

Carter County

Tourism Development Plan



2021 Carter County Tourism Assessment

INTRODUCTION

The Carter County Tourism Assessment is a roadmap to help move Carter County forward over the next five years and to harness its true tourism potential. The Chickasaw Country team was tasked with evaluating the current state of tourism assets, the untapped tourism resources and what tourism resources are needed to increase visitation within the county. This was accomplished by working with the major stakeholders of the county. The list of stakeholders includes cities, Chambers, CVB's, DMO's and local businesses.

Chickasaw Country is a destination marketing organization, within the Chickasaw Nation Department of Commerce, promoting both Chickasaw-owned and non-Chickasaw tourism assets within the 13 counties in south-central Oklahoma known as the Chickasaw Nation. Chickasaw Country promotes tourism to local, regional, national and international visitors in hopes of generating exposure, garnering interest and driving visits to the region.

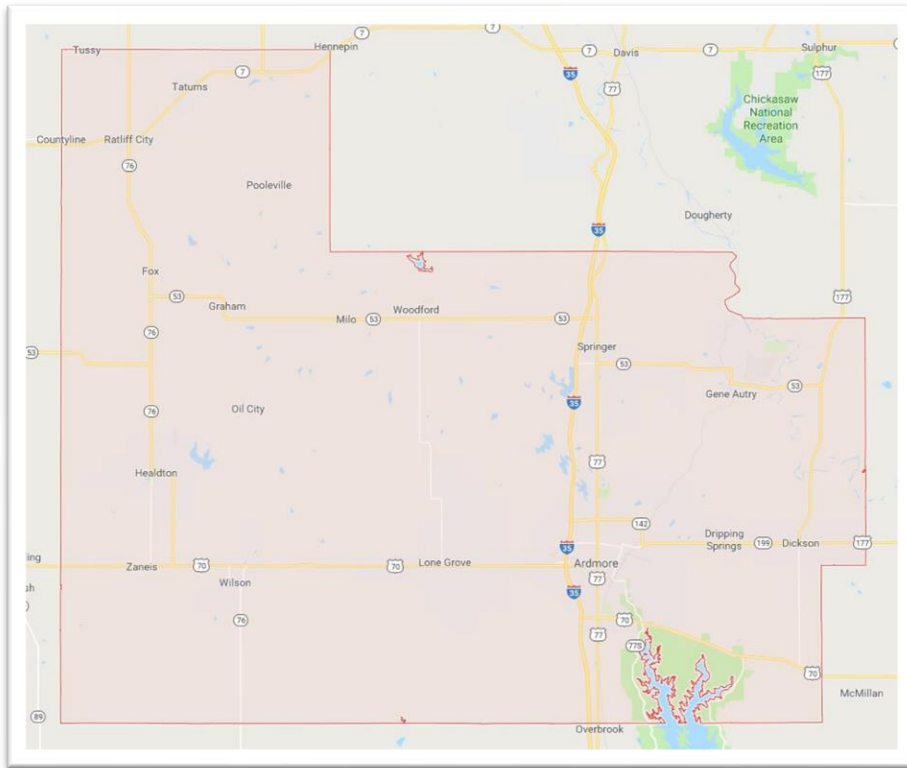
This assessment – and the related goals and strategies – is the result of the Chickasaw Country team's extensive conversation with stakeholders and Carter County leadership. The planning process used to develop this final document was open and transparent, with stakeholders encouraged to provide both positive and negative feedback about the current state of tourism within their region.

It is important to highlight that the plan was developed during an economically challenging time, for Carter County and stakeholders within both the public and private sectors. To help anticipate financial and time commitments required in implementation, the plan includes recommended phasing. Strategies in the early years are intended to ensure a smooth transition towards the fulfillment of this newly focused tourism strategy.

