



**Good Practice Story Title:** The Power of Inclusion: Amplifying Authentic Experiences and Local Voices

**Destination:** Greater Palm Springs, California

**Country:** USA

**Submitting Organization:** Visit Greater Palm Springs

**Submitter Name & Position:** Lauren Bruggemans, Director of Sustainability & Community Engagement

**Category:**

**Destination Management**

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

**Destination description:** Long sought-after by travellers for its inspiring scenery and lure of adventure, Greater Palm Springs is Southern California's most storied desert oasis. Our regional destination is comprised of nine linearly interconnected cities along the Coachella Valley running from west to east: Palm Springs, Desert Hot Springs, Cathedral City, Rancho Mirage, Palm Desert, Indian Wells, La Quinta, Indio and Coachella — each offering its own blend and flavor of experiences.

Spanning approximately 45 miles (72.4 km) along the San Jacinto, Santa Rosa, and San Bernadino Mountain ranges, the valley boasts an array of natural and geographical features that make it a true haven. Greater Palm Springs' towering mountains, iconic palm fronds, desert blooms, and natural mineral hot springs are just a few of the destination's plethora of tourism resources. The region celebrates its thriving LGBTQ+ community and welcomes all to explore its



Indigenous heritage, experience its Hispanic and Latino cultural offerings through food and music, and witness its vibrant local art scene, alongside midcentury modern architecture.

Greater Palm Springs' residents likewise contribute to the abundance and diversity of offerings; each city possesses unique characteristics, including varying levels of infrastructure, economic development, and community resources.

### **Summary of Good Practice Story:**

Greater Palm Springs is well-known for its image of luxurious resorts, golf courses, and warm weather. Yet there is so much more that the destination has to offer. Guided by our organization's core values — balance, collaboration, community, inclusion, innovation, integrity, and passion — Visit Greater Palm Springs (VGPS) recognized that we had to expand awareness of our destination's diverse offerings so that we were meeting the needs of today's travelers while ensuring the benefits of tourism were felt by our whole community.

Prioritizing broad stakeholder involvement in decision-making is a crucial part of our work, and as destination stewards, we focus on centering our community and relationship-building first and foremost. This includes amplifying the voices of local Native American Tribes, non-profit partners, underrepresented entrepreneurs, and local artists.

By enriching our marketing with authentic community narratives that resonate with visitors, we have been able to show that we are a destination that values its cultural heritage, supports local communities, and offers authentic and enriching experiences to visitors.

### **Issues faced:**

Greater Palm Springs is renowned for its warm climate, luxurious resorts, and world-class golf courses. While this reputation has led to tourism becoming the region's top economic driver – accounting for US\$8.7B of total economic impact and generating 1:4 jobs in [2022](#) – it has also posed challenges as we've sought to sustain the cultural vibrancy of the region.

To stay relevant to our audiences we must diversify the products and experiences we offer, understanding that visitors are increasingly seeking [valuable, authentic experiences](#) that do not



negatively impact the communities they travel to. We know it is not enough to simply highlight a few cultural experiences or diverse businesses and say our work is done.

The challenge facing our destination and organization was to identify how we could foster a more inclusive and sustainable tourism model that benefits all stakeholders, including local Indigenous Tribes, artists, small business owners, and the broader tourism workforce. How could we highlight the sustainable and culturally enriching experiences available to help visitors reimagine their perception of our region? What investments do we need to make (time, resources) to ensure everyone in our community feels the positive benefits of tourism?

### **Solution:**

To effectively manage visitation while promoting inclusive tourism and sustaining an authentic cultural identity, we recognized the need to refine our internal inclusion practices and authentically represent our community's diversity. We also aimed to invest in our local community by providing both capacity building and entrepreneurial opportunities for marginalized groups.

Our actions included:

1. **Internal Transformation:**
  - o Established a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) committee and invested in a Director-Level staff member dedicated to these initiatives.
  - o Integrated DEI and community focus into our organizational core values.
  - o Developed frameworks and standard operating procedures to incorporate DEI principles throughout the organization.
2. **External Impact:**
  - o Focused on building relationships and engaging stakeholders to ensure our marketing authentically reflects our community's diversity.
  - o Initiated community projects that leverage tourism to expand opportunities and support underserved communities.

