



Osoyoos Lake, mountains and vineyard views from a table at The Patio at Nk'Mip Cellars.

PHOTOS: CURT WOODHALL/SPECIAL TO THE SUN

OSOYOOS

Romance heats up in southern B.C. resort

A variety of outdoor activities and culinary experiences make area an ideal couples retreat

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SPECIAL TO THE SUN

Every July my family packed the Ford station wagon, with my brothers and I knee-to-knee in the back seat, and made the six-hour drive to Osoyoos for a weeklong camping trip. We spent our vacation splashing in the lake, eating cherries, playing Uno and reading Archie and Jughead comic books. This was our family tradition, and I looked forward to the trip every year.

As an adult my love for Osoyoos has not waned, however my interests and travel preferences are more sophisticated. Fortunately for me, an influx of vineyards and vintners has helped transform Osoyoos from sleepy little beach town into gastro-nomic haven.

My husband and I have now created our own tradition, which is to leave our darling daughter with her grandparents and pack a year's worth of date nights into one long weekend.

Our mission is to seek out the pinnacle of romance; indulgences that we are regularly denied with having a toddler at home. Having toured many of the area's wineries in previous years, we focused our energies this trip on the lake, the spa and lengthy three-course meals paired with local wine and adult conversation.



Above left: A baked-cheese appetizer at Miraduro in Oliver at the Tinhorn Creek winery estate. Above right: A view of Osoyoos Lake.



Picnic on the lake

Osoyoos is home to Canada's warmest freshwater lake, and there's no better way to enjoy it than by boat. As a couple, we prefer an early morning cruise on the calm, peaceful glasslike surface of Osoyoos Lake, before it's flooded with personal watercraft and wakeboarders.

Our favourite Osoyoos breakfast haunt, family-run Dolci Artisan Fare, also happens to pack a fantastic

picnic, which is a welcome addition to any voyage. This quaint European café on Main Street was opened by German-trained pastry chef Jörg Hoffmeister and his wife, Swiss-trained pastry chef, Anna. Artisan's pastries, soups, breads and sweets are superb, whether enjoyed on the café's patio or in the middle of the lake. Starlite Marina, next to the Holiday Inn on Main Street offers hourly and daily rentals on Waverunners, SeaDos, jet and non-motorized boat rentals.

Sip & SUP

To ward off any guilty feelings associated with three-days of drinking and dining we booked an activity that actually included a full-body workout. 3 Phase Adventures is the brand new SUP (Stand Up Paddleboard) company in Osoyoos.

Owners Correna Fletcher and Jason Jennings share their passion for the sport through a variety of lessons and packages, including a romantic sunset paddle and our favourite the Sip & SUP, which ends with a wine tasting at LaStella Winery.

The hour-long paddle starts and finishes on the beach directly below the winery, after which guests partake in a premium wine-tasting on the LaStella patio overlooking Osoyoos Lake. Since 2006, LaStella has focused on producing low-yields and practised sustainable farming. All of the wine is named after musical notes to honour its vision of la dolce vita: the harmony of fine wine, food and music. Our top picks were the Maestro, a Merlot that retails for \$100 per bottle, and the Moscato de Osoyoos, which hits our price point at \$23.

Horseback riding and lunch

Another activity impossible to do with a toddler is horseback riding. Indian Grove Riding Stable, next to Spirit Ridge Resort, offers morning, afternoon and daylong rides. The morning outing is a gentle two-hour trail ride that travels along the mountain, through the desert antelope brush

and cactus, then down to the lower foothills onto the beach where the horses cool off with a walk in the lake. Our new favourite spot for lunch just happens to be a stone's throw from the stables, where The Patio at Nk'Mip Cellars is arguably the most romantic setting in Osoyoos. Overlooking the vineyard, with sweeping lake views, The Patio is a completely al fresco dining experience open from late April through early October, weather permitting. The village smoked cheddar custard and braised wild boar tacos are well worth the calories.

Dinner with valley views

As a parent of a young child you are rarely granted the luxury of sipping on a glass of wine and simply losing yourself in the beauty of your surroundings. It's now a treat that, when given, I don't take for granted. There are two restaurants in the Osoyoos area that offer truly spectacular views, Mica at Spirit Ridge Resort and Miraduro in neighbouring Oliver.

High on a hill overlooking the Nk'Mip vineyards and Osoyoos Lake, Mica Restaurant focuses on wine-country comfort food with plates such as short rib sliders, pork and beans and Moroccan Spiced Duck. Miraduro, on the beautiful family-run Tinhorn Creek winery estate was awarded Best Winery Dining at the 2012 and 2013 Vancouver Magazine Restaurant Awards.

A partnership between the winery and Manuel Ferreira, owner of Vancouver's La Gavroche restaurant, Miraduro offers Mediterranean influenced cuisine and panoramic valley views. Executive chef Jeff Van Geest's modern menu features Neapolitan-style pizzas, handmade pasta and hearty meat and poultry dishes.

I've now traded the tent trailer of my childhood vacations for much swankier digs, my favourite being the Walnut Beach Resort. This boutique all-suite property is lakefront with a lake view heated pool, private sandy beach and Promenade Wine Bar, which has an outdoor barbecue kitchen that serves the most tender, delicious ribs I've ever eaten.

The warm weather in Osoyoos lasts well into October, and a local source tells me that come September, when the kids are back to school, the romance heats up even more.

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Spa treatment, dinner for two

An afternoon at the spa followed by dinner in a wine-bar exceeded our romance requirements, and Watermark Beach Resort on the shores of Osoyoos Lake is the perfect venue for both. Illumination, Watermark's vegan and organic day-spa, blends the traditions, treatments and products of the eastern and western worlds. The Twin Souls package, which includes a couples side-by-side massage and pedicure, will leave you soft, supple and dangerously close to catatonic.

We hadn't eaten at the Watermark Wine Bar since executive chef Jonas Stadländer took over, and were delighted with the new regionally focused tapas menu.

Our meal included the chef's tasting plate (cheeses, house made cured meats, pâtés, chutneys and pickled vegetables), seared spice-crusted albacore tuna and parsnip cake with goat cheese icing. From appetizer through dessert the experience was outstanding.

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