

## **B.C.'s First Nations welcome the world**

Baby boomers are now joining international travellers in exploring the province's aboriginal-based attractions

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International travellers have a long tradition of fascination with the first nations aspects of life, culture and history in British Columbia. Now, domestic tourists are making the same sort of discoveries at an increasing number of aboriginal-based attractions around the province.

This is, in no small part, fuelled by the drive to kick-start the aboriginal tourism sector into high gear as the 2010 Olympics approaches. Assembled and organized under the Aboriginal Tourism BC banner, these first nations enterprises are growing in economic strength and numbers.

For instance, there are about 200 aboriginal-owned and operated tourism companies throughout B.C. at present, and at least another 65 new tourism products are in the works, says ATBC.

"It is our aboriginal tourism blueprint strategy that really sets us apart from others around the world," says Brenda Baptiste, an executive with ATBC. "We initially based our strategy on the Australia and New Zealand aboriginal tourism models, but now they sometimes turn to us for advice. We are probably the most organized aboriginal tourism body in the world."

Statistics compiled by ATBC suggest that visitors to these attractions are generally a well-educated bunch, with upper-middle income wages, and residing in the baby boomer demographic. Following is a sample of some aboriginal-based attractions and activities around the province -- some within the Vancouver Lower Mainland orbit, others at more distant destinations.

### **St. Eugene Golf Resort and Casino**

It's not easy to find benefits in the legacy of the residential school system that was imposed on Canada's aboriginal population. But the aboriginal operators of the St. Eugene Golf Resort and Casino have managed to do just that, converting an abandoned mission school near Cranbrook/Kimberley into a high-end resort property.

The St. Eugene building is an imposing structure in a majestic setting on the B.C. side of the Rockies. Mission history remains a strong theme at the St. Eugene Resort, with the retention of design elements and luxury furnishings that echo the early 1900s. The main floor of the mission building features the signature Chief David room, housed in the former chapel.

The resort features 125 guest rooms located in both the historic mission building and in a newly constructed lodge. Informal fine dining is available in the Purcell Grill overlooking the deck and golf course.

Within the hotel is the Casino of the Rockies, a full-service casino operated in partnership with the B.C. Lottery Corporation. Also on-site is the St. Eugene golf course, one of Canada's top courses.

The St. Eugene Resort is owned and operated by a partnership of the Ktunaxa Nation, Samson Cree Nation and the Rama Mnjikaning First Nation. ([www.steugene.ca](http://www.steugene.ca); 1-866-292-2020)

### **Haida Heritage Centre**

As one of the world's top repositories of ancient aboriginal cultural relics, the Queen Charlotte Islands -- better known by some as Haida Gwaii -- are nearly without peer. Now, a new cultural interpretive centre has been built to lend important context and historical background to the first nations antiquities at Haida Gwaii, within the Gwaii Haanas National Park Reserve. Located at Kaay Llnagaay, the new Haida Heritage Centre had its unofficial opening in July 2007, and is in the midst of preparing for its grand opening later in the summer.

The 4924 sq. metre (53,000 sq. ft.) centre resembles a series of longhouses, connected by interior walkways and atrium space.

The design creates the feeling of a traditional Haida seaside village. Films and interactive exhibits feature Haida history, contemporary culture and Haida Gwaii's unique ecosystems.

Standing like sentinels in front of the centre are six impressive totem poles representing the six historic villages in the southern region of Haida Gwaii.

The Canoe House is home to the LooTaa, a 15.24-metre (50-foot) Haida war canoe, carved by the late Bill Reid for Expo '86 and paddled from Vancouver to Skidegate. The Performing House is designed like a traditional Haida longhouse and is ideal for storytelling and Haida song and dance performances.

The Eating House offers insight into the preparation, presentation and preservation of traditional foods and will also offer Haida-style cuisine. And the Carving Shed is a space available to Haida carvers working on larger projects such as canoes and totem poles. ([www.haidaheritagecentre.com](http://www.haidaheritagecentre.com); 250-559-7885).

### **Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre**

For visitors to Whistler and the Sea to Sky Corridor, it is too easy to forget that these were once the lands in which the Squamish and Lil'wat first nations lived, worked and developed a rich coast mountain culture. Tourists will now get a wonderful new reminder of that at the Squamish Lil'wat Cultural Centre, which is located adjacent to the Four Seasons Resort Whistler and Fairmont Chateau Whistler, just steps from Whistler village.

The centre, set to open June 21, is designed to be self-guided over the three levels of its main building. This includes a Great Hall, whose glass plank walls and seven-metre ceiling offer spectacular views of Whistler's forest and mountain environs. On display are carved cedar canoes, which recall the canoe culture of these first nations. A gallery, showcasing colourful indigenous art seen nowhere else, is also part of the experience at the new centre.

A gift shop offers goods created by Squamish, Lil'wat and other first nations artists, including ceremonial masks, wood weavings, limited-edition prints and jewelry.

