



Orange County Associates Virtual Exchange (OCTAVE)

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In our last **OCTAVE** newsletter, we focused on Green Initiatives and discussed “ecotourism” opportunities for the OC Coastkeeper. Ecotourism, microtourism, and cultural tourism have increasingly leveraged the reach of the internet and social media to create new economic opportunities for small local producers and local culture bearers. Digital platforms allow artisans, guides, small farms, and community organizations to promote experiences directly to travelers without relying solely on large tour operators or intermediaries. Through tools such as social media storytelling, online booking platforms, and location-based reviews, local residents can showcase authentic cultural experiences. This digital visibility lowers market-entry barriers for small-scale operators, enabling them to reach global audiences while maintaining control over how their cultures and landscapes are represented. Such experiences can enrich visitors’ overall trips and increase the number of days/money spent in the area. As a result, a greater share of tourism spending can remain within the community, supporting local livelihoods, sustaining cultural traditions, and encouraging conservation of natural resources. This week, we will spotlight cultural tourism as well as microtourism experiences and opportunities for Orange County.

Cultural Tourism: An OC Economic and Artistic Force

When people think of Orange County Tourism, we think of world-famous theme parks, world-class shopping, celebrated beaches, conventions, and sports arenas. However, an *Americans for the Arts* study found that 41.5% of attendees at arts and culture events in Orange County were not local. Of these attendees, 82.4% said that their primary purpose for being in OC was to attend that cultural event. Beyond our sunny coastline and amusement attractions, OC’s cultural offerings, from arts festivals and historic sites to theater, music venues, and ethnic celebrations, play a significant role in attracting tourists, supporting local economies, and strengthening community identity.



COSTA MESA is central to the county's high-profile performing arts offerings. The **Segerstrom Center for the Arts** is one of Southern California's premier stages, presenting Broadway touring productions, ballet, opera, and concerts. Nearby institutions like **South Coast Repertory** bring world-class theaters to Orange County audiences, often drawing theatergoers from outside the region. **The OC Fair & Event Center** also hosts a wide array of concerts and cultural festivals, among its diverse offerings. This vibrant performing arts

ecosystem reinforces Orange County's identity as a cultural destination. It is not uncommon for visitors from neighboring counties and abroad to spend a day shopping at South Coast Plaza, dining at local restaurants, seeing a show, and staying in a local hotel. In fact, Costa Mesa is designed for just this scenario.

LAGUNA BEACH, founded as an artist colony, has developed an international reputation as a coastal art enclave. It is home to several annual arts festivals that define OC's cultural calendar. The historic **Pageant of the Masters** presents living recreations of classic artworks for over nine decades, drawing tens of thousands of visitors each summer. **The Festival of Arts, Sawdust Art Festival, and Art-A-Fair**, which capitalize on the Pageant's legacy, showcase the work of hundreds of local and regional artists in vibrant, immersive settings. The **Laguna Art Museum** features programs for all ages and free school tours, connecting diverse communities to California art traditions, while the **Laguna Playhouse** is a regional draw. While some residents express frustration about the impact of tourism on daily life, the tourist dollars generated by these popular events help fund local grants and arts programs that enrich Laguna Beach's cultural infrastructure.



South OC's **SAN CLEMENTE** blends coastal beauty with a strong historical foundation, attracting visitors year-round. The **Casa Romantica Cultural Center & Gardens**, a historic bluff-top estate overlooking the Pacific, anchors the city's cultural tourism with rotating art exhibitions, concerts, lectures,



and community festivals that regularly draw audiences from outside the region. The **Cabrillo Playhouse**, one of Orange County's longest-running community theaters, offers year-round productions and educational programs that bring performing arts patrons into the city's historic downtown. San Clemente is also home to the **Surfing Heritage and Culture Center**, a nationally recognized museum and archive that preserves the history of surf culture and attracts enthusiasts and researchers from around the world. These cultural

venues complement the city’s vibrant downtown along Avenida Del Mar, where visitors frequently pair performances and museum visits with dining, shopping, and nightlife. Together, San Clemente’s arts institutions and coastal setting position the city as a destination where culture, history, and leisure tourism intersect, supporting local businesses while reinforcing the city’s distinct sense of place.

