

Travel

BRITISH COLUMBIA



Tourism Kelowna

Drinking in the mysteries of Ogopogo

A recreation-packed search for lake monster of legend

By John Flinn

As lake monsters go, Ogopogo is thoroughly Canadian.

It is said to be gentle rather than menacing, happy to cede the limelight to its publicity-conscious cousins and, according to those who've encountered it, unfailingly polite.

Still, you never know. So on my quest to find Ogopogo in Lake Okanagan, I armed myself with every advantage the modern tourist industry could provide, from aerial surveillance to an escape system straight out of a James Bond movie.

No need to travel to a misty, brooding Scottish loch for this monster. With a vibrant and expanding food-and-wine scene, an 83-mile-long lake

Ogopogo continues on L4



Lake Okanagan (above) may harbor a mysterious creature, as re-created in a lakefront statue (below). Or does it?

John Flinn / Special to The Chronicle

Tasting Room: Vineyard putting a new, modern face on estate with old family name in Mendocino County. **L2**

Rick Steves: Long before the Gothic churches, stone circles were sacred sites of Britain. **L6**



Globetrotter: Famed Wigwam dressing up the property for its 85th anniversary — and the 2015 Super Bowl nearby. **L3**

Gear: Osprey bag gets a handle on ease, utility. **L6**



FROM THE COVER



John Lau / Tourism Kelowna

No quest for a mysterious creature is complete without a trip to a sun-drenched winery like Summerhill on Lake Okanagan, with a special viewing station.

Diversions in search for monster

Ogopogo from page L1

cradled in mountains and a sun-baked climate that regularly hits 100 degrees in summer, the Okanagan Valley is Canada's Sonoma County, Lake Tahoe and Palm Springs all rolled into one.

And getting here just got a whole lot easier: United Express now offers daily nonstop flights from San Francisco to Kelowna, a 2½-hour trip.

Ogopogo Viewing Station

Don't roll your eyes when I tell you my quest began on the deck of a Kelowna winery, glass of chilled Riesling in hand.

The Gray Monk Estate Winery, with its commanding view of the lake, is an officially designated Ogopogo Viewing Station.

Three decades ago, co-owner Trudy Heiss was on the winery's terrace, tidying up after an event, when she spotted ... *something* in the lake "swimming, diving, going up and down."

Other than being sure it wasn't a boat wake, that's all she would say on the subject. But as I scanned the water I, too, saw something odd: long surface ripples with no apparent cause in sight.

Nonbelievers say it's the lake's unusual shape — extremely long, narrow and deep — that produces these mysterious currents. The same, incidentally, is said about Loch Ness.

Never mind. What was really absorbing my attention at the moment was the remarkably crisp and citrusy Riesling in my glass.

British Columbia wines have made enormous strides in recent decades, in large part due to the efforts of Heiss and her husband, George, emigrants from Germany and Austria respectively, who pulled out the hybrid jug-wine grapes that once prevailed here and planted fine varietals from Alsace.

Because of the desert-like climate and northerly latitude, all manner of wine grapes flourish here, from big sun-loving Cabernet and Zinfandel to finicky Pinot Noir to cooler-weather varietals such as Riesling and Pinot Gris.

Aerial reconnaissance

Time for some aerial reconnaissance. At the pier along Kelowna's waterfront, I hopped into a speedboat belonging to Ogopogo Parasail. There was even a bust of the beastie's green, grinning head on the bow.

My sole experience with parasailing was many, many years ago on the beach in Puerto Vallarta, and the episode was so hectic and higgledy-piggledy that I spent my entire ride checking my harness.

This was just the opposite — which is what you want when you're about to be hoisted 150 feet into the air. Another bonus: Their rig allows



Ogopogo Parasail

Ogopogo Parasail sports a likeness of the beastie on the front of the boat. Was this the way to see it?

you go up as a pair, or even a threesome.

We lifted off from a platform on the back of the boat, and as the big parachute filled, it gently raised us into the sky. Up high it was surprisingly quiet and peaceful.

