

The Ultimate Classroom

The Junior Ranger Program teaches younger generations about the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians and their ancestral home in the beautiful Indian Canyons.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY NEIL HUSVAR

LEFT: The Junior Ranger Program allows students to explore the Indian Canyons free of charge and learn about the Agua Caliente through ranger-led hikes.



THERE IS NO finer classroom than the Indian Canyons in Palm Springs. A significant amount of research indicates the value of hands-on learning in a child's educational experience. For instance, a pivotal study from the University of Arkansas found that cultural field trips offer students — disadvantaged students in particular — an important opportunity to add measurable depth to their education. "To my mind, there is no better teaching aid in the world than to have kids come out here and experience this area," says Agua Caliente Tribal Ranger Raven Longbow, one of the tribal rangers who help facilitate the Junior Ranger Program. "It's not a prop. These canyons are an actual, living breathing entity."

The idea of educating children in the Coachella Valley about the rich history of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians and their ancestral home has been around for a long time. Tribal rangers — the trained experts who guide visitors in the Indian Canyons — began visiting schools to share their knowledge decades ago.

The Junior Ranger Program gives school groups the opportunity to explore the

CLOCKWISE: Agu Caliente Tribal Ranger Raven Longbow. School groups are guided along the 1-mile Andreas Canyon Trail, an easy, one-hour hike through one of the canyon's palm oases. Ranger Longbow shows students the various trail systems that run through the canyons.



During the hike, students get a close-up of some of the natural rock formations that form part of Andreas Canyon.



Indian Canyons free of charge. All three school districts in the Coachella Valley participate, with many consistently scheduling visits year after year. The Tribe also supports a bus grant program that extends as far as the Salton Sea, which enables children in more disadvantaged areas to make the trip. For the past 10 years, groups from Desert Arc have come in, and so has the Braille Institute. Meanwhile, word continues to spread — and interest in the Indian Canyons isn't necessarily governed by geographical proximity. New schools from Yucaipa have recently scheduled tours,

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home school groups from as far away as Arizona have made the journey, a school from New York comes every year, and a school from France visits twice annually. Visit the Indian Canyons on any given day and you're likely to spot a school group being educated by tribal rangers. It's a favored field trip for third graders, but tribal rangers have played host to students ranging in age from preschoolers all the way up to the collegiate level. Groups vary in size from a mere handful of students to as many as 200 at a time. Tribal rangers peg the perfect size group, regardless of age, at about 60 kids. It's a

comfortable number to traverse the 1-mile looping trail in Andreas Canyon that the rangers typically guide visitors along. In more ways than one, the tour is interactive. Upon arrival, many children express genuine surprise, amazed that such a lush oasis exists amid the harsh desert landscape. They're awestruck by the indigenous flora and fauna surrounding them, while the rushing water never fails to mesmerize. "I tell them, 'Don't be afraid to touch. You aren't going to hurt anything. Touch this, smell that, experience it all,'" Ranger Longbow says.

Students field intriguing questions that prompt them to

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:
Many students are surprised to find water flowing in the desert environment. Learning about native plants and their uses during ancient times is a key part of the Junior Ranger hands-on experience. Students explore the inside of a *kish*, a form of shelter built by the early Agua Caliente.



Junior Rangers

For more information about the Junior Ranger Program or to book a field trip, call 760-285-9106 or email JrRangerProgram@aguacaliente-nsn.gov.

consider how the early Agua Caliente thrived in the Coachella Valley. A tribal ranger might ask, "Did any of you have to go hunting for your breakfast this morning?" and he'll respond to the inevitable chorus of no's with a description of how even very young members of the Tribe long ago were involved in hunting and food preparation. Students come to realize that every Agua Caliente Tribal member, no matter how young or how old, played an integral role in the Tribe's survival for thousands of years.

During the outing, tribal

rangers point out edible native plants and other ones that can cure ailments, lessons that would mean far less if students read about them in a book.

There are countless practical lessons to impart and much history to absorb in the Indian Canyons, yet Ranger Longbow doesn't feel his mission is complete until he teaches students one word they will always remember, *achema* (pronounced ah-CHEE-ma), the Cahuilla word for "thank you." The Junior Ranger Program hopes to impress upon these students the importance of

family and community and their involvement with and responsibility to them. Gratitude, of course, is an immeasurable part of the equation.

Far from a novelty program, the Junior Ranger Program is a bona fide opportunity to increase awareness about the history and culture of the Agua Caliente. It enlightens not only students but the adults who accompany them as chaperones. "When visitors pass through the gates, they soon come to realize that this is the real Palm Springs," Ranger Longbow says. 

VISITING THE CANYONS

The Indian Canyons are open to the public daily from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Oct. 1 through July 4 and weekends only from July 5 through Sept. 30. Cost is \$9 for adults, \$7 for seniors, and \$5 for children ages 6-12. Visit www.indian-canyons.com for more information. Please note: Hours of operation and ranger-led tour schedules are subject to change.