

ACCESSIBILITY TRAVEL GUIDE

A TRAVEL PLANNING RESOURCE FOR AUTISTIC,
SENSORY-SENSITIVE AND ACCESSIBILITY CONSIDERATIONS

A LETTER FROM OUR MAYOR

Congratulations to Visit Mesa for leading the way in making our community the first-ever Autism Certified City in the world! This means visitors can now plan their time in Mesa, Arizona, using a helpful guide that shows how different activities may affect their senses. Also, hundreds of workers across the city have been trained to better serve people with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their families.

More than 32 million people in the ASD community are looking for places where they feel welcome and safe while on vacation. Mesa is proud to be one of those places. We are sending a clear message to families everywhere that they are invited to visit and enjoy all we have to offer.



Why Mesa? Because we care. When our community sees a need, we come together to help. Businesses, nonprofits, government agencies, churches and local groups have worked as a team to create a more inclusive city. It's simply the right thing to do.

From the beautiful Sonoran Desert to the exciting arts, museums, shops and restaurants downtown, Mesa offers something special for everyone. We are excited to welcome families from across the country and around the world to experience our city.

Thank you, Visit Mesa, for making our community more inclusive and welcoming for all.



Sincerely,
Mark Freeman
Mayor Mark Freeman
City of Mesa



A LOOK INSIDE

- 04 • VISIT MESA'S COMMITMENT TO INCLUSION

06 • DISCOVERING MESA WITHOUT LIMITS

08 • DIVERGENT ADVENTURES

08 • SEE THE WORLD IN VIBRANT COLOR

10 • MESA OFFERS ADVENTURES FOR EVERY FAMILY

11 • SPOTLIGHT ON SENSORY-FRIENDLY ACTIVITIES

12 • ACCESSIBLE TRAILS & INCLUSIVE EXPERIENCES

13 • YOUR DESERT ADVENTURE: KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

13 • A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT ON THE TRAILS

14 • MAKE WAVES IN THE DESERT

16 • A WELCOMING DESTINATION, THEN AND NOW
- 20 • IBCCES PARTNERSHIP

20 • WELCOME TO AUTISM CERTIFICATION

21 • SENSORY GUIDES: AN INTRODUCTION

22 • WHAT IS A SENSORY GUIDE?

24 • A JOURNEY OF INCLUSION

26 • OUR STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES

28 • ARMANI WILLIAMS: TEAM ARMANI RACING

29 • ARMANI'S MESA HOTSPOTS

30 • OUR LIFECHANGING VACATION

32 • 7 TIPS FROM OUR TRIP

33 • ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND RESOURCES

34 • MESA MAP

VISIT MESA
CITY LIMITLESS®

Visit Mesa
1 N. Macdonald, Suite 209
Mesa, AZ 85201
President and CEO
Marc J. Garcia

Executive Editor
Alicia Boe
Graphic Design
HAPI

ON THE COVER: Wild horses near the Lower Salt River

The Autism Travel Guide is published by Visit Mesa. Every effort has been made to make this guide as accurate as possible and represent Certified Autism Centers through the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education (IBCCES). Visit Mesa and its affiliates will assume no responsibility for errors, changes, incorrect data or omissions. All rights reserved. Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited. 4/2025



@VISITMESA / #VISITMESA

VISIT MESA'S CONTINUED COMMITMENT TO INCLUSION

A LETTER FROM OUR CEO

Since Visit Mesa embarked on its ambitious journey to become the first-ever Autism Certified City in the nation, we've witnessed remarkable progress. We've not only elevated Mesa's profile as a leader in accessible travel, but we've also seen a growing number of businesses have become autism certified. This progress resonates globally, solidifying Mesa's position as a welcoming destination for all. We hope your stay reflects the dedication and passion behind this important designation.

As a father of a son on the autism spectrum, I understand firsthand the complexities of travel for individuals with ASD. This personal experience fuels my dedication to ensuring Mesa remains a leader in accessible tourism. We recognize the evolving needs of travelers with autism, and Mesa's proactive commitment to creating inclusive environments aims to provide unforgettable experiences for all our visitors.

Mesa is dedicated to providing a seamless and supportive experience for all families, which is why we've fostered a city-wide commitment to autism certification. This dedication is reflected in the

integration of key city partners into our expanding network of Certified Autism Centers at hotels, attractions and restaurants, including all City of Mesa Parks, Recreation and Community Facilities, City of Mesa museums, the Mesa Police and Fire Departments and numerous health and wellness services, non-profits, and other vital resources.

Visit Mesa remains unwavering in its dedication to meeting your needs. We are proud to welcome you to City Limitless®, a place where inclusion and accessibility are not just ideals, but realities.



Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Marc Garcia".

