

> DISCOVERING CANADA

## Sampling some desert pleasures in B.C.

A hardscrabble landscape of dust, snakes and cacti is home to surprising wineries

JIM BYERS  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

OSOYOOS, B.C.—I've just tasted a ridiculous number of wines at a wonderful hillside winery called Road 13. It's our fourth stop of the day on our electric bicycle tour of the southern Okanagan Valley and I think I've had enough sips.

But Richard Cooper, my guide with Heatstroke Cycle, has other ideas.

"One more!" he insists. "This one's different."

We tumble down a dirt road, gliding past deep green apple orchards groaning with ripe, red fruit, then turn on the motors and work our way up a bumpy hill backed by dun-coloured mountains covered with rock, pine and sagebrush. As we round a bend, I spot a clothesline covered with laundry: old-style red overalls, dark socks and brassieres.

"Oh, good!" Richard says. "That means they're open."

Rustico Winery is 17 degrees beyond kitschy, a rollicking, borderline goofy winery where you'll find a pair of adorable Sicilian donkeys out front named "George" and "Nooner" and an old miners' bunkhouse with a sod roof.

There's no pretence in this winery, where you'll probably find cowboy-hatted, wild-haired owner, Bruce Fuller, who sports the kind of facial hair you might expect on a saloon keeper in Tombstone, Ariz., and a smile as wide as the Canadian sky.

"A lot of tasting rooms are pretty similar and they all start to look alike," he says, as I gaze on the cowboy hats and steer heads mounted on the walls and the goofy signs.

Fuller, who once worked in marketing for B.C. magnate Jimmy Pattison, tells me he doesn't trust uppity judges who hand out wine awards. Instead, his tasting bar is festooned with mock medals naming Rustico as "most fun" winery in the area.

Rather than label his wines with the variety of grape, Fuller prefers to give them names such as "Doc's Buggy," "Farmers Daughter," and "Three-some."

"We're different here," Fuller tells me. "Our dirt is different. We're rocks and boulders."

Indeed, they are.

The Osoyoos area is the only part of Canada that looks like the desert landscape most Canadians think of when the word is mentioned: crackling sagebrush and a dry, dusty landscape that supports cacti and, yes, rattlesnakes.



JIM BYERS FOR THE TORONTO STAR

Bruce Fuller is the man behind Rustico Winery in Oliver, B.C., a wild and rollicking place with a western theme.

### > JUST THE FACTS

**Sleeping:** Watermark Beach Resort is a wonderful family spot with large, condominium-style rooms, a great pool, a waterslide and a perfect location right on Osoyoos Lake. There's a nice beach and a lovely waterfront path, plus a great restaurant with a seasonal patio. It's a short walk to nice shopping, cafés and grocery stores. Rooms in October from about \$185, with special packages available. [watermarkbeachresort.com](http://watermarkbeachresort.com).

**Wining:** Hester Creek is a beautiful winery with pleasant white wines and a lovely Cabernet Franc. It's one of the few places and, perhaps, the only one that makes wine from the Trebbiano grape, popular in Italy. There's a great patio, too. [hestercreek.com](http://hestercreek.com). Road 13 has

fantastic wines and a scenic hillside tasting room in what looks like a Loire Valley castle. Try the Syrah blends with Malbec or Mourvèdre grapes and also be sure to sip Jackpot VRM, a mix of Viognier, Roussanne and Marianne grapes. [road13vineyards.com](http://road13vineyards.com). Gehring Brothers Estate is a low-key, lovely winery where you can find popular varieties as well as unusual German styles such as Ehrenfeller. [gehringerwines.ca](http://gehringerwines.ca).

**Dining:** Miradoro is a terrific restaurant at Tinhorn Creek Winery in Oliver. It has great views of the valley and excellent food. Try the elk with blueberries and red cabbage or the luscious lemon crema for dessert. [tinhorn.com](http://tinhorn.com).

**Doing:** Heat Stroke Cycles can rent

bikes for you to explore on your own or you can try a tour. A three-to-four-hour wine tour with electric bikes is \$139 (\$100 for regular bikes).

Downhill and general sightseeing packages also are available. [heatstrokecycle.com](http://heatstrokecycle.com). A one-hour tour at Covert Farms is \$40 for adults and \$20 for kids (free for those 4 and under). It includes tasting fruits or veggies in the field as well as wine pairings and small bites afterward. [covertfarms.ca](http://covertfarms.ca). The Osoyoos Desert Centre has a variety of tours, including night tours. Most run spring to early fall, so check before you go. Prices from \$16 for adults. [desert.org](http://desert.org).

**Web surfing:** [hellobc.com](http://hellobc.com), [destinationosoyoos.com](http://destinationosoyoos.com).

We don't see any of the pesky critters on our tour of the Osoyoos Desert Centre, but the centre is a marvellous spot where you can learn about the diverse ecosystem that has adapted to the harsh conditions in the area, where summertime temperatures close to 40 C aren't uncommon and where summer rain can be just a whisper in the air.

My guide, Valerie Blow, explains how there are 14 types of bat found in

the area, and just 20 in all of Canada. Pallid Bats, she says, can hear scorpions and spiders walking on the ground while they're in the air and can eat half their own body weight in a day. That's like me eating, well, about 700 quarter-pounders in 24 hours.

She also tells me how there are plants here that corkscrew themselves into the ground and how there's a rodent in the area called a

pocket mouse, which stores seeds on the outside of its mouth as a kangaroo uses its pouch. There's also a kind of frog that has what looks like a shovel on the side of its leg to help it dig.

"The desert does weird things to people," Blow says. "Animals, too."

She points out tiny prickly pear cactus that shrink in the cold winters to protect themselves and also shows small brown plants that turn green

before your eyes if you pour water on them. She talks about a species of boa constrictor in the area, as well as rattlesnakes. Blow explains that a rattle from a rattlesnake is a defensive warning.

"Don't scream or run or you might scare them," she advises. "The best thing is to walk away slowly, preferably not in the direction of another rattlesnake."

Gee, thanks!

On my final day in the area, I take in a fabulous tour of Covert Organic Farms, just up the road in the town of Oliver. It is one of the Canadian Tourism Commission's Signature Experiences, a top-notch tour where they take you out into the vineyards in a gleaming, restored and shiny red 1952 Mercury pickup truck and explain the science of agriculture. In season, you also can pick ripe, red raspberries or strawberries or tomatoes and other fruits and veggies, or perhaps let the kids bounce on a giant, trampoline-like mattress or get up and close and personal with their furry-faced and friendly Highland cattle, named Laverne and Shirley.

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**BRUCE FULLER**  
RUSTICO WINERY OWNER

It's a fourth generation farm where they've been practising environmentally friendly operations for decades. They encourage red tail hawks to take roost in the area as they get rid of the birds that eat their fruit.

"It's better than using traps or poison," says sales manager and farm chef Derek Uhlemann as we ride past vines laden with deep purple Zinfandel grapes.

The farm is certified organic and safe for local salmon and they also follow biodynamic practices.

We taste a lovely varietal with Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and Zinfandel, as well as a fruity white blend called Amicitia made from semillon, Roussanne and Viognier grapes. We sip the wines and nibble on some of Uhlemann's charcuterie in the shade on a hot summer's day.

In the Canadian desert.

Not a bad way to spend an afternoon.

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