The factors outlined below are important in context to the plan and its strategic direction. These factors include a snapshot of the current Carter County tourism industry, prioritization of overnight visitors versus day trippers, the role of tourism in economic development, the characteristics of a highly functioning tourism system and the value of diverse assets.

County Snapshot

As part of the Carter County Tourism Assessment, the Chickasaw Nation Tourism team considered the current state of the tourism market within Carter County. Available data indicates Carter County employed 1,750 tourism workers in 2018 and attracted \$124.8 million dollars in visitor spending ^[1]. This assessment seeks to continue the growth of the county's tourism industry by building upon its current strengths and potential tourism assets.



This image represents a map of Carter County ^[4]

Current County Population: 48,111 (2019) ^[3]

- Age 0-5 6.9%
- Age 6-18 24.9%
- Age 19-64 51%
- Ages 65+ 17.2%

- Female 51.2%
- Male 48.8%

Current Economic Resources: ^[1-9]

- Agriculture
- Energy, Oil & Gas
- Manufacturers & Distribution Centers
- Education
- Medical
- Trucking
- Parks & Recreation
- Retail

Current County Unemployment Rate: ^[5]

- April 2021 4.4%
- April 2020 16.9%
- April 2019 2.7%

Current Tourism Related Organizations: ^[7-9]

- City of Ardmore Chamber of Commerce
- Healdton Chamber of Commerce
- Lone Grove Chamber of Commerce
- Wilson Chamber of Commerce
- Chickasaw Country Marketing Association
- Lake Murray State Park
- Ardmore Main Street Authorities
- Create Ardmore
- Ardmore Tourism Authority

Cities with Tourism Product:

- Ardmore
- Gene Autry
- Lone Grove
- Healdton
- Wilson
- Dickson
- Springer

Overnight Spending

This assessment addresses leisure, business- and event-based visitors who come from outside of the County. Visitors may come from a nearby county, surrounding states or internationally. Their stay may range from a few hours to a few days per visit. According to 2018 Dean Runyan Associates data, the average overnight spend per person in Carter County is \$79 per trip while a day tripper contributes only \$180 to the local economy. ^[1]

Because of the significant difference in the economic value of an overnight visitor versus a multiple night visitor, the ultimate focus of this plan is to generate additional overnight stays and encourage travelers to stay longer, experience more and return to Carter County.

Much of the plan focuses on cross-promotion between experiences. It creates compelling, yet convenient, ways for visitors to see more than the main attractions that inspired their visit. This portion of the plan also serves to strengthen attractions for day travelers visiting Carter County.

Tourism is Economic Development

Tourism is the third economic driver for the state of Oklahoma creating 103,600 jobs in 2018. Domestic and international travelers to Oklahoma spent \$9.6 billion in 2018 and generated \$1.1 billion to federal, state and local governments. The tourism industry in Carter County represented approximately 5.2% of the County's total employment in 2018 and paid more than \$31.68 million in total wages in 2018. Tourism jobs are valuable because they provide employment opportunities for a multitude of people. Some will advance up the career ladder in tourism, moving from entry-level service positions to higher-paying jobs while others will build on the skills and experience they gain in the tourism sector to branch out into other sectors.

Tourism brings in monetary funds that would otherwise never enter the local economy. In Carter County, visitors who spend money at tourist attractions, restaurants, overnight accommodations, gas stations and other related suppliers of tourism-related goods or services bring new currency to the area. Many of these funds get circulated within Carter County's economy, leading to additional jobs and income for residents. Many tourism investments work to attract and serve visitors while contributing to the quality of life for Carter County residents.

Highly Functioning Tourism System

The assessment builds on the successes of previous tourism efforts put forth by the stakeholders within Carter County, Chickasaw Country and the Chickasaw Nation. Strategies will be established to build on the strengths and weaknesses of Carter County. As a result of this planned approach, Carter County is expected to grow as a highly functioning tourism system. At the end of 2021 or five years (2026) the tourism system should include:

- Strong assets that attract visitors to Carter County and encourage them to stay longer, explore more and return often.
- Create/Update/Maintain the county's brand or image that builds on its strengths in a genuine and powerful way.
- Effectively market and promote the county's tourism efforts by cross-promotion.
- Strong supporting infrastructure and services, including overnight accommodations, restaurants and signage.