Marc Garcia

Visit Mesa, President and CEO



DISCOVERING MESA WITHOUT LIMITS



In addition to being the first-ever Autism Certified City, Mesa has also been recognized by Wheel the World as the first city to receive their Destination Verified Seal, paving the way for travelers to have limitless opportunities to explore a variety of experiences throughout the city. These initiatives and programs ensure that Mesa is a place where diversity isn't only celebrated but also accommodated.

SCAN FOR
MORE
ACCESSIBILITY
INFO



It all began in 2018 when Marc Garcia, Visit Mesa President and CEO, took his autistic son on a family vacation and had a less-than-stellar experience. Frustrated by the stares, unsolicited advice and general lack of awareness of his son's needs from hospitality staff, Garcia went home with a new mission: to ensure that the city he represented would always provide a welcoming environment for visitors with autism.

A year later, Mesa became the first city ever to receive an official designation from the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES). The training helps participants better recognize Autism Spectrum Disorder and service the needs of autistic travelers from the planning stages of their vacation to their arrival at their destination and throughout their stay.



But this has been just the beginning. In 2023, Mesa became the first Verified City by **Wheel the World**, an online marketplace for visitors with disabilities to travel and experience the world in a way best suited for them. Through Wheel the World's website, visitors can create a personalized profile allowing them to recommend accommodations and activities in Mesa that are compatible with their travel aspirations and personal needs.



Beyond these important designations, Mesa has also implemented several other accessibility initiatives. The **Hidden Disabilities Sunflower Program** helps those with non-visible disabilities communicate their needs by wearing a bright green lanyard or bracelet emblazoned with sunflowers. Certified businesses have trained workers to recognize the lanyards and bracelets so that they can provide extra assistance if necessary.



Aira, an on-demand visual interpretation service, assists people who are blind or have low vision. Visitors using this service can download the app to their smartphone and get connected with a trained Aira agent who can assist with trip planning, reading restaurant menus, and a bevy of other services. While in Mesa's city limits, visitors can access an agent to guide them through public buildings, attractions, restaurants, hotels and more. Customers receive instant access to visual information at the touch of a button, enhancing everyday efficiency, engagement and independence.



Mesa's dedication to inclusive travel also extends to our partnership with **Threshold 360**, which provides virtual tour access. This program offers over 50 tours of local venues, empowering visitors to make informed decisions about their trip by previewing accessible parking, doorways, restrooms and ADA hotel rooms. This level of pre-trip planning is particularly valuable for individuals with mobility, visual and sensory needs.

With a commitment to accessibility, Mesa offers a travel experience in which every corner of the city becomes an open invitation and experience without constraints. Inclusive accommodations, transportation options and attractions ensure that every visitor, regardless of their abilities, can soak in the sunsets, savor the local flavors, and immerse themselves in the unique charm of Mesa, City Limitless®.

DIVERGENT ADVENTURES



Based right here in Mesa, Arizona, Divergent Adventures offers engaging and enjoyable outdoor experiences designed for neurodiverse individuals and their families. They provide detailed, self-guided Arizona Adventure Itineraries that empower you to explore at your own pace, any time of year. These itineraries feature outdoor activities, nature walks, hikes, and skill-building opportunities thoughtfully created with sensory sensitivities in mind. You'll find comprehensive day-by-day details, maps, directions, helpful "Pro Tips," and highlights of accessible outdoor spaces, parks, and exciting Mesa destinations—many of which are Certified Autism Centers.

Divergent Adventures also offers a **FREE Autism Travel Guidebook**, specifically created for families with autistic children (ages 7-13 and 13-18). This valuable resource helps both parents and children understand what to expect throughout their travel journey, offering practical tools and strategies to build confidence and essential skills. Together, their itineraries and guidebook provide the freedom of self-paced exploration within a supportive structure designed to meet unique needs, fostering a safe and welcoming environment to discover Arizona's natural beauty together.

Both the Guidebook and the Arizona Adventure Itineraries are **FREE**. To discover more, visit divergentadventures.com.

LEARN MORE
ABOUT
**DIVERGENT
ADVENTURES**



SEE THE WORLD IN VIBRANT COLOR



Visit Mesa is proud to partner with EnChroma to offer specialized glasses at select Mesa museums, including the idea Museum, Arizona Museum of Natural History, Mesa Historical Museum and Mesa Contemporary Arts Museum at the Mesa Arts Center. These glasses enhance color differentiation for individuals with red-green color blindness, unlocking a richer, more vibrant museum experience. Ask at the front desk for details.



