

Okanagan more than just a wine route

B.C. INTERIOR | Wildlife, scenery and sunshine add to charm of region, home of the only aboriginal-owned winery in North America

BY JOSEPH BLAKE

I visited British Columbia's Okanagan valley for the fine wine, but I fell under the spell of the soft, muted colours of the desert landscape near Osoyoos and the Provence-like charm of the Naramata Bench.

The glorious landscape and wildlife surrounding the southern end of Lake Okanagan and smaller lakes farther south — Skaha, Vaseux, and Osoyoos — is only part of the bountiful, agriculture-dominated valley.

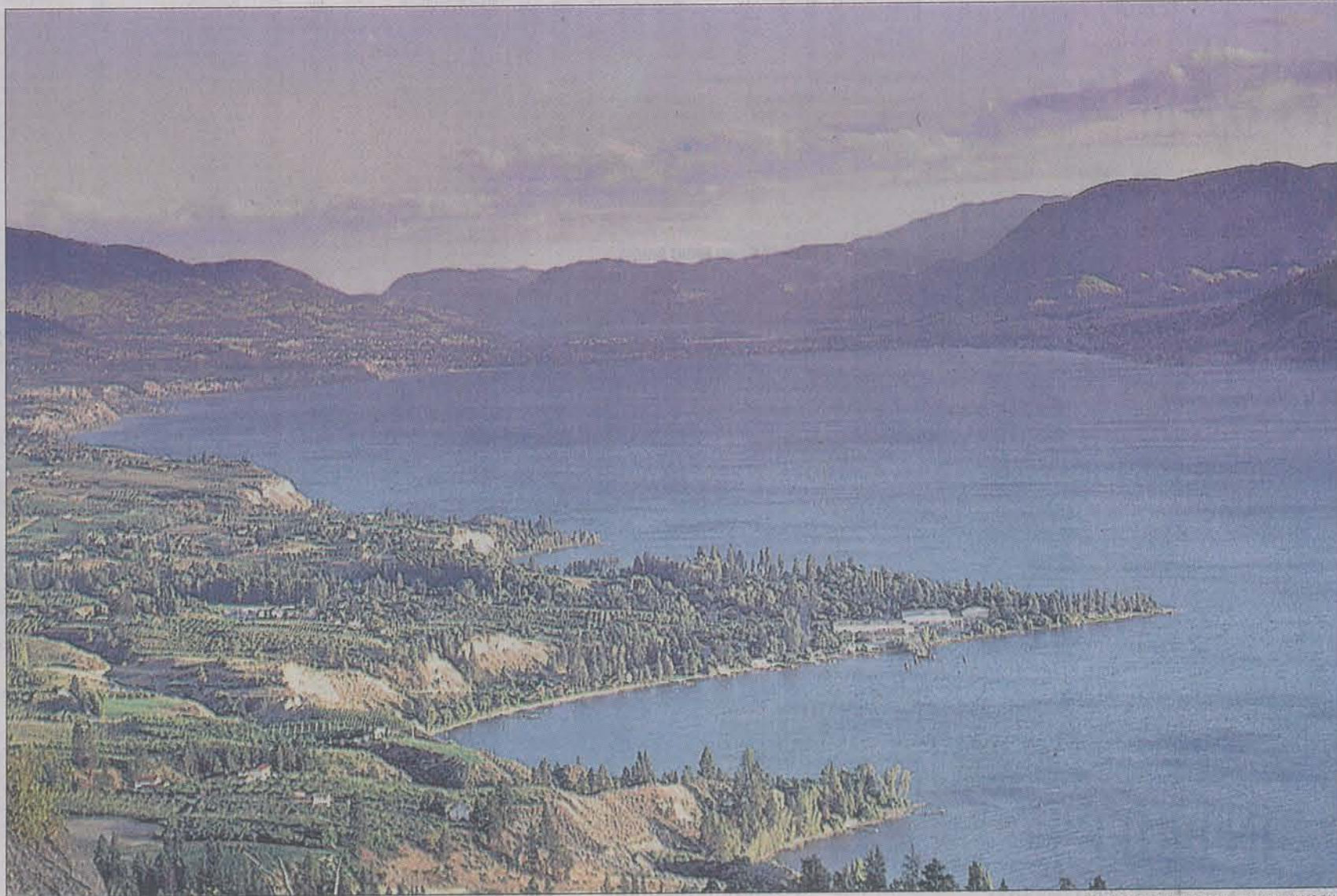
With its wealth of winery-spawned resorts, dramatic architecture, emerging food scene, trails and golf courses, the south Okanagan provided my family with a memorable holiday.

