Osoyoos Indian Band:

Land, Legend, and People

The history of the Osoyoos Indian Band of British Columbia begins in a time when only animals and spirits dwelt on the earth. One of the greatest of these creatures was Sen’klip, the coyote. Sen’klip foresaw the coming of humanity and prepared the world for them. He brought salmon into the Okanagan Basin so that when the “people to be” came, they would not starve. He knew that the “people to be” might not always understand the need for balance in nature, but he also knew that they would be intelligent and quick to learn. Sen’klip took it upon himself to guide them so they would never lose their connection to the land.

The Nk’Mip Desert Cultural Centre in British Colombia is a tribute to that connection and to the Okanagan people—the Syilx—who call the area home.

“These legends are where our understanding of the world comes from,” says Charlotte Stringam, general manager of the Nk’Mip Desert Cultural Centre and Osoyoos Indian Band council member. “They teach us to value family and to be caretakers of the land. Here~~,~~ we teach about the land, the legend, and the people.”

Located on the southernmost end of the Okanagan Valley and on the banks of Osoyoos Lake (Canada’s warmest fresh water lake), the Nk’Mip Resort is a new family tourist destination. This luxury resort features hotel suites, a spa, a golf course, vineyard wine-tasting tours, and RV campgrounds—all set amid the rugged beauty of the Okanagan desert. The year-round warm weather makes it an ideal destination for winter travelers. In the middle of this unique, living landscape, the Nk’Mip Desert Cultural Centre stands as a testament to the thousands of years of Okanagan First Nations’ culture and to the land in which it is presented.

Guests to the Centre can visit traditional structures such as reconstructed pit houses and sweat lodges. They can take daily guided trail walks with trained interpreters and experience the desert ecology for themselves. For those who prefer to remain inside, two multisensory theatres continuously present legends and cultural facts in ways that are both educational and entertaining. One of these theatres, set inside of a replica of a pit house, allows visitors to watch the story of Sen’klip projected onto the walls.

As Sen’klip, the coyote, would remind us, people aren’t the only important desert dwellers. The Canadian desert lands are at extreme ecological risk and are home to many endangered plants and animals. The Centre allows visitors to interact with some of these species through guided tours and live exhibits. And if you want to get a little bit closer, snake handlers are on site to introduce visitors to Western Rattlesnakes and will even permit guests to handle Great Basin Gopher Snakes.

“The Osoyoos Indian Band is an active member of several wildlife conservation groups,” Charlotte Stringam explains. “Part of being caretakers of the land is being caretakers of the animals. We hope that by showing how important these species are, we can teach others to respect them as well.”

When you find yourself just north of the border, the Nk’Mip resort in Osoyoos, British Columbia, is a great way to spend a weekend. Sen’Klip, the coyote, might not be available to offer tours himself, but the Okanagan people will be happy to assist.

*—Christopher Fosse*

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