**MESA FOR ALL
FOUNDATION**

CREATING A WORLD WHERE EVERY TRAVELER FEELS SEEN



SCAN QR CODE TO
LEARN MORE OR HEAD TO
WWW.MESAforall.ORG

THE MESA FOR ALL FOUNDATION SUPPORTS PROGRAMS THAT MAKE TRAVEL MORE INCLUSIVE FOR NEURODIVERGENT INDIVIDUALS AND THEIR FAMILIES. WE'RE BUILDING A FUTURE WHERE EVERYONE FEELS WELCOME, SUPPORTED, AND FREE TO EXPLORE.

MESA OFFERS ADVENTURES FOR EVERY FAMILY



Mesa, Arizona, is a vibrant city with something for everyone. Whether you're seeking outdoor adventures, cultural experiences or simply a relaxing getaway. Mesa has it all. And for families with children on the autism spectrum, Mesa offers a variety of attractions and activities designed to ensure a comfortable and enjoyable experience.

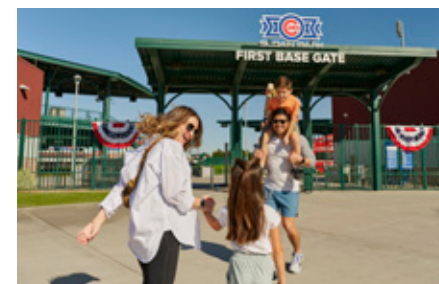


SPOTLIGHT ON SENSORY-FRIENDLY ATTRACTIONS



ARIZONA MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

The museum's "Hands on Fun" area allows children to explore and interact with exhibits, fostering learning and development.



SLOAN PARK & HOHOKAM STADIUM

Visiting Mesa in the spring? Catch a Cactus League spring training game and cheer on your favorite MLB team. The family-friendly atmosphere and accessible seating make it a great outing for everyone.

USERY MOUNTAIN REGIONAL PARK

Hike or bike through stunning desert landscapes, spotting cacti and other desert creatures. The park offers ranger-led hikes, stroller cruises, an even scorpion blacklight hunts.

BUTTERFLY WONDERLAND

Immerse yourself in the calming, temperature-controlled rainforest environment of Butterfly Wonderland, home to North America's largest butterfly conservatory. Enjoy the gentle flutter of over 60 butterfly species, vibrant flowers and soothing sounds. To support sensory needs, Butterfly Wonderland offers 'Sensory Bags' including earmuffs, sunglasses, fidget toys and calming timers. Spacious walkways and a relaxed atmosphere further contribute to a sensory-friendly experience.



ODYSEA AQUARIUM

While staying in Mesa, venture out to visit Arizona's world-class aquarium and experience their commitment to creating a welcoming environment for all visitors. Features like sensory rooms, staff training and adjustments for those with sensitivities make it a comfortable experience for families with diverse needs.

MESA RIVERVIEW PARK

This expansive park features accessible walkways, playgrounds with sensory elements and a 30-foot climbing wall, making it a great place for children to burn off energy.



IDEA MUSEUM

The idea Museum prioritizes an inclusive and welcoming environment, offering a range of sensory accommodations. sensory support backpacks, available at the front desk, include fidget toys, weighted animals and visual timers. Noise-reducing headphones and specialized glasses are also available to address light and sound sensitivities and color blindness. Designated quiet spaces provide calming retreats and their staff are trained to be mindful of sensory needs, ensuring a comfortable and supportive visit for all.

Mesa is committed to making all visitors feel welcome and comfortable. With its diverse range of attractions and activities, along with a focus on inclusivity, Mesa is truly a destination for every family.

For more trip planning inspiration and resources, check out some of these pre-planned itineraries and full list of Certified Autism Centers (CACs).

VIEW MESA'S
CERTIFIED
AUTISM
CENTERS



VIEW OUR
AUTISM
FRIENDLY
ITINERARIES



MESA TRAILS ARE OPEN TO ALL

Step into the heart of the Sonoran Desert and discover Mesa's trails, where natural beauty is accessible to everyone. Our local parks offer more than just paths; they provide therapeutic benefits and moments of joy, inviting families and individuals to connect with nature on their own terms. To ensure you maximize every step of your journey, consider these outdoor hiking adventures.



ACCESSIBLE TRAILS & INCLUSIVE EXPERIENCES



USERY MOUNTAIN REGIONAL PARK
3939 N. Usery Pass Rd, Mesa
(480) 984-0032
maricopacountyparks.net

Usery Mountain Regional Park remains a cornerstone of our accessible trail system. Its barrier-free trails, such as the Merkle Trail, offer smooth, wide paths perfect for strollers, wheelchairs and individuals with mobility challenges. The park has enhanced its accessibility features with improved signage and clearly marked accessible parking.