FULLERTON, in North Orange County, offers a mix of educational and cultural destinations. The **Fullerton Arboretum** at California State University, Fullerton, is a 26-acre botanical garden and living museum with plant collections from around the world and historic exhibits such as the **Heritage House**. Fullerton is a college town filled with performance spaces and theaters from top-ranked high schools, Fullerton College, and California State University, Fullerton, which constantly host top talent on their stages and in their galleries. The historic **Muckenthaler Cultural Center** hosts year-round art exhibitions, concerts, festivals, destination weddings, and education programs. The Fullerton Museum in the original downtown Carnegie Library building is another draw, hosting exhibits, the Leo Fender Gallery (Fender Guitars started in Fullerton), and a beer garden with seasonal farmers' markets and cultural festivals in the adjacent courtyard around a popular fountain, a cultural hub of downtown. Fullerton’s downtown area is rich in nightlife and dining, drawing visitors who combine cultural outings with social evenings.



SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO is anchored by the iconic Mission San Juan Capistrano, the original mission from which our county’s land grants and eventually cities sprouted. Founded in 1776, the mission serves as a museum, cultural center, and active historic landmark that interprets the region’s Native American, Spanish, Mexican, and early Californian heritage, drawing more than 300,000 visitors annually. The city’s cultural calendar further strengthens its tourism appeal through events such as the annual Swallows Day Parade and St. Joseph’s Day celebrations, which commemorate the legendary return of migrating cliff swallows each March with parades, music, markets, and heritage programming. In addition to the mission, visitors explore historic districts like Los Rios Street, cultural demonstrations, and living-history programs that recreate early mission life. Together, these heritage sites and festivals position San Juan Capistrano as a cornerstone of cultural tourism in South Orange County, attracting regional, national, and international visitors while supporting local restaurants, retail, and hospitality businesses.



OC’S MUSIC SCENE spans intimate clubs, mid-size theaters, and large arenas. The **OC Fair & Event Center’s Pacific Amphitheatre** and the **Honda Center** have hosted major touring acts for decades, contributing to the county’s concert tourism. Smaller venues throughout the region support local acts and touring musicians alike, which helps sustain production crews, road personnel, and hospitality workers

who stay in area hotels and dine in local restaurants. Theme parks like **Disneyland** and **Knotts** employ many top local musicians and performers who enrich the park experience.

CULTURAL FESTIVALS across Orange County play a central role in cultural tourism by celebrating the traditions of the county’s diverse communities while drawing visitors from across Southern California and beyond. **Día de los Muertos** celebrations in cities such as Santa Ana, Anaheim, and San Juan Capistrano have become major annual events, combining visual art, music, dance, and traditional food to honor Latino heritage and attract large, multigenerational audiences. Orange County is also home to one of the largest Vietnamese populations outside Vietnam, and **Little Saigon’s Tết** (Lunar New Year) Festival in Westminster is among the region’s most significant cultural gatherings, drawing hundreds of thousands of attendees for parades, performances, and night markets. Little Arabia in Anaheim, officially recognized as a cultural district along Brookhurst Street, adds another important dimension to the county’s festival and cultural tourism landscape, hosting Arab and Middle Eastern cultural celebrations that highlight music, dance, cuisine, and traditions from across the region, like the recent **Silk Road Festival**. Korean cultural festivals, K-pop events, and heritage celebrations (particularly in cities such as Buena Park, Fullerton, and Irvine) reflect the county’s strong Korean American presence. At a countywide scale, venues like the Great Park in Irvine increasingly host large multicultural festivals and are preparing to welcome the Orange County Asian American Museum, which will further anchor Asian American history, art, and storytelling as a regional cultural draw. Together with Filipino, Persian, African American, Indigenous, and Pacific Islander cultural events held throughout the county, these festivals reinforce Orange County’s identity as a place where cultural diversity is not only lived but celebrated, driving repeat visitation, supporting small businesses, and strengthening cultural tourism as a year-round economic engine.



