



THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Grapes and greens

By BRIAN KENDALL
From Wednesday's Globe and Mail

The combination of fine wine and championship fairways has propelled B.C.'s Thompson-Okanagan region into the spotlight

Award-winning vineyards and superior golf - the irresistibly modern one-two tourism punch pioneered by California's Napa and Sonoma valleys - has in less than a decade put the once largely overlooked Thompson-Okanagan region of British Columbia on the radar of travellers.

Three high-profile golf courses are making their debut this season, a construction boom unmatched by any other Canadian destination. The first to launch, on July 6, was Tobiano, a gorgeous 7,328-yard Tom McBroom design set on bluffs offering views of Kamloops Lake and the Columbia and Cascade Mountains from every hole. Also planned for the \$500-million resort community near the city of Kamloops is a 100-slip marina, an equestrian centre, three hotels and more than 1,000 homes.

"Blockbuster mountain views, rolling grasslands and desert plains make the Thompson-Okanagan a spectacular canvas for golf-course design," says McBroom, a Toronto-based golf architect with a growing international reputation. "Add vineyards, water sports and all the other attractions and there's almost no limit to the region's potential as a summer tourist destination."

Stretching from the U.S. border, where the northern tip of the Sonoran Desert snakes between the mountains into British Columbia, northeast to the town of Valemount near the Alberta boundary, the Thompson-Okanagan basks in an average of more than 2,000 hours of sunshine annually. Apples, peaches, plums, strawberries, cherries and raspberries grow in abundance. Also driving the summertime economy are fishing, boating, dude ranches, outdoor theatre, and jazz and country music festivals. Come winter, the marquee draw is Big White, the largest ski resort in the B.C. interior.

Despite these other advantages, tourism officials agree that it's the combination of fine wine and championship fairways that has propelled the Thompson-Okanagan into the spotlight. In Canada, only Ontario's Niagara Peninsula is able to offer visitors a similarly attractive mix of grapes and greens.

"Surveys show that golf travellers spend more per trip and travel more often than other tourists," says Miles Prodan, executive director of the Thompson Okanagan Tourism Association.

"They're a sophisticated, high-income audience with an often passionate interest in food and wine. Golf and wine is the perfect tourism marriage."

Once the producers of the sort of plonk that came packaged in cartons and had "Ripple" or "Duck" in the name, local wineries finally got serious about their product after the enactment of the North American free trade agreement in

1989, which removed provincial legislation taxing B.C. wines at half the rate of imports. Guided by experienced winemakers hired from around the world, local vineyards soon began winning awards at prestigious wine fairs and attracting the attention of tourists.

Throughout the region, glitzy resorts rose to accommodate the influx of visitors. Property values soared (high-end vacation properties now sell for \$450,000 and up). And top golf architects began sculpting courses through the rolling red hills of a northern oasis where rain delays are rare and the playing season, often stretching from late March to early November, is one of Canada's longest.

Most of the early golf-course development centred on bustling Kelowna, on the eastern shore of Okanagan Lake, a theatrically steep-banked 110-kilometre-long waterway linking the city of 111,000 with the smaller communities of Penticton to the south and Vernon to the north.

Just across from Kelowna's recently expanded international airport is the Okanagan Golf Club, offering two 18-hole layouts that tumble through ponderosa pine forests. Canadian architect Les Furber built dramatic elevation changes and multitiered fairways into the club's Quail Course, while Jack Nicklaus's Golden Bear Design produced a mix of links-style and parkland holes at the Bear Course.

Two other standouts among the 14 courses in the Kelowna area are Gallagher's Canyon Golf and Country Club, a Furber-Bill Robinson hillside collaboration offering panoramic views of the valley below, and the Harvest Golf Club, which another leading Canadian architect, Graham Cooke, routed through vineyards and orchards overlooking Okanagan Lake.

Though Kelowna has long been the hub, it was the 1991 opening of Predator Ridge Golf Resort near Vernon that put the Thompson-Okanagan region on the map of Canadian golf. The 486-hectare property's scenic landscape of clear lakes, fast-rushing streams and wheatgrass meadows includes a central lodge, two- and three-bedroom luxury cottages, as well as 27 superb golf holes designed by Furber (21 holes) and Nicklaus's company (six holes). Work on an additional nine-hole layout will begin next spring.

