



Reward Miles • Destination: Golf Canada



PHOTOS: LEFT, SONORA DUNES GOLF COURSE, NKMIP RESORT - OSOYOOS, BC, RIGHT, THUNDERING WATERS GOLF CLUB, NIAGARA FALLS, ON

Before driving south for your next golf holiday, consider playing a round in Canada

The September morning sun rose with an apparent vengeance overtop the tiny town of Osoyoos, B.C., its rays defying the arrival of fall as they cast warmth and a crisp light across the Okanagan Valley's winery-clad slopes. For golfers teeing up at the desert-style Sonora Dunes course, it was yet another picture-perfect day in a unique corner of the vast and diverse paradise known as Canada.

Lifelong golfer Keith Ryder has never played at Sonora Dunes. But the Toronto-based advertising executive says he and his wife Catherine, who have golfed in Ontario, Quebec and in the Maritimes – among other locales worldwide – have talked about taking a trip out west to do just that.

Mr. Ryder – who once lived in Alberta – says he would like to introduce Catherine to the thrill of golfing amid the majesty of the Canadian Rockies at fabled properties like the Fairmont Banff Springs Golf Course, and explore B.C.'s exotic interior.

No doubt, they would love it.

Sonora Dunes' par-35, 2,523-yard course is small compared to some others nearby, including the championship 27-hole Osoyoos Golf & Country Club and 18-hole Nk'Mip Canyon Desert Golf Course. But Sonora Dunes' impeccably manicured greens and emerald fairways, not to mention its stunning amenities and breathtaking setting, more than compensate for its compact nature.

Beyond top-quality golf, Sonora Dunes – part of the

impressive Adobe-style Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa complex – offers golfers ready access to après golf attractions including Nk'Mip Cellars winery, the Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre, and a private beachfront along shimmering Osoyoos Lake.

Like other links in the area, however, it's this course's natural surroundings that are perhaps most impressive of all. The region encompassing Osoyoos is Canada's only true desert, a tiny sliver of the great Sonoran Desert that stretches all the way to Mexico. Sighting small cacti, desert succulents and even rattlesnake isn't uncommon.

Not what you might expect of a golf holiday in Canada? You might be surprised.

According to golf experts who know and love this land, Canada offers a terrific selection of unique courses and experiences.

Rob Warrington, who works in the Toronto offices of Ultimate Golf Vacations, says the Niagara Region is among Ontario's most popular golf destinations, and for good reasons.

Mr. Warrington says most of his clients are groups of men who play two to four rounds of golf over an extended long weekend. "They typically try to jam in as much golf they can

and then get out and enjoy the area afterwards."

Sounds familiar to Keith Ryder.

A golfer since age 10, Mr. Ryder says many of the 20 to 30 rounds he plays each year are on golf weekends with his buddies.

"When you go to Niagara, you get the whole package.

After we've played a couple of rounds, some guys go to the casino, some out for dinner or just relax. It's a super location."

Among his favourites, Mr. Ryder and his friends like Whirlpool, one of the area's first courses, and Thundering Waters, a challenging 18-hole John Daly signature course

near the falls.

Beyond enjoying Thundering Waters' park-like setting and lush, maple-lined fairways, Mr. Ryder says, "Thundering Waters will test your game. It's a risk-reward course. If you can drive the ball 320, great – bring your three and five irons and lay it out all day."

Another plus, says Mr. Ryder, "Every third or fourth hole, you come to the halfway house. It's perfect; if you want a sandwich, you don't have to wait."

Mr. Warrington says he encourages his clients to consider tapping into value opportunities amid Niagara's abundant courses.

"In terms of price there's not a lot of difference between a 3.5- to 4.5-star golf course. When you play more than once at the same facility, it makes a big difference. You can benefit from multi-round rates and still enjoy a lot of variety."

For that and other reasons, he recommends Ussher's Creek Golf Club at Legends on the Niagara, describing this Thomas McBroom designed facility as simply "a great product."

"You have 36 holes with well-manicured fairways, plus a huge, 360-degree range facility and a warm-up nine-hole course too. Plus, you're six kilometres south of the falls, so you're close to the entertainment. And it offers a great clubhouse to rest in between – or stay for dinner. These are the little things golfers look for, and add up to good value."

While Mr. Ryder's reminiscences about numerous

Ontario courses he's played – including Glen Lawrence, near Kingston, where Mr. Ryder and a group of longtime pals convene for a week-end each year – he says he and Catherine have particularly fond memories of a golf holiday they enjoyed recently in the Maritimes.

His favourite links on that excursion: the Cape Breton Highlands Links Golf Course.

Beyond reminding him of playing in Scotland, Mr. Ryder says the challenging Stanley Thompson-designed course also offers a welcome extra – a spa.

On one occasion, while Catherine decided to sit out a round in favour of some R&R in the spa, Mr. Ryder says he chose to buck the local custom and walk the 6,600-yard length of this Canadian classic, rather than go by cart.

It was a long walk, but also a chance to soak up the splendour of Highlands Links' rolling fairways and surrounding hardwood forests. "In between some tees and greens, it's almost a mile. You end up walking places where virtually no one else ever goes. It was amazing."

Mr. Ryder looks forward to more Canadian golf travel. "It's a nice complement to a vacation – a wonderful way to spend your day."

He admits, "Essentially you'll enjoy just about any golf course. It's about being with your friends. As they say, 'There's never bad weather on a golf course. It can be pouring rain, but you're still golfing.'" ■

Teeing up a golf holiday? Grab your buddies and your wallets, guys

A recent Angus Reid Public Opinion poll conducted for Capital One Canada reports that men spend more freely on vacations than women, and when it comes to a golf holiday are more likely to bring their buddies over their spouses.

Capital One spokesperson Laurel Ostfield says the poll revealed that 61 per cent of men would bring their friends on a golf holiday, while 52 per cent of women would bring their significant others.

"Men also report spending more while on vacation

and are significantly more likely to spend money on indulgences such as golf."

The study also says men are slightly more likely to say their current finances have no impact on their travel plans, says Ms. Ostfield.

When it comes to destinations, the poll indicates 90 per cent of golfers play in their own province, while 14 per cent have golfed in another province and 13 per cent golfed outside of the country.

