

JOURNEYS

# British Columbia's New Vine Trail



Stuart Issett for The New York Times

Pinot grapes at the CedarCreek Estate Winery, overlooking Okanagan Lake. [More Photos »](#)

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LAST October, my husband and I packed the kids in the car and drove north 300 miles from Seattle to western [Canada](#)'s key wine country, the [Okanagan Valley](#) in [British Columbia](#).

### Okanagan Valley Travel Guide

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Perhaps it was capricious to combine the family road trip with that most couple-y of activities, wine travel. But why not? We like our children. We like wine. If the tasting-room pressure to buy were to become too intense, our son and daughter (at the time almost 5 and 18 months, respectively) could be our out. And to ease the journey, my husband and I brought along a secret weapon: my mother. A spry septuagenarian, she likes a buttery [chardonnay](#), a long country ramble and the antics of her grandchildren.

She also doesn't mind sitting in the back seat of the car (or wouldn't say if she did), and she gave us a critical extra pair of hands that let us taste without worrying about one of the children reinterpreting the very messy spit-bucket scene from "Sideways."

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Okanagan Valley, Canada

Okanagan Valley has come to be a prime [winemaking](#) region, thanks to well-drained glacial till, the temperature-modifying effects of the very deep 84-mile-long Okanagan Lake that runs through the heart of the valley, and a surfeit of sunshine (by Canadian standards, at least). But it wasn't always so.

Until the late '80s, the Okanagan Valley was plonk-central, producing mostly mediocre wine for inexpensive domestic consumption. Then after 1988, when Canadian trade policy eliminated price protection for domestic [wines](#), most of the valley's wine could no longer compete on flavor or price with inexpensive imported wines. Soon, the old hybrid vines were replaced with respectable varietals that could produce more refined (and more marketable) wines, and a new kind of viniculture flourished alongside the valley's orchards.

Today, there is a broad selection of grapes being grown in the valley, in part because its own microclimates are so varied but also because it is a youthful region, still searching for its style. As in any other developing wine region, Napa looms large in the Okanagan imagination, so one can find oaky chardonnays, consciously un-oaky chardonnays, and big-gun blends fostering cult followings.

Up high in both altitude and latitude, near the towns of Penticton and Kelowna, the winemaking tends to suggest northern [Europe](#), with [pinot noirs](#) and Germanic whites flourishing. (The region also makes well-respected ice wines.) In the southern part of the valley, where many of the most coveted grapes are being grown, even sun-loving syrah vines can thrive.

Some of the breathlessness about British Columbian wine comes from the glory of the valley landscape, which marries broad-shouldered mountains, chalky cliffs and rock escarpments with the green corduroy regularity of the vineyards.

It's the kind of environment that affects your taste buds: the best glasses I tasted seemed to have the same brimming clarity as the lake itself. And it's smart to enjoy the wine in situ: between the bureaucracy of wine imports and the jingoistic fervor with which British Columbian wine is consumed in swank restaurants in [Vancouver](#) and [Whistler](#), little of the stuff makes it down south of the border. Thus, our trip north.

Naturally, we started at the southern end of the valley, just over the border. There, near the town of Osoyoos, the arid landscape supports a grassy desert ecosystem (or, some would argue, a shrub-steppe). Walking the trails near the Spirit Ridge Resort, which is owned by the Osoyoos Indian Band of the Okanagan Nation, we took a moment to adjust to the bright and pale but ultimately bewitching landscape: blond grass, lichen-green sage, the occasional dark spike of ponderosa pines.

After a dusty ramble, and some hide-and-seek with the children in a replica Okanagan pit house — a semi-subterranean dwelling with a domed earth roof — we crossed the parking lot to the Nk'Mip (pronounced IN-ka-meep) winery next door, also owned by the tribe. We sipped airy pinot blanc and stared out at the irrigated grapevines abutting the desert scrub.

North of Osoyoos, the vineyards multiply along the Black Sage Road. We visited several imposing estate wineries, like the stunningly sited Burrowing Owl Estate. A bit more than an hour's drive north, past the southern tip of Okanagan Lake, in Penticton, we reached the Naramata Bench, a gloriously scenic highland that is crowded with smaller wineries, including the Elephant Island Orchard winery, which makes surprisingly sophisticated fruit wines. There we cozied up in the winery's rustic guesthouse, perched above a green sea of leafy cherry trees. Later, my mother, my daughter and I took an evening ramble past quails scuttling in and out of the neighbor's grapevines.

A long stretch of the former [Kettle Valley Railroad](#) has been converted into a recreational trail, which our family explored on foot and by bike at several points throughout the journey, including during our stint in Naramata. The railroad trail is at its most remarkable, however, farther north in Myra Canyon, which I cycled with my husband.