Orange County’s cultural tourism portfolio is anchored by a wide range of **MUSEUMS AND HISTORIC SITES** that interpret art, science, history, and place. The **Orange County Museum of Art (OCMA)** at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts campus has quickly become a major regional draw, offering free admission to rotating exhibitions of modern and contemporary art that attract visitors from across Southern California and beyond. In Irvine, the **Great Park** is evolving into a significant cultural destination,



with museums and interpretive spaces that highlight aviation history, Orange County’s agricultural past, and community-driven exhibitions connected to the region’s growth and diversity. Santa Ana’s **Bowers Museum** remains one of the county’s most nationally recognized institutions, presenting internationally touring

exhibitions alongside deep collections focused on world cultures. In Garden Grove, **The Cube** (formerly Discovery Cube Orange County) draws families and school groups from across the region year-round with hands-on science, technology, and environmental exhibits that support both tourism and education. Complementing these larger institutions, **OC Parks Heritage Parks**, including **Heritage Hill Historical Park**, **Old Orange County Courthouse**, and **Irvine Ranch Historic Park**, preserve and activate historic structures through tours, reenactments, festivals, and educational programming. They are complemented by other historic downtowns in Fullerton and San Clemente, house museums, historic cultural centers, and 134 properties with national or state historic designations. Together, these museums and historic sites broaden Orange County’s visitor appeal beyond leisure travel, offering cultural depth that supports overnight stays, school travel, and repeat visitation while preserving the county’s layered history.

FOOD has become one of the most accessible gateways into cultural tourism in Orange County, where the region’s diverse communities have created a culinary tour of the world through one’s taste buds. Cesar Chavez said, “If you really want to make a friend, go to someone’s house and eat with him.” Visitors make friends easily in Orange County. They can explore vibrant Latino food cultures through family-owned taquerias, panaderías, and regional Mexican specialties centered in cities like Santa Ana and Anaheim. Then one can experience Little Saigon’s Vietnamese offerings such as pho, bánh mì, and traditional coffee culture. A short drive North on Brookhurst showcases Little Arabia’s markets, bakeries, and restaurants, with tastes of Persian, Lebanese, and other Mediterranean traditions. Continuing north on Brookhurst, we come to Korean barbecue houses and bakeries in Northwest Orange County that reflect the region’s growing Korean community. Anthony Bourdain said, “Food may not be the answer to world peace, but it’s a start.” And it is a delicious way to learn about a place one visits.

MAKING ART is an important part of the OC Cultural Tourism picture... motion picture that is. Orange County has long played a supporting role in Southern California’s film and television industry, benefiting from its proximity to Hollywood and the region’s extensive production infrastructure. Portions of north Orange County fall within the historic Thirty-Mile Zone (TMZ), a 30-mile radius used by film and television unions to define the standard local production area. Locations within this zone allow studios to film without incurring additional travel and accommodation costs for crews, making nearby communities attractive for on-location shoots. Locations just out of the TMZ may still qualify with shuttles from a TMZ location. As a result, beaches, historic neighborhoods, and modern urban settings have served as convenient backdrops for commercials, television episodes, and feature films. The region’s varied landscapes, from coastal bluffs and harbors to suburban streets and civic centers, provide filmmakers with a diverse range of visual settings while supporting local economic activity through permits, hospitality, and production services. Favorite locations of celebrated films become tourist attractions for fans.



