



Orange County Associates Virtual Exchange (OCTAVE)

is a vehicle for collaboration of the **Tourism Cohort**
of the **Jobs First Initiative**,
administered by the **Orange County Business Council**.

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WELCOME TO ISSUE #1!

For the past two years, the Orange County Business Council has been developing and implementing the California Jobs First **Orange County Tourism Activation Plan**, and it has been my pleasure to be tasked with this effort. A key deliverable of that plan is the coalescing of a Tourism Cohort that can continue beyond the Jobs First Initiative and create durable bonds and strategic partnerships that strengthen the whole industry. To that end, enjoy this first issue of *OCTAVE*, an acronym for Orange County Tourism Associates Virtual Exchange, a virtual network to connect OC's tourism leaders. In music, when a musician or singer "goes up an octave," they are playing the same music but at a higher level. We hope that by communicating, we can do the same with OC Tourism.

Over the past year, we have gathered over 100 tourism leaders from our steering committee, business leadership, academic programs, community organizations, and funders who are reading this newsletter now and have contributed to the conversation we present here. Through interviews, focus groups, and surveys, we gathered consensus on your successes, challenges, needs, recommendations, best practices, emerging trends, and skills gaps. We will report out the findings to you in this newsletter.

If you have news or other information relevant to the conversation, please contact me, and we will do our best to include you.

– Zoot Velasco, Consultant

OCTAVE is a newsletter of the Orange County Business Council written by Zoot Velasco. Send us your questions, tourism success stories, needs, challenges, best practices, skills gaps, and emerging trends, and we will try to include the most relevant ones in OCTAVE!

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THE ORANGE COUNTY TOURISM LANDSCAPE

By Zoot Velasco

Octave is a collaboration of leaders in the Tourism space in Orange County, the largest visitor destination in the state, rivaled only by neighboring Los Angeles. But before we can talk about the future of tourism, we need to understand what that sector looks like today. While Anaheim keeps great data on its visitors, that is not true of the county as a whole. However, the industry is much more diverse than we would imagine. Many people believe that visitors come to Orange County only for Disneyland. And while “The Magic Kingdom” is a significant draw for about half of all OC tourists, there is much more to the story.

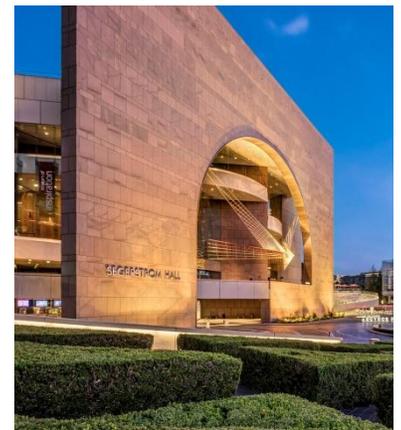
DISCLAIMER: This study of our tourism landscape uses estimates based on publicly available online information. Actual figures may vary and were not available for this report.

It would be a safe bet to say that every visitor who comes to our county and stays overnight is likely to visit at least one of these places, listed by visitor appeal:

1 ANAHEIM is driven by its anchor, one of California’s undisputed destination champions since it was built in 1955. **The Disneyland Resort** draws over 27.35 million visitors each year, exceeding pre-pandemic levels in the past two years. The Mouse, a bellwether for the industry, is back! Beyond the magic of *Disneyland*, Anaheim is also a key spot for major sporting events, dining, and conventions, with **Angel’s Stadium** drawing 2.58 million visitors and the **Honda Center**, home of hockey’s *Anaheim Ducks*, pulling in 1.4 million, and the **Anaheim Convention Center** open to over a million attendees each year. Foodies and explorers love visiting **Anaheim Packing District**, a historic citrus packing house turned vibrant food hall with diverse eateries and live events, as well as its lively **Anaheim Night Market**. For family-friendly fun, that’s theme-park-light, **Adventure City** offers rides and attractions perfect for younger kids, without the crowds of larger parks. New things are in the works with **OC Vibe**, **DisneylandForward**, and **Store One**.



