.

Ferry fever flares up again when cars leave the ferry, said Samson. Vehicles are let off in single file, creating one long line of traffic. There's a tendency among many drivers to try to get

to the head of the pack and open road, which creates more speeding and dangerous passing manoeuvres.

Of course, it doesn't help that 138 in this mountainous region is one lane in each direction, with steep gradients and hairpin turns and very few stretches where passing other vehicles is possible, let alone legally permitted.

"You take your average Quebecer, on your average Quebec road, and he's a good driver," said Samson in an interview. "But you put that same Quebecer on the stretch of road I talk about in my report and he undergoes a psychosocial change in his driving habits."

What's more, said Samson, many drivers get to Tadoussac after many hours on the road, so weariness also affects their behaviour.

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Germain Rousseau, an ambulance technician in Saint-Simeon, said the problem on the 138 is that traffic moves at two different speeds - tourists driving slower than the speed limit and regular users of the road who drive at or over the speed limit.

"The regular users get irritated with the tourists," said Rousseau, whether it's the fishermen in the spring, summer vacationers or hunters in the fall.

Rousseau, who has worked locally as an ambulance attendant since 1985, said accidents on the 138 "tend to be very spectacular."

He said he had one accident where a car was crushed like an accordion so badly that two tow trucks had to be called to pull it apart - one truck pulling in one direction, the other truck pulling in the opposite direction. He described another accident where newlyweds in a car collided with an oncoming truck. When he arrived at the scene, the car was completely underneath the truck.

"Married on the Saturday, killed four days later on the Wednesday," he said.

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Henri Allard, a truck-driver, travels the 138 almost every working day, hauling logs from the Manicouagan forests to the Krueger paper mill in Trois-Rivieres.

"It's definitely a dangerous road," he said as he sat behind the wheel of his truck on the Saguenay car ferry. "Among truck-drivers, it's known as the 'driving school.' It's where you really learn how to drive. So many dangerous turns and lots of hills, and only one lane in each direction. And the tourists are a problem. They slow everything down."

Steve Tremblay, a Saint-Simeon telecommunications worker,

said impatience with tourists' driving habits is particularly acute among people along the north shore who work on commission or have to commute through several communities to get to work. Some villages, like St. Fidele, have long been meeting to discuss problems on the 138, according to St. Fidele Mayor Ulysse Ducharme.

"It started after we lost four of our youths to accidents on the 138 in one year," said Ducharme.

Samson's inquiry was triggered by the death last November of Leonard Turbis on a section of the 138 near Les Escoumins.

He had just gotten off the ferry at Tadoussac and was driving east to his home in Havre St. Pierre, a town east of Sept isles. At one point, he crossed a double yellow line (no passing allowed) to get ahead of the car in front of him. Suddenly there was a sharp turn in the road, and a tractor-trailer appeared. Turbis couldn't get back into his own lane. At the morgue in Baie Comeau, Samson inspected Turbis's body and found that his brains had literally been knocked out by the collision.

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In the world of accident research, the notion that there's a debilitating driving condition like ferry fever is not accepted fact, and still only has the status of "theory," according to the Traffic Injury Research Foundation of Ottawa, a leading research group on road accidents.

Since the release of Samson's report, two local departments of community health have joined forces to begin to design a study that will attempt to verify Samson's ferry-fever hypothesis.

The findings of this study will have some relevance in regions of Quebec east of the provincial capital, where the St. Lawrence grows steadily wider as it flows downstream and where many communities depend on year-round ferry service to travel between the north and south shores.

In his report, Samson called for better signage on Highway 138 warning of the high incidence of accidents near the ferry crossing, and urged community leaders to discuss solutions. Those on the east side of the Saguenay have already held their first meeting.

One study showed that 80 per cent of drivers on the 138 are regular users, and that half of those are people driving from Baie Comeau or points east to Quebec City or points west. Baie Comeau to Quebec City is a six-hour drive, and the Saguenay River is the mid-point. In other words, roughly four in 10 drivers enter the Saguenay Rectangle with at least three hours of driving behind them.

One solution could be a bridge over the Saguenay, but the coroner didn't call for one. Instead, he suggested building more passing lanes and improved police surveillance. Quebec had already pledged road improvements east of Tadoussac before the release of Samson's report, but work has not yet begun.

"There will never be a bridge," said Gerard Lamarche, a garage-owner in Tadoussac.

"I was talking to a provincial politician, who told me the debt servicing on a bridge would be three times more expensive than the cost of operating the car ferry. But that's OK. If I had to choose between a bridge and better roads, I'd take better roads."

Rousseau, the ambulance-driver, agrees. "The 138 is an old horse trail," he said. "They just paved over it."

- David Johnston's E-mail address is djohnston@thegazette.southam.ca

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