Cultural tourism is more than aesthetic—it’s economic. According to **Americans for the Arts’ 2023 “Arts & Economic Prosperity 6” study**, nonprofit arts and culture in Orange County generated significant economic activity, supporting nearly 5,000 jobs and producing more than \$50 million in annual tax revenue. This underscores that cultural events and institutions attract visitors whose expenditures on dining, lodging, and local services pump dollars into the regional economy. The statewide **Otis Report on the Creative Economy**, produced by *Otis College of Art and Design* in partnership with economic research firms, is one of the most authoritative analyses of how creative industries contribute to jobs, wages, and economic output in California. While the statewide report doesn’t break out every statistic by Orange County alone, it provides clear context for the scale, wage levels, and trends affecting creative employment in OC as part of the Los Angeles–Orange County region. Importantly, many highly-paid, skilled careers are rooted in OC’s cultural ecosystem, from culinary chefs creating destination dining experiences to union actors, designers, and production crews working in local theaters and touring productions. Even roles in entertainment tech and design, such as those at Disney Imagineering, Blizzard Entertainment (Irvine’s maker of top video games to the tune of \$2.01B annually), and other creative enterprises, defy the “starving artist” stereotype by offering well-paid professional opportunities. These cultural industries help diversify the workforce and cultivate talent pipelines for future generations.

Cultural tourism in Orange County is a dynamic and multifaceted contributor to both community life and economic vitality. From art festivals and ethnic celebrations to world-class performing arts venues and educational programs, OC’s cultural landscape enriches visitors and residents alike and supports a diverse workforce. Through continued investment and celebration of cultural expressions, Orange County stands as a compelling model of how the arts fuel tourism, job growth, and community identity.

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EMERGING TRENDS: Microtourism & Cooperative Enterprises

By Zoot Velasco

Just over a year ago, my wife and I went to the Yucatan for our anniversary. It was on my bucket list because Yucatan food is my favorite Mexican food. These are recipes from the ancient Mayans, handed down from generation to generation and still made today. My favorite of these is a pork dish called *Cochinita pibil*. As the name suggests, it's a young pig marinated in sour orange and annatto, cooked in a hole in the ground, and served as a taco on a freshly made corn tortilla with pickled onions and a habanero salsa. Eating the best version of this is a religious experience. In trying to learn how to cook it, I discovered microtourism. Some Mayan grandmas with tech-savvy grandkids have YouTube channels with over 4 million followers watching them cook their recipes. Many of them are now consultants to chefs worldwide from their ranchitos in the country. They are featured in Netflix food documentaries. And for those who will pay, one can go to their house and learn directly from the master as they cook, then eat the food of the gods with them, and pay \$500 US and up for the privilege. And don't get mad at me because I am one of those tourists. It was my favorite thing I did on that trip. Worth more to me than all the theme parks, beach trips, or poolside margaritas. And my money did not go to a large corporation or marketing. It went to a grandma keeping her culture alive. But in the process, I invested a lot of money in the Yucatán economy that week.

If people are familiar with microtourism at all, it's usually thought of as a practice in developing nations or marginalized communities that presents local culture to tourists or promotes environmental awareness.

However, microtourism is happening everywhere, leveling the playing field for small local entrepreneurs, including here in Orange County.

Two of Jobs First Tourism Pilot Programs (which we will be reporting on in future newsletters), both from *Cooperacion Santa Ana*, are based on community-based tourism (CBT) cooperatives, also known in the past decade as microtourism and ecotourism enterprises. CBTs have increasingly been adopted as a strategy worldwide for local community development, equitable distribution of benefits, and sustainable livelihoods. Local communities—especially Indigenous peoples, ethnic communities, and marginalized groups—are developing cooperative social enterprises that balance economic opportunity with environmental stewardship and community well-being.



Tourism's rapid growth often focuses on profit and can exclude host communities from decision-making and benefits. CBT counters these trends by placing local people at the core of the tourism process, with communities benefiting directly from economic gains and cultural preservation through inclusive decision-making and ownership. CBT has been linked to improvements in livelihoods, local capacity, and cultural integrity when community stakeholders participate in governance structures.

However, sustainable community tourism cannot rely solely on unregulated market forces. Alternative organizational models such as *community land trusts*, *cooperatives*, and *mission-driven social enterprises* help balance social justice, ecological protection, and cultural autonomy.

