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The Future of Tourism in Orange County
By Zoot Velasco

The Smith Family leaves Las Vegas in a flying velotaxi taken from a parking garage at the Bellagio, and lands at John Wayne Airport just after sunrise, breezing through a seamless biometric check-in before hopping aboard a clean-energy shuttle synced to a regional transit app that maps their entire stay. By mid-morning, they're gliding past palm trees on a Metrolink train toward Anaheim, where a global gaming championship is electrifying the Honda Center and fans from Tokyo to Toronto are tuning in through immersive hybrid broadcasts. That afternoon, they take a Waymo driverless taxi to kayak through the kelp forests off the coast with a marine naturalist, sampling locally cultivated oysters while learning how reef restoration is protecting the shoreline. Dinner isn't just a meal, it's a hands-on culinary micro-tour in Little Arabia or Little Saigon, cooking alongside local chefs whose stories are as rich as their spices. Their hotel stay might be a smart high-rise overlooking Disneyland, or a thoughtfully regulated home-share in a vibrant neighborhood. The following day, they celebrate their daughter's sunset destination wedding at San Onofre Park, while drones stream it live to guests across continents. Everywhere they turn, technology enhances the journey from the augmented reality (AR)-guided art walk at the Bowers Museum, in which the artist gives the tour from China, to personalized event alerts and frictionless mobility, while the heart of the experience remains deeply human: culture, coastlines, creativity, and community. Orange County is no longer just a destination; it's an interactive, immersive playground where visitors design their own adventure in real time.

Orange County's tourism future will no longer just be defined by theme parks and beaches, but by innovation, mobility, cultural authenticity, environmental stewardship, and a fluid workforce pipeline. While Disneyland Resort, coastal recreation, and convention business will remain economic anchors, industry research suggests the next chapter of Orange County tourism will be driven by experience-based travel, regional mobility integration, hybrid events, sustainable practices, and new education-to-career pipelines.

Orange County's visitor journey is becoming increasingly multimodal. John Wayne Airport continues to serve as the county's primary commercial aviation hub, but with new services like electric "velotaxis", more formally known as electric vertical takeoff and landing (eVTOL) air taxis, poised to redefine how visitors arrive and depart from John Wayne Airport. Companies like Joby Aviation have announced plans to build networks of compact, vertiports across major U.S. markets, integrating air taxi service directly with existing airports, parking lots, and ground transportation hubs. These aircraft are designed to provide short, quiet, zero-emission flights that can dramatically reduce travel times between airports and dense urban or tourism centers. For Orange County, that could mean five- to fifteen-minute flights linking John Wayne Airport with destinations such as Anaheim's resort district, coastal cities, or even connections into the broader Southern California megaregion. By leveraging existing parking infrastructure as mobility hubs and incorporating AI-driven check-in, biometric recognition, and streamlined baggage handling systems, vertiports aim to create a seamless transition from air to ground. When implemented locally, velotaxis would position Orange County at the forefront of advanced air mobility—offering visitors a faster, tech-forward, and environmentally conscious gateway into the region's tourism ecosystem.

Regional rail connections through Metrolink join Orange County to Los Angeles, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties. The Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) has emphasized regional rail expansion and first- and last-mile connectivity as essential to economic competitiveness and major event readiness (SCAG, 2020). Transportation innovation (including micro-mobility, app-based rideshare systems, and potential airport-adjacent alternative transport services) reflects broader global trends in smart destination management (Gretzel et al., 2015). As Southern California prepares for mega-events such as the 2028 Olympic and Paralympic Games, regional transportation coordination is expected to accelerate investment in integrated transit, wayfinding technologies, and visitor mobility platforms.

While Orange County's brand remains strongly associated with Disneyland and coastal tourism, research shows that traveler preferences are shifting toward experiential and cultural engagement. The United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2023) reports sustained growth in experience-driven travel, where visitors prioritize learning, authenticity, and local immersion over standardized attractions.