- A collaborative and coordinated network of partners in the public, private and non-profit sectors working together to strengthen the county's tourism market for the benefit of all.

STRATEGIC APPROACH

The strategic approach and foundational direction for this county's assessment is to focus visitor attention toward the anchor clusters and anchor attractions while simultaneously working to enhance and extend the visitor experience through sustaining clusters and sustaining assets.

The strategic approach begins with performing a SWOT Analysis of the county's current tourism climate. Carter County focuses promotional efforts around current strengths and opportunities of the county and establish goals and strategies to overcome weaknesses and threats. By performing this analysis, we are able to identify anchor clusters and anchor attractions within the county. The promotion of anchor and sustaining clusters is aided by cooperative marketing, maps, tourism packages, promotions, signage and technology-guided tourism. To support this approach, the plan outlines the need for an improved tourism infrastructure and refined tourism funding.

SWOT Analysis

As a Destination Marketing Organization, Chickasaw Country does not own all of the tourism assets within Chickasaw Country. It is vital that Chickasaw Country portrays realistic expectations on what this region has to offer which is why it is important for us to understand the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats affecting our ability to attract visitors.

Strengths:

- Proximity to lakes
- Camping
- Hunting and fishing
- Developing accommodations
- Historic Main Street
- Historical museums
- Performing arts
- Meeting and convention space available
- Mature communities
- Graduate and undergraduate opportunities available
- Parks and recreational areas
- Proximity to I-35
- Less than 100 miles to DFW Airport
- Growing marketing efforts
- Golf courses

Weaknesses:

- Limited number of activities for adults, families, and children
- Surrounding towns of Ardmore have limited attractions
- Limited employment opportunities
- Limited group travel and experiences
- Limited night life
- Limited number of festivals/large events

Opportunities:

- Ardmore Historical Main Street events
- Centrally located on I-35 between Dallas and Oklahoma City
- Developing roadways (Exit 30 off of I-35)
- Ability to partner with surrounding locations for complete destination visitor experiences
- Lake Murray, Lake Texoma, and Arbuckle Mountains are within 45 mins
- Undeveloped land for attractions and activities
- Ardmore Municipal Airport
- Available real estate for downtown accommodations
- Amtrak connection

Threats:

- High crime rate statistics in the Ardmore area
- Growing population with limited number of employment opportunities
- Tornado/severe weather season and drought
- Difficulty gaining interest in business growth
- Limited interest in employment

Anchor & Sustaining Descriptions

Anchor clusters and anchor attractions were identified by the Chickasaw Country team through stakeholder interviews. These meetings and interviews revealed assets for which Carter County is best known as well as the most popular tourism draws. The Chickasaw Country team defines anchor clusters and attractions as those strong enough to attract large numbers of visitors from outside the county and those with built-in marketing infrastructure programs.

The list of anchor clusters includes:

- Tribal Assets
 - Gold Mountain Casino
 - Ardmore Community Center
 - Black Gold Casino
 - Chickasaw Travel Stop (Wilson)
 - Ardmore Medical Center
- Non-Tribal Assets ^[8]
 - Parks and Recreational Areas
 - Lakes
 - Ardmore City Lake
 - Lake Jean Neustadt
 - Mountain Lake
 - Lake Scott King
 - Lake Murray
 - Historical Museums
 - Healdton Oil Field Museum
 - Wilson Historical Museum
 - Greater Southwest Historical Museum
 - Eliza Cruce Hall Doll Museum
 - Military Memorial Museum
 - Gene Autry Oklahoma Museum

