

Travel CRUISING

Canada's only desert is becoming a hot tourist destination

Travel Talk

DONNA CARTER



Just like a Mexican piñata, the small town of Osoyoos, B.C. is filled with treats and surprises. If you've never heard of the place you're not alone. Most easterners are a blank page when it comes to this emerging vacation destination tucked in the southeast corner of the province, just a mile from the U.S. border and Washington State. A recent trip to this charming community on the edge of Osoyoos Lake (purportedly the warmest lake in Canada) at the lower end of the Okanagan Valley was a genuine eye opener in terms of its appeal as a unique Canadian getaway.

Even though it's surrounded by lush orchards and vineyards, Osoyoos lies in the midst of a desert environment. That's right, a desert with all the desert stuff like rat-

tlesnakes, cacti, scorpions and sagebrush. I thought I was a pretty knowledgeable globe hopper but learning there is one true desert in my own country was a big revelation. In fact, it's the northern tip of the vast Sonora Desert that stretches through the western U.S. and Mexico.

The first obvious clue that Osoyoos, a town of a mere 5,000 residents, is on the cusp of becoming a well known tourist destination, is the new Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa, a south-western adobe-style, four-star establishment that sits on a ridge overlooking the town. Investors rarely sink big dollars into a resort of



The town of Osoyoos had an idyllic location in the Okanagan Valley.



The lush green of the Sonora Dunes Golf Course in contrast to the adjacent desert.

this calibre unless they are confident the area is destined to become a popular vacation spot.

I stayed at Spirit Ridge and the one- and two-bedroom villas that are owner rentals were top drawer - and located just minutes from downtown and local attractions. Together with Bellstar Hotels & Resorts, a major partner in the Spirit Ridge development and future expansion is the local Osoyoos Indian Band that independently owns the onsite winery (Nk'Mip Cellars), the Sonora Dunes Golf Course and Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre. The resort, golf course, winery and cultural centre are all clustered together in one convenient compound.

In addition to all the typical resort amenities including outdoor pool, spa and great dining, the Sonora Dunes Golf Course is less than a chip shot to

the clubhouse and the first tee of an excellent nine-hole course that embodies a true desert golf experience. This is a track that demands accurate shot making since landing on anything that isn't green falls in a landscape defined by sand, sagebrush and critters you don't want to meet up with. However, when I played the course I'll admit I never saw a single rattlesnake in spite of frequent signage warning of their presence.

Adjacent to the golf course is the winery where there are daily wine tastings, a retail shop filled with an array of vintages plus special wine and dinner evenings. A highlight of the resort property is the Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre, a 20,000 sq. ft. interpretative facility that celebrates thousands of years of Okanagan First Nations life on the surrounding desert lands. The Centre features numerous displays including a reconstructed traditional village, artefacts, live rattlesnakes and just about anything and everything visitors might want to know about this desert enclave and the Osoyoos aboriginals who have lived there for centuries.

However, the attraction of the town of Osoyoos do not end at the Spirit Ridge property. Visiting the downtown area is like taking a reflective step back in time to what seems like the 1960s. There are plenty of little shops and



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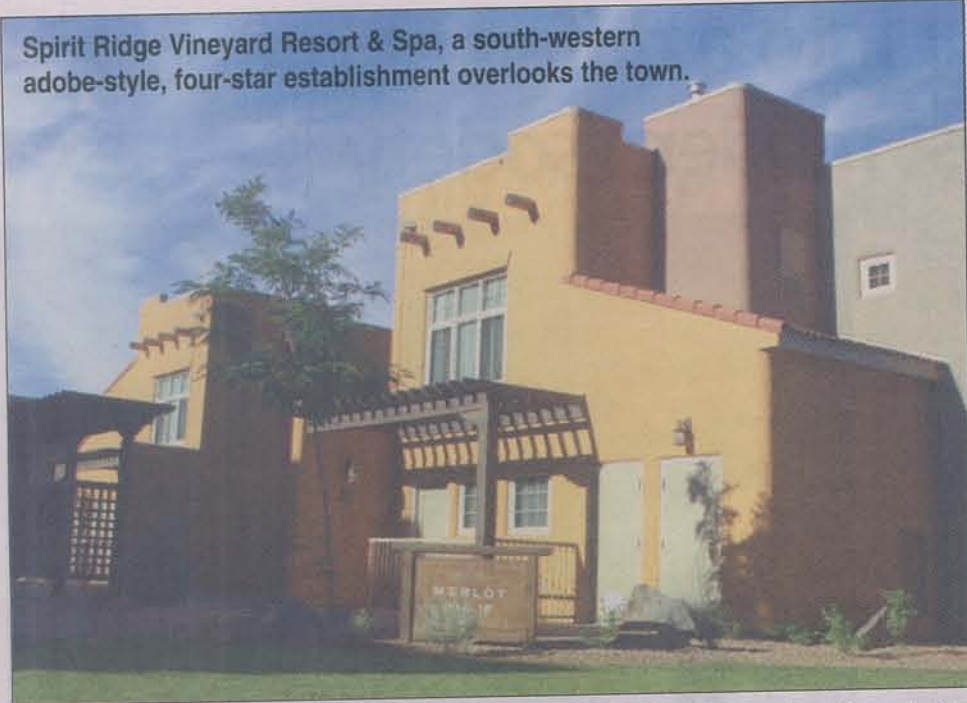


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Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa, a south-western adobe-style, four-star establishment overlooks the town.

dining spots set in an environment that harks back to the days when life seemed a whole lot simpler. Overall, the town embodies a character that Communications Coordinator for Destination Osoyoos, Michelle Jefferson, says visitors really like. "With our town's growing popularity we must be careful to maintain the character and assets that make us special. We have to be careful not to kill the goose that laid the golden egg."

With new developments and new vacation properties springing up around town, it may be difficult to achieve that balance but in the meantime Osoyoos is a desert oasis that success hasn't yet spoiled. There are area wineries galore offering daily tastings, sailing on Osoyoos Lake, parasailing, hiking, horseback riding, bird watching, numerous area golf courses and the best small town museum in B.C. where exhibits include everything from antique

cars to ancient liquor "still" from the Prohibition period. Overall, "special" is certainly the word that best describes today's Osoyoos. Notwithstanding its plethora of wineries and small town charm, its desert environment alone makes it one of the country's most unique travel destinations. Osoyoos Tourism & Economic Development Director, Glenn Mandziuk, says that per capita the town is the fastest growing community in the province and is expected to double over the next five

years. It is to be hoped that in the process its prevailing character is not lost.

Travel Planner

Getting there: There are direct flights from Toronto to Kelowna; and Osoyoos is a pretty two-hour drive south of the airport through the beautiful Okanagan Valley.

Information: www.destinationosoyoos.com or call 1-888-OSOYOOS www.spiritridge.ca or call 1-877-313-9463

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