### **Methods, Steps, and Tools applied:**

For us, destination management means prioritizing inclusivity, community engagement, and relationship building. It begins internally: DEI, much like sustainability, is woven into the fabric of our organizational practices, ensuring our approach centers community and stakeholders.



We also invited more diverse voices to our stakeholder groups, including the approval of a Tribal representative, Kate Anderson, of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians to join our Board of Directors. This signified the importance of the Tribe's role in our region and would help to ensure that Indigenous voices are amplified in the destination's decision-making processes.

Our Director of Sustainability & Community Engagement, Lauren Bruggemans joined in 2022 to ensure that VGPS would be accountable for our community strategy. We then updated our board priorities integrating DEI in our organizational core values, which include: balance, collaboration, community, inclusion, innovation, integrity, and passion. These values have become part of our organizational DNA; they guide how we operate and are foundational to everything we do. In addition, we instituted a marketing department [DEI standard operating procedure](#) to guide our content production and planning to ensure inclusion and representation in our collateral.

This internal alignment has allowed us to shape a more inclusive and comprehensive narrative of what it means to experience Greater Palm Springs, further integrating our core values of inclusion and community in marketing content and community engagement initiatives such as:

### **Amplifying Indigenous Stories**

Recognizing the significance of the Cahuilla people's ancestral roots, we embarked on a multifaceted approach to amplify Indigenous stories while also honoring their culture and history. In November 2022, we launched a [landing page](#) on our website dedicated to the region's Indigenous communities, featuring Native American content and promoting Indigenous tourism as well as ways for visitors to engage with local Indigenous culture. All our Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians content is reviewed by our Board Member, Kate Anderson, who vets language and visuals for appropriateness. This review takes place during regular cultural tourism meetings held by VGPS' brand department and as needed. We also work with other local Tribes to ensure representation of their cultural stories and offerings.

### **Spotlighting Local Artists**

To bring awareness to the diverse and dynamic art culture in Greater Palm Springs beyond the well-established Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival and midcentury modern architectural trail, and to draw linkages between art and nature, we elevated the stories of local artists. We launched the ["Oasis of Art"](#) campaign in September 2022 to highlight the vibrant local art scene, creators, and their contributions to the cultural identity of the region, with inspiration from the natural splendor of the desert. A key component was an original video series, [Art & Sol](#),



featuring a wide range of artists, including fashion designers blending African heritage with midcentury modernism, local LGBTQ+ community members promoting drag as an art form, and pop art muralists transforming public spaces. Our arts-and-culture [landing page](#) was also redesigned, giving us a platform to better uplift the artists in our community.

### **Widening the Circle of Opportunity for Underserved Entrepreneurs with Small Businesses in the Tourism & Hospitality Ecosystem**

In 2023, we [partnered](#) with a non-profit organization, [Caravanserai Project](#), to support a cohort of Spanish-speaking entrepreneurs in the Coachella Valley through the SEED 2.0 Business Readiness Training Program. This partnership empowered Spanish-speaking small business entrepreneurs within the tourism and hospitality ecosystem with business training, access to capital, and broadening of their networks. Further activities we undertook included hosting the entrepreneurs at our office for their day-long business course, providing them with marketing opportunities, and hosting a “Marketplace Meet & See” event at the Palm Springs Art Museum in September 2023, showcasing the entrepreneurs in our cohort to local tourism partners.

### **Achievements and Results:**

#### **Notable Achievements:**

- [CalTravel award for DEI & Accessibility Champion in 2023](#).
- Status as a [Certified Autism Center](#) allowing us to authentically help our members who likewise seek to create more welcoming spaces.
- A shift in perception from 2018-2023:
  - [2018 comprehensive image awareness study](#) revealed that visitors were increasingly associating our destination with warmth, golf, sun, and desert
  - [2023 study](#) (unpublished) found that while “spending time at the pool” remains the most popular envisioned activity (47%), prospective visitors to our region also saw themselves engaging in more natural and cultural activities vs. playing golf (17%)
    - Going on nature walks (46%)
    - Visiting historical sites (31%)
    - Experiencing the local heritage and unique culture of the area (30%)
    - Participating in art activities (24%)