SAN TAN MOUNTAIN REGIONAL PARK
6533 W. Phillips Rd, Queen Creek
(480) 655-5554
maricopacountyparks.net

San Tan Mountain Regional Park, with trails like the easy 0.7-mile Littleleaf Trail, continues to charm visitors with its scenic beauty. We've partnered with the park to create sensory-friendly maps, detailing areas with varying levels of stimulation, and catering to individuals with sensory sensitivities.



LOST DUTCHMAN STATE PARK
6109 N. Apache Trail, Apache Junction
(480) 982-4485
azstateparks.com

Lost Dutchman State Park's Treasure Loop, a 2.4-mile adventure, still ignites imaginations with tales of hidden gold. In recent years, the park has added audio descriptions at key points along the trail, enhancing the experience for visually impaired visitors.

YOUR DESERT ADVENTURE: KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Embarking on a desert adventure promises stunning scenery and unforgettable experiences. To ensure a safe and enjoyable time, especially for travelers with sensory sensitivities, a little preparation goes a long way. Here's how to make the most of your Sonoran Desert exploration.



HYDRATION & SUN SAFETY

Bring ample water (one gallon per person for a full day), consider electrolyte drinks and pack extra for hot days. Apply SPF 30+ sunscreen regularly and wear a hat and UV-protective sunglasses.



TRAIL & WILDLIFE AWARENESS

Stick to marked trails to protect the environment and ensure safety. Be mindful of wildlife like rattlesnakes, Gila monsters and scorpions; give them space and make gentle noise as you walk.



COMFORT & SENSORY NEEDS

Layered, breathable clothing and closed-toe shoes are essential. You may also consider water shoes near rivers and lakes. For sensory sensitivities, bring noise-canceling headphones, comfortable clothing and familiar snacks.



WATER SAFETY & RESPECT

Always wear life jackets for water activities, closely supervise children and be aware of changing currents. Also remember to follow "Leave No Trace" principles by packing out all trash and respecting the natural environment.



A COMMUNITY OF SUPPORT ON THE TRAILS

The spirit of Mesa is reflected in the kindness and helpfulness of those encountered on our trails. Our community is known for its welcoming and supportive atmosphere. We've built upon this by hosting regular "Inclusive Outdoor Days," where experienced guides lead hikes designed for individuals with autism and other disabilities, fostering a sense of belonging and camaraderie.

YOUR ADVENTURE AWAITS: DOWNLOAD THE ADVENTURE EXPLORER GUIDE

To help you plan your accessible adventure, download our "Adventure Explorer Guide"

DOWNLOAD THE
**ADVENTURE EXPLORER
GUIDE**





MAKE WAVES IN THE DESERT

Who says you can't find a beach in the desert? Mesa surprises visitors with miles of accessible shoreline, beautiful lakes and the flowing Lower Salt River—plus, the exciting Revel Surf at Cannon Beach for those seeking a wave experience! Whether you're looking for a relaxing float, a scenic kayak trip or a day of fishing, Mesa offers diverse water adventures for everyone, including families with sensory sensitivities.

For a comfortable and accessible water experience, consider a scenic cruise on the **Dolly Steamboat at Canyon Lake**, where the smooth ride and guided tour allow for sensory-friendly enjoyment of the stunning scenery. Or, enjoy a gentle float along the Salt River, or soak up the sun at Butcher Jones Beach. Saguaro and Canyon Lake marinas offer easy lakefront access and rental options for boating and fishing enthusiasts. For a relaxing stay with easy access to Saguaro Lake and the Salt River, the **Saguaro Lake Guest Ranch** provides a stunning yet peaceful environment with opportunities for gentle outdoor activities.



Mesa's lakes and rivers cater to various interests and accessibility needs. For calm fishing experiences, Eastmark Great Park, Greenfield Park Community Fishing Lake (with ADA-friendly access), Red Mountain Lake and Riverview Lake offer serene settings and diverse fish species. Larger lakes like Apache, Canyon, Roosevelt and Saguaro provide extensive shoreline, boating and fishing opportunities. The Salt and Verde Rivers offer scenic beauty and guided water tours, perfect for those seeking a more adventurous experience.

Many parks feature playgrounds, shaded areas and picnic facilities, making them ideal for family outings. Get ready to embrace the unexpected and discover the refreshing side of Mesa. With its diverse water recreation options, City Limitless® provides memorable experiences for all visitors.

FIND YOUR ADVENTURE

Scan the QR code to download our Water Recreation Guide and explore all of Mesa's aquatic adventures!

VIEW OUR
WATER
RECREATION
GUIDE



A DESTINATION MINDFUL OF ALL YOUR SENSES.



