

This Canadian 'desert' is British Columbia's secret winter oasis

Osoyoos draws snowbirds from across the country for winter wine, farm-to-table dining, and outdoor adventure.



Osoyoos, a small town in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, has emerged as a popular winter vacation destination because of its relatively mild winters and sunny days.

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At the southern edge of British Columbia's Okanagan Valley, about a five-hour drive east of [Vancouver](#), Osoyoos holds a distinction found nowhere else in the country; the town lies within Canada's arid, almost 'desert-like' ecosystem. Framed by sagebrush hills, vineyards, and orchards, this pocket of the South Okanagan is among the nation's warmest and driest regions. While summers are famously sun-soaked, it's winter that has become Osoyoos' most compelling season.

When much of Canada is locked in heavy snow, temperatures in Osoyoos often hover just above freezing, snowfall is limited, and sunny days are common. That gentler climate has drawn a growing community of Canadians seeking a milder winter without crossing the border. Each year, roughly 2,000 snowbirds spend the colder months here, turning Osoyoos into a distinctly Canadian winter refuge that remains largely under the radar.

A Canadian snowbird revival

Osoyoos' appeal as a snowbird destination isn't new, but its resurgence is. "This used to be a much larger market in Osoyoos, but as age demographics changed and more locations in the United States became available, the number had started to decline slowly year after year," says David McBean, general manager at [Watermark Beach Resort](#). This lakeside property that features suite-style accommodations designed for extended stays.

That trajectory shifted for many in recent years. “During COVID, when we could not go south to Arizona, we Googled the warmest place in Canada, and the search came up with Osoyoos,” says Eileen Laycock, who, along with her partner Terry, has spent the past six winters here. “Being from Southern Manitoba and staying from the last week of October through the end of April, we really enjoy the mild weather and the change of seasons.”

Most snowbirds come from regions with harsher winters, especially [Alberta](#), [Manitoba](#), and [Saskatchewan](#), McBean says, adding that some also travel from [Ontario](#) and [Quebec](#).

More recently, geopolitics has also played a role. “This year, with the political environment in the United States, Canadians are now opting not to go to the United States, and many are opting to remain in Canada,” McBean says.

While climate draws many people in, it’s often the sense of connection that keeps them returning. “We find the community to be very welcoming and friendly, always giving out ideas of what to do in the area,” Laycock says. “We feel a strong sense of connection here as every place we go, we meet people that we have met in past winters, and they remember us and make us feel at home.”

In addition to its appeal as a welcoming community, Osoyoos offers much for visitors to do and see, even in the winter.

Wine tasting remains a year-round pursuit

Osoyoos sits at the heart of Canada’s 'desert-like' region, where hot summers, low rainfall, and long growing seasons shape a distinctive wine profile.

“Osoyoos is known to produce full-bodied Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, and Merlot of exceptional quality,” says Justin Hall, winemaker at [Nk’Mip Cellars](#), North America’s first Indigenous-owned winery. He adds that wines from the area often showcase concentrated red and dark fruit notes, including blackberry and black cherry. “The desert sage gives the wines in this region a unique herbal spice note that is savory and sweet at the same time, like spring flowers,” Hall explains.

What sets Osoyoos apart is contrast. Clear skies and low humidity allow daytime warmth to give way to sharply cooler nights, while occasional Arctic air pushes winter temperatures low enough to support icewine production. “For icewine, the grapes need to freeze naturally on the vine at least -8°C (18°F), but around -12°C (10°F) is when we see exceptional quality,” Hall says.



This temperature range allows wineries to craft both bold reds and delicate dessert wines, an unusual combination that few regions in the world can achieve. At Nk'Mip Cellars, visitors can taste the Qwam Qwmt Riesling Icewine, layered with honey, baked apple, citrus, and apricot, alongside terroir-driven table wines that reflect the surrounding landscape.

