

BY SUZANNE WRIGHT

OKANAGAN

VALLEY —RIPE WITH POSSIBILITY

Never heard of the Okanagan Valley? Maybe that's because only 8,500 cases of wine are exported from Canada to the United States annually.

The Okanagan is located 250 miles east of Vancouver, British Columbia. Missionaries planted the first vineyards in the 1860s, and the oldest wineries date from the 1930s. Today, more than 95 boutique wineries dot this sunny, dry region often referred to as “Napa North.” Drier than Bordeaux and Burgundy, the Okanagan has 6,000 acres and a six-month growing season. An astonishing number of varietals—almost equally split between red and white—thrive here, including pinot noir, pinot blanc, Riesling, merlot, syrah, viognier, cabernet franc and meritage. Icewine is also produced.

I've spent weeks acquiring gear for my wine-centric cycling/hiking trip jointly operated by Austin-Lehman Adventures and Arizona Outback Adventures. I've got a woman's CamelBak for hydration on the go, padded bike shorts and jerseys, wool socks, lightweight sneakers, sunglasses and a water-repellent windbreaker. And I've stepped up the evening walks at Piedmont Park. I've also stepped up my drinking since the focus of the trip is wine tasting (although I was pretty fit for that).

TRAVEL

DAY 1

We begin with introductions. There are two gals traveling together from Maryland (one is a personal trainer who reminds me of Joyce DeWitt from “Three's Company”), a lovely fiftysomething couple from Chicago (he's a retired executive); three mothers from Montana and Wyoming traveling together (they arrived on a private chartered plane); a couple of New Yorkers now living in Aspen; and Dan Lehman, co-owner of Austin-Lehman Adventures. This is an inaugural trip, but many are return guests. Our two guides for the six-day tour are über-fit Melissa and Matt. Everyone has cycling experience, save me. I'm a little nervous.

Melissa sets up a table with sandwich fixings and tells us to make our lunch and stash it in our daypack for our hike to Wildhorse Canyon at Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park. Brilliant fuchsia fire weed covers the ground; it grew after the devastating fires of 2003. As we climb on a trail of loose shale from 1,200 to 2,200 feet, I stop to catch my breath and lean against a tree. The bark is burnt, leaving soot on my hand. I pluck a few ripe wild raspberries and pop them in my mouth. Most of the women have clambered up the hill like mountain goats, as I huff and puff. The view is worth it: a spectacular vista into the valley that we will traverse over the next few days. Melissa passes a bag of chips to accompany our sandwiches.

That afternoon, we visit Summerhill Pyramid Winery, Canada's largest organic vineyard. A skinny white guy with black dreadlocks gives us a tour of the property and the Egyptian-inspired pyramid where the wine is stored. It's a marketing ploy that attracts

tourists, though I'm not sure its boosts the wine quality. Our digs at the Hotel Eduardo are plush, and dinner at the Wild Apple Grill includes a sweet-onion-and-goat-cheese tart, New York strip loin and ample glasses of wine.

DAY 2

Our hybrid bikes—handy on both pavement and paths—have our names on them. After stretching and a snack, we cycle the Naramata Bench along the Kettle Railway. Already, an easy camaraderie has developed among us, and everyone is helpful and encouraging. The crushed gravel trail is rough, too rough to be enjoyable (future itineraries will address this), but I make the best of it. I dawdle, checking out the rock ovens built by railway laborers and watching turkey vultures with eight-foot wingspans in synchronized flight. I admire picturesque Okanagan Lake below, and focus on the upcoming meal.

Al fresco lunch is at the Barrel Room Bistro at Hillside Estate; the baked chicken wrap with peach chutney and jalapeño jack cheese is marvelous. Proprietor Bill Carpenter calls himself a “schizophrenic winemaker” because he grows so many varieties (yet produces just 15,000 cases a year). I fall in love with the rosé, which has an appealing pepper-like finish.

Later, at the Cobblestone Restaurant at the Naramata Heritage Inn, we admire the wit of local winemakers as we peruse the list: See Ya Later Ranch, Therapy Vineyards (with its signature Freudian sip), Dirty Laundry Vineyard, Forbidden Fruit and Laughing Stock. We devour freshly baked foccacia with such toppings as tapenade, smoked salmon and locally made blue cheese accompanied by a creamy Poplar Grove pinos gris; there's also succulent Okanagan venison loin with polenta and hand-churned ice cream.

DAY 3

The Sonora Desert begins in Baja, Mexico, and snakes its way north to Oliver, British Columbia. There's a heat wave sweeping the region. The temperature rises to 104 degrees, and the roads radiate with warmth. The gently undulating hills are perfect for biking as we make our way to Osoyoos past cherry, pear, peach and apricot orchards. I make a point to pedal into sprinklers. Mine is a ride of self-discovery: I like a slight uphill; downhill, not so much.

“Are you having fun?” I am asked. I pause. I think I am.

I hypothesize that as a Type A, it's because I don't like the loss of control. At the

Southwestern-style Burrowing Owl, we tuck into another generous lunch, a feast of cold poached jumbo prawns with roasted bell pepper dip and a hazelnut-crusting warm goat cheese salad. The scenery is breathtaking.