I could see many miles of Lake Okanagan, and I scanned for long, serpentine shapes just below the surface. Alas, nothing. But the view made up for it: terraced hillsides, vineyards and mountains stretching to the horizon.

We were being reeled back in when it occurred to me that I had forgotten to tell the crew we wanted to skip the op-

tional dip in the lake. I suspected they knew this — we were in street clothes and gesturing frantically — and with mad grins they lowered us until my big toe skimmed the surface before landing us softly — and dryly — back on the platform.

Zenning out

Ogopogo is said to be a benevolent, even spiritual, beast. I wanted to approach it with a centered, quiet mind, in the manner of author Peter Matthiessen's Buddhism-infused quest for the snow leopard.

Stand-up paddleboard yoga seemed like just the

thing.

I've never been on a paddleboard and I'm almost comically incapable of bending my doughy body into even the most basic of yoga poses on dry land, so on a day when temperatures hit 99 degrees I figured I'd spend a lot of refreshing time in the lake.

"Being out on the lake is a different experience than being in a yoga studio," explained my instructor, Laura Martini. "You have to surrender yourself to the elements, to what's going on around you. You're no longer in control. It's surrender. It's acceptance."

The paddleboarding part was easier than I expected. One tip I'll pass on: When you're moving you're a lot more stable than when you're standing still.

Fortunately Martini's yoga program had no standing poses, just sitting and down-on-all-fours moves such as Downward Dog. And I was able to do them all. (Well, sort of.)

The last pose was the Corpse, which is exactly as it sounds and one move for which I had plenty of natural ability. My mind floated off into a pleasant nothingness — which lasted until a gentle bump

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Kerri-Jo / Tourism Kelowna

Every monster seeker needs a break for some fun such as Flyboarding.



John Flinn / Special to The Chronicle

Hunter finally finds hunted. John Flinn meets up with Ogotogo, albeit in statue form, in a murky spot 25 feet beneath the surface of Okanagan Lake.

announced I'd drifted all the way to shore.

An escape plan

What if, despite my newly quieted mind, I still managed to harsh Ogotogo's mellow? Faced with a possibly cheesed-off beastie, I needed an escape plan, a way to launch myself out of the lake like a Poseidon missile.

That's the promise of the brand-new sport of Flyboarding. You slip into a pair of boots attached to a downward-pointing fire hose. The hose's other end is hooked up to the motor of a souped-up jet ski. The operator guns the engine and suddenly you've got 60 pounds per square inch of thrust roaring out of the bottoms of your feet, enough to lift nearly 400 pounds.

You might have seen recent pictures of Canada's own Justin Bieber doing it.

Out in the water, Devon Spittle, owner of Okanagan Flyboard, goosed the throttle, and I slowly rose out of the lake. I aborted my first couple of takeoffs as I struggled for balance, but eventually I was able to stand more or less stably atop a column of roaring water. I'd soared only 4½ feet into the wild blue yonder, but it felt at least twice that.

I couldn't help thinking: This is what Iron Man must feel like.

If there's a way to return gracefully to the lake, I never discovered it. My splashdowns were a series of ungainly belly flops. So when Spittle suggested I try going higher — Flyboarders can fly as high as 35 feet, and occasionally higher — I declined. As long as Ogotogo couldn't leap 4½ feet out of the lake, I was good.

Into the deep

Finally there was no putting it off. It was time to get in the water and go looking for the beastie.

Except for one thing: I didn't know the first thing about scuba diving. Fortunately — and a bit incongruously, as it's 200 miles from the nearest saltwater — one of the top diving schools in North America is in Kelowna.

Diving Dynamics trains not just newbie recreational divers but also commercial divers and the instructors themselves.

They've probably never had a student like me: I'm terrified by the thought of going underwater. My first attempts ended in hyperventilating panic attacks. I'm telling you this in case you harbor, as I did, a fearful curiosity about diving: If they could get me past my paralyzing fright, they should have no trouble getting you past yours.

I enrolled in the Discover Scuba Diving Experience, a non-certification program that teaches the basics of the sport.

