

Osoyoos, Canada's lone desert

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Paul French

SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Osoyoos, B.C.—It's a sign of the times. Driving deep into the Okanagan Valley in central British Columbia, there's a puzzling message at the side of the road: "No National Park." Communities often rally together to protest garbage dumps, uranium mines and such. But a national park?

"Some people don't appreciate the terrain we're trying to protect," says Debbie Clark, community liaison with Parks Canada, which wants to preserve a part of a unique and dry landscape.

The grasslands and bald hills outside the town of Osoyoos are an extension of the Sonoran Desert that runs as far south as Mexico and creeps north to form Canada's only arid desert.



Photo courtesy of Tourism B.C.

The Osoyoos Desert's scrubby terrain is part of a sensitive ecosystem which is home to 100 rare plants, such as varieties of cactus, and 300 animals such as the burrowing owl found exclusively in this region. The temperature climbs above 38C and Osoyoos is often the hottest spot in the country.

At first glance, you might think this area is not much different from the rest of the Okanagan Valley with its vineyards and orchards and lakes. But closer inspection reveals the desert is in the details.

The Osoyoos Desert Centre, nine kilometres out of town, offers insight into this sensitive ecosystem, which is home to 100 rare plants and 300 critters found nowhere else in Canada. Signs posted along the 1.6-kilometre self-guided boardwalk tell of painted turtles, scorpions, lizards and pygmy horned toads.

I make a note to return in August during the full moon for Romancing the Desert. This fundraiser lets visitors explore at night when desert dwellers come alive with activity and local wines and cuisine fuel the fun exploration.

Nearby is Spotted Lake, an unusual formation of salts, calcium and other minerals found in hundreds of pools that pockmark the terrain.

For Okanagan First Nations, this is sacred ground and the waters are known to have healing properties. But it's not on their reserve and the contested land, whose owner wanted to build a spa on the site, is off-limits to the public, though it can be viewed from a roadside lookout on Highway 3.

Come summer, the water dries up, leaving salt-stained circles on the sun-baked earth. It gets hot here in summer. The temperature climbs above 38C and Osoyoos is often the country's hottest spot. And at an average 24C in July and August, Osoyoos Lake is said to have the warmest freshwater in Canada, making its sandy beaches an ideal destination to cool off.

All those orchards and vineyards that turn the desert green are fed by irrigation, which gives rise to such anomalies as a desert cherry festival. The annual Cherry Fiesta on the July 1 Canada Day holiday includes cherry-spitting and pie-eating contests. Crossing the isthmus that divides the town (the name Osoyoos is derived from native dialect meaning where the water narrows), I head for Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort and Spa and Nk'Mip (pronounced in-ka-meep) Cellars. This 80-hectare is home to the first winery owned by aboriginal people in North America.

The Osoyoos Band has been growing grapes here since 1968 and in co-operation with Inniskillin Wineries now makes award-winning wines that reflect the terroir.

"You need 165 frost-free days in a vineyard and we have well over 200, one of the longest growing seasons in Canada," says Jennifer Busmann, who leads tours of the winery and its cellars. "The summer heat intensifies the big flavours of Merlot and Syrrah."

The Spirit Ridge hotel is amid the vineyards with terrific views of the lake and mountains across the valley. The earth colours of the pueblo-style architecture lends a Southwestern feel to the place that is echoed in the adjoining Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre.

This attraction, built with rammed earth walls, presents the history of Okanagan First Nations through hands-on displays and films shown in a reconstructed winter hut and the Chaptik Legend Theatre.

The Osoyoos Band is known as one of the country's most business-savvy aboriginal communities and this centre is a testament to its success. The story continues out of doors where nature trails wind through the desert, past sculptures depicting traditional means of providing food and shelter in this harsh, hot climate.

A popular seasonal attraction at the cultural centre is the rattlesnake research program. The desert is home to endangered Western rattlesnakes, which are captured, tagged, put up for awhile in the "rattlesnake hotel" so visitors can watch them before being released back into the wild. Snakes hibernate, so the best time to see them slithering around is from April to October.

"They love to eat grapes and are frequently found in the vineyards," says Charlotte Sanders, manager of the centre. There are rattlesnake crossing signs on the grounds because "snakes are creatures of habit and stick to the same route to get where they're going," says Sanders.

So, watch your step, especially after swilling a few samples of chardonnay.

The popular southern Okanagan wine route takes in Dirty Laundry, Therapy, Laughing Stock and Blasted Church, to name just a few of the local producers. Most welcome visitors and some, like Nk'Mip and Burrowing Owl have restaurants that offer a taste of the valley and feature regional seasonal fare.

This area is fast becoming a four-season destination. There's skiing from December to the end of March at Mount Baldy Ski Resort above the valley, viticulture is sprouting in every inch of arable land and real estate development is booming for snowbirds, the summer holiday crowd and for those who like to live in Canada's hot zone. This place looks like it needs a national park, not only to save the desert, but also to protect it from its own success.

Paul French is a Toronto-based freelance writer. His trip was subsidized by the Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association.