After visiting NK'MIP Cellars, we bunk overnight in villas at Spirit Ridge Resort; both are owned by aboriginals. The family-style dinner is terrific: salmon with sautéed green beans, quinoa with chickpeas and feta and brownies. My bike shorts are feeling decidedly tighter.

DAY 4

Apex Mountain, abuzz in winter, is a ghost town in summer, so we've got it all to ourselves for a private hike. Signs for a ski run called “the Good, the Bad and the Ugly” give me pause; these are our trails. I am once again bringing up the rear; but I can admire the lupin and Indian paint brush in between my panting. As I scramble to the top (7,200 feet), my heart catches. The snow-capped coastal range is in the distance—I've secured my own Rocky Mountain high.

On our way to check in at the Summerland Waterfront Resort, we persuade Matt and Mel to stop at a roadside stand and buy glossy deep red cherries. The Maryland girls and I order a couple of pizzas and uncork several bottles of wine, talking and enjoying the lake views from their third-floor suite.

DAY 5

I take a day off and hang out at the pool and the lake. I'm not the only one.

Late in the afternoon, we visit Mission Hill, distinguished by its 12-story bell tower, the bell pealing as we arrive for our architectural tour. The sky is intensely blue and the grounds offer gorgeous views; the cathedral-like vaulted cellars are blissfully cool.

Our farewell dinner (so soon?!) is at the Old Vines Patio at Quail's Gate; we're back in Kelowna, on the west side of the lake. The five-course meal paired with wines is flawless: roasted summer tomato soup, sea scallops with charred apple and crisp pancetta, halibut with lemon risotto and a berry tart. I learn that because Canadians pay workers about \$11 an hour to pick fruit, prices are higher than we see stateside. Still, I buy three bottles (\$60), including an unusual ehrenfelser to take home.

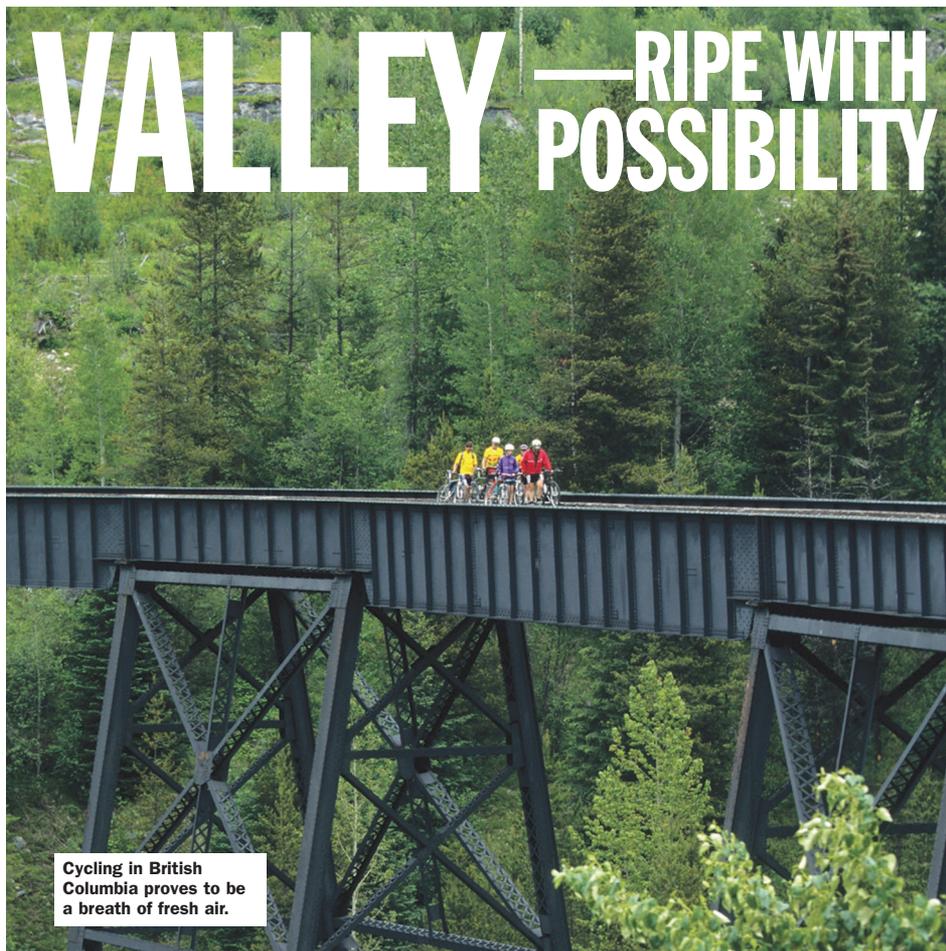
DAY 6

Our group begins to splinter, as those with early departures head home. We exchange e-mails, addresses and hugs, promising to send photos.

I feel victorious. I may have to buy a bike. **SP**

IF YOU GO

For general information on the region, visit www.totabc.com and www.winebc.com, the latter of which has specifics on wineries. Check out the six-day tour at www.aoa-adventures.com or www.austinglehman.com. If you only have a day, try the Wildflowers and Wine Tours: www.wildflowersandwine.com.



Cycling in British Columbia proves to be a breath of fresh air.

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