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Thompson Okanagan emerges as a region for health and wellness vacations

BY CLAIRE NEWELL, SPECIAL TO POSTMEDIA NEWS COMMENTS (6)



The Thompson Okanagan region has long been a tourist attraction for wine-lovers, but a growing number of people are coming for the area's many spas.

The Thompson Okanagan is well known for many popular getaway activities, in particular wine touring, golfing and family vacations. Now a new trend emerging in the region is health and wellness vacations or spa getaways, to rejuvenate body and spirit.

Referred to as "Napa North" by The New York Times and picked by Frommer's as one of the world's top travel destinations, the Thompson Okanagan is known internationally as the place to go for food, wine and outdoor adventure.

The region stretches from the sagebrush and ranching country around Cache Creek in the west to Mount Robson in the north and the US border in the south.

At its heart is a long, fertile valley running north-south along Okanagan, Skaha and Vaseaux lakes, where vineyards, orchards, golf courses and forests of ponderosa pine blanket the hills above a string of warm, beach-fringed lakes. Okanagan Lake, the longest of the three at 135 kilometres (84 miles), is also said to house Ogopogo, a shy, but harmless, creature; rarely seen but possibly related to Nessie of Loch Ness.

The Okanagan Valley hosts the bulk of the region's 100-plus wineries and more than 50 golf courses, as well as several world-class ski resorts and Kelowna, the area's main city, with direct flights from Vancouver, Seattle and Calgary. It also, not surprisingly, hosts the vast majority of visitors to the area.

Less known are the region's other landscapes, from the hundreds of trout-stocked fishing lakes in the rolling ranch country around Kamloops, to the vast boreal forests of the north; from the many reaches of Shuswap Lake, where vacationers can explore 700 kilometres (435 miles) of shoreline by houseboat, to Osoyoos, in the northern tip of the Sonora Desert, where 2,000 hours of annual sunshine help support species found nowhere else in the country.

Some of BC's biggest, most dramatic wilderness parks are found in the Thompson Okanagan. These include Wells Gray Provincial Park, home to the stunning 137-metre (449-foot) high Helmcken Falls, one of Canada's highest waterfalls, as well as great canoeing, fishing and hiking, and rich populations of moose and mule deer. East of Wells Gray is Mount Robson Provincial Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site surrounding the highest peak in the Canadian Rockies.

Each year, vinophiles flock to the Thompson Okanagan to tour, taste and to enjoy the region's four annual wine festivals. Others come to hike and bike on the area's long distance paths, including the famous Kettle Valley Rail Trail, and to fish, canoe and camp in the back country. Still more come to golf at the region's many championship courses, enjoy spa treatments, savour local cuisine in vineyard-and-lake-view restaurants and bask on lakeside beaches.

When planning your trip to the Thompson Okanagan, visit www.HelloBC.com/to/offersfor more information, and plenty of deals. Don't forget to stop in at a Visitor Centre -keep an eye out for the familiar blue and yellow "I" signs -to get up-to-date information on attractions, events and things to do, plus reservations, tickets and much more.

SPAS AND WELLNESS

With pristine wilderness, stunning mountain, island and seaside settings, and a fitness-minded population (British Columbians are consistently ranked healthiest in Canada), this province is prime territory for health and wellness vacations. The Thompson Okanagan, in particular, boasts a burgeoning spa and wellness scene.

SPARKLING HILL RESORT

Chief among new health and wellness developments is the 152-room Sparkling Hill Resort, a world class health and wellness facility opened in May 2010 near Vernon. The 40,000-square-foot KurSpa is home to North America's only "cold sauna"(boasting a temperature of -110 Celcius). Great value introductory rates can be found at this impressive new destination spa. www.sparklinghill.com

BEYOND WRAPTURE DAY SPAS

Taking a page from the local wine culture, Beyond Wrapture Day Spas offer a variety of "vinotherapy" services which utilize wine, grape seeds, stems and skins. These products contain antioxidants called polyphenols that are thought to be 10,000 times stronger and 50 times more healing than vitamin E. www.beyondwrapture.com

Beyond Wrrapture has a number of locations, including the stunning Summerland Waterfront Resort and Lake Okanagan Resort, both great weekend getaway picks with value-added packages.

www.summerlandresorthotel.com; www.lakeokanagan.com

SUNMORE GINSENG SPA

Kamloops is home to the Sunmore Ginseng Spa, where guests can choose from treatments that include the herbal root, known for its energizing and detoxifying properties. The Spa is a unique combination of eastern and western philosophies and treatments.

www.sunmoreginseng.com

HEIRLOOM SPA

For a boutique experience, the Naramata Heritage Inn is home to Heirloom Spa, based on Aveda products and "Elemental Nature" philosophy. www.naramatainn.com/spa.php

SONORA DESERT SPA

At Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort in Osoyoos, guests will find Sonora Desert Spa. This spa offers packages and specials for guests of the resort, which is also home to the NK'MIP Desert Cultural Centre, a destination that provides visitors with insight into this unique bio-region and the First Nations culture of Canada's only desert. www.spiritridge.ca

Claire is the official Travel Consultant for Global BC and has appeared on the Today Show, Fox & Friends, CNN, Martha Stewart Radio and other US media. Claire recently launched two lines of luggage & travel accessories. She is the best selling author of Travel Best Bests -An Insider's Guide to Taking Your Best Trips, Ever. Visit www.clairenewell.com

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