Outside, guests can explore a traditional Squamish longhouse and a Lil'wat "istken," or pit house, the traditional dwelling of the Squamish and Lil'wat peoples. ([www.slcc.ca](http://www.slcc.ca); 1-866-441-7522)

### **Mascot Gold Mine Tours**

Rising nearly straight up from the lush floor of the Similkameen Valley in south central B.C. are the walls of rock above the tiny town of Hedley. Clinging to that rock face some 1,000 metres up is the small wooden building at the mouth of once productive Mascot Mine -- now the site of one of B.C.'s most innovative aboriginal attractions.

Participants in the Mascot Gold Mine Tours should count on reaching the interpretive centre at the top of the cliff via an exciting and scenic ride up the steep Nickel Plate Road in the company's tour bus. The interpretive centre explains that the area has a long history with the Upper Similkameen Indian band, who extolled the rock cliffs for their colourful mineral elements, and used those elements to make ceremonial grease paint.

More recently, settlers discovered rich mineral veins in the cliffs and set to work extracting them. Mascot Mines and others in the area profited from those efforts from the late 1800s until the mid-1950s.

The Upper Similkameen band opened the Mascot Mine as an attraction in 2000, and has been refining it ever since. (1-888-799-8732)

### **Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre**

An continuing model of success in the business of aboriginal tourism is that of the Osoyoos Indian Band in the Okanagan Valley near Osoyoos. This is embodied in three principal projects -- the Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre; Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa; and Nk'Mip Cellars.

The Nk'Mip Desert Cultural Centre celebrates thousands of years of Okanagan first nations culture and habitation, with sculptures and interactive displays, plus on-site cultural tours, programs, self-guided nature trails, interpretive sites and visitor programs. The centre is also home to rattlesnake research and tagging programs. ([www.nkmipdesert.com](http://www.nkmipdesert.com); 1-888-495-8555).

### **Spirit Ridge Vineyard Resort & Spa**

The only 4.5-star vineyard resort in the South Okanagan wine country is set amidst lush vineyards. It overlooks Lake Osoyoos and offers luxurious condo-style villas and suites with gourmet kitchens, dining areas, living rooms and spacious balconies with barbecues. Guests can order a gourmet meal at the Passatempo Restaurant or book an indigenous spa treatment at the Sonora Desert Spa. ([www.spiritridge.ca](http://www.spiritridge.ca); 1-877-313-9463).

### **Nk'Mip Cellars**

North America's first aboriginal-owned and operated winery receives fruit from some of the oldest vines in the Okanagan, originally planted in 1968. This maturity has resulted in more than 50 international wine awards for Nk'Mip Cellars since opening in 2002. A patio restaurant features great views of the lake, vineyards and the Okanagan Valley. Hospitality programs include wine tastings, winery tours and special events. ([www.nkmipcellars.com](http://www.nkmipcellars.com))

## **U'mista Cultural Centre**

Living without the potlatch celebrations and ceremonies was something that west coast aboriginals had to face following the abolition of this popular festival by the Canadian government in 1884. During its banishment, potlatch artifacts were seized by the government, to be subsequently housed in museums or sold to collectors. In recent years, some measure of justice has been restored with the recovery of most of these artifacts, including colourful dancing masks and the "coppers" that signified status within first nations such as the Kwakwa'ka'wakw. These are now housed in the superb U'mista Cultural Centre at Alert Bay, off the coast of Vancouver Island.

The return of the potlatch artifacts sparked the origin of the centre's name -- U'mista means "the return of something important" in the language of the Kwakwa'ka'wakw. U'mista now operates a modern museum and cultural education facility in Alert Bay.([www.umista.ca](http://www.umista.ca))

## **Xay'tem Longhouse Interpretive Centre**

The oral history traditions of aboriginal life in B.C. is embodied at the Xay'tem Longhouse Interpretive Centre in Mission, where UBC archeologists and elders of the Sto:Lo First Nation agreed there was something special about this place located an hour east of Vancouver.

Originally slated for development as a 14-house subdivision, the area was given a permanent reprieve by the discovery of a sacred "transformer" stone site, featuring a huge boulder, central to village life 9,000 years ago.

Through Sto:Lo oral tradition, this huge boulder was connected to the story of how the Creator transformed himself and walked the Earth to make a better life for his people. This was achieved by instructing them on how to use and share the gifts of Mother Earth, like the salmon and the cedar tree, say the Sto:Lo.

The status of Xa:ytem as a sacred site was confirmed by Sto:Lo elders who remembered the story of the rock. These claims were backed by carbon-dating performed at the site by UBC archeologists -- and by the discovery of some 2,000 "surface" artifacts. Also, archeologists excavated what is termed as "B.C.'s oldest house," at 6,000 years of age.

Today, visitors to Xay'tem will see one longhouse, as well as two "pit houses." The centre is open year round. ([www.xaytem.ca](http://www.xaytem.ca)).