- Regional Park Festival of Lights (Ardmore)
- The Samuel Roberts Noble Foundation
- Charles B Goddard Center for Visual and Performing Arts
- Heartland Flyer
- Convention Center
- University Center of Southern Oklahoma
- Hardy Murphy Coliseum
- Southern Oklahoma Technology Center
- OSU Institute for Agricultural Biosciences

Accommodations	Number of Rooms	Average Weekend Occupancy %	Average Weekday Occupancy %	Average Cost
Hotels, Motels & Inns	1,650	72%	50%	\$71.65
Cabins & Lodging	71	88%	63%	\$250.00
RV's & Campgrounds	427	76%	59%	\$38.40

**Data collected as of July 2021 [10-36]*

Sustaining clusters and sustaining assets constitute additional places to visit, experience and engage within the community. These clusters are the reason to stay longer, explore off the beaten path and experience local living. The sustaining assets can be even stronger than its anchor assets that do not currently have the drawing power to get visitors to Carter County on their own. However, a few of the clusters and attractions listed as sustaining in this plan may evolve into future anchor attractions as they draw more attention and their marketing efforts grow.

The list of sustaining clusters includes:

- Tribal Assets:
 - First American Culture
- Non-Tribal Assets:
 - Atmosphere
 - Historic Main Street (Ardmore)
 - Ardmore Sports Complex
 - Carter County events
 - Lakes activities

Hidden Assets Identified

Hidden Assets were the third category of tourism assets identified in the strategic approach. Hidden assets are not well known and are closely connected with community life. The Chickasaw Country team identified places, people, culture and activities a tourist would consider ‘authentic’ and allow them the “live like a local.”

Through the hidden asset analysis, the Chickasaw Country team identified five (5) “new” assets. The analysis revealed a number of cultural, natural resource and sustainability events that would never surface through a conventional tourism assessment. The integration of these hidden assets with the more

significant attractions and assets has many benefits. Beyond building respect for the communities where tourism occurs, these benefits include:

- Deepening and creating more authentic visitor experiences.
- Bridging business travel with leisure travel.
- Creating additional funding streams for tourism, such as Preserve America grants or Heritage Tourism funds.
- Improving the financial success of small towns and natural resource assets.
- Expanding the overall market for tourism by bringing in new visitors.
- Linking current and new residents to the history and culture of the area.
- Leveraging local residents as tourism ambassadors for visiting friends and relatives.

The list of hidden assets includes:

- Tribal Assets:
 - First American Culture
- Non-Tribal Assets:
 - Gene Autry Museum
 - Create Ardmore, Art Group
 - Eliza Cruce Hall Doll Museum
 - Mountain Lake

Overview of Goal & Strategies

Goals

- Goal 1: Incorporate family-friendly activities within the community.
 - Strategy: Identify stakeholders willing to invest in and integrate family-friendly opportunities within community.
- Goal 2: Identify, create and promote tourism opportunities to drive visitation outside of Ardmore.
 - Strategy: Identify stakeholders and potential tourism assets to promote within surrounding areas.

TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IMPLEMENTATION

Goals, Strategies & Tasks

Goal 1: Incorporate family-friendly activities within the community.

Strategy: Identify stakeholders willing to invest in and integrate family-friendly opportunities within the community.

- Rationale – This goal and strategy is important to provide interactive, family-friendly opportunities where existing locations are limited.

- Approach – Determine family-friendly needs and potential locations for business/event opportunities. Identify stakeholders willing to invest/participate in development.
- Tasks – Identify potential locations, determine a plan of action or business model and execute strategy.
 - Timeline – Based on funding/earnings and willing stakeholders.
 - Resources – Community stakeholders, individuals, businesses, organizations and DMO’s.

Goal 2: Identify, create and promote tourism opportunities to drive visitation outside of Ardmore.

Strategy: Identify stakeholders and potential tourism assets to promote within surrounding areas.

