

VACATIONS

B.C. excursions range from deluxe to rustic

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Planning a summer break in B.C.? Here are four vacation destinations worth checking out.

Vancouver Island: Sonora Resort

As anyone who loves to fish knows, you can't always get what you want. But on a recent visit to Sonora Resort, a deluxe escape on a remote island north of Campbell River, I'm reminded of another truth: If you try sometimes, you just might find, you get what you need.

No question, Sonora Resort is a place you need to visit. Long the domain of manly men who wanted their salmon large and scotch smooth, Sonora has recently gone upscale and, dare I say, a bit soft.

But it's a good soft. The resort is now all-inclusive, its functional fishing camp accommodations replaced with Whistler-style lodges. Guest rooms feature natural wood tones, luxurious linens, a fully stocked bar fridge and expansive picture windows that overlook the swirling Yuculta Rapids.

The cuisine is upscale, too, with offerings such as butter-poached lobster, roasted veal tenderloin and duck breast with seared foie gras.

Thankfully, Sonora offers activities to counteract the decadence.

Fishing is still a big draw, but there's now a spa with health and soul-enhancing treatments, a fitness studio, covered tennis court, mineral pools and multiple hot tubs.

The not-to-be-missed excursion from Sonora is via high-speed boat, then van, to view the grizzly bears of Bute Inlet. This non-invasive adventure, offered mid-August to October by First Nations outfitter Homalco Wildlife Tours, allows a spectacularly close viewing experience from five well-secured towers and two open areas on the banks of the Orford River.

On my visit, I spy nine grizzlies, including a mother and cub, lumbering along the gravelly riverbanks. I watch silently as the bears wade into the shallows and swoop down to catch the salmon that are so critical to their winter survival. I'm reminded that these salmon are, in fact, Old Mother Nature's recipes, the bare necessities of life for these bears.

More: Sonora Resort, 1-888-576-6672; www.sonoraresort.com
Homalco Wildlife Tours, 1-866-234-2327; www.bearsobute.com

The Kootenays: Nelson

Winding my way down on Baker Street, light in my head, dead on my feet after an afternoon of walking Nelson's steep streets, I hear the faint, but unmistakable sound of African-American gospel music. I know Nelson, tucked on the west arm of Kootenay Lake in the Selkirk Mountains, is a magnet for active people and artists. Mountain bikers wax poetic about Mountain Station, a network of 20 trails with stunts, technical descents and free-flowing single-track just a few blocks from downtown. Skiers and snowboarders go on about the powder at neighbouring Whitewater Resort. Artists boast about Nelson's designation as Canada's Small Art Town, pointing to the summer-long visual arts festival called Artwalk as proof of the town's artistic street cred.

Even the names of the shops, many housed in the town's 350-plus heritage buildings, attest to the kind of people who live here — Ripping Giraffe Boardshop, Valhalla Pure Outfitters, Abacus Beads, Hemp & Company.

So where do the happy, clappy gospel singers fit in? I follow the hallelujahs and praise-the-Lords to find out.

I end up outside the 80-year-old Capitol Theatre where the Harlem Gospel Choir is raising the roof at this Canadian stop on its 2007 world tour.

The next morning, it's me who shouts hallelujah when I see sunshine glancing off the dark jade waters of Kootenay Lake. It's a perfect day for an invigorating hike to Pulpit Rock.

More: Nelson & District Chamber of Commerce, 1-877-663-5706; www.discovernelson.com

Cariboo Country: Elkin Creek Guest Ranch

A couple of country singers once advised mommas not to let their babies grow up to be cowboys, not to let them pick guitars or drive old trucks.

Thankfully, the parents of the cowboys and cowgirls who work at Elkin Creek Guest Ranch weren't listening.

Because for all the great things this working ranch offers visitors — a drop-dead-gorgeous location 180 kilometres

west of Williams Lake in the remote Nemaiah Valley; a collection of deluxe log cabins, each with two bedrooms and a cosy sitting room; an extensive list of activities including horseback riding, fishing, hiking, biking, river kayaking and whitewater rafting — what really makes this place special is the people.

Setting the standard is charismatic general manager and head cow boss Mike Hawksbury. Whether teaching a young buckaroo how to rope a (wooden) cow, showing a wannabe fisherman how to cast a line or entertaining guests with stories over dinner in the main lodge (one guest referred to him as "our own little Buffalo Bill"), Hawksbury embodies the best of western hospitality.

His staff follow suit. Wranglers Carey Goddard and Kim Moss charm hesitant greenhorns with their bright smiles and competent demure. Chef David Correa welcomes inquisitive food lovers to shoot the breeze while he whips up all manner of delicious food, from simple turkey wraps to take on a day-long ride to wild mushroom cappuccinos and crab-stuffed snapper for dinner.

