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Kelowna: In style

Some come to play in the lake and mountains. Others to bask in the sun. We did all that, and topped it off with memorable visits to wineries and restaurants and by soaking up Kelowna's surprisingly rich cultural scene.

BY RANDALL ANTHONY MANG

Sometimes, it takes awhile. And on some vacations, it never really happens at all. But with every satisfying getaway I've experienced, there has come a moment when I feel like I have really arrived – transported from the ordinary to the extraordinary. On our recent trip to Kelowna, B.C., my wife Louise and I felt that holiday spirit the moment we touched down. From that point forward it just got better and better.

Admittedly, our bright outlook was fuelled by Kelowna's promise of providing things we love to do: explore interesting places, wine-and-dine – and, of course, soak up the R&R. What surprised us is how far above our expectations this town of 107,000 people would deliver.

We were greeted by the region's typical brilliant blue skies and warm, dry weather – attributes of its semi-arid climate. A scant 15-minute drive from Kelowna International Airport was all it took before we were front and centre at our resort – sunglasses on, chilled Chardonnay in hand and a sweeping view of the nearly 70-mile-long shimmering blue-water lake before us.

Choosing a romantic hideaway among Kelowna's 3,000 rooms was relatively easy. We focused on higher-end lakefront properties and were pleased to include The Grand Okanagan and Manteo resorts and the charming Eldorado Hotel among properties on our short list.

From our suite we gazed across at the low-slung, pine-topped mountains, where orchards and vineyards co-exist with farms and modern neighbourhoods. During our stay we would venture into those hills: a hike along a mountain trail included surprising sights such as indigenous tumbledweed and small cacti; a bike ride down a rural country road



PHOTO: OLD VINES RESTAURANT

Old Vines Restaurant at Quails' Gate Winery is just one of Kelowna's fantastic dining establishments that combine sumptuous cuisine with breathtaking settings.

refreshed us with a breeze sweetly scented by peach blossoms.

Amid this beautiful countryside, we stopped at the Okanagan Lavender and Herb Farm where owner Andrea McFadden has turned her passion for lavender into an art form. Not only does she cultivate this fragrant flower, she uses it in fantastic ways. In her shop we discovered lavender in aromatic sachets; bound into beautiful bouquets, and blended with Herbs de Provence and sea salts for cooking. McFadden even makes a delicious jelly preserve with lavender. Suffice to say the shopping was irresistible.

On a parting note, she genuinely extended an invitation to return for

the Okanagan Lavender Farm Harvest Festival, which takes place July 7 to 10. It sounds like a great event.

While the lavender farm is unique in these parts, fruit orchards and, increasingly, vineyards rule.

For us, it meant a chance to visit acclaimed wineries including CedarCreek, Mission Hill, Quails' Gate and others.

While self-touring is easy, tour operators enhance the experience by providing insight into the history and lay of this land. They're also a safer way to go from tasting to tasting.

Naturally, Mission Hill Family Estate Winery was on our must-see list. Not only does it produce fine

wines, its setting, architecture, art collection and restaurant are of the highest calibre. Credit proprietor Anthony von Mandl for sparing no expense in his winery's design; its gardens, lawns and the warm Tuscan hues of its buildings form a monument to tasteful elegance.

Across the lake at CedarCreek Estate Winery we happened to meet Gordon Fitzpatrick whose father started the winery 20 years ago. Like other top-ranked vintners, the Fitzpatricks' interest transcends business; for them it is a passion. CedarCreek started out producing easy-to-drink blended wines, but its aspiration to become a respected maker of premium wine has been amply real-

ized. This year, CedarCreek was (once again) named Canada's Winery of the Year.

We tasted a few selections including a peppery 2003 Platinum Reserve Merlot. For me, the showstopper was the Platinum Reserve Pinot Noir. We left with a mixed box.

Just down the road we visited Carmelis Goat Cheese Artisan. This family-run business produces over 20 varieties of goat cheese, from seasoned chèvre to a blue cheese that proprietor Ofri Barmor calls Goatgongola. Carmelis' fromage is heavenly, but touring the farm and meeting the folks behind the product brings the experience home.

Tucking into Kelowna's food scene became a driving force in our agenda. At Old Vines Restaurant at Quails' Gate Estate Winery we dined on grilled ahi tuna served over lemon fusilli with shiitake mushrooms and spinach. It was decadent paired with a delicious 2004 Limited Release Pinot Noir. What made this experience heavenly, however, was the setting: a sloping vineyard giving way to an expansive view of the lake and countryside.

Among our other memorable dining adventures in downtown Kelowna was dinner at Bouchon's – a French bistro so authentic it transported us back to Paris (even though our waiter admitted, with a wink, that he's from Quebec). Meanwhile, brunch at the Bohemian Bagel Cafe was steeped in hip, artistic décor. The Boh's scrumptious and hearty cuisine and coffee would make Starbucks founder Howard Schultz proud.

After brunch we strolled through the town centre, charmed by its colourful storefronts. Later, we ventured into Kelowna's Cultural District, impressed by the volume and quality of public art as well as its array of galleries and funky shops. Inspiring? Let's just say we bought a collectable or two.

Back at the resort, the sight of people along the boardwalk motivated us to go for jog.

Before we knew it, our holiday was done. Were we satisfied? Absolutely. Would we come back for more? In a heartbeat.

Before you go:

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