Community land trusts (CLTs) are nonprofit, community-based corporations that own land in trust for community benefit while leasing it long-term to residents, cooperatives, or enterprises. CLTs separate land ownership from buildings, allowing long-term affordability and community stewardship of land and associated economic activities. CLTs' long-term land stewardship addresses one of tourism's major tensions: the displacement of owner-operators due to rising housing costs. Governance is typically tripartite, including community residents, broader neighborhood interests, and public/nonprofit actors. This structure enables democratic governance and *shared stewardship* of land and housing assets.

CLT models originated with tribal governments but have now spread widely. While California Native American reservations are not generally CLTs, they operate on the same principles. Altadena, CA, is establishing a CLT now in response to the Eaton Fire to prevent developers from acquiring local land. While most CLT research orbits housing, the model's emphasis on community land control and equitable asset sharing is highly applicable to tourism, where resident operators face land price inflation and displacement. CLT structures can help anchor microtourism enterprises and homestay owners by reducing speculative pressures and ensuring stable occupancy as tourism activity grows. By retaining land as a community asset, CLTs can enable owner-operators and worker cooperatives to base their operations on secure, affordable tenure rather than insecure short-term leases or market rents. This model is especially valuable in tourism-exposed rural and urban fringe areas facing gentrification. This is the case in our pilot with *Cooperacion Santa Ana*, which is partnering with a CLT, *THRIVE Santa Ana*.

Cooperatives are organizations where *members collectively own and democratically govern economic enterprises*, pooling resources, sharing risks, and distributing benefits equitably. In tourism, cooperatives may operate accommodations, guiding services, transportation, restaurants, markets, micro-farms, resorts, or tours under collective branding and governance, ensuring profits stay within the community. Cooperative networks can expand local economic footprint and increase competitive capacity without external corporate ownership.

Such cooperatives are proliferating worldwide, with better Corporate Social Responsibility models than those of large-scale operations. They can reduce the supply chain, increase incentives, adopt a more holistic approach to workers' care, enhance cultural experiences for visitors, and reduce the carbon footprint. Many US-based cooperatives operate as 501(c) (3) not-for-profit organizations, meaning profits are reinvested in the cooperative, including our own *Cooperacion Santa Ana*.

We see indigenous tourist cooperatives here in California with tribal gaming. Indigenous tourism enterprises often integrate *equitable benefit distribution, environmental stewardship, and cultural practices* within business operations. This includes *community funds, shared training, and collaborative environmental protection practices* that reinforce communal well-being beyond individual gain.

After sharing land, Indigenous communities worldwide are leading **ecotourism** enterprises through *community governance and cultural stewardship*. For example, ecolodges like *Chalalán Ecolodge* in Bolivia's Madidi National Park are fully owned and operated by Indigenous San José de Uchupiamonas,



ensuring revenue flows directly to community members, and governance aligns with cultural values and environmental protection. A visitor package there may include boat tours, treks through “the world’s lungs,” and local guides sharing messages about how the region combats climate change. Similarly, the *La Ruta Moskitia Ecotourism Alliance* provides ecotourism products and services within the Rio Platano Biosphere Reserve in Honduras. They direct the financial benefits of sustainable tourism initiatives to local communities. Sustainable tourism practices can help prevent locals from overhunting, overfishing,

and overusing the land in the bio reserve. The Alliance began with support from Rare, a conservation and wildlife protection organization, and the United Nations. These are just two examples, but alliances like this exist now in most countries and tourist regions. Ecotourism is not relegated to indigenous people or cooperatives, either. See our article from last issue on *OC Coastkeeper*.

Social Enterprises come in two models: nonprofits and Certified B Corporations, which are for-profit entities certified to meet high standards of social and environmental performance, accountability, and transparency.

Nonprofits, including all four of our Jobs First tourism pilot programs at *Cooperacion Santa Ana, RevHub* and *Store One* in Anaheim, earn income that is used to further their cause/mission. For example, Store One has a mission to “to support food business startups and build the local culinary workforce, while

also providing a place for the community to gather and access related services.” While appealing to tourists in a city built on tourism, they also serve their mission of helping incubate local food-based businesses while creating a community gathering spot in a neighborhood on the rise.