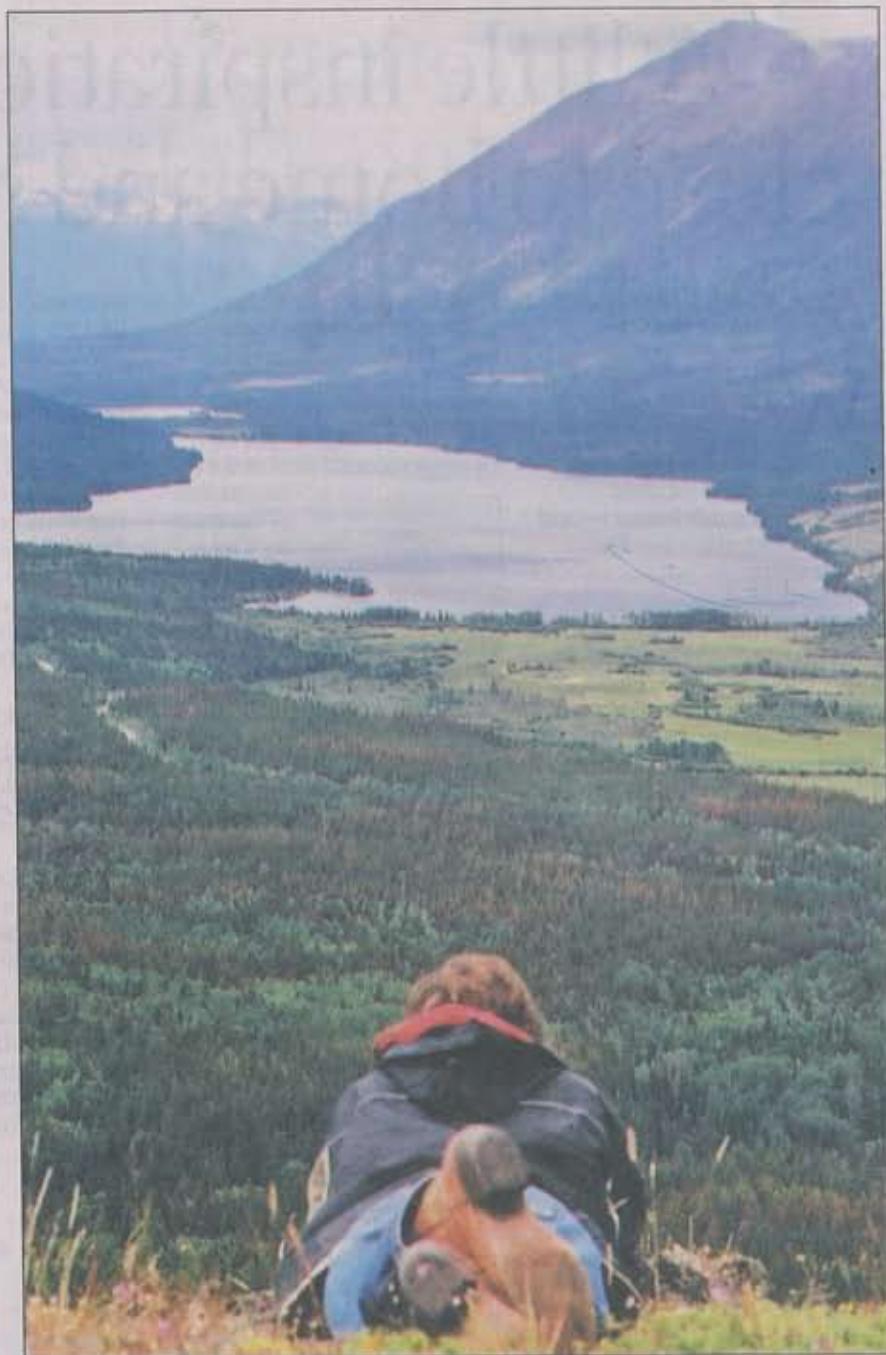
More: Elkin Creek Guest Ranch, 1-877-346-9378; www.adventurewestresorts.com

South Okanagan: Osoyoos

My mind is on fire. My soul is on fire. I'm feeling hot, hot, hot. Given that I'm hoofing it through Canada's only pocket desert at high noon, my overheated status is not surprising.

I've just spent the morning at the Nk'Mip (in-ka-meep) Desert Cultural Centre on a hillside outside of Osoyoos being immersed in the rich living culture of the Okanagan First Nations people. Highlights include the outdoor gallery of metal, rock and water sculptures representing local legends, the soulful Coyote Spirit film shown in the theatre, and a display of art done by reservation school children in the 1930s and '40s (there's an intriguing Disney connection).

Now I'm rushing over to neighbouring Nk'Mip Cellars, North America's first native-owned and operated winery, for an afternoon at wine tasting, traditional First Nations cuisine and native dance. Thankfully, when I'm done, it's an easy stroll to my suite at the four-star Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa.



Ann Campbell for CanWest News Service

Wrangler Carey Goddard surveys the range at Elkin Creek Guest Ranch.

Tonight I plan to dine at the resort's Passatempo restaurant.

It's obvious this hillside is sizzling, and not just because of the climactic conditions. In addition to the cultural centre, winery and Spirit Ridge, this land is home to the executive-sized Sonora Dunes Golf Course and the Nk'Mip RV Resort. A long-popular campground, the resort now offers on-site trailers (for those of us who never want to see the inside of a tent again) and gas campfire pits (for roasting marshmallows when the inevitable fire bans are in effect).

From the lake, you'll need to drive way up the hillside to reach the Observatory B&B, surely the hottest ticket in town based on how difficult it is to get a reservation. Stargazers from around

the world flock here to hobnob with owner and internationally renowned astronomer Jack Newton and his wife Alice. Each evening, with the aid of a 16-inch computer-controlled telescope that lives under a dome on top of the house, Jack will fly you to the moon and let you play among the stars. You might even see what spring is like on Jupiter and Mars.

More: Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre, 1-888-495-8555; www.nkmip-desert.com; Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa, 1-877-313-9463; www.spiritridge.ca; Nk'Mip RV Resort, 1-250-495-7279; campingosooyoos.com; Observatory B&B, 1-250-495-6745; www.jacknewton.com; Destination Osoyoos, 1-888-676-9667; www.destinationosooyoos.com.