

The Okanagan

BC's Wine Region Grows Up

by Carolyn B. Heller

Elizabeth Cucnik has seen lots of changes in BC's Okanagan Valley. The general manager of Penticton Lakeside Resort & Conference Centre grew up in this sunny, agricultural region once known for "beaches and peaches." Today, she says, with more than 200 wineries and an expanded infrastructure for active pursuits, the Okanagan is becoming "a world-class destination."

An influx of entrepreneurs—opening coffee shops, breweries, wineries, restaurants, and more—has brought greater cultural diversity and sophistication to the Okanagan, which extends from the US border, along a chain of lakes north to the cities of Kelowna and Vernon. For visitors, this mix of urban attractions, outdoor experiences, and a growing selection of places to eat and drink, offers plenty to see and do.

Penticton Lakeside Resort & Conference Centre

Opened in the 1980s on Okanagan Lake, the 273-unit Penticton Lakeside Resort has evolved along with the region. Family-run RPB Hotels took over the property in 1993, and in 2017, constructed an upscale 70-suite annex. This newer West Wing is an environmentally friendly all-wood structure, which Cucnik describes as one of the first of its kind in Canada. From the spa-like bathrooms to the oversized lakeview balconies, she says that the West Wing offers "a more elevated experience," to couples and business travellers who can afford a higher price point.

During the summer, Cucnik says, the hotel's overall demographic "is typically families that have a healthy disposable income and love spending time exploring," enjoying water sports, mountain biking, and other outdoor activities. The property also draws older independent travellers, who come for wine touring or sampling the microbreweries.

Courtesy of Penticton Lakeside Resort



The Penticton resort offers more than 32,000 square feet of conference space as well, and after two challenging years, the meetings and event business “is coming back in abundance,” Cucnik notes. The hotel is attracting corporate retreats, by offering yoga classes and other wellness services onsite, and partnering with local businesses, such as nearby wineries, to host private tours or tasting events.

“People now are seeking these niche, unique experiences,” Cucnik states. “They want something that they can’t get everywhere. So as a hotel, we’ve really had to think about how we can stand out.”

Summerland Waterfront Resort & Spa

Many guests at Summerland Waterfront Resort & Spa “just want to zone out,” says General Manager Tom Matthews. “They want to get their shoulders down from their ears and unwind.”

At this strata property located lakeside between Penticton and Kelowna, the 115 studio, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom suites, all with kitchens and fireplaces, are individually owned. Families, primarily from the Lower Mainland, make up the resort’s main summer clientele, while in the off-season, Matthews says, “We see a lot of couples wanting to escape for a couple of days.”

“We do a huge repeat business,” adds Matthews, who also owns Tepic Management Group which manages this Summerland property. “It’s people coming for their annual Father’s Day trip. It’s the grandparents joining the grandkids for the 15th summer in a row.”

The growth in the wine industry is the biggest change that Matthews has seen during the more than two decades he’s lived in the Okanagan, and the city of Kelowna has developed exponentially as well. “I remember winter days up there 28 years ago where the tumbleweed would be blowing down Harvey Avenue,” Matthews quips. Now, he says, “Kelowna has exploded.”

Hyatt Place Kelowna

Opened by Surrey BC-based West Fraser Developments in July 2020, Hyatt Place Kelowna is capitalizing on the city’s expansion, says General Manager Cedric Younge. The 161-room Hyatt is positioned between limited-service properties and more expensive waterfront resorts, targeting millennial business and leisure travellers seeking “a cool vibe and elevated service at a decent price.”

The Hyatt brand is drawing active travellers, including Americans who might previously have chosen Whistler or Banff. The hotel rents e-bikes for cycling the nearby rail trail, and Younge says, “You can be in the woods hiking in about 10 minutes.” The city’s north end has become a craft beer hub, and both the culinary scene and the wine industry continue to evolve.

When he arrived in the Okanagan from Montreal in 2005, Younge says the lack of diversity surprised him, but these days, “every single culture is represented.” At the Hyatt Place, employees come from Russia, Mexico, Chile, and Jamaica, as well as many Canadian regions.

What makes Kelowna—and the Okanagan—so attractive, Younge adds, is that from wine, food, and the outdoors to its increasingly multicultural population, “you’re hitting all the niches.” ■

Photos this page courtesy of Summerland Waterfront Resort & Spa