2 COSTA MESA is a top shopping destination with **South Coast Plaza’s** marketing strategy that transforms it from a mere shopping center into a must-visit tourist destination by emphasizing luxury, exclusivity, and a holistic visitor experience, attracting almost as many as Anaheim at 24 million annual visitors. It strategically curates an exceptional mix of over 275 high-end boutiques, flagship stores, and acclaimed dining options that appeal to affluent shoppers and global travelers seeking premium retail and lifestyle experiences, and tailors



messages with influencers and digital content that reinforce their sophistication and luxury. The center promotes bespoke guest services, including multilingual concierge assistance in 40+ languages, valet parking, exclusive traveler offers, and shop-and-stay packages with local hotels, to make international and domestic tourism seamless and inviting. They also leverage their cultural context by aligning themselves with world-class arts and entertainment nearby, highlighted by the **Segerstrom Center** and **South Coast Repertory Theatre**, which together attract 3.5 million audience members annually. The **OC Fair & Event Center**, a versatile year-round destination, adds to Costa Mesa's attractions with a wide array of concerts, sporting events, trade shows, and cultural festivals, highlighted by its signature summer *OC Fair*, which draws hundreds of thousands of visitors.

3

Number 3 on our list is not a city or a single destination; however, as a county-wide system, **Orange County Parks (OC Parks)** draws over 15 million visitors each year, and that is most likely an undercount, as annual visitor figures are difficult to capture precisely, given the open nature of many sites. OC Parks manages nearly 60,000 acres of inland and coastal parkland, open space, trails, beaches, and historic sites across Orange County, offering everything from wilderness preserves to family-friendly regional parks. The diversity within the OC Parks system is part of its broad appeal. Outdoor enthusiasts can explore dramatic canyon landscapes and miles of trails at Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park or Whiting Ranch Wilderness Park, perfect for hiking, mountain biking, or horseback riding. Riverside and creek-side settings like O'Neill Regional Park offer extensive trail networks and camping opportunities, while urban regional parks such as Irvine Regional Park (home to the Orange County Zoo and scenic picnic areas) and Yorba Regional Park (with lakes, bike paths, and family amenities) provide accessible settings for picnics, fishing, and casual recreation. Other notable parks include Laguna Niguel Regional Park, with its reservoir and recreational facilities, and beach parks like Salt Creek Beach Park, which combine coastal access with OC Parks management. Together, these sites make OC Parks one of Orange County's most visited and beloved attractions, offering natural, cultural, and recreational experiences for visitors of all ages



4

NEWPORT BEACH offers a rich blend of coastal recreation, classic seaside entertainment, and upscale shopping, making it a standout destination for visitors. Along the waterfront, the historic **Balboa Fun Zone** anchors the Balboa Peninsula, inviting over 2 million visitors each year to its iconic Ferris wheel, arcade games, harbor cruises, and easy access to whale-watching tours, all of which capture the nostalgic spirit of a Southern California beach town. Nearby, the Balboa Pier and Newport Pier invite strolling, fishing, and sunset views, while the Balboa Island Ferry adds a charming, short harbor crossing to quaint island shops and eateries. Complementing these beach



experiences is **Fashion Island**, an open-air luxury shopping and dining destination overlooking the Pacific, where over 8 million visitors annually enjoy high-end boutiques, chef-driven restaurants, ocean views, and seasonal events in a resort-like setting. Together with outdoor assets like the Back Bay trails and waterfront parks, Newport Beach seamlessly combines play, nature, and sophistication into a compelling, well-rounded tourism experience. Historic **Crystal Cove State Park**, once threatened with destruction and saved through advocacy, is a high-value natural asset that balances outdoor recreation, environmental stewardship, and heritage preservation, attracting over 2 million beachcombers each year. Stretching across miles of protected coastline and inland backcountry between Newport Beach and Laguna Beach, the park attracts visitors seeking coastal access, hiking, tidepools, camping, and scenic experiences that contrast with the region’s more urban and commercial destinations. The Historic District, with its coveted restored beach cottages available for overnight stays with early reservations made more than six months in advance, adds a rare heritage tourism component that supports more extended visits and experiential travel. Crystal Cove’s integrated trail system connects coastal and inland environments, reinforcing its role in eco-tourism, wellness travel, and educational programming. Within the broader OC tourism ecosystem, the park serves as a critical open-space counterbalance, enhancing destination diversity, supporting sustainable visitation, and reinforcing Orange County’s brand as a place where world-class natural landscapes coexist with major visitor attractions.

5 **LAGUNA BEACH**, with its history as an artist colony, is a distinctive cultural and coastal destination where natural beauty, arts, and environmental stewardship intersect, serving 6.3 million visitors each year. Renowned for its coves, beaches, and coastal trails, the city attracts visitors seeking scenic recreation, wellness travel, and outdoor experiences that set it apart from more commercialized beachfront destinations. Laguna Beach’s nationally recognized arts scene—anchored by institutions such as the **Laguna Art Museum** and major annual events including the **Pageant of the Masters**, **Festival of Arts**, and **Sawdust Art Festival**—drives significant seasonal visitation and reinforces the city’s identity as an arts-driven tourism hub. A compact, walkable downtown with galleries, boutique hotels, and chef-driven dining further supports extended stays and higher-value visitation. Collectively, these assets position Laguna Beach as a high-impact, experience-rich node within OC tourism, offering a sophisticated blend of culture, landscape, and sustainability that strengthens the county’s overall destination portfolio.