At the edge of a 13-foot-deep indoor pool, I slipped into an air-tank harness and lead weight belt as 22-year-old instructor Dylan Bond taught me how to communicate with basic hand signals, relieve the pressure in my ears, retrieve a wayward respirator and clear my mask of water.

And then, in a series of baby steps punctuated by tortured freakouts, he gradually eased my underwater phobia to the point where I was able to swim back and forth along the bottom. If I ever win the lottery, I plan to hire Bond as my personal life coach. He could get me through anything.

I'd heard that Ogotogo could be reliably spotted 25 feet below the surface in a cove called Paul's Tomb. (I really didn't want to know the story of how it got that name.)

We motored out to the cove and anchored the dive boat. The lake water here was pleasantly cool — not cold at all — but murky because of plant material and a silty bottom. As we followed the sloping lake floor down into the depths, we could see only a few cloudy feet ahead.

And suddenly we were face to face with Ogotogo itself.

Its hideous green horse-head appeared out of the watery gloom, leering at me with uncertain intent. Behind it, I could see its undulating serpentine body disappearing into the murk.

Like Bilbo Baggins approaching the dragon Smaug, I moved in and hesitatingly touched Ogotogo's head: It was hard and slimy. The monster didn't flinch, or even budge. Was it taking a siesta on the lake bottom? Stunned? Pining for the fiords?

OK, so it wasn't technically a flesh-and-blood Ogotogo. It was an enormous statue someone sank in the lake — no one could tell me who did it or when — and it was a notable stop for contestants on last year's "Amazing Race Canada." Just as Peter Matthiessen never saw his snow leopard, I never saw an actual Ogotogo. I guess it's one of those it's-the-journey-not-the-destination deals, but I can personally attest that the journey goes much better with a glass of chilled Okanagan Riesling in hand.

John Flinn is the former editor of Travel. E-mail: travel@sfcronicle.com

If you go

All prices in U.S. dollars.

GETTING THERE

United Express operates daily nonstop flights from SFO to Kelowna.

WHERE TO STAY

(All addresses in Kelowna except where noted.)

Ogotogo Bed and Breakfast: 845 Manhattan Dr.; (250) 762-7624; www.ogotogobedandbreakfast.ca. A lovely guest house with the right mix of conviviality and privacy, steps from the lake. Rooms start at \$158.50, including breakfast. Two-night minimum.

Delta Grand Okanagan Resort: 1310 Water St.; (250) 763-4500; www.deltagrandokanagan.com. A modern resort-style hotel on the shore of Lake Okanagan, convenient to water activities and downtown. Rooms start at \$180.



Delta Grand Okanagan Resort

Gourmet grilled cheese at the Quench stand.

WHERE TO EAT

Salted Brick: 243 Bernard Ave. (778) 484-3234; saltedbrick.com. House-cured charcuterie, local cheeses and wines. Open for lunch and dinner. Lunch entrees, \$5 to \$14.

Okanagan Street Food: 812 Crowley Ave.; (778) 478-0807; www.okanaganstreetfood.com. Upscale diner food, from pulled-pork sandwiches to gourmet poutine. Breakfast and lunch. Entrees, \$5 to \$13.

Quench Gourmet Grilled Cheese: on the waterfront boardwalk next to the Delta Grand Okanagan Resort. Grilled cheese sandwiches taken to the next level. \$6 to \$8.

RaudZ Regional Table: 560 Water St.; (250) 868-8805; www.raudz.com. Creative presentations of locally sourced fare. Dinner only; no reservations. Entrees, \$13 to \$26.

Waterfront Restaurant: #104 1180 Sunset Drive; (250) 979-1222; www.waterfrontrestaurant.ca. Restaurant and wine bar located in Kelowna's Cultural District, specializing in Okanagan food and wines. Open for dinner only. Entrees, \$22 to \$31.

Grapevine Restaurant at Gray Monk Estate Winery: 1055 Camp Road, Lake Country, B.C.; (250) 766-3168; www.graymonk.com. Sophisticated fare sourced from Okanagan growers with sweeping views of the lake from an officially designated Ogotogo Viewing Station. Open for lunch and dinner. Dinner entrees, \$22 to \$31.

