



Dinner with a view: Guests at select Okanagan wineries can watch the sunset while enjoying an array of organic foods and locally produced wines.

PENTICTON & WINE COUNTRY TOURISM

A Wine, Foodie and Nature Surprise Package

BY JUDY WAYTIUK

WHILE THE 2010 Winter Olympics held in Vancouver and Whistler saw a bit of a global climate-change challenge (who would have ever thought any place in Canada could be sans snow in mid-winter?), the spectacular world event certainly had its desired effect. The city of Vancouver saw more than 6.6 million tourists from January through September 2010;

that's a 3 percent rise from 2009 figures. More than 4 million of those were other Canadians with another 1.5 million U.S. travelers thrown in.

It seems Vancouver still qualifies as an off-the-beaten-track destination for many Americans, even though the city was voted the best urban destination in the Americas by *Condé Nast Traveler* in its 2010 Readers' Choice Awards. Vancouver earns its high marks by offering a diverse restaurant scene,

remarkable shopping, Stanley Park and the Vancouver Aquarium and, increasingly, aboriginal culture. The Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia and the Bill Reid Gallery of Northwest Coast Art are two introductory points for native history and art here, said Monica Leeck, Tourism British Columbia's market development manager for North America.

Farther afield in the province, there also are many other marvels to discover.



ROLAND NEAVE, TOURISM WHISTLER/THE ADVENTURE GROUP

Wells Gray Provincial Park's Helmcken Falls can be viewed from a 575-foot perch above the canyon floor. Visitors can experience Whistler's spectacular winter wilderness on skiing packages and snowshoe tours.

HAIDA GWAI: MAGIC AND MYSTERY

Kamloops-based Wells Gray Tours offers three departures every summer to Haida Gwaii, "and it always sells out," said Roland Neave, the company's owner. "We do it as a land tour, spend six days touring mainly Graham Island and go on a Zodiac trip into Gwaii Haanas National Park from Moresby Camp and stop at the abandoned village of Skedans." Groups stay in Skidegate, where a massive museum covering Haida history opened a couple of years ago. Neave said it takes about four hours to explore thoroughly.

Wells Gray also does a 10-day "Vancouver Island Toe to Tip" tour. "It covers the things we don't do a lot of the time," Neave said. "For example, Race Rocks, the actual southern tip, for some whale-watching, Cathedral Grove with its giant cedars and Nootka Sound, where we charter a boat to go out to the sound."

On the northernmost point of the island, his groups stay at Cape Sutil. They also spend time in Victoria and at Tsa-Kwa-Luten lodge on Quadra Island. "It's one of my all-time favorites—native-built, designed like a gigantic long house with a lobby four or five stories high all built out of logs."

And true to his corporate name and roots, Neave runs tours of Wells Gray Provincial Park, a wilderness spot replete with rivers, waterfalls, lakes and forests that British Columbians love, but outsiders seldom discover.

UP THE COAST AND UP THE HILL

Small cities along mainland B.C.'s coastline that once relied on commercial shipping and fishing are turning more to tourism, and that's had a positive effect for area receptive operators, restaurants and hotels in places like Prince Rupert. The quaint port city, which may well have the most bountiful whale-watching on any North American coastline, also boasts aboriginal cultural experiences, a perfectly preserved old salmon cannery (now a museum) and bear-watching.

Prince Rupert is situated on Kaien Island, approximately 480 miles north of Vancouver, just north of the mouth of Skeena River. It's a port of call for some cruise lines and connects with B.C. Ferries for transportation by water. FITs are beginning to discover that the region offers genuine, unspoiled natural beauty, and a few tour operators

are beginning to introduce groups to these more remote parts of the province. "That's what's great about companies like Wells Gray and Anderson [Vacations], the Elderhostels of the world, that are offering such a wide variety [of product] into the various areas," Leeck said.

While summer is high season in B.C. by a long shot, winter attracts outdoor adventurers looking to hit the slopes. There are plenty of Nordic ski trail opportunities as well as the PEAK 2 PEAK gondola that carries Alpine skiers from Whistler Mountain to Blackcomb and back. And the Sea to Sky Highway from Vancouver to Whistler received \$500 million in improvements, making it not only scenic, but now a much safer road.

While Whistler Blackcomb may be the ski resort with the highest profile in the province, a dozen or more resorts in the series of mountain chains that cover most of the B.C. interior offer everything from ski-in, ski-out, family-style skiing to high-end digs for those seeking more grown-up runs. Most resorts now offer Nordic skiing to lure boomers concerned about potential downhill broken bones.

FOOD AND WINE, SO FINE

Two of the biggest reasons for B.C.'s burgeoning popularity are wine and food. New wineries popping up in the Lower Mainland area—50 alone in the Fraser Valley—have added to well over 140 wineries in the Okanagan Valley and some 40 wineries and cideries in the Cowichan Valley on Vancouver Island. Some tour operators use the wineries as glammed-up, top-notch lunch stops, others as learning experiences to discover the pleasures of good wine, Leeck said.

“As baby boomers’ tastes become more refined, wine and culinary are a part of most vacations these days,” she added, and B.C. tourism product routinely offers both. Edible British Columbia on Vancouver’s Granville Island, for example, offers everything from gourmet kayaking to private gourmet dinners on Vancouver’s busy farmers’ market/boutique shops/restaurants hub, Granville Island.

The world-renowned Rocky Mountaineer train, which travels from Vancouver to Banff, Calgary and Jasper, now offers an optional two-day stopover in Kelowna for a concentrated wine-touring or golf package. And NTA-receptive Brewster Travel Canada has changed one of its tour packages from

Clockwise from top left: Local vendors sell a variety of homemade goods, seafood, and fresh fruit and vegetables at Granville Island Farmers Market. Whistler Mountaineer offers afternoon tea service on its Glacier Dome Experience package. Victoria’s Fairmont Empress Hotel is just steps away from the Inner Harbor, shops and restaurants.

one overnight in Kamloops to two in Kelowna for winery explorations.

The central and southern Okanagan Valley, where small estate tasting rooms and restaurants dot side roads within a few hundred yards of each other, is a wine-touring hot spot. Thanks to the wine, fine chefs and foodies have descended on once-rustic towns like Penticton, blossoming them into utterly charming little cities. At Bogner’s of Penticton restaurant, the chef grows his own herbs and some veggies on site. And spots like eclectic, hole-in-the-wall Burger 55 (custom gourmet burgers with dozens of toppings and sauces) and the Book Shop—the largest used bookstore west of Toronto—flesh out the busy little downtown.

During the fall Okanagan Wine Festival, visitors can hit the vineyards, pick grapes

for a while and then head to the barn for a hearty harvester’s lunch at Noble Ridge Vineyard & Winery. Also thanks to wine, culinary and golf (40 courses, including glitzy new Predator Ridge), top-notch hotels have opened along the valley, noted Ellen Walker-Matthews, Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association’s market development specialist for North America. Offerings include the all-suite Watermark Beach Resort and Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa in Osoyoos (attached to the Nk’Mip aboriginal-owned winery), the stunning five-star Sparkling Hill Resort in Vernon (seven saunas and North America’s first super-sub-zero cryo-spa), the Summerland Waterfront Resort & Spa in Summerland near Penticton, and Alpine Meadows Resort near Hallam Lake in the north Thompson area. ©