The local wine industry signalled its own coming of age with the 2001 opening of Mission Hill Family Estate Winery, a \$40-million hilltop showpiece just outside Kelowna. The Mediterranean-influenced complex designed by renowned Seattle-based architect Tom Kundig includes a 12-storey bell tower, a performing-arts amphitheatre, dramatically lit cellars and the outdoor Terrace restaurant, offering views of Okanagan Lake and hillsides covered in rows of pinot noir and chardonnay vines.

Though tours and tastings are year-round attractions at most of the region's 74 wineries, many oenophiles visit during the Okanagan Spring Wine Festival or during the even more popular Okanagan Fall Wine Festival (Sept. 28 to Oct. 7).

Both festivals received a boost from the 2004 release of the buddy film *Sideways*, in which the wine-loving heroes drink and golf their way through California's Santa Barbara County.

Nowhere is the marketing of golf and wine more closely entwined than at The Rise, a much-ballyhooed \$1-billion condominium and resort project perched high above Okanagan Lake, near Vernon, that will be built in stages over the next several years. In addition to a private beach club and a Fred Couples-designed golf course scheduled to open next season, the property will feature an on-site estate winery capable of producing 35,000 cases of premium Okanagan wine annually.

The Rise is just one of several new courses and resorts poised to challenge the dominance of Predator Ridge. Most of the construction is found within an hour's drive of sprawling Kamloops, 163 kilometres northwest of Kelowna, where tourism is the fastest-growing sector of the robust local economy.

In addition to Tom McBroom's Tobiano, July saw the launch of Canoe Creek Golf Course, a 7,090-yard track that former Canadian PGA Tour player Dave Barr carved through farmland near the town of Salmon Arm. And set to open today is Talking Rock Golf Course, a Wayne Carlton layout developed by the Little Shuswap First Nations on the shores of Little Shuswap Lake, midway between Salmon Arm and Kamloops.

Industry observers are already talking up Tobiano as a potential winner of Golf Digest's best new Canadian course

award. McBroom took the same prestigious honour last year for his Ridge at Manitou layout in Ontario's cottage country.

"Tobiano is by far the most spectacular piece of property I've ever worked with," says McBroom, who is currently designing two high-profile courses in Kelowna. "I'm so bullish on the Thompson-Okanagan that my wife and I recently bought a place in Kelowna. I figure I'll be spending a lot of time there in the next few years."

Brian Kendall is the author of Northern Links: Canada From Tee to Tee.

Pack your clubs

OKANAGAN GOLF COURSES

TOBIANO 1-877-373-2218; 7000 Trans-Canada Highway, West Kamloops; <http://www.tobianogolf.com>. New high-profile lakeside layout by Tom McBroom near Kamloops. Green fee: \$80 to \$130.

CANOE CREEK GOLF COURSE

1-866-431-3285; 6360 Auto Rd., Salmon Arm; <http://www.canocreekgolf.com>. New course by former Canadian PGA Tour player Dave Barr near the town of Salmon Arm. Green fee: \$50.

TALKING ROCK GOLF COURSE

1-800-663-4303; 1663 Little Shuswap Lake Rd. W., Chase; <http://www.talkingrock.ca>. New Wayne Carlton layout midway between Salmon Arm and Kamloops. Green fee: \$65.

PREDATOR RIDGE GOLF RESORT 1-888-578-6688; 301 Village Centre Pl., Vernon; <http://www.predatorridge.com>. Facility near Vernon features 27 holes with layouts by Les Furber and Jack Nicklaus's Golden Bear design. Green fee: \$115.

OKANAGAN GOLF CLUB 1-800-446-5322; 3200 Via Centrale, Kelowna; <http://www.golfgbc.com>. Two 18-hole Kelowna courses designed by Furber and Nicklaus's Golden Bear Design. Green fee: \$95 to \$105.

GALLAGHER'S CANYON GOLF AND COUNTRY CLUB 1-800-446-5322; 4320 Gallagher's Dr. W.; <http://www.golfgbc.com>. Furber-Bill Robinson hillside design in Kelowna offering valley views. Green fee: \$105 to \$110.

HARVEST GOLF CLUB 1-800-257-8577; 2725 K.L.O. Rd., Kelowna; <http://www.harvestgolf.com>. Graham Cooke design in Kelowna that winds through a working orchard. Green fee: \$105 to \$110.

MORE INFORMATION

Thompson Okanagan's tourism website: <http://www.totabc.com>

The site features information on other attractions in the area, such as whitewater rafting, horseback riding and wine tours.

The author travelled as a guest of the Okanagan Golf Alliance and Tourism Kelowna.

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