



2023 TOP 100 GOOD PRACTICE STORY

Title of the Story: Vail's Community-Positive Destination Stewardship Model

Destination Name: Vail, Colorado

Country: United States of America

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Position: Economic Development Director

Submission category:

Please find detailed information for the categories in the Top 100 training module 'Good Practice Story'.

- Destination Management Solutions
- Nature & Scenery
- Environment & Climate
- Culture & Tradition
- Thriving Communities
- Business & Marketing

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Address each aspect of your good practice story in the different sections being specific including relevant quantitative and qualitative information.





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Issues faced

FOUNDED AS A SKI RESORT in 1962, and incorporated as a town in 1966, the Town of Vail's vision is to be the Premier International Mountain Resort Community. Tourism is the lifeblood of the economy, with 2.5 million annual visitors and just under 5,000 residents. The adjacent Vail Ski Resort is one of North America's largest with 5,317 acres of terrain. It consistently ranks among the continent's most visited and favoured ski resorts. Vail's Destimetrics reports show the resort town offers between 104,104 and 115,258 available rooms per month at its 26 professionally managed hotel and condo-tel properties. In addition, a December 2021 report of the town's short-term rental landscape identifies 2,454 vacation rentals, mostly two- and three-bedrooms, with a maximum total occupancy of 15,804. All these properties collect a modest 1.4% lodging tax that generates about \$4 million a year to fund the Vail Local Marketing District (VLMD). Formed in 1999, the VLMD promotes and markets Vail's natural attractions, businesses, and special events, with a focus on summer travellers.

UNPRECEDENTED VISITOR PRESSURES precipitated the development of Vail's Stewardship Roadmap ("the Roadmap"), the first comprehensive destination management plan developed for Vail. Since its earliest days, the town has strived to deliver warm, exceptional customer service. But its hospitable nature has been strained in recent years by visitors who trampled trails, left trash and waste, and ignored local courtesies. Rapidly rising housing costs stoked a growing gap between typical local salaries and the cost of mortgages or rents. With many workers struggling to find a place to sleep much less build a life, businesses are challenged to operate at full capacity and deliver the brand of customer service that has long been a hallmark of Vail. Despite these challenges, Vail residents in their biannual community survey rated the quality of life excellent: 8.2 on a 10.0 scale.

TOURISM AS THE ECONOMIC DRIVER The imbalance between the numbers of residents and visitors pays off in one extremely beneficial way: generation of sales and lodging tax revenue. Because Vail's sales taxes often exempt groceries and medications, a huge share of the proceeds typically comes from visitors. Since its founding, Vail has directed the proceeds of its tourism economy into building a better community. The town began creating lower-cost resident housing decades ago. Vail's free in-town transportation system is a model of convenience for all, and a newly formed Eagle County Regional Transit Authority is poised to extend similar benefits countywide. Often with the generosity of residents, both seasonal and year-round, Vail has developed an extraordinary collection of amenities available to all, including worldclass cultural offerings, public arts, year-round skating ice, golf courses, and health care facilities that attract patients from across North America and the world.





TOURISM ALSO CREATES PRESSURES The housing shortage has triggered a decline in available workforce that keeps restaurants from filling seats and hotels from filling rooms. Unfilled openings for childcare workers make it even harder for working families in Vail. High housing costs and workforce shortages also contribute to rising mental health concerns. Too many are either working multiple jobs or pulling extra shifts to make ends meet. The stakes are high for Vail to make sure its tourism economy continues to deliver strong benefits and to address its unwanted impacts.

HIGH NIGHTLY RATES AND NORMALIZING OCCUPANCY As pandemic restrictions lifted and visitors streamed into outdoor spaces, Vail's visitor economy began to boom bigger than ever. Summer 2021's occupancy rate of 45.1% was on a par with pre-pandemic levels, but the average room rate of \$308 crushed previous highs. The average occupancy rate for Winter 2021/22 was 57.3%, a height not seen since Winter 2016/17. The average daily rate hit an historic high of \$681, far exceeding pre-pandemic rate averages. Revenue estimates, however, began to flatten midway through 2022 as occupancy numbers began falling from the blistering highs of 2021. But even though occupancy began dropping in July 2022, room rates kept climbing. The average Summer 2022 rate hit a record \$336 per night, well above the previous record of \$308 set in 2021. Bookings through June 2023 suggest rates may keep climbing to new historic highs in coming months, even though signs of a slowdown in demand are surfacing. Local experts believe Vail should continue to build non-ski month occupancy levels, which have never crested 50%, and that more visitation can be achieved through strategies attracting visitors at midweek and off-peak times.