- Rationale – This goal and strategy is important to create awareness of smaller communities within county in order to increase visitation and revenue.
- Approach – Determine key organizations with the ability to identify and create potential tourism assets to drive visitation.
- Tasks – Hold community meetings to identify tourism opportunities based on hidden assets within the county and execute a plan of action created by the tourism organizations.
 - Timeline – Setup initial meeting within six (6) months.
 - Resources – Community stakeholders, organizations, community members and DMO’s.

TARGET MARKET

Introduction

Carter County’s target audience is determined by the following demographics, geographic markets and niche groups based on tourism offerings and resources.

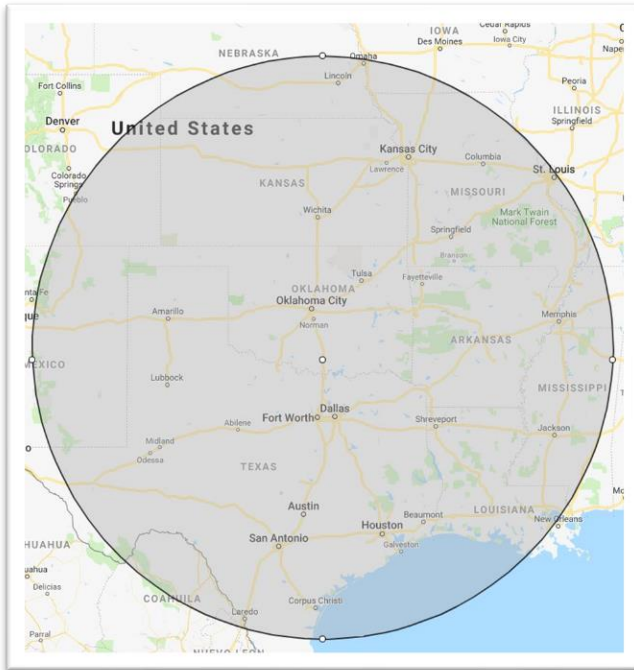
Demographics

In the travel industry over 70% of all family vacations are planned by the female of the household, according to US Travel Research data. Based on tourism assets and gaming product available as well as conversations with community stakeholders, the following age range was determined as Carter County’s target market: ^[3, 7-9]

- Female: 21 – 70
- Male: 25 – 75

Geographic Regions

Research shows that a traveler feels a 500-mile radius is a comfortable distance to travel for a vacation or getaway and we believe that north Texas and Oklahoma City (Metro Area) are ripe markets for the unique experience Carter County has to offer. Research shows that the international market is very interested in First American culture, the close proximity Chickasaw Country is to DFW airport and their direct flights; foreign countries are a prime market for Chickasaw Country.



Radius of 500 miles from Carter County [2]

- **Oklahoma**
 - Entire State
- **Texas**
 - Dallas/Fort Worth
 - Amarillo
 - Lubbock
 - Midland
 - Odessa
 - Abilene
 - Austin
 - San Antonio
 - Houston
 - Laredo
 - Corpus Christi
 - Galveston
 - Beaumont
- **Arkansas**
 - Entire State
- **Kansas**
 - Entire State
- **Colorado**
 - Colorado Springs
- **Missouri**
 - Springfield
 - Branson
 - St. Louis
 - Columbia
- **New Mexico**
 - Santa Fe
- **Nebraska**
 - Lincoln
 - Omaha

Other Customer Segments

Niche Markets: [7-11]

- First American & Western Heritage enthusiast
- Hunters and fishermen
- Art lovers
- Unique festival seekers
- Outdoor enthusiast
- Local shopping lovers
- Meeting and convention
- Destination wedding
- Bed & Breakfast seekers

EVENTS

Carter County plans to continue hosting events in select communities. Events are planned to help drive tourist to the community and help local businesses generate revenue. Carter County hosted the following annual events:

CITY / EVENT	TIME OF YEAR
Healdton	
Healdton Oil Field Days	August
Ardmore	
Goddard Center Performing Arts	Year Round
MLK Day Parade	January
Sanders & Lake Murray Resort Bluegrass Festival	February
Cowboy Way Jubilee	May
Lake Murray Fireworks Display	July
Carter County Free Fair	September
Revenge of the Bulls	September
Blue River Car Show	September
Trick or Treat on Main	October
Valero BBQ Cookoff	October
Fall Festival	November
Carter County Arts & Craft Festival and Food Fair	November
Annual Chigger Chase	November
Parade of Lights	November/December
Ardmore Festival of Lights	December
Springer	
Springer Christmas Parade	December
Gene Autry	
Gene Autry Open Rodeo	July
Gene Autry Birthday	September

By hosting these events with local Chambers, businesses and cities, it gives Carter County the opportunity to be seen as a destination attraction.

RESOURCES

- 1) Dean Runyan Associates (December 2019). Oklahoma Travel Impacts. Retrieved from <https://ds8hbldo2z4gr.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/OK-Travel-Impacts-Statewide-and-County-Impacts-2010-20181.pdf>
- 2) Radius Tool: <https://www.mapdevelopers.com/draw-circle-tool.php>
- 3) United States Census Bureau. (2019). QuickFacts Carter County, Oklahoma Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/cartercountyoklahoma/PST0452179>
- 4) Google Maps
- 5) Economic Research (2021). Unemployment Rate in Carter County, Oklahoma. Retrieved from <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/OKCART9URN>
- 6) 10 Most Dangerous Towns in Oklahoma to live in. Retrieved from <http://www.onlyinyourstate.com/oklahoma/ok-dangerous-places/>
- 7) Welcome to Ardmore, Oklahoma. Ardmore City Lakes. Retrieved from <http://www.ardmorecity.org/131/City-Lakes>
- 8) Ardmore OK Development Authority
- 9) T. Young, Personal Communication, June 14-21, 2016
- 10) Overnight Accommodations: America's Best Value Inn; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 11) Overnight Accommodations: Best Western Plus; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 12) Overnight Accommodations: Borders Inn & Suites by Cobblestone; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 13) Overnight Accommodations: By the Lake RV Park Resort; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 14) Overnight Accommodations: Candlewood Suites; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 15) Overnight Accommodations: Comfort Inn & Suites (Ardmore); Personal Communication, July 2021
- 16) Overnight Accommodations: Courtyard by Marriott; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 17) Overnight Accommodations: Days Inn; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 18) Overnight Accommodations: Hotel Ardmore; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 19) Overnight Accommodations: Hampton Inn & Suites; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 20) Overnight Accommodations: Hilton Garden Inn; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 21) Overnight Accommodations: Holiday Inn; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 22) Overnight Accommodations: La Quinta Inn & Suites; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 23) Overnight Accommodations: Lake Murray Floating Cabins; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 24) Overnight Accommodations: Lake Murray Lodge; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 25) Overnight Accommodations: Microtel Inn & Suites of Ardmore; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 26) Overnight Accommodations: Motel 6; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 27) Overnight Accommodations: Quality Hotel; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 28) Overnight Accommodations: Red River Rose RV Resort; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 29) Overnight Accommodations: Red Roof Inn; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 30) Overnight Accommodations: Ardmore RV Park; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 31) Overnight Accommodations: Shiloh Morning Inn; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 32) Overnight Accommodations: Somewhere Landing Cabin; Personal Communication, July 2021

- 33) Overnight Accommodations: Spring Hills Suites by Marriott; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 34) Overnight Accommodations: Super 8 Motel; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 35) Overnight Accommodations: The Camper's Friend RV Park; Personal Communication, July 2021
- 36) Overnight Accommodations: Cool Breeze RV Cinema & Resort; Personal Communication, July 2021

Chickasaw
COUNTRY