

THE INSIGHTS BRIEFING

MAT-SU CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU CULTURAL & HERITAGE TOURISM INITIATIVE



February 2022

Presented By: US Cultural & Heritage Marketing Council

The Vantage Point of Cultural & Heritage Tourism

**PREPARED EXCLUSIVELY FOR:
THE MAT-SU CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU**

INTRODUCTION

SETTING THE STAGE

THE PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

The U.S. Cultural & Heritage Marketing Council (USCHMC) has been retained to collaborate on the critical cultural & heritage tourism initiative for the Mat-Su Convention & Visitors Bureau. The core objective of the collaboration included:

- Assessing the various aspects and attributes of the region's diverse cultural & heritage assets, experiences, and related partners.
- The initiative has also included the wider representation of the region's communities, tourism facing businesses and representatives throughout the Mat-Su Valley.
- This approach ensured a balanced viewpoint for collective information gathering, assessments and future engagements.

THE DISCOVERY INITIATIVES

The cultural & heritage program was developed by USCHMC throughout the 4th Quarter of 2021 and included the following direct connections and collaboration with the Mat-Su CVB, the region and business community:

- Facilitation of discovery meetings and discussions with Mat-Su CVB staff;
- Activation of two virtual Cultural & Heritage Tourism Town Hall Programs with 30+ tourism partners in attendance;
- Conducted a Mat-Su CVB culture heritage tourism survey for additional tourism partner insights, thoughts, and contributions;
- Facilitation of offline research and analysis of the region's current sales, marketing and tourism development mechanisms;
- Reviewed the 2021 tourism research assessment that Destination Analysts facilitated for Mat-Su CVB to bring context to the cultural & heritage tourism project.

The results of the noted 'Discovery Initiatives' brought forward unique perspectives, business insights, current barriers, possible obstacles and attributed opportunities that would frame the subsequent onsite program that was facilitated January 15-18, 2022.

THE DISCOVERY INSIGHTS

➤ CORE INSIGHTS

- At the center of the discovery phase was the central focus that cultural & heritage tourism opportunities for the Mat-Su Valley and the region's diverse assets have tremendous potential;
- The community expressed their support of engaging the cultural & heritage initiative
- Numerous constituents also shared their wanting to assess how the proposed Gateway Visitor Center will play a part in generating incremental visitors, dwell-time in market and overall tourism growth and related spend;
- The opportunity to embolden an inclusive representation of the diversity of the region's people, places and experiences was also a common theme, as will be noted in further details in the Key Findings section;
- The impact of tourism to the region; and the challenges of reopening, rebuilding, and ensuring sustainability was also addressed;
- At the core, there is a willingness to grow synergistic collaborations at the intersections of "Communities – Cultures – Commerce" that will strengthen this effort for the Mat-Su Valley and the Mat-Su CVB as a champion of the effort.

➤ THE CLOUDS INSIGHTS

- The survey that was conducted provided the unique opportunity to create the Mat-Su Valley Word Cloud. The baseline question to respondents was
 - *"From your point of view - what words or phrases come to mind when you think of the arts, culture, and heritage related experiences of The Mat-Su Valley?"*

The results as noted below reflect the key themes that were shared – with significant emphasis on Native, Farming, History, Culture, Denali, Indigenous and Agriculture.



Provided By: Mat-Su CVB

MEETINGS IN THE MAT-SU VALLEY

USCHMC had the opportunity to connect directly with numerous tourism business and local constituents as a part of the Culture & Heritage Tourism Program. This provided real-time context to the variety of cultural experiences, heritage assets and historic sites in key areas of the Valley. It further informed the sentiment of the current tourism climate, pandemic related impacts, recovery plans and opportunities to consider forward.

This meetings, site visits and experience visits included:

- The Palmer Museum & Visitor Center
- The Musk Ox Farm
- Chickaloon Native Village
- Talkeenta: Schoolhouse Museum & Community Insights`
- Willow: Denali Brewing Company
- Willow: Iditarod Training Facility
- Wasilla Museum & Visitor Center
- Palmer: The Colony Inn
- Regional Overview

CULTURAL & HERITAGE TOURISM PROJECT COLLABORATIVE MEETING

Activation: Tuesday, January 18, 2022:

Mat-Su CVB gathered a diverse representation of the Region's tourism community – as part of the destination's intent to have an open and inclusive approach to the critical work associated with the developing Mat-Su CVB Cultural & Heritage Tourism Project.