### **Amplifying Indigenous Stories:**

The long-term relationship building with the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians has allowed us to highlight the Tribe's ancient wellness traditions and the hot springs as a natural and cultural resource in a BBC StoryWorks series, "[In Pursuit of Wellness](#)." The production demonstrates the trust that has grown between the Tribe and VGPS by allowing us to share this story. The documentary has reached vast audiences; we are delighted with the first 8 weeks of the campaign's performance:

- 1.9M impressions
- 503.4K video views
- 695.7K engagements across social channels
- 156.3K clicks through to website

Additionally:

- Native American content on our website received 19K+ views since January 2023.
- Most visited page (11K+ views) highlights the Agua Caliente's Cultural Plaza, a cultural attraction featuring a Tribal Museum and the Tribe's sacred hot mineral spring.
- Visit California selected Agua Caliente's Cultural Plaza as the site to launch [Visit Native California](#) in 2023. This decision reflected the Tribe's work in shifting the narrative around our region's history and cultural heritage.
- Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians actively and voluntarily contributes funding to VGPS.

### **Spotlighting Local Artists:**

The Oasis of Art campaign has raised awareness of VGPS among travelers interested in arts and culture:

- 4.8M+ social media impressions
- 857K video views
- 480% increase in landing page sessions
- 602% increase in users
- Recognized as a finalist in the [City Nation Place Awards](#)
- Second season commissioned, launched April 2024.





“Visit Greater Palm Springs and the Art & Sol Series is an essential part of my growth as a humanitarian and artists. Their unwavering commitment to community outreach, diversity, and inclusion for all, is universally aligned with my purpose and mission. I've gained community support, knowledge, and a deep appreciation for Greater Palm Springs.”

~ Tysen Knight, Art & Sol featured artist

### **Widening the Circle of Opportunity**

“The benefits of nurturing small businesses extend beyond economic gains. A strong network of local enterprises contributes to a vibrant community where individuals feel a sense of pride and connection. This, in turn, attracts more visitors and potential residents, further strengthening the region.”

~ Mihai Patru, Executive Director, Caravanserai

### **Marketplace Meet & See Event:**

- Attended by 250+ industry partners
- Facilitated connections between small business and established industry
- Enriched offerings and viability of hospitality partners and entrepreneurs

### **Lessons Learned and Advice:**

We believe that sustainability in tourism requires a holistic approach ensuring community buy-in to support long-term sustainability alongside marketing efforts promoting the destination. Perhaps our most important lesson learned is that it is imperative to dedicate resources to build strong and lasting relationships with our community members. Investing in relationships with Indigenous groups, local artists, and small business entrepreneurs has allowed us to share authentic and meaningful stories that resonate with both visitors and locals.

### **Additionally:**

- Implementing DEI in a practical way ensures that our organizational values are activated to foster equity and tangible benefits for the community. Without this, environmentalism cannot be fully realized.
- As destination stewards, we must pay respect to the people who were here first. We can do this by authentically sharing the stories of our Indigenous communities and amplifying their culture and cultural tourism products respectfully and with humility.





- We cannot tell someone else's story; stories are often co-opted by others, but authenticity comes from hearing from those with lived experiences.
- Lasting and strong relationships with stakeholders require reciprocal support, e.g., prioritizing the time to show up for each other's events or including a designated spokesperson in a content review process.

### Recognitions and Additional References:

- [Visit Greater Palm Springs \(VGPS\) Website](#)
- [VGPS Economic Impact Reports](#)
- VGPS Marketing Department [DEI Standard Operating Procedures \(SOP\)](#)
- [Aqua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians \(Aqua Caliente\) Website](#)
- CallTravel Summit 2023 DEI Award [Recognition](#)
- [Oasis of Art Campaign](#)
- VGPS Caravanserai Partnership [Video](#)
- VGPS Caravanserai Partnership [Press Release](#)
- VGPS June 24, 2022, Updated [Board Priorities](#)
- VGPS Native American Culture [Landing Page](#)
- [Visit Native California](#)
- [2018 Consumer Image Awareness Study](#)
- [2023 Image & Awareness Study](#)
- [2022 Expedia Sustainable Travel Study](#)
- [VGPS Autism Certified](#)
- [BBC StoryWorks Production featuring Aqua Caliente](#)
- Oasis of Art: [2023 City Nation Place Finalist Award for Best Communication Strategy, Tourism](#)





