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If you haven't been to Kelowna lately, it's a good time to get reacquainted. As for first-time visitors, suffice to say you're in for a treat.

The last few years have seen a boom in wineries, restaurants, shopping, hotels, recreational opportunities and cultural attractions. And many who know this region are convinced among British Columbians and Albertans, is on the cusp of even greater popularity.

The international media have already come calling. Frommers.com put the Okanagan on its list of top travel destinations for 2007, and The New York Times dubbed it "a Napa of the North."

"Now is the time to discover Okanagan Wine Country," says Gordon Fitzpatrick, president of Kelowna's CedarCreek Estate Winery and former chairman of the

B.C. Wine Institute. In the two dozen or so wineries surrounding this city of 111,000, things are still small-scale and personal. Drop into any vineyard restaurant or boutique, says Fitzpatrick, and there's a good chance you'll bump into the owner.

While still pastoral, the range of winery experiences for visitors is growing by leaps and bounds. "The concentration of spectacular scenery and award-winning wine and cuisine is unbeatable," he says.

Many wineries, including multiple award winners such as CedarCreek, have opened highly acclaimed fine dining restaurants. At Quails' Gate Estate Winery, where the celebrated Old Vines restaurant offers year-round fine dining overlooking Okanagan Lake, even more grand plans are in the works. The winery is preparing to open a new 4,500-square-foot

hospitality centre early in the summer of 2007, which will feature a demonstration kitchen, wine and food pairings, and space for meetings and special events.

Visitors can learn more about Southern B.C.'s winery and fruit packing history at the Laurel Packinghouse, a heritage building in downtown Kelowna that now houses museums devoted to both industries. The packinghouse is one of the highlights of the city's charming Cultural District, which also includes other museums, art galleries, artists' studios, performance spaces and almost a dozen displays of public art.

The District, which is situated just north of Kelowna's downtown and stretches six blocks adjacent to Okanagan Lake's waterfront, has recently received a boost from a spate of new residential developments. Now, everything from home

decor boutiques to gourmet restaurants have opened up to cater to the throngs who visit and live here.

"There's just a new buzz around the Cultural District," says Sheila Olcen, cultural development supervisor with the City of Kelowna.

The city is particularly effervescent during the annual Life and Arts Festival (May 11 to 13), which this year will include a number of design-themed events to complement spectacles like the illumination of Waterfront Park with countless paper lanterns. Later in the summer, live performances are held five nights a week throughout July and August as part of the Parks Alive summer concert series.

A generation ago, Kelowna was known mainly as a great camping destination, due to its abundant recreational opportunities. If you're outdoorsy, you'll be pleased to note there are even more activities here today than ever before. Within minutes from downtown, walkers and hikers can try an easy stroll through Gellatly Nut Farm or hike the more challenging Bear Creek or McDougall Rim trails. Thrill seekers can go rock climbing, mountain biking or wakeboarding, while kayaking and birdwatching appeal to quieter tastes.

## A city on the rise

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But Kelowna's journey has taken it far beyond its backpacker roots. Increasingly popular with affluent visitors, the region has sprouted a host of spas, vacation condos, gourmet restaurants and an expanding lineup of upscale properties. This increasingly diverse range of top-flight amenities set against its natural attractions has also put Kelowna on the map with meeting and incentive travel planners.

"We have natural beauty, unique industries like wineries, golf and plenty to do for pre- and post-conference activities," says Diane Wetherill, director of sales at the Coast Capri Hotel, who notes that the rising number of direct flights into Kelowna International Airport is also an advantage. In addition, she says, Kelowna offers "significant savings over larger cities, especially in the shoulder seasons."

Several hotels and resorts in Kelowna are well equipped to handle meeting and convention business.

Looking for a private hideaway for two? Settle in among numerous quaint bed and breakfasts, many with panoramic lake views. How about staying offshore aboard your very own houseboat equipped with a hot tub and fireplace? Paradise found. ■

# Kelowna



"The word is getting out about the Okanagan Valley. In a few days there, we found top-notch small-batch wineries where the owners and winemakers work the tasting rooms and roam the grounds."

— Bonnie Tsui, New York Times