VISIT MESA
CITY LIMITLESS®

A WELCOMING DESTINATION, THEN AND NOW



Nicole Thibault is the travel planning mom and agent behind Magical Storybook Travels. Her leading travel agency specializes in family travel and travel for families with special needs. It's her own experiences that drive her passion for assisting other families achieve their travel dreams.

In 2018, Nicole Thibault shared her family's transformative experience in Mesa, Arizona, the world's first Autism Certified City. Her unique perspective, blending the heartfelt experiences as a mother with the strategic insights of a travel professional, illuminated Mesa's unwavering commitment to inclusivity. Today, we revisit Nicole's story and discover how Mesa continues to be a haven for families on the spectrum.

**FEATURING
NICOLE THIBAUT,
MAGICAL STORYBOOK
TRAVELS**



I'm a wearer of many hats.

The hat I'm most proud to wear is that of mom to three amazing boys. They're my life, my love, and watching them grow into little men is my favorite pastime. Raising three boys has not always been easy - one of my boys has autism, one is neurotypical and one has sensory processing disorder and childhood apraxia of speech. We have our challenges, but it makes our successes so much sweeter.

Travel has always been a big priority for our family. Despite our hurdles, we've learned how to travel with our sons who have anxiety, sensory issues and dietary restrictions. We've learned how to explore the world with as little stress and as much ease as possible.

The second hat I love wearing is that of a Certified Autism Travel Planner. I became a travel agent in 2013 so that I could use our family's first-hand experiences with traveling with our boys and share that with other families with autism who are hoping to confidently travel with their children.



"After our fun-filled days of vacationing in Mesa, one of my sons said that he loved visiting this city because they were laying out the welcome mat for families with autism. I answered, 'Yes, sweetie, they sure are!'"

As a Certified Autism Travel Planner, I love guiding families to destinations that are accommodating to families with children, teens and young adults on the spectrum. The best successes my clients have had have been to Certified Autism Centers, or CACs. These destinations and attractions have gone through a rigorous autism training process by the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Educational Standards (IBCCES) to ensure that autistic travelers are met with smiles, handshakes and most importantly, understanding.

Mesa, Arizona, is the world's first Certified Autism Destination. [Editor's Note: Since the original publication,

Mesa has achieved the designation of Autism Certified City, reflecting its continued commitment to inclusivity.] More than 50 businesses and attractions in the Mesa area have made the commitment to go through the autism training with IBCCES to become a Certified Autism Center. And the list continues to grow as more and more organizations understand the benefits of being able to welcome ALL families to their business.

On a recent trip to Mesa, my family visited many of the newly Certified Autism Centers in and around the city and it was an amazing few days of adventure, exploration and acceptance. Mesa, Arizona is leading the way in autism travel by creating an all-inclusive travel destination for families to enjoy - with hotels, restaurants, attractions, playgrounds and parks and outdoor adventure destinations all on the list. There's no other place in the world where families with autism have this amount of destination choices when crafting their vacation, and I can't wait to share our experiences with my travel clients!



CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

Since our first trip to Mesa in 2018, our family has returned four times. Mesa, Arizona, holds a special place in our hearts, drawing us back time and time again with its warm hospitality, breathtaking desert landscapes and inclusive community. The city's stunning scenery, from the Superstition Mountains to its vibrant parks, creates the perfect backdrop for adventure and fun with our kids. What makes Mesa even more remarkable is its commitment to inclusivity, with autism-certified destinations that ensure every member of our family feels welcome and supported. Whether exploring interactive museums, enjoying sensory-friendly attractions, or simply experiencing the quiet of the desert, Mesa continues to be a destination where our family feels at home. We will be back again soon!



WELCOME TO AUTISM CERTIFICATION



When we connected with Marc Garcia at Visit Mesa at the onset of this project, we were thrilled to hear about his vision for their community. Working together on this ground-breaking initiative has been rewarding and exciting, particularly seeing so many vital

organizations moving forward toward a common goal – true inclusion and accessibility.

Over the last two decades, IBCCES has worked with thousands of individuals and groups who provide care and services to individuals with autism and other cognitive disorders. As the need continues to grow for understanding and inclusion, so does the need for training and certification. We know that autism-friendly is not enough, and that certification brings a whole new level of awareness and education to accessibility efforts. Our comprehensive, evidence-based process includes educational trainings and knowledge assessments of common behaviors and sensory considerations associated with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Many Mesa area businesses also participated in IBCCES audits to further improve experiences for individuals with autism and we've developed Sensory Guides which serve as vital planning tools in advance of their visit.



There are thousands of families and individuals looking for places to visit and create memories who don't currently feel like they have options. Visit Mesa and the regional community are changing that, leading the way for others to follow suit in the future.

We're proud to be a partner in this amazing initiative and to claim Mesa, Arizona as the very-first Autism Certified City in the world!