In tourism, **B Corps** adopt *triple-bottom-line* strategies (*The four Ps*) that balance economic returns (Profit) with community benefits, worker care (People), transparency, ecological sustainability (Planet), and managed Progress. Examples of local B Corps in Tourism and Recreation include well-known ones like *Patagonia* (based in Ventura) and less-known success stories like *Parks Project*, based in LA, which creates park-themed merchandise and donates millions to support U.S. National Parks, thereby directly benefiting the park tourism experience.



Networks such as *B Tourism* unite travel-related B Corps to “collectively advance sustainable and inclusive tourism practices,” fostering knowledge sharing, community investment, and regenerative tourism projects. Companies like *Inquisitive Traveller* demonstrate how certified travel agencies embed *fair labor practices, community engagement, and environmental contribution* into their core operations, including support for homestays and community-based experiences that benefit local hosts.

Combining CLTs, cooperatives, indigenous governance, community-based nonprofits, B Corps, and networks constitute a multi-stakeholder governance system in which land, enterprise, and community development are interlinked. This ensures local people not only benefit financially but also retain decision-making power and cultural autonomy. These CBT networks are driving systemic change worldwide through micro-tourism.

Micro-tourism cooperatives are succeeding and growing worldwide, including:

- South Korea (Jeju Island - *Haenyeo*): A community of women divers who dive without oxygen tanks, preserving unique cultural heritage and providing income, attracting international visitors.
- Mexico (*Much Kaab*): A women's cooperative producing honey-based beauty products, supported by the Travel Foundation, selling to hotels and empowering rural villages.
- Peru (*Chincho*): Quechua women's weavers cooperatives demonstrating traditional dyeing and weaving, selling textiles and offering cooking classes, directly benefiting highland communities.
- Uganda (*Karatunga*): Focuses on community-based tourism in the Karamoja region, showcasing unique local culture, cultural festivals, and cycling safaris.
- France (*Okra-Roussillon*): A cultural cooperative formed around an old ochre (a natural indigenous pigment) factory, bringing together workers, artisans, and locals to share knowledge and maintain local heritage.
- Canada (*Vallée Bras-du-Nord*): A cooperative committed to sustainable tourism, protecting the environment, helping hard-to-employ young workers “with difficulty” and integrating principles of local stewardship into their operations.



These are just some of the myriad examples. And micro-tourism cooperatives are taking off right here in Orange County. Our two pilot programs with the cooperative, *Cooperacion Santa Ana* (CSA), are a shining light in this field. CSA is a non-profit organization that supports the development of cooperatives, offering an introductory course, “CooperAcción,” technical assistance, and business incubation from start to launch. As a worker’s cooperative, they state on their website that they are “a values-driven business that places the well-being of workers and the community at the heart of their purpose. They are owned and controlled by their workers.” They also state that in Santa Ana, “we have cooperatives in childcare, construction, consulting, food and beverage, and urban agriculture.”

CSA operates a micro-farm called “La Colmena,” or “The Hive” in English, which is open Thursday-Sunday with a coffee shop in the center, as this report is being written. The other pilot is a Market of restaurant stalls modeled after the very successful Mercado La Paloma in Los Angeles. Both projects will be reported in depth in later newsletters, along with RevHub and Store One; however, La Colmena is now open and should be visited. One can turn a corner in busy Santa Ana, among mini-malls, and suddenly be transported to a coffeehouse and patio in the center of a microfarm, with hand-woven blankets sold next door by the artist.

Local people are actively creating *inclusive, community-owned tourism ecosystems* by leveraging proven models, including CLTs, cooperatives, social enterprise certification, and Indigenous governance frameworks. These structures help redistribute tourism benefits, protect land and culture, and ensure equitable economic opportunity while fostering environmental stewardship. As tourism continues to evolve, these models offer scalable pathways for *equitable, community-led sustainability*.

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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!

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In our next edition, we will continue with Part II of our four-part series on Educational Challenges in Orange County Tourism with a discussion on the job pipeline and digital education!

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