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French Riviera of Canada in B.C.

Spirit Ridge basks in small town

ALEX FRAZER-HARRISON
FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

When people talk about escaping Alberta for a warmer, more temperate climate, they often default to thinking of places like Phoenix or Mexico. But they can enjoy something of the same desert atmosphere without having to dig out their passports.

Nestled at the south end of the Okanagan, the town of Osoyoos has built a reputation on providing something a little different for vacationers and homebuyers. Curt Jansen, director of resort real estate for Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort and Spa, describes the town as "our French Riviera of Canada."

It's home to Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort and Spa, which offers a hotel, marina, bistro, restaurants, a popular conference centre — and the Spirit Ridge Residential Club, which offers fractional vacation home ownership opportunities.

"We'll never be a big metropolis of a city — and part of the mandate of Osoyoos is not to ever become one," says Jansen.

That's one of the reasons buyers from Calgary and Edmonton are attracted to buy into Spirit Ridge, he says.

The first two phases totalling 226 units are nearly sold out in the main resort, while a final phase of 43 units in the Residence Club recently opened for pre-selling, with fractions as small as 1/8th available.

Although the economic downturn in the U.S. resulted in "phenomenal deals" in American real estate in places like Phoenix, having a Canadian option is what's attracting buyers here, says Ed Romanowski, president and CEO of Bellstar Hotels and Resorts Ltd., which began developing Spirit Ridge in 2005.

"There are some good bargains in Phoenix, but there's also implications of ownership in the U.S. in terms of financing or not financing, cost of health care, crossing the border and the fact the time you can stay down there is limited for tax reasons," he says.

"Osoyoos offers a choice to Canadians to find a place that is extremely hot during summer months and warm enough in winter to make it bearable. We believe it's a great destination and the market is proving that out."

Not only is Osoyoos attracting buyers from across Canada, says Romanowski, it's even attracting people looking for vacation escapes from Kelowna.

The option of buying fractions is one of Spirit Ridge's main selling features, says Jansen.

"The Spirit Ridge Resort, itself, starts at 25-per-cent ownership," he says. "The 226 units



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Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort and Spa in Osoyoos, B.C., has everything from spas to restaurants.

are all centrally located with a beautiful pool, cabana and courtyard area."

The new Residence Club phase, with fractions starting at 1/8th, will be built overlooking the seventh hole of the Sonora Desert Golf Club, "and it will be tiered into the side of the hill, overlooking the entire valley," says Jansen.

Once this third phase is complete, that's it, Jansen says Spirit Ridge aims to remain a "boutique-style" resort.

Prices, which start in the \$70,000 range, have opened up the concept of vacation home ownership in Osoyoos to a wider range of people than the traditional empty-nester retiree, he says.

"It's driven by that baby boomer market, but we're also seeing younger couples wanting to stake their claim," he says. "It's people who know what they want — who always wanted to buy here — and they see real value here right now."

When owners aren't using their property, they can trade time with owners of other properties around the world, or Bellstar can rent out the unit for them to vacationers.

You never know who might pay a visit to Osoyoos, says Mayor Stu Wells.

His town recently played host to a new film starring Steve Martin, Jack Black and Owen Wilson.

"Steve Martin was saying how good it was to wake up in a hotel looking out at the mountains and the lake — he was so impressed with the beauty of Osoyoos," says Wells.

With a modest area population of about 8,000 (including suburbs), and a location near Canada's only bona-fide desert, the town has managed to avoid the intense development experienced by bigger Okanagan hot spots such as Kelowna.

That suits Wells just fine.

"There's an energy you can feel here," he says.

"And it has to do with the cachet of small-town Osoyoos. It's our intent and goal to maintain that small-town, agricultural approach."

Don't bother looking for big-box stores here. A 30,000-square-foot cap on commercial buildings ensures the town maintains a healthy base of smaller businesses.

Osoyoos continues to embrace southern B.C.'s burgeoning wine industry, which Wells says is one of the major drawing cards for Albertans looking to move to Osoyoos or buy recreation property in the area.

"Part of our ambience is that agriculture component, which includes all the fruit and the wine," he says.

The town also embraces its relationship with the Osoyoos Indian Band, whose lands adjacent to the town include the award-winning Nk'Mip Cellars winery, Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre and the Sonora Dunes golf course, says Wells.

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