Sincerely,

Myron Pincomb
Board Chairman, IBCCES



SENSORY GUIDES: AN INTRODUCTION

As part of the Autism Certification education offered through the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES), many Mesa organizations completed an audit of their place of business. This onsite review of their facility by an IBCCES expert includes a comprehensive report with suggested changes or modifications to better serve individuals on the spectrum as well as the development of Sensory Guides for activities.

IBCCES Sensory Guides help individuals determine the impact on each of the five senses that an activity or interaction may have. The goal is to empower individuals with sensory sensitivities to fully understand what to expect when visiting a location and, if needed, to adjust their visit to ensure the most positive experience. IBCCES Sensory Guides are not meant to dictate or indicate an individual's abilities or limitations, but rather to better inform individuals what to expect so they can plan accordingly. The rating scale for each sense ranges from 1 (low sensory impact) to 10 (high sensory impact), and the guide includes a description of each activity as well as features/experiences that may have a sensory impact.

Visitors planning stays in Mesa, Arizona, can download and view online Sensory Guides for these Certified Autism Centers at AutismTravelAZ.com:

- Arizona Museum of Natural History
- City of Mesa: Parks, Recreation & Community Facilities
- Idea Museum
- Mesa Arts Center
- Red Mountain Center Rock Wall
- Skyline Aquatic Center Play Area & Water Slide

These businesses have completed audits with IBCCES to obtain recommendations and suggestions on how to best service autistic customers. Contact them directly for more information:

- Delta Hotels by Marriott Phoenix-Mesa
- DoubleTree by Hilton Phoenix Mesa
- Sheraton Mesa Hotel at Wrigleyville West



WHAT IS A SENSORY GUIDE?

IBCCES Sensory Guides help individuals determine the impact on each of the five senses that an activity or interaction may have. The goal is to empower individuals with sensory sensitivities to fully understand what to expect when visiting a location and, if needed, to adjust their visit to ensure the most positive experience. IBCCES Sensory Guides are not meant to dictate or indicate an individual's abilities or limitations, but rather to better inform individuals what to expect so they can plan accordingly. The rating scale for each sense ranges from 1 (low sensory impact) to 10 (high sensory impact) and the guide includes a description of each activity as well as features/experiences that may have a sensory impact.