In attendance, in-person and virtually:

LIST ROSTER HERE (obtain the list from the Mat-Su CVB team)

THE PROGRAM

USCHMC facilitated the half-day program that included a comprehensive interactive presentation and associated discussions surrounding the value propositions of a succinct cultural & heritage tourism marketing approach. The program was structured with three key components:

1. **PRESENTATION BY USCHMC FRAMING CULTURAL & HERITAGE TOURISM:**
 - a. Overview of cultural & heritage tourism;
 - b. The creative economy connections to the businesses and cultural assets of a community/region;
 - c. Insights into developing a collaborative approach to cultural & heritage marketing programs, tourism initiatives and product development.

2. THE GROUP DISCUSSIONS

- a. Key sub-groups established to delve deeper into the various topics for the day;
- b. Co-facilitated by Mat-Su CVB staff & USCHMC.

3. SHARING OF INSIGHTS

- a. The program elements from each sub-group were captured and shared with the wider group;
- b. Discussions and further ideas also addressed also incorporated into the findings of the day.

BREAKOUT PROGRAM INSIGHTS

The collective group had the opportunity to engage directly with one another through interactive dialogue and concurrent break-out discussions - centering upon three signature areas:

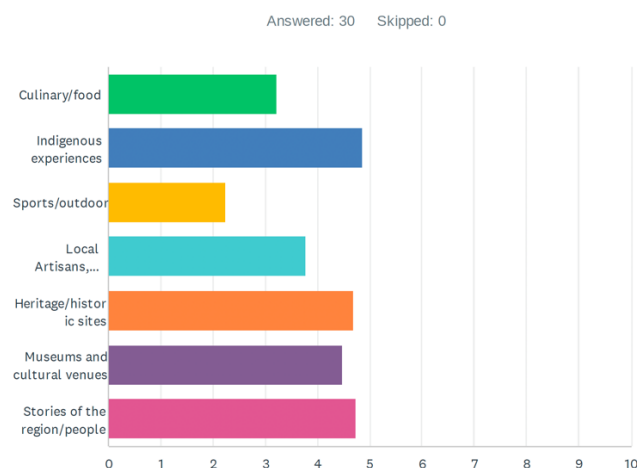
- Indigenous Storytelling & Programs
- Museums & Experiences
- Agritourism & Food Culture

The break-out sessions were framed from the Mat-Su CVB Cultural & Heritage Tourism Survey that was conducted in December 2021/January 2022. This survey provided the context to related themes of interest by the respondents.

Sample Survey Graph:

Representative responses to core thematic areas for development

Q2 In consideration of the key “ingredients of cultural heritage tourism” – in what order of importance would you place the following cultural tourism elements:



Provided By: Mat-Su CVB

THE KEY INSIGHTS: PROGRAM BREAK-OUT SESSIONS

The following insights were gathered during the program sessions, and provide the timely context for further review, assessment, and development. And where appropriate, the insights can be incorporated in numerous aspects of Mat-Su CVB's overall strategic plan – with the potential of activating a *cultural & heritage working* group for the region. The insights are not presented in any order – and are meant to be reviewed and further researched in the subsequent phases of this project.

GROUP 1: AGRITOURISM / FOOD CULTURE

This sub-group convened to discuss incorporating the regions key elements of the food culture experiences in the Valley; with a view towards Indigenous food culture. The group also discussed eco-tourism opportunities.

1. The Farming focus does not fully embody Indigenous history
 - a. Implement garden features that showcase native plants;
 - b. Include interpretive signs and educational programs;
 - i. Sustainable harvesting
 - ii. How these plants were used
 - iii. Symbolisms, importance of native plants
 - c. The Valley has guilds that can help with classes or lessons about harvesting;
 - d. It would be important to share this knowledge with existing tour groups;
2. Cultural education needs to start with residents and existing tour businesses to effectively be carried to the region's visitors.
 - a. Establish a "Steward of the Land" pledge business can adopt and participate in - and share with their guests/customers;
 - b. Incorporate Indigenous food culture and plant knowledge in a food passport
 - i. An inclusive passport would spotlight how diverse the region's food culture is and encourage visitors to experience all of it.
 - ii. The passport could also include a map with relevant interest points
 - iii. There are 31+ villages/towns in the Valley. A passport indicating what not to miss in all these communities can also encourage longer stays and longer dwell times.
 - iv.
 - c. Heritage Trails education
 - i. Create an outdoor interactive experience with those features;
 - ii. A trail program that teaches along the way - as you go;
 - iii. Establish training for trail guides needed - education starts at home.

GROUP 2: MUSEUMS & CULTURAL VENUES & EXPERIENCES

This group discussed the various attributes of the cultural venues, heritage sites and experiences throughout the region. This exercise enabled the group to broadly assess the various attributes associated with the cultural assets for the region, while also delving into the core opportunities across the cultural segments.