6 **BUENA PARK** hosts **Knott’s Berry Farm** and **Knott’s Soak City**, which function as a foundational anchor for Orange County tourism, particularly in the family and value-oriented travel segments, and draw 5.2 million visitors to the city and other local attractions. As one of California’s oldest continuously operating theme parks,



Knott's contributes to the county's visitor economy by offering a diversified product that combines major thrill attractions, heritage-based theming, live entertainment, and regionally distinctive food traditions. The adjacent Knott's Soak City Water Park extends seasonal demand and length of stay, especially during summer months, while on-site lodging and year-round special events help stabilize visitation outside peak periods. From a tourism systems perspective, Buena Park's appeal extends well beyond Knott's. The city supports a broader cluster of visitor experiences that enhance the length of stay and diversify tourism, such as interactive themed dinner shows like **Medieval Times Dinner & Tournament** and **Pirates Dinner Adventure**.

7 Within the Orange County tourism ecosystem, **Huntington Beach**, known as *Surf City*, plays a central role as an iconic coastal destination built around surf culture, outdoor recreation, and large-scale visitor events that draw over 2 million visitors each year. The **Huntington Beach Pier** serves as the city's primary tourism anchor and visual symbol, drawing millions of visitors annually for sightseeing, fishing, dining, and beach access, while also serving as a focal point for major events such as the U.S. Open of Surfing and other international competitions. Surrounding the pier, Downtown Huntington Beach offers a dense mix of hotels, restaurants, nightlife, and retail that supports walkability and extended stays, particularly for younger travelers and international visitors. Beyond the pier area, assets such as **Bolsa Chica Ecological Reserve**, miles of beachfront bike paths, and a growing calendar of sports and cultural events diversify the destination's appeal. Together, these elements position Huntington Beach as a high-energy, brand-defining coastal city within OC tourism—one that balances authentic beach culture with event-driven visitation and significant economic impact.



8 **Irvine** functions as a modern, master-planned central destination hub, anchored by the Irvine Spectrum Center, which combines retail, dining, entertainment, and public gathering space in a highly curated, open-air environment that attracts over 2 million shoppers annually. With its iconic Ferris wheel, multiplex cinema, comedy club, experiential dining, and frequent events, the Spectrum draws visitors in the evenings and on weekends, supporting extended visitor stays and business travel tied to Irvine's strong corporate and university presence. Beyond the Spectrum, Irvine's extensive network of parks and trails, cultural venues such as the Irvine Barclay Theatre, and proximity to UC Irvine reinforce its appeal as a clean, accessible, and amenity-rich destination.



9

Dana Point is a premium coastal destination known for its scenic harbor, marine recreation, and eco-tourism offerings, attracting over 1.5 million adventurers each year. Anchored by *Dana Point Harbor*, the city draws visitors for boating, whale-watching, kayaking, and paddleboarding, while also offering a range of dining, shopping, and waterfront leisure activities that encourage longer stays. The area's proximity to **Doheny State Beach** and coastal trails adds recreational diversity, appealing to families, outdoor enthusiasts, and wellness-focused travelers. Dana Point also leverages its maritime heritage through events such as the Festival of Whales and harbor-based celebrations, which support seasonal spikes in visitation and local economic activity.



10

San Clemente functions as a coastal destination that combines historic charm, outdoor recreation, and lifestyle appeal, attracting 1.2 million annual visitors seeking a more relaxed Southern California experience. The city's beaches and pier serve as focal points for surfing, swimming, and scenic strolls. At the same time, the downtown area—centered on Avenida Del Mar—offers boutique shopping, dining, and cultural events that reflect the city's Spanish Colonial Revival heritage. San Clemente's network of coastal and inland trails, including the popular **San Clemente Coastal Trail**, supports walking, biking, and nature-based tourism, complementing its beachfront attractions. The city also hosts seasonal festivals and public events that attract regional visitors and boost hotel occupancy and restaurant traffic. Positioned at the southern edge of Orange County, San Clemente provides a quieter, lifestyle-oriented contrast to the county's major theme-park and urban destinations, enhancing the overall diversity and appeal of the region's tourism offerings.