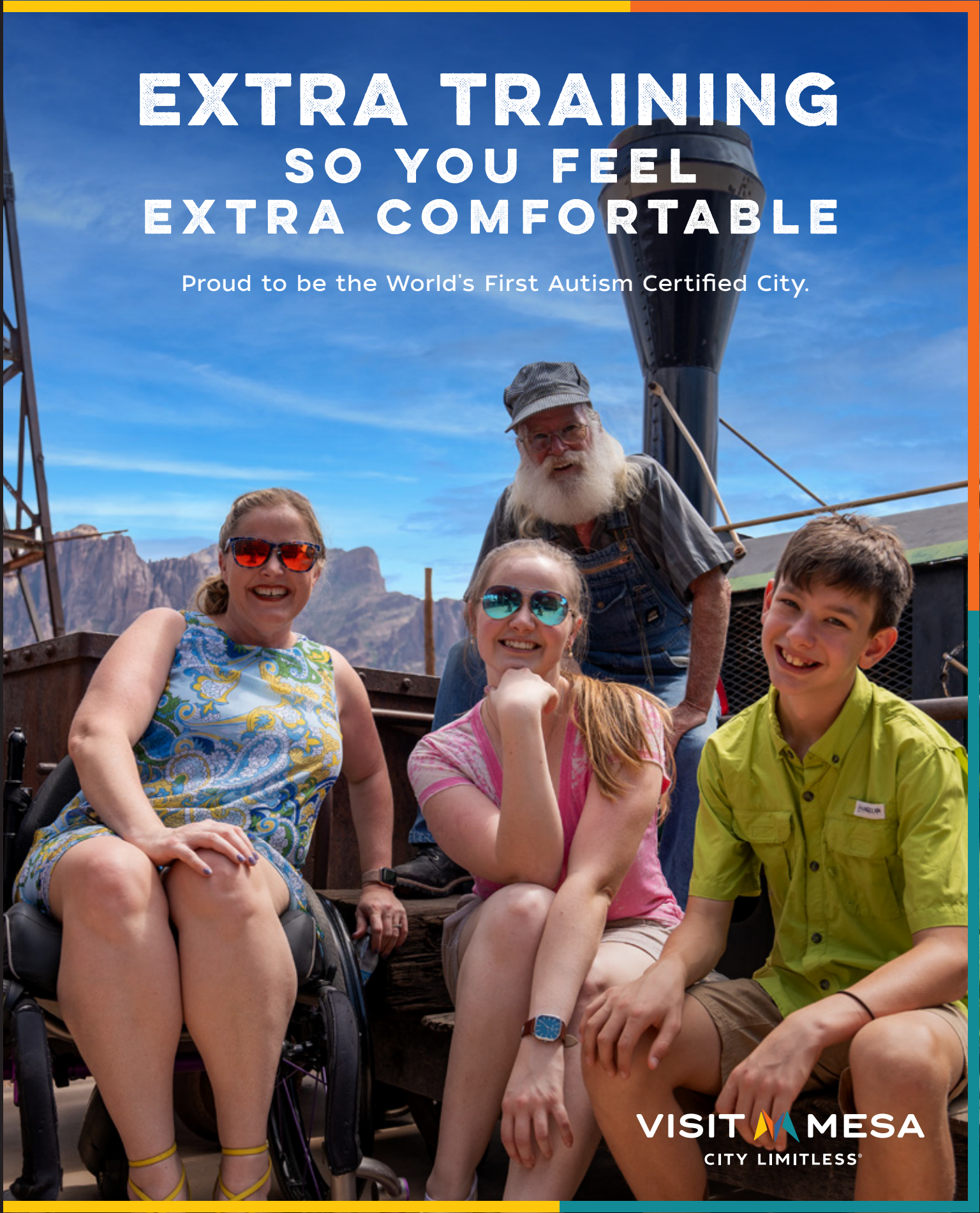
IBCCES

Sensory Guide™

Sensory Levels (1 = Low Sensory Stimulation, 10 = High Sensory Stimulation)

	1	2	3	4	5
	Area/Attraction Name	Location	ISD#12345		
	TOUCH	TASTE	SOUND	TASTE	SOUND
	6	1	3	3	1
PARTICIPANT GUIDELINES	Visitors can climb, swing, slide, crawl and more		Potential for close proximity/shared space with other visitors		Low impact on this sense
	Varied surface textures for play areas, walking paths, etc.		Natural/outdoor lighting – some shaded areas available		
	Free/unstructured play		Some background noise from wildlife possible, as well as nearby dog park area		
	Accessible play areas and structures		Some brightly colored equipment/areas		

- 1
- Area/attraction name, location, and sensory guide # are listed here.
- 2
- Sensory Ratings** are listed for each sensory area. These ratings indicate the level of sensory stimulation (1 is low stimulation and 10 is very stimulating). Combined with the Guidelines noted below, this enables individuals to prepare for the sensory environment and plan ahead for their experience.
- 3
- Participant Guidelines** describe the type of sensory input that may be in this area and potential triggers for participants. Every individual will have different concerns and interests – what may be triggering to one individual may be an interest or benefit to others.

