

'I stand a little taller': At Sunnylands, students lead the tours — and gain confidence



Sunnylands intern Isabella Ibarra gives a tour inside the historic Sunnylands estate as guests Sarah Heck, center, and Mark Munro listen, in Rancho Mirage, Calif., on Sept. 29, 2022. Interns go through 5-weeks of immersive training prior to giving their first tour. *Taya Gray/The Desert Sun*



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On a tour of the Sunnylands estate in Rancho Mirage, it is easy to feel overwhelmed by the magnitude of history and beauty.

Impressionist paintings glisten on the walls. Van Gogh and Monet brushstrokes appear to dance to the tune of light fluttering through the manor's floor-to-ceiling windows.

A casting of Auguste Rodin's statue, "Eve," radiates bronze energy from under a vast, recessed skylight at the center of the home's famous atrium.

The art is just the beginning.

Some people visit Sunnylands just to see the William Haines furniture.

Others come to admire the A. Quincy Jones midcentury architecture.

Anglophiles gawk at portraits of the late Queen Elizabeth and worship where she and Prince Philip dined during their 1983 tour of California.

Political buffs delight to see where Barack Obama hosted Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013 and to read correspondence from former U.S. Presidents to the Annenberg family.

Still others tour Sunnylands just to catch a glimpse of the 70 species of native and arid-adapted plants that comprise the impeccably-manicured gardens.

It's a lot to take in as a visitor, and even more to learn as a Sunnylands tour guide.

Expectations for tour guides are high, with prices for a guided 90-minute house tour at \$55 per person and grounds tours starting at \$26.



Sunnylands intern Isabella Ibarra checks her headset prior to loading guest onto the shuttle for a tour of the historic Sunnylands estate in Rancho Mirage, Calif., on Sept. 29, 2022. Taya Gray/*The Desert Sun*

Guides are entrusted to know (almost) all the top-line information about the arts, the politics, the gardens and the history of the 200-acre winter estate of the late U.S. ambassadors Walter and Leonore Annenberg — the desert getaway where they hosted former presidents, royalty and celebrities since 1966.

Yet, neither scholars nor docents lead public tours of the estate. College interns do.



Isabella Ibarra connects to her online Anthropology: Intro to Biology class through College of the Desert inside her home in Palm Desert, Calif., on Nov. 21, 2022. All four of Ibarra's COD courses are online this semester due to transferring late. She hopes to attend in person next semester. *Taya Gray/The Desert Sun*

Since public tours of Sunnylands began in 2012, college students have led guests, in a sense, through eras long before they were born.

“Working here is like taking a step back in time,” said tour guide Alyssa Hall. “It feels like you're walking back to (the Annenbergs), that they're still alive in the house.”

Education was a pillar of the Annenbergs' philanthropy, so it remains one for the Annenberg Foundation Trust, which preserves the Sunnylands estate.

For that reason, students are the guides, explained Michaelleen Gallagher, Director of the Sunnylands Center and Gardens.

Currently, Sunnylands has 19 guides who offer house and garden tours available to purchase at the Sunnylands website.

They study at College of the Desert, Cal State San Bernardino and Cal State Pomona. In previous years, guides have come from the University of California, Riverside; University of California, Los Angeles; and Cal State Fullerton.

Their majors have ranged from pre-medicine to IT, but, of course, many students are drawn to art, history, political science and architecture.

Guide Isabella Ibarra studies international relations at College of the Desert, so she was naturally drawn to the Sunnylands internship.

As a guide, she has learned more about the Annenberg Foundation Trust's pillars: global cooperation, global health, civic and democratic institutions and fighting food insecurity.

"This really is providing that foundation for my next step in life," Ibarra said of her experience.



Sunnylands intern Isabella Ibarra gives a tour inside the historic Sunnylands estate, the former winter home of Walter and Leonore Annenberg, in Rancho Mirage, Calif., on Sept. 29, 2022. Interns go through 5-weeks of immersive training prior to giving their first tour. *Taya Gray/The Desert Sun*

To learn all the information needed for the various tours, guides undergo an intensive, month-long paid training period in August with Gallagher and other Sunnylands staff. Sunnylands touring season begins in September.

Prospective guides spend weeks memorizing key names and dates and learning about Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art, major 20th-century political events and architectural motifs.

Much of that information works its way into their tours through an arduous process of fine tuning scripts, public speaking and guest relations skills.

"You have to learn how to take constructive criticism to formulate your style and to find those assets that you're going to implement in your tour," Ibarra said.

"It's a tough process," Gallagher admitted. "It gives them a really thick skin, but it's exciting to see guides from day one to their graduation."

Sunnylands is well-regarded for its polished image, and guides are not cut any slack for being college students.

Guides are expected to present with confidence and authority, Gallagher explained. They can be humorous on their tours, but shouldn't be crass. There is a dress code, too. Guides wear khaki bottoms and white and yellow button-down tops.

Months into the job, Hall, a Cal State San Bernardino student, says the hard work at Sunnylands was paying off.

"The reward for me is being more confident when I speak in front of people, and I feel really smart that I retained all that knowledge," she said.

"In daily life, I think I stand a little taller and with more confidence," Ibarra added.



Michaelaelyn Gallagher, Director of Sunnylands Center and Gardens, talks about the three-year Sunnylands internship program for college students in Rancho Mirage, Calif., on Sept. 20, 2022. Taya Gray/The Desert Sun

After all, it takes confidence for a 19-year-old to stand in front of groups of people, often much older and with living memories of some of the events that transpired at Sunnylands, and give them a tour of the grounds.

Yet, Ibarra says it's the people — not the things or the history — that make the job great.

"I would say the highlight has been getting to know all the people who come on my tours," she said.

"Really all of us, the visitors and the guides, are here to enjoy the space, and, ultimately that's the best part of the job," Ibarra added.

Even with its prestige, Sunnylands sometimes struggles recruiting guides.



Sunnylands intern Isabella Ibarra transports guest in a shuttle to tour the historic Sunnylands estate, the former winter home of Walter and Leonore Annenberg, in Rancho Mirage, Calif., on Sept. 29, 2022. [Taya Gray/The Desert Sun](#)



Sunnylands tour guide intern Alyssa Hall, 21, sits for an interview at Sunnylands Center and Gardens, in Rancho Mirage, Calif., on Sept. 20, 2022. [Taya Gray/The Desert Sun](#)

“We're up against competition,” Gallagher said. “I mean, some of the fast food restaurants are paying top dollar now.”

To some, weighing a job at Sunnylands against one at McDonalds might seem like an apples-to-oranges comparison.

But many tour guides, including Hall, had never heard of Sunnylands before applying to work there.

Plus, with Coachella Valley rents skyrocketing and the cost of living increasing, every dollar counts for many cash-strapped students.

Pay for a Sunnylands tour guide begins at \$18 an hour and increases \$2, annually. Some fast food restaurants are paying \$20 an hour or more.

So, coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, Gallagher revamped the tour guide program.

“This year we have redesigned the program based on feedback from a 10-year study of past guides,” she said. “It now offers professional development, social events and additional opportunities for training.”

Second- and third-year guides gain additional benefits, such as priority access to seasonal internship programs in other Sunnylands departments and mentoring opportunities with Sunnylands staff.

In January, Sunnylands will begin taking applications for the following season's guide class. Interested students can find more information and apply at: sunnylands.org/guide-program/.

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