

# Into the wilds of Osoyoos desert

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*Travel Writers' Tales*

**I**T'S POURING IN Vancouver but, just five hours' drive away, I'm sitting by the poolside along a dozen other guests of Spirit Ridge Resort & Spa in Osoyoos, Canada's only desert.

Here, the weather is a balmy 25 degrees, with just a slight spring breeze.

Bikinis and books are the order of the day, though it's easy to get distracted by the view.

Before us, the neat lines of a vineyard stretch for miles to Lake Osoyoos,

while the arid mountains form a protective circle around this small town of 4,200 people.

This desert is a far cry from the lush rainforest of B.C.'s coastal regions.

Here, cactus plants grow in abundance, shaggy-maned bighorn sheep graze on the steep mountain slopes and the sky is that perfect shade of blue that convinces you that summer is tangible.

Pleasure craft zoom around Canada's warmest lake and it's hard to banish a smile as the thought of the rainy Lower Mainland crosses your mind.

Spirit Ridge Resort opened last year on land owned by the NK' Mip, one of the Osoyoos First Nation's five tribes.

The 130-room property has the architecture and feel of a New Mexico-style establishment, its buildings constructed in rectangular blocks and coloured in earthy tones, offering large verandas and a perfect vantage point overlooking the vineyards, mountains and lake.

The resort is steps away from the NK' Mip Desert Cultural Centre, a striking, \$9-million monolith of concrete that opened in June

2006 just beyond the neat rows of vineyards.

The centre is playing a fundamental role in celebrating the culture, heritage and future of the Osoyoos Indian Band and in reaffirming its members' sense of identity.

One of the displays at the centre houses the artwork of students at the Inkapmeep Day School between 1931 and 1942, drawings that depicted their life on the reserve.

The fact the art work is still there is something of a miracle, considering it almost burned in 1943.

The children created the



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art under the instruction of Anthony Walsh, a teacher at the school in the 1930s and 1940s.

When he left the school, his successor denounced Walsh's encouragement of art as being detrimental to "civilizing the children," and determined to burn it in a bonfire.

But Katie Lacey, a non-native supporter of Walsh and his educational methods, couldn't bear it.

She rescued as much as she could from the fire and stashed the artwork in a box beneath her bed, where it stayed for the next 21 years.

The art gives its viewers a sense of what life was like for a child on the reserve.

The desert stands boldly directly behind the cultural centre, its slopes wearing the antelope brush that characterizes this arid region of British Columbia.

It's a landscape alive and writhing with animals, all of which have mythological and cultural value to the band.

Outside, a series of hiking paths snake into the Great Basin Desert, leading visitors to a reconstructed traditional Okanagan village, and to the Chief's Lookout.

Signs along the way advise hikers to keep a sharp eye out for snakes and, on a warm day, it is an added delight to see a snake's tail disappear into the brush, or the profile of a raptor soaring on the

thermals.

Here, you can feel the magic of the desert, one that is made more real and alive by the depth of the Desert Cultural Centre's exhibits and explanations.

A delectable way to end the experience is to dine at Passatempo, the resort's restaurant, and to visit the **NK' Mip Cellars** and sample some of the 10 varieties of **wine** produced here.

This is a space where guests delight in the flavours of pinot noir, meritage and ice **wine**, and treat themselves to a meal on the terrace embraced by the hot desert air.

Before them, the vineyards stretch to the lake, their sun-dappled plants eventually surrendering to the shadow of the mountain as day turns to dusk.

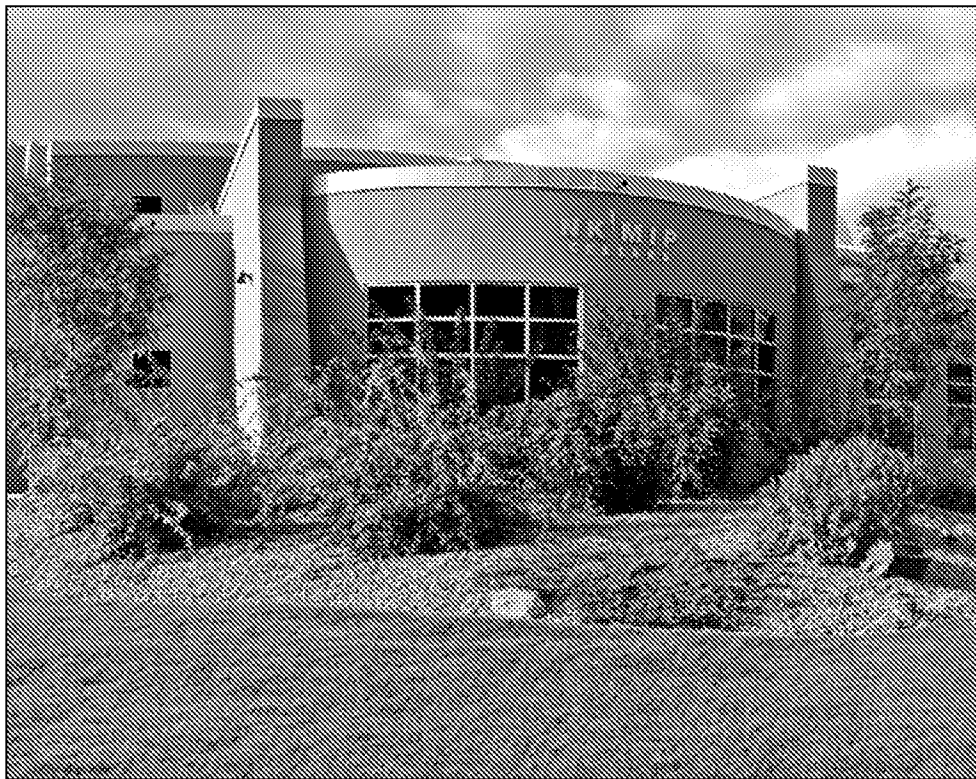
#### IF YOU GO:

- Osoyoos is a five-hour drive from Vancouver. For information on the town, visit [www.tourismosoyoos.com](http://www.tourismosoyoos.com).

- Spirit Ridge has suites and villas, all with full kitchens, that range in price from \$159 to \$389 per night, depending on the size of room and the time of year. For more information, visit [www.spiritridge.ca](http://www.spiritridge.ca) or call (877) 313-9463

- Admission to the NK' Mip Desert Cultural Centre is \$12 for adults, \$11 for seniors and students, \$8 for children aged 5 to 17, and \$36 for families.

- For more information, visit [www.nkmipdesert.com](http://www.nkmipdesert.com) or call 1-888-495-8555.



**Nk'mip Cellars** offers 10 varieties of **wine** produced on site, as well as a restaurant patio with views of the lake and vines.