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By Eric Rosen

<https://thepointsguy.com/news/visit-native-california/>

This week, Visit California (the state's tourism marketing arm) revealed plans to launch a new online platform designed to promote Indigenous tourism destinations, experiences and enterprises in California.

Visit Native California will launch on VisitCalifornia.com in March 2023 with blog posts, suggested itineraries and podcasts that highlight opportunities for travelers to visit and learn more about California's 109 federally recognized tribes and tribal communities.

The announcement was made at one of the centerpieces of tribal-based tourism in California, the Agua Caliente Cultural Plaza in downtown Palm Springs, which is set to open sometime early in 2023.

Native Californian tourism

State officials and tribal leaders from across the state gathered for a press conference last week to discuss the new platform and call attention to a few of the destinations it will promote.

"Our Native cultures discovered, protected and preserved the landscapes that visitors come to California for today," said Caroline Beteta, president and CEO of Visit California. "Our shared culture and lifestyle draw visitors to California ... and tribal people throughout the state have shaped that culture and lifestyle."

"It is woven into the very fabric of California," she continued, "and Visit Native California will curate, preserve and uplift Native Californian stories."

Funded with a \$1 million earmarked grant from the federal American Rescue Plan Act, Visit Native California will be the first state platform to push forward Native American tourism experiences in a "top-of-mind way," according to Beteta, who called the forthcoming Agua Caliente Cultural Plaza "the epicenter for all tribal cultural tourism in California."

"This project, this site, gives my people the opportunity to share our culture, to celebrate our culture and to educate the public about

who we are as a people," said Reid Malanovich, chairman of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, speaking about the new cultural center. "This is us. This is our story."

"When we share our culture," he continued, "it helps preserve our culture."

"This is a historic step forward for Visit California," added Sherry Rupert, CEO of the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association. "California is uniquely positioned to significantly impact the growth of tourism and visitation to tribal cultural experiences," she said, citing the fact that nearly a quarter of all Native-owned businesses in the U.S. are in hospitality, providing nearly 118,000 jobs and generating \$14 billion in revenue annually.

Indigenous experiences across California

After the press conference, the tourism officials, tribal representatives and media in attendance made their way to the nearby Indian Canyons Golf Resort. There, they got a sample of some of the experiences and tribes that travelers will be able to learn about on the Visit Native California platform once it's live.

Among them, travelers can head to the state's northern border with Oregon and visit Yurok Country in Redwood National Forest. There, they can learn about the Yurok's stewardship of the primordial forests and pristine coastlines of this part of California, take guided canoe tours in massive single-piece redwood dugouts or enjoy pulse-pounding jetboat rides along the Klamath River.

Farther south in Tuolumne County, near the edge of Yosemite National Park, travelers can meet with members of the Me-Wuk tribe and learn their language in educational sessions and take seasonal guided tours delving into their ancient way of life and how they lived off the land.

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About an hour's drive northwest of Sacramento in the Capay Valley, guests at the Yocha Dehe Wintun Nation's Cache Creek Casino Resort can spend an afternoon tasting the gourmet olive oils and wines produced at Seka Hills, among other activities.

The meet-and-greet was followed by a lunch specially prepared by chef Crystal Wahpepah of Oakland's Wahpepah's Kitchen. She is a member of Oklahoma's Kickapoo Nation, but grew up in Oakland, and her restaurant pays tribute to the Ohlone land in which she lives and where her restaurant sits. The dishes included specialties like pumpkin squash soup with edible flowers and chile oil and bison meatballs with dried blueberries as well as a tart but sweet chia-berry pudding with an acorn-flour chocolate chip crisp.

Over the course of the meal, Me-Wuk singers shared full-throated songs and young tribe members from Oakland performed traditional dances.

The day presented a snapshot of the partners that will be showcased on Visit Native California. But even that was enough to reflect the diversity of experiences that travelers will encounter on the site and is an encouraging step forward in promoting Native-owned and -operated tourism businesses in California, even as other states and other nations around the world begin looking to Indigenous tourism enterprises of their own to draw in travelers.

Given the size of California's Native population and the breadth of activities, locales and landscapes that travelers can explore, the state could truly become a driving force for Indigenous-inspired travel in the United States and beyond. Hopefully, that will be the case once Visit Native California launches.

The Agua Caliente Cultural Plaza is reason enough to be optimistic about the future of Indigenous tourism in the state, though.

Bringing Native culture to downtown Palm Springs

The Agua Caliente Cultural Plaza will be a multifaceted complex where visitors can learn about the traditional inhabitants of the areas around Palm Springs as well as their 500-plus modern-day descendants. It will be the second-largest Native American cultural center in the country.

The center has been in the works since 2015, with a groundbreaking in May 2018, and is set to open in early 2023 at the corner of East Tahquitz Canyon Way and North Indian Canyon Drive. The 5.8-acre plot is right in the heart of downtown Palm Springs, just blocks away from popular points hotels in town, including the pet-friendly Kimpton Rowan Palm Springs and the Hyatt Palm Springs.

Designed by JCY Architecture and The Penta Building Group in conjunction with the Cahuilla nation, the center will comprise a few distinct components. A new iteration of the Agua Caliente Cultural Museum will house art and artifacts dating back thousands of years. An Oasis Trail with a water element lined by native California fan palms will give visitors a glimpse of the area's unique ecology.

There will also be an expansive wellness facility called the Spa at Sec-he, which means "boiling water," alluding to the mineral hot springs from which Palm Springs derives its name. In addition to 22 treatment rooms, visitors will be able to enjoy men's and women's bathhouses and a tranquility garden for relaxing before or after treatments as well as outdoor mineral pools for salubrious dips, a salon and a fitness center.

Come for the museum, stay for the spa ... or vice versa.

As for Visit Native California, the platform promises to be an exciting first step to highlight the many peoples who inhabited California before Europeans arrived and to support the compelling tourism activities that their descendants have created as they endeavor to share their cultures with visitors to this day.