

The Okanagan Valley Hikes

by Darlene West

About a half-day's drive from Vancouver, in a rain shadow between the Coast and Monashee mountains, the Okanagan Valley spans about 175 arid kilometers (109 miles) in BC's Southern Interior. With a string of clear lakes and a desert-hot climate, the Okanagan practically screams vacation. Beaches, golf courses, fruit stands, wineries, and ski hills draw visitors to the valley. (Some never leave.) The most urban amenities are found in Kelowna (pop. 106,000), the main center and one of the fastest-growing cities in Canada. From Kelowna, Hwy. 97 runs north along Okanagan Lake to Vernon and south to Osoyoos, next to the Washington border.

The hub of BC's flourishing wine industry, the Okanagan has more than 700 vineyards and 140 wineries (at last count), including one-of-a-kind establishments such as the architecturally imposing Mission Hill, near Kelowna, and North America's first Aboriginal-owned winery, Nk'Mp Cellars, on a sun-bleached setting in Osoyoos. The region celebrates all things wine in a handful of annual fetes, including a 10-day harvest festival in early October. (Visit www.owfs.com for festival dates and schedules.) Although orchards, increasingly, are giving way to vineyards, the Okanagan remains

BC's top fruit-growing region. Early summer through fall, fruit stands along Hwy. 97 and on Hwy. 3 in the neighboring Similkameen Valley are the spots to stock up on cherries, peaches, apricots, apples, plums, and pears.

The Okanagan's lakes, desert landscapes, and vineyard-covered slopes add up to scenery that will leave you speechless. Hiking terrain, for the most part, is gentler than what you'll find in some parts of BC, although keep in mind that the valley's sizzling summer temperatures can make hard work of even the easiest trails. This desert-like climate also harbors an amazing diversity of birds, animals, and plants. Hike along a riverbank in the company of osprey, eagles, and great blue herons. Watch for rattlesnakes as you scale rocky bluffs. Tally up wildflowers on hillsides in spring and inhale the scent of sage.

The hikes in this chapter are easy to get to—in many cases, just minutes from a main highway—and close to creature comforts. Although you'll want to devote the better part of a day to some trails, others are hike-able in a few hours—in July and August, get an early morning start and avoid the midday heat. What's more, you'll still have time for a round of golf, a winery lunch, or a trip to the beach.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

By Plane

Both **Air Canada Jazz** (☎ 888/247-2262; www.aircanada.ca) and **WestJet** (☎ 888/937-8538; www.westjet.com) offer daily non-stop flights to Kelowna from Vancouver, Victoria,

192 Calgary, Edmonton, and Toronto. **Horizon Air** (☎ 800/547-9308; www.alaskaair.com), a division of Alaska Air, offers daily non-stop service to Kelowna from Seattle. You can fly from Vancouver to Penticton with either Air Canada Jazz or **Pacific Coastal** (☎ 800/663-2872; www.pacificcoastal.com). Pacific Coastal also offers service between Calgary and Penticton.

By Car

If you're driving to the Okanagan Valley, the most direct route (395km/237 miles) to Kelowna from Vancouver is via Hwy. 5, the **Coquihalla Highway**. It's about a 4-hour trip. The 607km (378-mile) journey to Kelowna from Calgary takes about 8 hours. If you're heading to the southern end of the valley from Vancouver, the quickest (and most scenic) route is via Hwy. 3 through Manning Park and into the hilly **Similkameen Valley**, past orchards, vineyards, and fruit stands. It's a 402km (250-mile) drive to Osoyoos from Vancouver.