IDENTIFIED KEY CULTURAL EXPERIENCES INCLUDED:

- Palmer Museum
- Wasilla Museum
- Museum of Transportation
- Alpine Historical Museum
- Musk Ox Farm
- Rebarchek Agricultural Park/Farm
- Mining Site – Independence Mine
- Willow Log Cabin Preservation
- Talkeetna Museums
- Knik Historical Museum
- Talkeetna Ranger Station
- The Reindeer Farm
- Tours of Hidden Palmer
- Self-Guided Tours of Talkeetna
- Kahiltna Birchworks
- Experimental Farming Experiences
- Iditarod Historical Trails
- Mat-Su Glaciers Tours & Rafting

OPPORTUNITIES & IDEAS & CONCEPTS

- Develop an interactive App for the region that provides planning and information, whether for a visitor is researching for their travels or if they are already in the region and need to know more.
 - Include an interactive, real-time itinerary building tool in this application.
- Develop and further expand the sixteen (16) trails so that the collective listing is considered more a package experience.
 - Example: Menu options for selection of hotels + tours + museum admissions + a cultural site
- Collaborate as cultural partners in the region to network, education and cross-promote the tourism opportunities;
 - The concept of a collective draw to the Mat-Su Valley to increase dwell time in market.
- There is an opportunity to build a product & messaging around the “rugged individual” and how culture can lead beyond the outdoor adventures to amazing museums, cultural sites, and experiences.
- Develop an interactive map that provides the consumer/visitor with planning concepts;

Continued:

- Consider an App to filter more succinctly to experiences by number of hours, ages, prices, and locations;
- Create and enhance the cultural & heritage experiences and access for the community/region first; which will bolster and support the tourism connections for the Mat-Su Valley as a whole;
- Look at the synergies of key partners
 - IE: such as McKinley Princess Lodge; and the ability to develop new cultural packages to bolster visitation;
- The Mat-Su as a year-round destination needs to be reflective in the marketing engagements;
- Farm tours that optimize and grow the Winter seasonal business: greenhouse tours, seed exchanges, partner with the Chickaloon Tribal Village to prepare Indigenous meals in keeping with the agriculture and history of the region;
- Storytelling and authentic narratives are key.
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GROUP 3: INDIGENOUS STORYTELLING & PROGRAMS

This group discussed centered their discussions on the core attributes of the region's rich Indigenous heritage, history, and peoples. Further they assessed the current programs of engagement and community tourism connections that could bolster enhanced cultural & heritage tourism programming for The Mat-Su Valley's residents and visitors alike.

THE AUTHENTIC INDIGENOUS EXPERIENCES OF THE REGION

- There are 229+ Federally recognized Tribes in Alaska
- 13 Regional Alaska Native Corporations
- Indigenous Place Names:
 - Map and acknowledgment in the community
- Alaska Native Heritage Center has various established program offerings
- Knik Tribal Council is adding Dena'ina language information and cultural stories to interpretive signs and locations in the Mat-Su (Hunter Creek has a story).
 - Presenting via USPC codes for all visitors to access
- Settlers Bay trails, Paul Newman Memorial Trail, Swan Lake Trail at Mackentaz Elementary- Dena'ina names and interpretation on the trails
- Businesses should have Shem Pete Alaska book as a resource for learning
- Chickaloon Native Village has Cultural Interpreters
 - Friday Flings presentations through summer at Palmer Museum and Visitors Center
 - School presentations available
 - Presentations at Alpine Historical Park in Sutton for Salmonberry Tours and others
 - Future cultural interpretation of archaeological sites in the Mat-Su
- Palmer Museum and Visitors Center offers walking tours of Palmer throughout the summer/seasonally
- Knik Tribal Council partners with the Wasilla Museum
- Knik Tribal Council is presenting in the local school system – connecting the community
- Knik Tribe is developing a database of the trail systems that have Dena'ina interpretation;
 - Details at KnikTribe.org

Continued:

OPPORTUNITIES & IDEAS & CONCEPTS

- Local, Indigenous cultural awareness training for businesses (more widespread);
- Request of a showcase of 'how we live' as Alaska Native Peoples;
- Need a VISUAL connection to Indigenous Peoples of this place in downtown Palmer (and probably also Wasilla, Talkeetna, and other communities in Mat-Su)
 - Possible mural of People/Culture/History of the place
 - Possible seasonal wheel
- Maybe in downtown Palmer (a place with a good vista) have interpretation of the Dena'ina and Ahtna placenames of mountains that can be seen from that site;
- Musk Ox Farm wants to work with Tribes (Chickaloon and Knik) to develop the museum at the Musk Ox Farm;
- Database of Alaska Native Artists for selling crafts;
- Database of locals making food and medicine from local plants;
- Calendar of Indigenous and cultural events in the greater community;
- Reminder that Indigenous Peoples ARE still here, so the discussion needs to be present-tense not 'past-tense';
- The local Tribes need funding to keep staff members hired to provide cultural interpretation in the community and to visitors
 - Partnerships need to be further developed within the community to help fund the Tribes' Cultural Interpreters/Educators

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OBSERVATIONS: USCHMC'S KEY INSIGHTS

As part of the program of work, USCHMC engaged with numerous areas of the region and observed first-hand the communities from a visitor perspective; which was a critical part of the discovery phase to further frame insights for consideration.