In Orange County, this trend supports growth in experiences like culinary micro-tours featuring diverse communities such as Little Saigon, Little Arabia, and Latino culinary districts; environmental tourism

experiences, including coastal kayaking, mountain bike tours, marine ecology tours, and watershed education programs; and cultural workshops, maker-spaces, AR tours, and small-group learning experiences tied to arts, heritage, and gastronomy. This shift reflects what scholars describe as the "experience economy," in which value is created through participation and personalization rather than passive consumption (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

Post-pandemic travel behavior has reinforced demand for shorter, regional trips. The U.S. Travel Association (2023) notes that domestic leisure travel remains strong, with many travelers opting for drivable destinations and flexible itineraries. Microtourism—short, frequent, close-to-home trips—aligns well with Orange County's geographic position within a population base of more than 20 million people in Southern California.

Weekend gaming tournaments at Honda Center, esports competitions, hybrid conventions at the Anaheim Convention Center, coastal eco-tours, and culinary workshops all support repeat, short-duration travel patterns that generate consistent economic impact without relying solely on long-haul visitors.

Event tourism is undergoing a structural transformation. The global meetings and events sector has adopted hybrid formats that blend in-person attendance with digital broadcasting and remote participation (Deloitte, 2021). Orange County's convention infrastructure—particularly in Anaheim—positions it well for this evolution.

Hybrid destination weddings, esports championships, international cultural festivals, AR tours, and large-scale conventions increasingly incorporate live streaming/drone broadcasting, interactive digital participation, virtual reality previews of venues, and AI-driven event personalization. These developments reflect the broader concept of "Tourism 4.0," which integrates artificial intelligence, big data, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and smart infrastructure into destination management (Gretzel et al., 2015).

For Orange County, this means tourism marketing and on-site engagement may increasingly rely on mobile apps, immersive storytelling, self-guided AR tours of cultural districts, and predictive analytics for visitor flow management. This change also has another positive side effect: better visitor tracking and more accurate data.

The growth of peer-to-peer accommodations continues to influence Orange County's lodging landscape. Research on the sharing economy demonstrates that platforms like Airbnb and VRBO have reshaped travel behavior by enabling localized, neighborhood-based stays and co-created guest experiences (Guttentag, 2015). While cities throughout Orange County have adopted varying short-term rental regulations to balance neighborhood concerns with tourism demand, alternative accommodations remain a significant part of the regional visitor economy. The California Travel and Tourism Commission (Visit California, 2023)

notes that accommodation diversity enhances destination competitiveness by meeting a range of price points and traveler preferences.

Sustainability is no longer optional in destination planning. Coastal destinations face rising climate risks, including erosion, sea-level rise, and ecosystem degradation. The California Coastal Commission (2021) has emphasized adaptation planning, habitat restoration, and responsible coastal access as critical to long-term tourism viability.

In Orange County, eco-tourism opportunities include marine habitat education, watershed tours near the Santa Ana River mouth, and kelp forest awareness programs. These align with global demand for environmentally responsible travel (UNWTO, 2023). Sustainable tourism practices not only protect natural assets but also enhance brand identity among environmentally conscious travelers.

Perhaps the most transformative element of Orange County's tourism future is workforce development. The hospitality and leisure sector remains one of the county's largest employment categories. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2023), hospitality occupations continue to rebound and evolve, with growing demand for event management, digital marketing, and technical production skills. A modern tourism ecosystem requires event technical staff, social media strategists, hybrid production managers, sustainable tourism coordinators, and cultural experience designers. Not to mention unlimited opportunities for small local entrepreneurs who can create cultural and culinary experiences. Community college and university programs are changing to accommodate the new landscape. Upward mobility pipelines are also changing, as tech-savvy entrepreneurs can create businesses without the past obstacles of real estate, finance, and permits. Companies are also changing their training programs. Internships have lost credibility since COVID, as many are no longer designed to be a pipeline to management but have, in many cases, devolved into little more than cheap labor. Companies are examining these issues and redesigning internships for the 21st-century workforce. Research consistently shows that structured career pathways, apprenticeships, and work-based learning significantly improve wage outcomes and long-term career advancement (Carnevale et al., 2020). Future students might begin in entry-level service work, pursue hybrid coursework at a community college, transfer into a bachelor's program in event or entertainment management, learn some tech skills on their own through internet resources, complete internships with major venues or destination marketing organizations, and progress into upper management roles. Large tourism employers increasingly provide on-the-job training, digital badging, healthcare benefits, and advancement pathways that professionalize what was once seen as low-wage seasonal work.