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Methods, steps and tools applied

ENVIRONMENT, ECONOMY, SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY PILLARS

Following a robust procurement process, a consortium of three leading tourism organisations was selected to lead the development of the Roadmap: Better Destinations of Denver, MMGY NextFactor of Vancouver and the Travel Foundation. The thoughtful participation of community members, with more than 3,000 opinions shared, deeply informs this plan's goals and strategies. Nearly 500 people showed up to share their views in person. About half of these turned out for three rounds of public engagement sessions, first to share input, then feedback on initial findings, and finally to weigh in on a proposed Roadmap framework. This Roadmap leans into independent research. This included three resident surveys, including Vail's biennial community survey, which included customized questions for this process. Resident survey findings reinforced much of what was shared in public engagement sessions, 12 topical focus groups, and 30 in-depth one-on-one interviews. The research also included a ground-breaking Brand Perception and Consumer Segmentation Study, fielded in spring 2022 by a





tourism research firm, Strategic Marketing and Research Insights (SMARInsights). Among its most important findings: How Vail can evolve its brand to make travellers pick Vail over its competitors — and accomplish this by communicating values that matter to the community. Another valuable input for the Roadmap has been a comprehensive analysis of Vail’s progress as a sustainable destination. Led by the Travel Foundation with support from Green Destinations and other founders of the Future of Tourism Coalition, the Sustainability Analysis points the way to actions Vail can keep taking to improve its community and natural surroundings. Finally, the Travel Foundation’s proprietary Optimal Value Framework addresses how tourism can best deliver quality experiences for visitors and quality of life for residents, with a focus on identifying actions that will maximize benefits while minimising the burdens for the community.

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Key success factors

The development of Vail’s Stewardship Roadmap came at an ideal time for the community; robust community engagement was essential to the plan. Residents, workers, and others who love Vail were committed to sharing their views and addressing key areas of concern – over 3,000 opinions informed the Roadmap priorities. The prior alignment of key partners facilitated the prioritization of issues; partners including the United States Forest Service, Vail Resorts, Walking Mountains Science School, Holy Cross Energy, Eagle River Water and Sanitation and the Vail Recreation District, all of whom have executed a Memorandum of Understanding confirming their commitment to collaborate to maintain Vail’s certification as a Sustainable Destination through the Mountain Ideal standard. Vail’s firm commitment to sustainability provided a solid foundation to discuss how tourism affected these values – and helped identify solutions that serve to protect the quality of life for residents and workers and the quality of experience for visitors. In addition, the passing of two key tax initiatives; a half cent town sales tax dedicated to housing and a half cent county tax dedicated to regional transit helped the plan quickly identify strategies to address the challenges of housing and regional transit.

One innovative aspect of the approach to destination management is reflected in the requirement for the plan to address how to implement sustainability priorities into the destination’s marketing and messaging. The Roadmap includes one specific goal around strengthening the brand and ensuring it resonates with visitors who align with the community’s core values.

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Lessons learned

One of the greatest takeaways was the importance of truly listening to the community. The Roadmap defines the community as ‘all who care about Vail, including wildlife’ – this unifying approach enabled us to approach the issues raised with equity and openness. The community needed to be heard and we listened. A second key lesson was the critical conversations with our elected leaders, which empowered us to ensure that the vision of the 10-year plan was comprehensive, open, and yet true to the priorities identified. Another learning was around the importance of education – we must do a better job of educating our guests about our community priorities, about educating our stakeholders about the positive value of tourism, educating our young and underserved about the opportunities presented by the Roadmap. Education is critical to our success now and for the next 10 years. Another great takeaway was that capacity needs to be addressed with all key partners, including the MOU partners mentioned above. While our town has clear boundaries, our environment does not, and we need to ensure that we are doing all we can to protect and enhance not only the town but the greater environment surrounding the town.

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Results, achievements and recognitions

Vail’s Stewardship Roadmap was developed in 2022 in response to the challenges of rising visitation, damage to local natural assets, and a sentiment that the town could improve its management of the impacts of tourism on quality of life. The creation of a destination management plan was also an identified requirement of Vail’s certification as a sustainable destination. Through the community engagement sessions, six primary community values were identified, including quality of life, community, environmental stewardship, experience, respect, and fun. These values helped to shape the five key Roadmap goals that take aim at the biggest threats to our continued success:

1. Make Vail More Liveable
2. Enhance Vail’s “World-Class Experience”
3. Invigorate Vail’s Spirit
4. Continue Vail’s Commitment to Environmental Stewardship
5. Energize Vail’s Brand

The Roadmap provides forty specific strategies under each of the five key goals and a 10-year implementation plan to shape a stronger, more resilient tourism economy and manage visitation patterns. The strategies also include initiatives to analyze Vail’s carrying capacity to manage





demands, foster local entrepreneurship, explore new venues to support year-round cultural and community experiences, broaden local access to the world-class experience, and consider founding an iconic thought leadership event to advance mountain tourism sustainability. For much of our history, Vail has been shaped to meet the needs of our visitors. With this roadmap, we formally recognize that building a strong tourism economy requires a strong community and way of life. The Roadmap has been crafted to create a Community Positive approach to destination management. By so many measures, Vail is an extraordinarily successful community. This plan is designed to equip us to embrace a new tourism mindset, to optimize outside forces, and to continue on a path to success as defined by and to the benefit of the most important stakeholders, the Vail community.

It also outlines steps to safeguard and enhance our biggest asset – the stunning, irreplaceable natural surroundings. By bringing a sharp new focus to the purpose of Vail’s tourism economy, the Roadmap embraces tourism to help our community sustain a remarkable way of life for generations to come.

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Additional references

Links:

[EngageVail.com/Stewardship](https://engagevail.com/stewardship)

[Vail’s Stewardship Roadmap](#)

[Sustainability Analysis.](#)

[Optimal Value Framework.](#)

[SMARI Sustainability Image Study](#)

Provide links to further information. Pictures and videos should be available for download either from YouTube, Vimeo or other Cloud-based (Google/ One Drive) download URL (not WeTransfer).

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