This includes the following:

DIGITAL FRONT DOOR: CONSUMER PERSPECTIVES:

As the work towards a robust and measurable Cultural & Heritage Tourism Marketing program takes shape for the region, it is also critical to engage partners to optimize digital marketing optimization, ensure content is relevant - and visitor focused messaging is curated for seasonal focus where applicable.

- Applications to support the process are available;
- Going beyond blogs and social media influencers – to cultural tourism ambassadors and supportive tourism partners.

MARKETING MATERIALS: REFLECTIVE OF THE VISITORS YOU WANT TO ATTRACT & WELCOME TO THE REGION:

The balanced approach of marketing research, visitor sentiment and community engagement come together in the marketing materials (print & digital) for Mat-Su CVB.

- There is a core opportunity to build upon Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging;
- The acknowledgement of history, heritage and of place can be further shared;
- Utilization of the survey results and recent research from Destination Analysts, in tandem with Board engagement to inform strategic marketing plans.
- Develop a Cultural Heritage Tourism Working Group (details in recommendations/next steps) to ensure continuity for long-term.

COMMUNITY SENTIMENT: LOCAL PERSPECTIVES

During the project's discovery phases, USCHMC had the opportunity to utilize the virtual town halls, community partner calls as further context to the project's core potential. The following represent various perspectives – from a local tourism business point-of-view:

- The region is overlooked; should not be a drive-thru to Denali;
- We need to have the right people telling the right stories;
- Tribal connections abound and are under-represented;
- Inclusivity in marketing and product engagement is needed;
- The seasonal content and focus – as a region for all-season tourism is key;
- The rural expanse, connected to farming, animals and wildlife is an asset;
- Traditional life ways are an area to share, develop for sustainable tourism;
- The “lower-48” tour guides don’t understand the region;
- The people and the stories are the core assets of The Mat-Su Valley;
- Food connects: Growing, harvesting, production, culinary focus, micro-brewing and more;
- Glacier experiences and Iditarod programs can be packaged differently;
- Visitor centers are offered in some capacity in each community of the Mat-Su Valley, though a central visitor welcome center could bolster dwell time in market;
- The culture and stories of the Mat-Su Valley, the Indigenous people and heritage perspectives are core to tourism connections.
- The Mat-Su Valley has the unique opportunity to reposition itself to the consumer that is more connected to sustainable, cultural and experiential tourism.

CRUISE EXCURSIONS: PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT & STORYTELLING REFRAMED

As a result of the pandemic's impact on the global cruise industry, and specifically Alaska's cruise passenger shore excursion programs for nearly two years, key insights that were shared by various partners includes the following:

- Cruise line passengers need to be educated to respect the land, communities they visit;
- Shore excursions need to be inclusive of the local heritage, history and stories of the Indigenous Peoples and wider communities;
- There is a direct thread to the sustainable tourism initiative and tourism service constraints in various rural areas of The Mat-Su Valley.



USCHMC: FORWARD RECOMMENDATIONS

The collective efforts associated with the Mat-Su CVB's Cultural & Heritage Tourism Initiative are best shaped via the diversity of insights, perspectives of partners, while maintaining a key focus on the shifting consumer sentiments to travel.

Within this briefing summary USCHMC would like to further share the following next steps and recommendations for consideration of the Mat-Su CVB. They include;

RECOMMENDATION #1

- Facilitate the internal debrief with USCHMC with Mat-Su CVB and Board of Directors to assess the core components of opportunity, shared collaborations, and applicable planning timelines.

RECOMMENDATION #2

- Develop the 'Cultural & Heritage Tourism Working Group' that can advise & inform the forward program of work bolstering the Mat-Su CVB's initiative to be a catalyst for inclusive cultural heritage tourism content, product, and experiences.

Recommendation #3

- Establish a 'Cultural & Heritage Educational Program' that provides Mat-Su CVB partners and tourism facing businesses with the key insights and tool-kit recommendations for their individual & collective activation.

In closing, USCHMC thanks the Mat-Su CVB for the opportunity to collaborate on this dynamic and transformative initiative with the Mat-Su Valley and tourism community.

Thank you!

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U.S. Cultural & Heritage Marketing Council

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