Orange County's tourism future is not a replacement of its legacy attractions but an expansion of them. The opportunity for OC tourism leaders lies in leveraging OC's global brand while embracing innovation at the neighborhood level. We must transform tourism from a single-industry identity into a diversified economic ecosystem that supports communities, protects natural resources, and builds professional career ladders for the next generation. To that end, we at Jobs First and OCTAVE will be rolling out future articles on many of the topics discussed here, as well as four pilot programs that capitalize on these changes. Stay tuned!

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AI in the OC Tourism Landscape

-Written by ChatGPT AI and edited by Zoot Velasco with Grammarly AI

Artificial intelligence is reshaping the global tourism industry — from how travelers plan trips to the way destinations market themselves and operate services. For a tourism-oriented region like Orange County, California, AI's growth offers both exciting opportunities and challenges across visitor experiences, marketing, transportation systems, and the local workforce.

One of AI's most visible impacts in tourism is the provision of personalized travel assistance and virtual guides. AI-powered tools — such as generative chatbots and travel planning assistants — can analyze traveler preferences to create tailored itineraries, suggest activities, and provide real-time assistance while on a trip (e.g., automated planning tools used in broader travel contexts).

For Orange County's many attractions — including theme parks, beaches, museums, and cultural districts — AI tools could enable visitors to:

- Access interactive virtual tours of landmarks before or during travel.
- Use AI chat assistants for guidance in navigating activities, directions, or local insights.
- Receive suggestions in their preferred language, improving accessibility for international visitors.

These applications help visitors optimize their experiences while reducing routine inquiries that would traditionally require human staff or printed materials.

Transportation and Smart Mobility

AI's integration into transportation systems is changing how tourists move around destinations. While specific Orange County deployments may still are emerging, broader AI developments in the region (such as autonomous and connected vehicle research in Southern California) suggest local tourism could benefit from:

- **Predictive routing and traffic optimization**, reducing congestion during peak visitation times.
- **AI-assisted dynamic pricing for transit and ride services**, offering cost-effective alternatives for travelers.
- **Intelligent customer service systems** that assist residents and visitors in navigating public transit options.

As autonomous and connected vehicle technology continues to develop in California, projections show these advancements could significantly alter travel patterns in destinations like Orange County by improving overall accessibility and convenience for tourists.

Marketing and Tourism Promotion

Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) serving Orange County are redesigning their marketing strategies as traveler behavior shifts from traditional search engines to AI-powered platforms. Instead of typing short keywords into Google, travelers increasingly ask conversational AI tools to plan full itineraries, compare destinations, or recommend experiences. This shift requires DMOs to move beyond traditional Search Engine Optimization (SEO) toward "Answer Engine Optimization" (AEO), structuring content so AI systems can easily extract, summarize, and recommend destination information (European Travel Commission [ETC], 2025).

To adapt, DMOs are restructuring their websites to include machine-readable data, schema markup, and FAQ-based content that directly answers natural-language travel questions. Marketing strategies now emphasize conversational content such as "Plan a three-day family trip" or "What are sustainable transportation options near the beach?" Research shows AI-enabled travel planning tools are increasingly used for trip ideation and itinerary building, pushing destinations to ensure their content is accessible to generative AI systems (González-Mendes et al., 2025).

AI also strengthens personalization. Using predictive analytics and machine learning, DMOs can segment audiences and deliver highly targeted campaigns tailored to traveler preferences — from luxury coastal

experiences to family-oriented attractions and culinary tourism. These data-driven strategies enhance engagement and marketing efficiency (Choi & Kim, 2024), while embedded AI chat assistants on destination websites function as 24/7 virtual concierges, reducing planning friction (ETC, 2025).

Tourism's Economic Footprint

Tourism remains a major economic driver for Orange County. Pre-AI integration trends show strong visitors' spending and job support across the hospitality and tourism sector. For example, tourism contributed billions in direct visitor spending and supported thousands of local jobs, underlining the industry's economic importance to the region.

While not all this growth is directly attributable to AI, modern promotional strategies — including digital, data-driven campaigns that increasingly rely on AI tools — likely help maintain competitive positioning and support visitation trends.