La Stella Winery adds a distinctly Old-World sensibility to South Okanagan, drawing inspiration from Italian winemaking traditions while working with locally grown grapes. The winery names its wines after musical notes, hinting at their personality and structure before the staff opens the bottle. Their Sangiovese and Merlot stand out, particularly the 2022 Maestoso "Solo" Merlot.

Just a 15-minute drive north of downtown Osoyoos, Tinhorn Creek Vineyards has helped shape the region's modern wine identity. Canada's first certified carbon-neutral winery, Tinhorn Creek, produces 100 percent estate-grown wines, including rich reds like Merlot and Cabernet Franc, as well as aromatic whites such as Gewürztraminer and Pinot Gris.

Seasonal farm-to-table dining

The area's landscape features vineyards, orchards, and farms that produce everything from stone fruit and apples to peppers, tomatoes, squash, and herbs. For local chefs, seasonal cooking makes sense, and makes farm-to-table dining a defining part of Osoyoos' food culture.

"Many of the quality-minded restaurants in our region focus on seasonal menu changes reflective of the best produce and ingredients available from farming partners and suppliers," says Chris Van Hooydonk, chef and owner of Backyard Farm. "Furthermore, many chefs have embraced simplicity in preparation, understanding that very fresh ingredients do not need much manipulation to be enjoyed by the guest."

For something casual, Gino's Coffee House on Main Street functions as both café and community hub. Local growers source ingredients to make fresh food in-house, and the coffee house brews espresso drinks using Fairtrade, organic beans roasted by a local First Nations partner. Classic breakfasts share the menu with gourmet sandwiches and paninis, making it a reliable stop any time of day.

At 15 Park Bistro, the menu puts farm-forward ingredients at the center while pulling inspiration from the Pacific Northwest and beyond. Dishes range from shredded beef tacos and chicken tikka masala to shepherd's pie; all served with views over Osoyoos Lake. The wine list highlights bottles from the Okanagan and Similkameen valleys, with an emphasis on family-run wineries using organic practices, an easy way to sample the region without hopping between tasting rooms.

Dining at a winery is also not to be missed, offering the chance to enjoy South Okanagan produce and wines at their peak. At Nk'Mip Cellars, meals served on the Sweetgrass patio shift indoors for winter to the Knowledge Keepers Lounge, where they create dishes like rosemary-marinated AAA ribeye steak bites, halibut tacos, and braised rabbit to complement the estate's wines.

Staying active in the winter

Winter in Osoyoos doesn't mean retreating indoors. "One of the best things is our mild winter weather that allows you to enjoy outdoor activities without having to bundle up too much or worry about getting wet in the rain," says Len McLean, owner of [Sessions Outdoor Sports](#). Birdwatching, hiking, cycling, and fishing all remain part of daily life. "The outdoor culture in Osoyoos in the winter is a slower, more relaxed pace than our very busy summer season," he adds.



| A wild horse roams on the wintry landscape of Osoyoos, British Columbia, Canada.
WIRESTOCK CREATORS, SHUTTERSTOCK

Cycling continues year-round, with many bikers using a similar setup as they'd bring in warmer months. "Some will go as far as running studded tires so that on our few colder days they can ride safely and can ride on the lake if it freezes over," McLean says.

For a leisurely outing, the paved 2.5-mile Irrigation Canal Walkway highlights the desert ecosystem alongside sweeping views of Osoyoos Lake. For a bit of a climb, mountain bikers can head toward Strawberry Creek for flowy, scenic descents and technical features through grasslands and forested terrain.

Osoyoos also boasts one of Canada's longest golf seasons, often stretching from February through November. [Osoyoos Golf Club](#)'s two championship courses, Park Meadows and Desert Gold, pair desert terrain with vineyard and lake views.

Walking trails stay popular year-round. The flat, three-mile Oxbows Trail follows the Okanagan River through wetlands and cottonwood groves, while [swiws Provincial Park](#) offers lakeside paths across a narrow peninsula. Winter brings a bonus: bald eagles, red-tailed hawks, and northern harriers are frequently spotted soaring overhead.