Near the U.S. border on the east side of Osoyoos Lake in the sandy hills below Anarchist Mountain, the Nk'Mip First Nation has established North America's first aboriginal-owned and operated winery (www.nkmipcellars.com, 250-495-2985).

The 400-member band also has built a four-star resort with a hotel, bistro-style restaurant, nine-hole golf course and the Nk'Mip Cultural Centre.

With its dramatic rammed-earth wall and eco-centric design built into the hillside, the Nk'Mip Cultural Centre houses rattlesnake research while offering the public hands-on displays, self-guided nature trails through the desert landscape, and theatre productions and programs celebrating the Okanagan Indians' history and living culture.

A critter corner in the \$10-million centre includes a snake demonstration area and a "rattlesnake hotel" with



BRIAN SPROUT/SPECIAL TO THE VANCOU

The view south over the village of Naramata and Okanagan Lake. Hiking trails north of Naramata lead into Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park.

viewing windows.

If you are lucky enough to visit during weekly tagging sessions, you can watch the researchers capture and tag the rattlers. A bat house nearby includes a webcam to view desert bats in flight.

The Pithouse Theatre offers a six-minute presentation about the history of the Osoyoos people and a 22-minute

video, *Coyote Spirit*, that tells the story of a young woman's return to the reservation and her Osoyoos roots.

In the surrounding desert, self-guided trails lead through 20 hectares of sage grassland and Ponderosa pine forest.

Guided tours offer a glimpse of a traditional village and tales of the Osoyoos people's pit house winter home,

sweat lodge and summer house.

From Osoyoos, we drove on the west side of the valley a few kilometres up Highway 97. The road leads past the agricultural heartland of Oliver, home to almost 70 per cent of the province's grape-growing land and acclaimed wineries like Burrowing Owl, Jackson Triggs, Tinhorn Creek and Gehring Brothers.

The town's Wine Country We Centre, a refurbished fire hall, has a restaurant and an informative, stocked wine store.

Oliver celebrates the Festival

See **BURROWING OWL** F8

If you go . . .

■ Westjet and Air Canada Tango fly Kelowna in the Okanagan.

■ Throughout the year, wineries in southern Okanagan Valley offer a busy schedule of tastings and festivals, which include:

■ The Okanagan Summer Festival, Aug. 10-12, at Silver Star Mountain Resort, the harvest-celebrating Okanagan Fall Wine Festival Sept. 29-Oct. 1 and the Icewine Festival at Sun Peaks Resort Jan. 17-20, 2008.

■ Red Rooster hosts a Bohemian Festival in August featuring jazz, rock and classical music, as well as dramatic human sculptures and showcases local and international visual art.

■ Nk'Mip Cellars holds a Traditional Salmon Feast, Oct. 6-7, which includes native arts and entertainment and traditional Indian cuisine paired with the winery's vintages. The cost is \$69.

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Burrowing Owl Estate has international status

From F6

Grape on Sept. 30 with 34 regional wineries, 17 food vendors and live entertainment at a family event, including blessing the harvest and a grape stomp in the community park.

Tickets to the festival are \$16 in advance, and free for kids.

On the east side of the valley in another desert ecosystem, Burrowing Owl Estate Winery (www.bovwine.ca, 877-498-0620) uses bluebird boxes, bat nurseries, and an environmentally sensitive team to harvest grapes that create the winery's international award-winning wines.

Farther north — 16 kilometres past Penticton's suburban sprawl — and at the end of the road on the east shore of the lake, we visited tiny Naramata.

With no road access from the north, this charming town of fewer than 800 was originally reached across Okanagan Lake by paddle-wheeler, and a pair of the historic steamships are on display in Penticton. A horse-and-carriage trail to Naramata was completed in 1910, and the town became a stop on the Kettle Valley Railway in 1915.

The Kettle Valley Railway is now part of the Trans-Canada Trail, with hiking and biking along the old rail bed. Work continues on the historic wooden trestles destroyed by the fires that ravaged the Okanagan in 2003.

History buffs will enjoy the Naramata Heritage Museum's collection of photos and artifacts illustrating the area's years in isolation. Down the road, Sailquest Sailing Adventures (250-496-5110) provides sailing trips on Okanagan Lake as well as sunset cruises. The more adventurous can even learn to ride waves on the lake at Naramata Wakeboard School (250-488-2179).

