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More Than a Destination: How Tourism Strengthens Communities in South-Central Oklahoma

Chickasaw Country, Okla. – Tourism continues to play a vital role in the economic vitality of Chickasaw Country, generating visitor spending that supports local businesses, creates jobs and enhances quality of life for communities across the region.

The World Tourism Organization defines tourism as a social, cultural and economic phenomenon that entails the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes. Tourism is the third-largest industry in Oklahoma. In Chickasaw Country, tourism has long been a driver for economic vitality and social and cultural interest.

According to recent data from the Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department and Dean Runyon Associates, the 13 counties represented in Chickasaw Country recorded 5.3 million visitors in 2025. Data collected by Chickasaw Country shows 74% of all visitors to the area last fiscal year were from out of state, with a large share coming from Texas.

Stretching across more than 7,600 square miles within the territorial boundaries of the Chickasaw Nation, Chickasaw Country has become one of Oklahoma's premier destinations for outdoor recreation, cultural tourism, entertainment and family travel experiences.

Popular destinations throughout the region include the Chickasaw Cultural Center, Chickasaw National Recreation Area, Turner Falls Park, Lake Murray State Park, Lake Texoma State Park, Chisholm Trail Heritage Center, WinStar World Casino and Resort and Riverwind Casino.

The towns that comprise Chickasaw Country rely on visitor spending as a vital resource for sustaining local businesses. Visitor spending is an economic engine, supporting hotels, restaurants, retail, attractions, outfitters, gas stations, tour companies, wineries and breweries, casinos and arts organizations.

Chickasaw Country data from Oct. 1, 2024, to Sept. 30, 2025, shows 16% of all spending at tourism-related businesses in the region came from visitors. Of that 16%, 40% of the visitors' spending went toward food and beverage purchases.

From the same data pool, 26% of transactions occurred at locally owned and operated businesses. Arts, entertainment, recreation and gaming is the leading spending category, followed closely by food service, according to state data recently released by the Oklahoma Travel and Recreation Department.

"When a traveler visits Chickasaw Country from outside the region, they are bringing new money into the local economy for circulation," said Paige Shepherd, director of tourism for the Chickasaw Nation.

“Tourism generates additional tax revenues for an area, benefiting the local economy and sustaining local businesses.”

“Tourism strengthens communities by creating economic opportunity, preserving culture, enhancing quality of life and giving people a deeper sense of pride in the places they call home,” said Andrea Horner, under secretary, marketing and tourism, for the Chickasaw Nation.

Tourism-related spending supports more than 18,900 jobs across hospitality, recreation, retail, entertainment and food service industries while helping sustain rural economies and drive continued investment in infrastructure, beautification and community development. While direct visitor spending creates and sustains jobs, indirect spending from supply chains and industry employees sustains communities. Jobs created or sustained by travel spending have increased eight percent in the past three years across Chickasaw Country, according to data from Travel Oklahoma and Dean Runyon Associates.

Recent state travel data shows that urban centers such as Oklahoma and Tulsa counties lead in direct travel spending; rural counties are still performing well, with Love and Carter counties ranking third and fifth, respectively, behind the urban counties.

Both Love and Carter counties sit along the I-35 corridor, between Oklahoma City and Dallas, making them highly accessible for drive-market tourism.

Two major attractions in these counties are Lake Murray State Park and WinStar World Casino and Resort. Together, these attractions offer recreation, entertainment, food and beverages, family activities and genuine hospitality.

“Tourism is more than visitation numbers — it is an investment in our communities,” said Shepherd.

“Travelers who visit Chickasaw Country support local restaurants, lodging properties, retailers, attractions, and small businesses while helping showcase the unique culture, history and natural beauty of this region.”

For more information about attractions, events, lodging and travel experiences in Chickasaw Country, visit ChickasawCountry.com.

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About Chickasaw Country

Nestled in the south-central region of Oklahoma, Chickasaw Country is a regional tourism organization representing 13 of Oklahoma's 77 counties. A division of the Chickasaw Nation, Chickasaw Country is a tourism resource for visitors and communities in the region, promoting local attractions, experiences and events. South-central Oklahoma is an easy, versatile, friendly and beautiful escape packed with First American and Western culture, outdoor recreation, local dining, breathtaking landscapes and one-of-a-kind festivals. For adventure-seekers, cultural lovers, and everything in between, Chickasaw Country is uniquely positioned as a go-to, spur-of-the-moment, easy-to-get-to, ever-changing vacation, for a day, a weekend, a week or longer.