Fullerton and **Garden Grove** tie for the next cities on our list of OC tourism destinations. Both host approximately one million visitors each year. **Fullerton** functions as a culture- and nightlife-oriented destination that leverages its historic walkable downtown, cultural institutions on and off campus, regional arboretum, and university presence to attract visitors. **Garden Grove** functions as a culturally distinctive destination, anchored by heritage tourism, faith-based travel to the Christ Cathedral campus, and the largest Vietnamese American community in the United States, **Little Saigon**.

Santa Ana is close behind with just under a million visitors. The county seat hosts a revitalized downtown, cultural institutions such as the **Bowers Museum**, the **Discovery Cube Orange County**, and the **Santa Ana Artists Village**, and a strong Latino heritage is expressed through its culinary scene, public art, and festivals, contributing to authentic cultural tourism experiences not found elsewhere in the region.

Other Orange County cities with over half a million visitors include **Seal Beach**, **San Juan Capistrano** (the original California mission), **Mission Viejo**, **Tustin**, and **Yorba Linda**.

If combined, all these sites would attract over 81 million visitors annually. However, there is significant overlap with the estimated 50 million who come to Orange County.

As a whole, “The OC” (as many Millennial visitors still think of it, thanks to the popular 1990s television series) is a diverse and multifaceted destination, and a vital contributor to Orange County’s economic health. In 2023, visitor spending in Orange County reached approximately \$15.8 billion, representing about 5 percent of the county’s overall economy. When tourism and hospitality are considered alongside related leisure sectors, including accommodations, food services, recreation, and attractions, the industry accounts for roughly 10 percent of all jobs in the county, underscoring its substantial role in the local labor market. Among Orange County’s key economic drivers, tourism consistently ranks in the top five, alongside professional and business services, healthcare, and finance. Its impact is amplified by globally recognized assets such as Disneyland Resort and the county’s beaches, which continue to generate local spending while elevating Orange County’s international profile.

Historically, California’s first major economic boom is often traced to the nineteenth-century Gold Rush. In the twentieth century, Orange County experienced its own “second gold rush” through the rise of citrus agriculture, particularly the demand for oranges and orange juice, which helped stabilize the regional economy even during national downturns such as the Great Depression. Today, Orange County stands poised for a potential third era of prosperity—driven not by a single commodity but by the diversity of its tourism economy, which spans theme parks, coastal recreation, cultural experiences, open space, and emerging travel forms that continue to draw visitors from around the world.

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In our next edition, we will discuss Orange County’s role in upcoming world events: The 2028 Olympics and the Men’s & Women’s World Cup Games in 2026 and 2027!

[I would like to subscribe!](#)



UPCOMING JOB FAIRS

📌 March 2026

- **Orange County CA Career Fair – Sales & Management**
 - 📍 Holiday Inn Orange County Airport, Santa Ana
 - 📅 **March 18, 2026, 6:00 pm**
-

📌 April 2026

- **2026 OC Job Fair @ Santa Ana College**
 - 📍 Santa Ana College
 - 📅 **April 23, 2026** — Free & open to all; employer list TBD closer to date.
 - **Orange County Job Fair & Career Fair**
 - 📍 Courtyard Marriott Santa Ana
 - 📅 **April 9, 2026** (per organizer schedule)
 - [Orange County Virtual Job Fair](#) – Apr 16, 2026
-

📌 May 2026

- [Orange County Virtual Job Fair](#) – May 21, 2026
-

📌 June 2026

- [Orange County Virtual Job Fair](#) – Jun 25, 2026

NOTE: Additional Job Fairs are available to registered students at all local Colleges and Universities. Check with your College Counselors.

ALSO...

- [Orange County Virtual Job Fair](#) – *Virtual* — will continue through 2027
- [OC Workforce Solutions](#) — **County Recruitment & Hiring Events (Free)** The **County of Orange Workforce Solutions** typically hosts *multiple free in-person hiring and networking events throughout the year* in Lake Forest, Brea, and South County (including industry-specific and multi-industry fairs). These events recur annually, though the *2027 calendar has not yet been published*. Watch their official site for the 2027 lineup.
- **County Career Fairs & Hiring Events** — typically in late winter (Feb), spring and fall
- [Diversity Career Group](#) run recurring **Orange County Job Fairs & Career Fairs** (in-person, often at the Courtyard by Marriott in Santa Ana).
- **Virtual Job Fair Series** [DiversityX](#)
- [JobFairX](#)