There are hiking trails just north of Naramata leading into Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park, whose 10,000 hectares promise mountain lakes, grasslands and spruce-fir forests accessible only on foot, horseback or bicycle.

Trails and rustic campsites are the facilities in the wilderness. There is also a hiking and biking trail along Okanagan River Dike to Mount Baldy and McIntyre Bluff.

The 6.5-kilometre Golden Mile

Hiking Trail wanders through orchards and vineyards on Oliver's west side, past Tinhorn Creek Vineyard's 350-seat natural amphitheatre and the site for outdoor musical performances, and the 18.4 kilometre hiking and bike trail from McAlpine Bridge leads north of Oliver past a dozen wineries to the head of Osoyoos Lake.

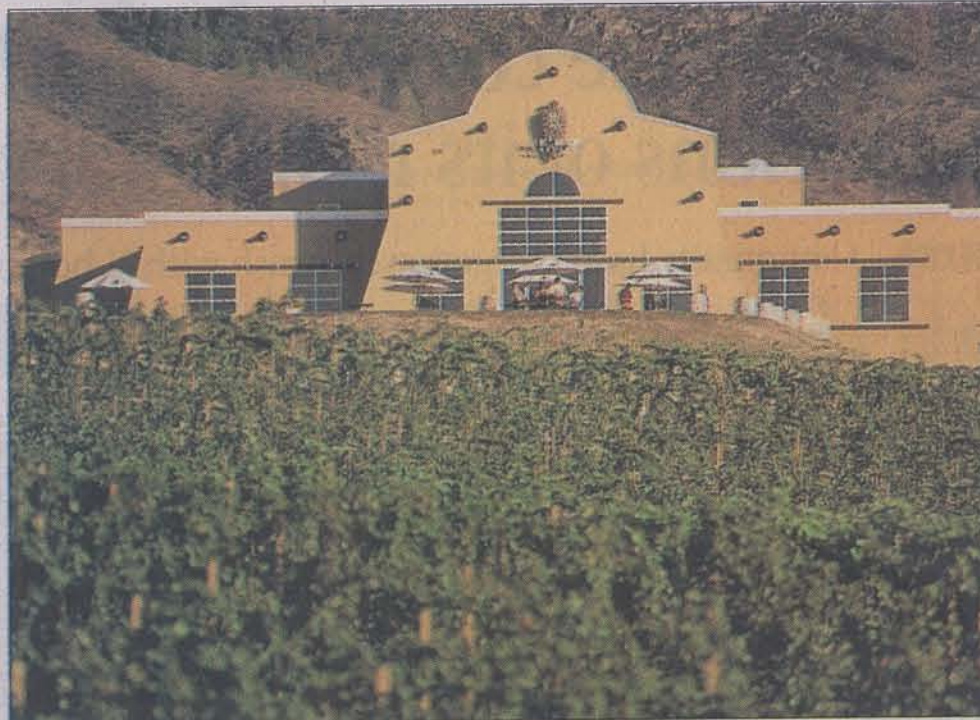
Local stables offer horseback excursions, and there is excellent swimming, boating, canoeing and kayaking in Okanagan and Kalamalka Lakes. Rumour has it that there is good trout fishing in McColouch Lake, and Manitou Beach is a popular local hangout on the lake.

We spent the night at Therapy Vineyard and Guesthouse (www.therapyvineyards.com, 250-496-5217). It's one of more than a dozen vineyards on Naramata Bench, a delightful landscape of rolling vineyards and orchards, a quiet, little town with a coffee shop, fun street market Wednesdays, and a busy schedule of wine-related cultural events throughout the year. It reminded me of Provence's tiny, hillside towns.

One of the most striking wineries on the Naramata Bench is the Red Rooster Winery (www.redroosterwinery.com, 250-492-2424). This sprawling complex includes a tasting room/wineshop, mission-inspired winery and lots of art on the grassy grounds. Maybe a little more like California's Napa Valley than Provence, it's another example of the wine industry's evolution into cultural tourism.

However, the more than 2,000 hours of sunshine a year offers ample opportunity to hike, bike, swim, sail, ski, golf and horseback ride in the enchanting landscape. So go for the wine, but don't miss the natural gifts.

CanWest News Service



Nk'Mip Cellars winery at Osoyoos (above) and one of the band's vineyards (below). At right, the Kettle Valley Railway Trail provides many scenic views of Lake Okanagan.



A lakeside hot tub at the Therapy Vineyard and Guest House in Naramata.