AI's Effect on Jobs

The impact of AI on employment within tourism is complex and multifaceted:

Positive Effects:

- AI can *enhance productivity* for employees by automating repetitive tasks, allowing staff to focus on high-value interactions and creative roles.
- Some tourism jobs evolve to include **AI system management, data analysis, and digital service optimization** functions.
- Training and AI literacy programs are increasingly part of the local workforce development landscape in Orange County, helping prepare workers for future roles where tech competency is an asset.

Challenges:

- Research suggests that AI may automate aspects of routine tourism roles — such as basic customer support or entry-level administrative tasks — potentially *reducing demand* for those specific tasks while increasing demand for more sophisticated and high-touch skills.
- Regional workforce planning reports point to *potential job displacement due to automation* unless accompanied by reskilling and education initiatives that align with technological trends.

Overall, the consensus from both regional planning documents and broader research is that AI will both *transform existing roles and generate new ones*, but success depends heavily on adaptive workforce strategies and training.

Challenges and Considerations

While AI presents many benefits for tourism, challenges remain:

- **High infrastructure and training costs** may limit adoption among smaller tourism operators.
- **Ethical issues such as privacy, data bias, and equitable access** must be addressed thoughtfully.

- AI cannot fully replace the *human touch* essential to hospitality and experiential tourism, underscoring the need for balanced integration.

These points are supported by both global tourism AI research and broader industry analyses that emphasize responsible, thoughtful implementation.

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence is shaping the future of tourism in Orange County by **enhancing visitors' experiences, optimizing marketing, and introducing operational efficiencies**. While AI's influence on jobs and daily operations poses challenges, it also offers opportunities for innovation, economic growth, and workforce transformation.

By integrating AI thoughtfully — paired with strategic skills development and mindful data use — Orange County can continue to build a vibrant, technology-enhanced tourism ecosystem that supports both visitors and local communities.

References (APA)

- *Because local academic studies specific to Orange County's AI impact are limited, many references below are broader research and contextual sources used to support general claims within the article.*
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OCTAVE is a newsletter of the Orange County Business Council. 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!

CONTACT: **Info@OCBC.com**

In our next edition, we will focus on Workforce Investment challenges and how to solve them! Stay tuned.

I would like to subscribe!

UPCOMING JOB FAIRS

📌 **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](#)

📅 Tourism Funding Calendar (April 2026 – Dec 2027)

APRIL 2026 (Names are active links to funder pages)
- **Verizon Small Business Digital Ready Grants** Deadline: March 31, 2026
  - Small business growth, digital tools, entrepreneurship
- **Preservation & Accessibility of California's LGBTQ+ History Grant** Deadline: April 1
  - California orgs to support preservation and accessibility of LGBTQ+ archives
- **FY 2025 Region 4 Wetlands Program (EPA)** Deadline: April 6, 2026
  - Local programs that protect, manage, and restore wetlands
- **California Arts Council – Impact Projects / Arts & Youth / General Operating** Deadline: April 30, 2026
  - Funds festivals, cultural tourism, workforce arts programming
- **Alliance for California Traditional Arts – Living Cultures Grant** Deadline: April 27, 2026
  - Supports cultural heritage tourism + community storytelling
- **Surrendered and Abandoned Vessel Exchange (SAVE) Grant** Deadline: April 30
  - The SAVE grant program is designed to remove, reduce and prevent abandoned recreational vessels from entering our waterways
- **Boating Safety And Enforcement Equipment 2026-27 Grant** Deadline: April 30

MAY 2026
- **Strengthening Community Colleges Training Grants** Deadline: May 20, 2026
  - Federal grant to build community college workforce training capacity, including short-term training linked to Workforce Pell programs.

JULY 2026
- **National Endowment for the Arts** – Grants for Arts Projects (Cycle 2) Deadline: July 9, 2026
  - Major funding for festivals, placemaking, and cultural tourism

UPCOMING & ONGOING
- Check local **Destination Marketing Organizations** by city for grant opportunities
- **Hello Alice** Small Business micro-grants ($5K–$25K) Ongoing
- **Fisheries Habitat Restoration** Coming in 2026
- **Restaurants Care Resilience Fund** Coming in 2026