

Canada: Okanagan Valley wine tour

Few British visitors see much of the Okanagan Valley. Shame, says Kathy Arnold, for it offers an astonishing variety of both wine and scenery.

By Kathy Arnold

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1 Comment

« Previous 1 of 2 Images Next »



'Blue Mountain Vineyard on the shore of Vaseux Lake in Okanagan Falls' Photo: CORBIS

There is nothing like a 14-mile bike ride to build up an appetite. Our route along the old Kettle Valley Railway provides glorious views across the Okanagan Valley, with its lakes, hills and – most importantly – vineyards. True, most of the cycling is downhill, but even so, by lunchtime I am ready for some good food and good wine.

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In the Barrel Room Bistro at the Hillside Estate Winery, I sip a glass of viognier and tuck into steamed mussels. My husband samples a gewürztraminer with the spiced carrot and apple soup, then a cabernet franc with the duck leg confit. Finishing with a late-harvest kerner and warm maple pecan pie, he is a full and happy man.

Wines from anywhere in **Canada** are rare enough in the shops of British high streets; wines from the Okanagan Valley in British Columbia are even rarer. Their reputation is rising fast, however, and we want to get in ahead of the Joneses. Many British visitors get a brief taste of the valley when they stop in

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Kelowna en route from Vancouver to the Rockies. They should see more, for the Okanagan has an astonishing variety of both wine and scenery. Flanked on both sides by steep hills, indented by shelf-like "benches", the valley stretches north to south for 150 miles.

From Vancouver, we drive through the Fraser Valley farmland, over the Cascade Mountains and enter the Okanagan, right on the United States border. I have seen a lot of Canada, but the arid landscape comes as a shock. Forget mountains, moose and Mounties: think cactus and the smell of sage. In high summer, temperatures top 100F (38C); luckily, a series of elongated, cold blue lakes provides natural air-conditioning. Our first stop, overlooking Lake Osoyoos (pronounced uh-soo-yuss), is at North America's first aboriginal-owned and operated winery: the Nk'Mip Cellars (pronounced inca-meep).

Whereas tribes in the US opened casinos on their reservations, the Nk'Mip opted for a resort with a spa, golf course and vineyard. In the tasting room, enthusiastic staff talk us through half a dozen clean, summery wines, from pinot blancs to chardonnays, contrasting vintages and the effects of ageing in French or American oak. Nearby, at the Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre, we learn about the heritage of this tribe.

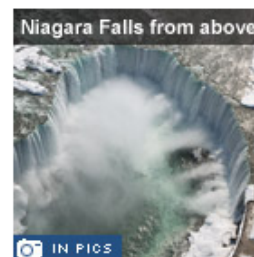
The development of vineyards is a recent phenomenon. Not all the valley is as parched as the southern end; indeed, the Okanagan's orchards were one of the fruit baskets of the British Empire. But as New World wines came into vogue two decades ago, a dozen optimists planted vines alongside the peaches, apples and cherries.

Today, some 200 winemakers compete for medals at competitions. In 2006, a Jackson-Triggs' 2004 grand reserve shiraz was judged the shiraz/syrah of the year at the International Wine & Spirit Competition in London. A first for a North American winery, this gold medal triggered a rush; now prime hillsides change hands for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The grape varieties are familiar enough, but which winery should we choose? We have no idea how Burrowing Owl and Quail's Gate compare with Blue Mountain and Therapy, or if Hester Creek and Gehringer outshine Blasted Church and Dirty Laundry. Luckily, many of the estates are along Highway 97, which runs the length of the valley. Welcome signs tempt us and, for a couple of dollars, we are soon tasting a wide range of wines.

At Tinhorn Creek, we sniff a glass of the bordeaux-like Oldfield Series 2Bench Red: "You should be getting dark fruits, like blackberries and plums, from this blend of cabernet sauvignon, merlot and cabernet franc." We are encouraged to say what we think, to enjoy the experience. Outside, the "demonstration vineyard" has half a dozen rows of labelled vines representing the varieties grown here. Not only can we compare and contrast the look of the grapes, but we are allowed to pick them. The chardonnay are small and sweet, the pinot gris have a thick skin.

Some visitors arrive on foot, hiking the Golden Mile Bench trail through the vineyards. "Be here in summer," they tell us. "On weekends they have concerts and plays out in the amphitheatre." They settle down to a picnic with baguettes, chunks of the local Poplar Grove camembert-style cheese and a bottle of pinot noir, all bought in the wine shop.



British Columbia is at the forefront of Canada's foodie revolution. Inspired by the Mediterranean, passionate and talented chefs are transforming the province's seafood and game, artisan cheeses and charcuterie, high-quality fruits and vegetables into light, fresh dishes, labelled "north-west cuisine".

Half the fun of wine tasting is eating in the wineries' restaurants. At Burrowing Owl, the Sonora Room is high on the hillside with panoramic views. The menu ranges from wild boar pistachio pâté with focaccia bread to wild BC salmon. Wines by the glass include Wild Goose Stoney Slope riesling. Clean, refreshing and with a bit of zing, this is a good example of what Canadians call "patio wines".

As for places to stay, nowhere else is like God's Mountain Estate. "Just off to prune our riesling grapes," Sarah Allen tells us. Although clad in gumboots and overalls, our host has a casual elegance – as does her b & b. "Like staying with friends in their Italian villa," we decide, after checking out the sitting room, with its squashy sofas and Turkish carpets. The view is spectacular: high on a bluff and surrounded by vines, we look across Skaha Lake to the hills. The best room is up on the roof; although the four-poster bed is under cover, the rest is open to the stars. How romantic is that?

Wine lore has it that the best wine should be served last. Certainly, the best wine that we taste, along with our best meal, is on our last evening. At the Victoria Rd Bistro in Summerland, Roger Gillespie, the chef/owner, serves up 100 per cent Okanagan menus, with his own heirloom tomatoes for salad and his own pears for the pear crème brûlée. He even smokes his own duck.

We are attending a winemaker's dinner, a regular feature of the harvest season. The paired wines are from the 8th Generation Vineyard. Bernd Schales has been in the Okanagan for only seven years, but his family's winemaking tradition in Germany dates back to 1783. He and his wife, Stefanie, have made an impact with their well-balanced rieslings as well as their chardonnays, pinot noirs and merlots, all complex and full of character. "Back home, friends don't believe that wine is grown in Canada," says Stefanie, whose viticulture credentials stretch back 10 generations. "When they visit, they are impressed by how healthy the grapes are here."

Wherever we go in the Okanagan, we meet wine enthusiasts. At tastings, we are told about soil differences and ripening times, altitude and sunshine. Some people swallow, others spit; there is no pressure to buy and not a hint of snobbery towards novices. "We are still young and still experimenting with grape varieties to see which does best," one winemaker tells us. "Most of all, we just want visitors to enjoy our wines." The international dialling code for Canada is 001

GETTING THERE

Air Canada (0871 220 1111; www.aircanada.com) flies daily from Heathrow to Vancouver. In September, fares start at £656.40 including taxes.

WHERE TO STAY

God's Mountain Estate, Penticton (250 490 4800; www.godsmountain.com)
Double rooms from C\$159, including breakfast.

Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa, Osoyoos (250 495 5445; www.spiritridge.ca) Family-oriented resort with golf. From C\$1,025 for a one-bedroom suite for a week in the autumn.

EATING OUT

Many restaurants have an online booking system.

Passa Tempo, Spirit Ridge, Osoyoos (250 495 8007; www.nkmip.com)