On the brisk morning of our visit, snow twinkled on the ground from an early autumn dusting the day before. It was easy pedaling, but the canyon, home to two tunnels and 18 trestles spanning its craggy ravines, offered plenty of vertiginous views. As we crossed gulch after gulch, the snow popped under our tires, and we were grateful for the handrails, which had been rebuilt, along with all the wooden trestles, after a devastating fire in 2003. In the bright glow of the morning light, gawky young conifers and aspens with shuddering golden leaves pushed skyward: signs of a forest re-establishing itself.

Later that day, after passing through an unlovely strip of Kelowna, we decided to go to the big Mount Boucherie wineries on the west side of the lake, including the Mission Hill winery, unquestionably the [Versailles](#) of the valley. Built by Anthony von Mandl, also the founder of Mike's Hard Lemonade, the winery is a broad-stroke bid for respect, with a design that is a crisp distillation of Mission style.

Inside, we tasted the estate's most prestigious wine, the Bordeaux-style Oculus, a \$60-plus bottle, whose blend varies from year to year. Our sommelier told us that the 2003 blend — the year of the fire — has more [cabernet sauvignon](#) than the following, cooler years. Another couple grimly joked about tasting hints of barbecue in the vintage.

The Oculus wines were grand indeed, but for the most part Okanagan wine is not about grandeur, but readily accessible pleasure, much like the surroundings. And even a 5-year-old can drink up the splendor of the hillsides.

It's worth stopping at the **Naramata General Store** (225 Robinson Avenue, Naramata; 250-496-5450) to look for wines that you might have missed, including excellent rosé, white and pinot noir-gamay blends from the Joie winery ([joie.ca](http://joie.ca)), which is not open to the public.

#### *On the West Bank*

**Mission Hill Family Estate** (1730 Mission Hill Road, West Kelowna; 250-768-7611; [missionhillwinery.com](http://missionhillwinery.com)). Big wines, big buildings and a breathtaking setting. Tours offered at several different prices and levels of access.

**Quails' Gate** (3303 Boucherie Road, Kelowna; 800-420-9463; [quailsgate.com](http://quailsgate.com)). Offers stunning views, a broad spectrum of wines (including colder-climate oddballs well worth a taste, like its Old Vines Foch Reserve).

### **IF YOU GO**

#### **WHERE TO DRINK**

##### *Near Osoyoos and Oliver*

**Burrowing Owl Estate Winery** (100 Burrowing Owl Place, Oliver; 877-498-0620; [bovwine.ca](http://bovwine.ca)). Spectacular setting at a premium vineyard that, at the age of 17, is ancient in Okanagan wine years. The winery has a great hand with red wines; look for a well-priced cabernet franc. It also houses an elegant guesthouse and restaurant.

**Stoneboat Vineyards** (7148 Orchard Grove Lane, Oliver; 888-598-2226; [stoneboatvineyards.com](http://stoneboatvineyards.com)). This family winery has a lovely tasting room amid exuberant English-style [gardens](#). We favored the [pinot noir](#).

**Nk'Mip Cellars** (1400 Rancher Creek Road, Osoyoos; 250-495-2985; [nkmipcellars.com](http://nkmipcellars.com)). The first aboriginal-owned winery in the country, offering an ambitious range, from a crystalline pinot blanc (a favorite) to a big, plummy reserve syrah.

##### *Near Penticton and Naramata*

**Elephant Island Orchard Wines** (2730 Aikins Loop R.R. 1, Naramata; 250-496-5522; [elephantislandwine.com](http://elephantislandwine.com)). An intriguing group of fruit wines: dry, almond-kissed cherry; sweet-tart crabapple dessert wine; and crisp bone-dry pear wine just right to drink with a curry.

**Lake Breeze Winery** (Sammet Road, Naramata; 250-496-5659; [lakebreeze.ca](http://lakebreeze.ca)). Icy whites abound at this Naramata winery. It's also a great spot for a scenic outdoor lunch high above Okanagan Lake.

## WHERE TO STAY

**Spirit Ridge Resort** (1200 Rancher Creek Road, Osoyoos; 877-313-9463; [spiritridge.ca](http://spiritridge.ca)). Adjacent to the Osoyoos Indian Band's Nk'Mip winery and Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Center ([nkmipdesert.com](http://nkmipdesert.com)). Family travelers will appreciate multi-room suites and pools. Peak-season rates start at 225 Canadian dollars (about \$215 at 105 Canadian dollars to the U.S. dollar).

The **Tree House at Elephant Island Orchard Wines**, a loft-style apartment above the winery's tasting room. It's cozy fun, with a kitchen, barbecue-equipped deck and toys. Rates start at 148.50 Canadian dollars a night, three-night minimum, with a cherry season discount in July.

The **Cove Lakeside Resort** (4205 Gellatly Road, West Kelowna; 877-762-2683; [covelakeside.com](http://covelakeside.com)) is on the lake's edge. Amenities include a pool, boat and kayak rentals, and a game room complete with foosball and air hockey. Peak-season rates start at 329 Canadian dollars.