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OLIVER OSOYOOS WINE COUNTRY

North-of-border niche has native roots

The southernmost part of British Columbia's Okanagan region claims to have Canada's only desert and the country's warmest lake, Osoyoos Lake ("oh-sue-use"). But semiarid scrublands and high temperatures alone aren't sufficient to justify the 4.5-hour car drive or 50-minute flight from Vancouver to the Oliver Osoyoos Wine Country.

Instead, it's what these conditions have created: Canada's highest concentration of wineries, in a spectacular setting that offers plenty of attractions for non-oenophiles, too. Named for the two towns at either end of 16 miles that stretch to the Washington border, Oliver Osoyoos boasts an amazing array of varietals, from Arneis to Zinfandel. Some 50 wineries turn them into small batches of wine rarely exported south; Vancouver restaurateurs and Canadian visitors snatch them up first.

The area is also fertile ground for exploring the deep roots of one of Canada's many aboriginal peoples, the Osoyoos Indian Band, and the unique environment that inspires their ancient culture — and today's viticulture.

— Jeanne Cooper, travel@sfbay.com



Todd Trumbull / The Chronicle



Jeanne Cooper / Special to The Chronicle

Top, sculptures at Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre pay tribute to the First Nations heritage of the Oliver Osoyoos Wine Country. Above, Spirit Ridge at Nk'Mip Resort overlooks Lake and the vineyards of the first aboriginal-owned winery in North America.



Platinum Bench

Platinum Bench Estate Winery & Artisan Bakery in Oliver offers wine pairings with fresh sourdough.

IF YOU GO

Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre: www.nkmipdesert.com

Oliver Osoyoos Winery Association: www.oliverosoyoos.com

Osoyoos visitor information: destinationosoyoos.com

Oliver visitor information: www.winecapitalofcanada.com

Spirit Ridge at Nk'Mip Resort: 226 condo-style suites with two pools, spa and beach access, from \$232. www.spiritridge.ca

The Villa at Hester Creek: Six hilltop suites with kitchenettes, soaking tubs and walk-in showers, from \$255, including breakfast. www.hestercreek.com/villa

Festival of the Grape: Oct. 1, in Oliver. Wine tasting, grape-stomping competition, live music, food trucks and art show. www.festivalofthegrape.ca

MORNING

First things, and First Nations, first: Start your day in Osoyoos at the Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre, open daily at 9:30 a.m. Pronounced "In-ka-meep," which means "bottomland," the striking center made of rammed earth focuses on the Osoyoos Indian Band, one of eight communities of the Okanagan Nation, and the flora and fauna of their desert home.

You'll have just enough time to peruse the galleries and use a fun card-reading device to learn a word or two of the Nsyilxən language (also known as Okanagan) before heading out on the daily, 45-minute guided walk at 10 a.m. Visitors can also follow trails on their own through grasslands of fragrant sagebrush and gnarled antelope brush — part of the desert ecosystem — and into ponderosa pine forest, passing replicas of a pit house, sweat lodge and teepee, along with informational displays.

Signs advise you to watch out for rattlesnakes, but if you don't spot one from — hopefully not on — the trail, check out the daily snake presentation at 11.

MIDDAY

Platinum Bench Estate Winery & Artisan Bread Co. makes an ideal start to wine tasting along the Black Sage Bench, the wine country's eastern flank. Before moving here from Manitoba, co-owners Murray Jones and Fiona Duncan used to spend weekends in Napa and Sonoma after her weeklong San Francisco courses in bread making. "We thought wine, bread and cheese were the three basic food groups," Jones quips.

You'll find all three at Platinum Bench, which like most (if not all) Oliver Osoyoos wineries charges a nominal tasting fee: \$5 Canadian (\$3.88 U.S.) for samples of five wines and five breads, waived if you buy a bottle. The sandy soil, late-afternoon sun and cool evenings help Jones create big, Napa-style Syrah and Cabernet Franc, lighter Gamay Noir, crisp and fruity Pinot Gris and a citrusy Chardonnay-Viognier blend known as Mur-Fi's White, among other wines.

Be aware that Duncan's sourdough loaves, twisted in a style known as pain d'épi, or wheat-stalk bread, and infused with local cheeses, sell out quickly.

AFTERNOON

After whetting your appetite, cross over to the Golden Mile Bench, as the western flank of Oliver Osoyoos is known, for a late lunch and more wine tasting at **Hester Creek Estate Winery** in Oliver.

Home to some of the oldest vines in the greater Okanagan region, planted in 1968 by an immigrant from Italy's Veneto region, Hester Creek produces Canada's only Trebbiano, bottled on its own or with Semillon and Gewürztraminer in the Character blend. Terrafina, the winery's Tuscan-style restaurant, offers pizza, panini, pasta and, if you want to keep the tasting theme going, build-your-own boards of charcuterie and other savories. Don't be shy about switching to a craft beer or cocktail at this point — the bar is excellent.

Wine lovers will want to make the short drive back to the Black Sage Bench for further tasting

at **Barrier Bros.**, an "effectively organic" winery, according to co-owner Michael Barrier. He can easily reel off the many minerals dragged here by a glacier conveyor belt some 12,000 years ago, but connoisseurs may be most interested in the flavors they impart to his very pale rosé and lemony Semillon. Both are refreshing on Oliver Osoyoos' typically hot summer days, which can veer into the high 90s.

Others may prefer to cool down at one of the well-maintained public beaches on Osoyoos Lake, such as Lions or Gyo parks. Connected by a paved path, both offer pleasant shade and changing facilities.

EVENING

Pick up a last few phrases, and wineglasses, near the cultural center where the day began; the **Nk'Mip Cellars** tasting room stays open till 8 p.m. in summer.

The first aboriginal-owned winery in North America (now in partnership with Fortune 500 company Constellation Brands) routinely wins Canada's top wine honors for its premium Qwam Qwmt ("kw-em kw-empt") collection, whose name appropriately means "achieving excellence."

If you don't suffer from vertigo, the golden hour is also a good time to head back to the Golden Mile for dinner at Miradoro restaurant. Cantilevered above the grapevines and grassy amphitheater at **Tinhorn Creek Vineyards**, Miradoro offers sweeping vistas to the east, paired with locally sourced cuisine from one of British Columbia's leading chefs. It's a fitting place to toast a day well spent.

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