By Bus

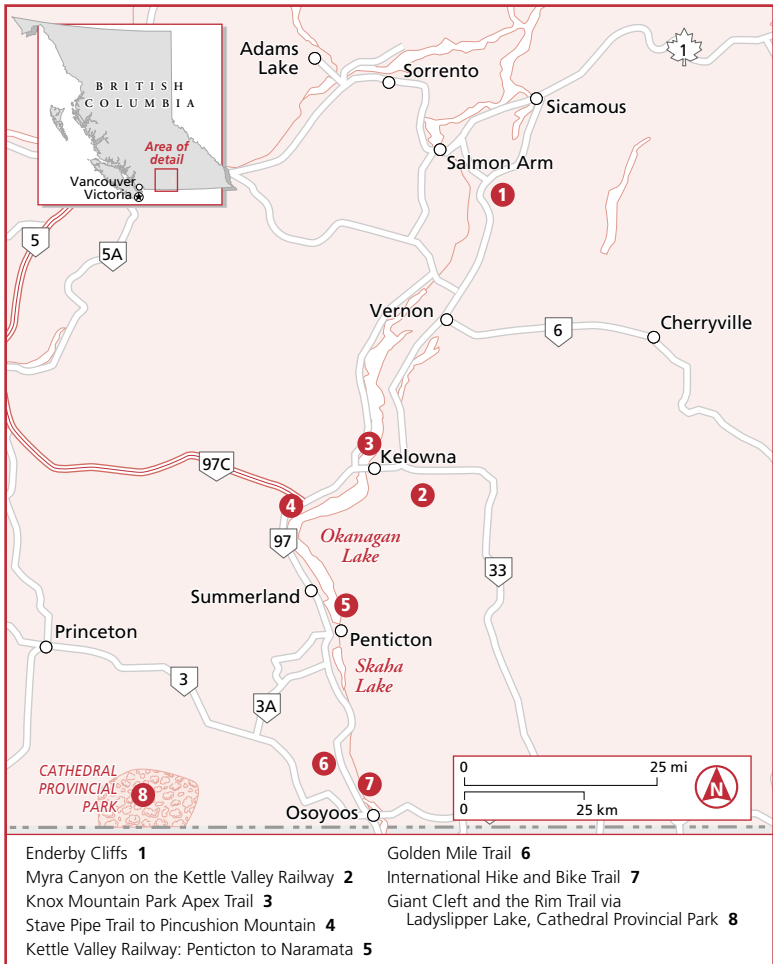
Greyhound (☎ 800/661-8747; www.greyhound.ca) runs daily service from Vancouver to Kelowna and Penticton, with service continuing on to Banff and Calgary. A round-trip ticket from Vancouver to Kelowna is C\$126. Greyhound also provides service to Oliver and Osoyoos.

VISITOR INFORMATION

The **Kelowna Visitor Centre** is on Hwy. 97 at 544 Harvey Avenue (☎ 800/663-4345 or 250/861-1515; www.tourismkelowna.com). If you're arriving in the south Okanagan, stop at the new **British Columbia Visitor Centre** at Osoyoos, junction of Hwy. 3 and Hwy. 97, for both regional (☎ 800/435-5622; www.hellobc.com) and **Osoyoos** (☎ 888/676-9667 or 250/495-5070; www.destinationosoyoos.com) visitor information. The center is open 8am to 6pm in summer (July through Sept 4) and 9am to 4pm other months. In Penticton, head for the **Wine Country Visitor Centre** at 553 Railway Street (☎ 800/663-5052 or 250/493-4055; www.tourismpenticton.com), which also houses an excellent wine shop, filled with the best of BC wines, along with cookbooks and gift items.

ORIENTATION The city of Kelowna sprawls along the east side of Okanagan Lake, about half way between Vernon and Penticton. Many points of interest are in a relatively compact area near the city's waterfront. Bernard Street is the main commercial strip. The lovely **City Park**, with a sandy public beach, flanks downtown and links to Waterfront Park, where a boardwalk winds along the lakeshore to the **Grand Hotel**. Adjacent to **Waterfront Park**, on the other side of Water Street, a 6-block **Cultural District** houses art galleries, shops, and museums in a renovated former fruit packing area. The **BC Orchard Industry Museum**, 1304 Ellis Street (☎ 250/764-0433) is in a former packing house that also contains a wine museum and a wine shop. The **Rotary Centre for the Arts**, 421 Cawston Avenue (☎ 250/717-5304) is a multi-purpose venue with a 33-seat performing arts theater, plus two art galleries and a number of artist studios.

Hwy. 97, which takes you north to Vernon and south to Penticton, Oliver, and Osoyoos, inches right through the heart of Kelowna. (It's called Harvey Ave. near downtown.) Traffic is heavy, particularly in summer. A new five-lane bridge across Okanagan Lake opened in 2008 and has helped ease the flow of cars, trucks, and motor homes, but



this is still the busiest stretch of highway outside the Lower Mainland, handling 46,000 vehicles a day.

GETTING AROUND

In Kelowna, the local bus service is operated by **Kelowna Regional Transit System** (☎ 250/860-8121). A one-way fare is C\$2. For a taxi, call **Checkmate Cabs** (☎ 250/861-1111). For bus schedules in Penticton, call **Penticton Transit System** at ☎ 250/492-5602 (one way fare: C\$1.75).