Sunset Organic Bistro at Summerhill Winery: 4870 Chute Lake Road; (250) 764-8000; www.summerhill.bc.ca. Locally sourced organic food with lake and vineyard views. Open for lunch and dinner. Dinner entrees, from \$23 to \$44.

WHAT TO DO

Ogotogo Parasail: (250) 300-5538; www.ogotogoparasail.com. Singles, \$81; tandem or triples, \$68 per person.

Sncewips Heritage Museum: 201-1979 Old Okanagan Highway, Westbank. (778) 755-2787; www.wfn.ca. A fascinating cultural museum of the Westbank First Nation people, with several depictions of Ogotogo. Open weekdays 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Free.

Diving Dynamics: (250) 861-1848; www.divingdynamics.com. The non-certification Discover Scuba Diving class I took costs \$68 to \$89 for one-on-one instruction.

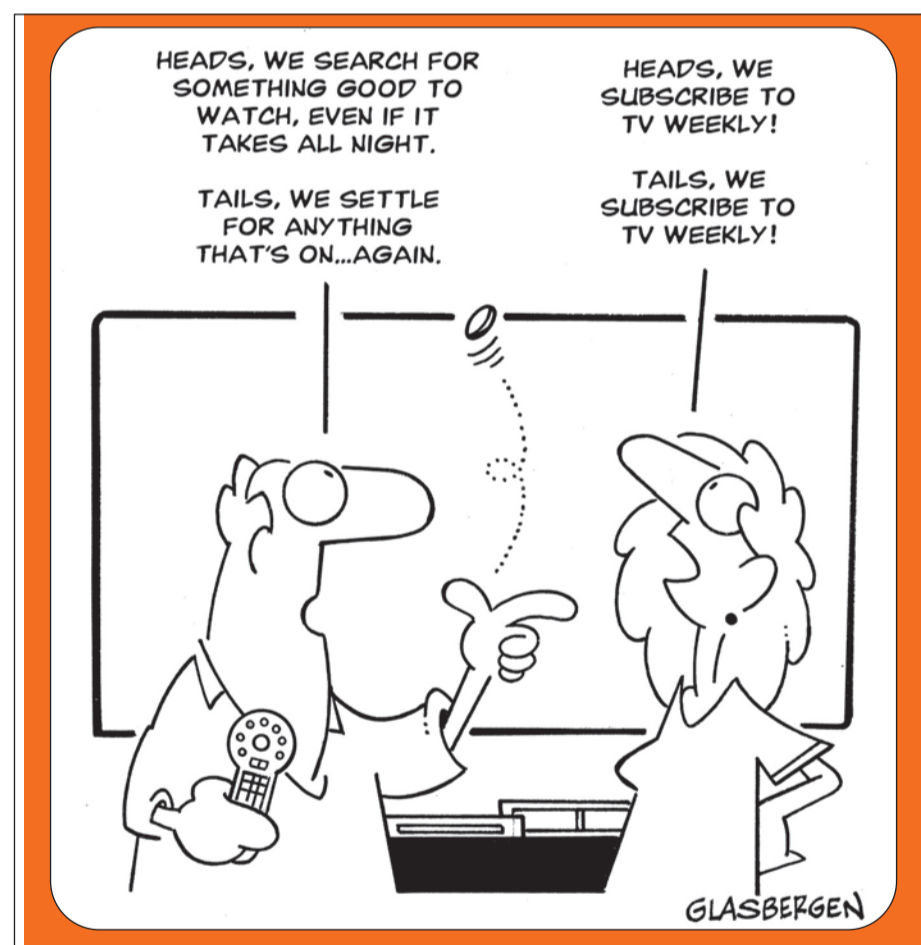
Okanagan Flyboard: www.okanaganflyboard.com/kelowna. Half-hour introductory session, \$144 weekdays, \$162 weekends.

Martini Yoga: (250) 859-8724; www.martiniyoga.ca. Stand-up paddleboard yoga classes, \$41.

MORE INFORMATION

Tourism Kelowna: (800) 663-4345; www.tourismkelowna.com.

Canadian Tourism Commission: www.us-keepexploring.canada.travel.



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