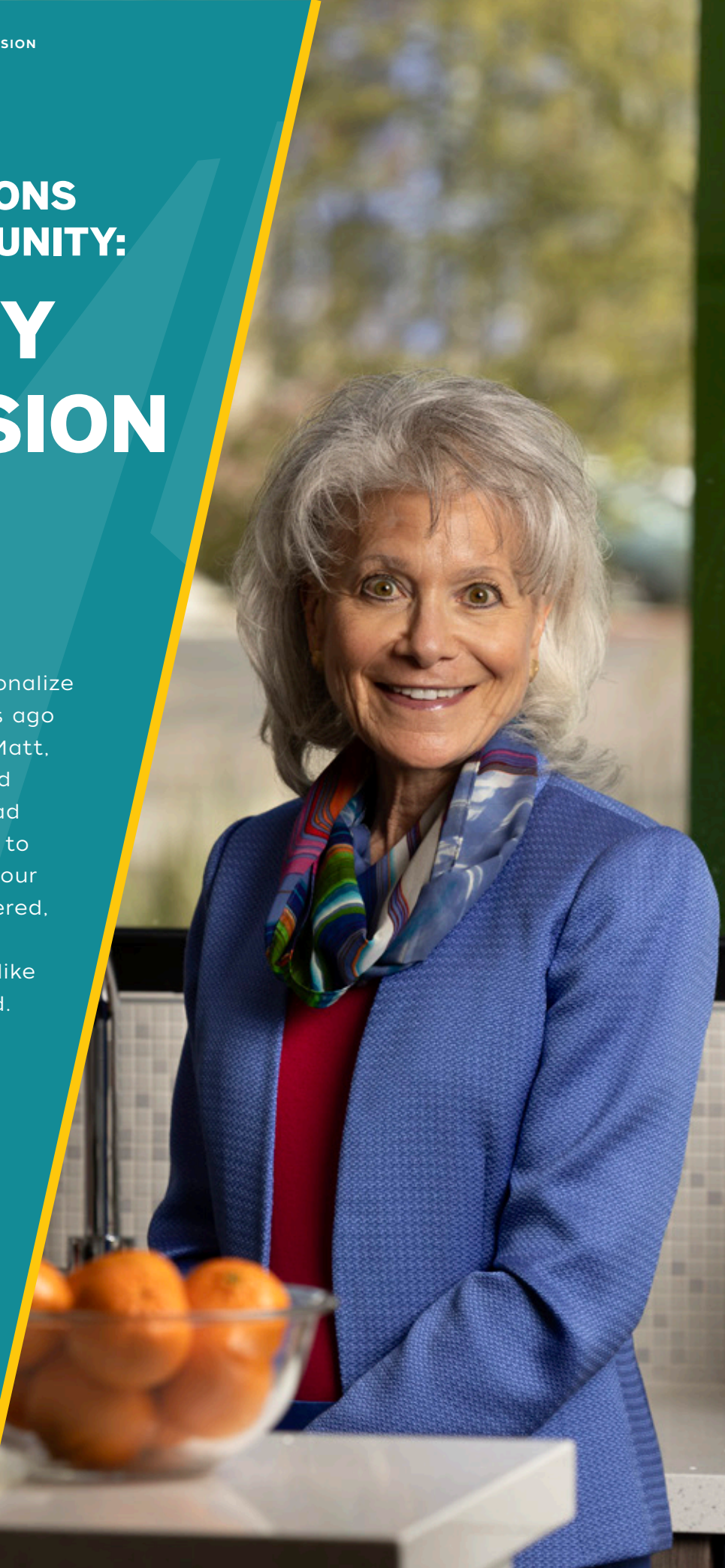


THE MANY DIMENSIONS OF BUILDING COMMUNITY: A JOURNEY OF INCLUSION



"Love, accept, and plan to institutionalize him." Those words, spoken 31 years ago when our then two-year-old son, Matt, was diagnosed with autism, ignited a journey of transformation. Instead of accepting limitations, we chose to reshape Matt's world and, in turn, our own. This journey, as we've discovered, is not linear, but a dynamic and multidimensional evolution, much like the communities we strive to build.

BY
DENISE D. RESNIK,
FOUNDER & PRESIDENT/CEO
OF FIRST PLACE AZ



The vision so many of us share for an inclusive community has gained significant traction – and Mesa's leadership in fostering an autism-friendly environment is a significant proof point. Such progress is the result of committed collaboration among public, private, nonprofit and philanthropic community leaders. We believe that creating a welcoming environment for everyone, regardless of ability, is a shared responsibility that extends from neighborhoods, schools and workplaces to places of worship and recreational spaces.

First Place AZ has helped lead this multidimensional approach. Beyond **First Place-Phoenix**, our 81,000-square-foot supportive housing property, the **First Place Global Leadership Institute** is actively building a more neuro-inclusive workforce, pursuing innovative healthcare initiatives, researching special population segments and advancing supportive technology initiatives. More recently, we've amplified support for a healthy, neuro-inclusive democracy. This holistic approach reflects the multifaceted lives of individuals with autism and the comprehensive support they require.

The tourism industry, exemplified by Visit Mesa and over 50 other businesses achieving Certified Autism Center status through the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards, has helped fuel this transformation. Mesa's achievement as the first Autism Certified City underscores the profound impact of these collaborative efforts.



All of us on this journey stand on the shoulders of those who fought for landmark legislation—including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Autism CARES Act – all of which have paved the way for current and future advancements. Those who came before us worked tirelessly to achieve the transformative passage of this crucial legislation over the years, which not only strengthened us but contributed to a more resilient state.

Appreciating such efforts on this journey of more than three decades, I recognize there is always more to do than hours in a day allow. Still, I remain committed to ensuring that our work progresses, the communities we create and nurture continue to evolve – and the next generation of leaders is as inspired and energized by this mission as we are.

Denise D. Resnik is the co-founder of the Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center (SARRC) and the founder and president/CEO of First Place AZ.



As a community, we are transforming the landscape of opportunity, ensuring that housing, healthcare and employment options are as bountiful for the special populations we serve as they are for everyone else. This multidimensional work – a testament to the power of collaboration among innovators, problem-solvers, trusted partners, philanthropists, humanitarians and self-advocates—is a celebration of our progress toward a truly inclusive future.

OUR STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES



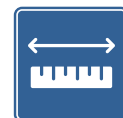
CONNECT

Break down silos and foster collaboration across diverse groups and age ranges.



REACH OUT

Involve the broader community and promote interagency collaboration.



MEASURE

Develop new metrics to track value and quality of life outcomes.



SCAFFOLD

Identify and leverage existing community assets.



INNOVATE

Explore creative solutions to address housing and other needs.

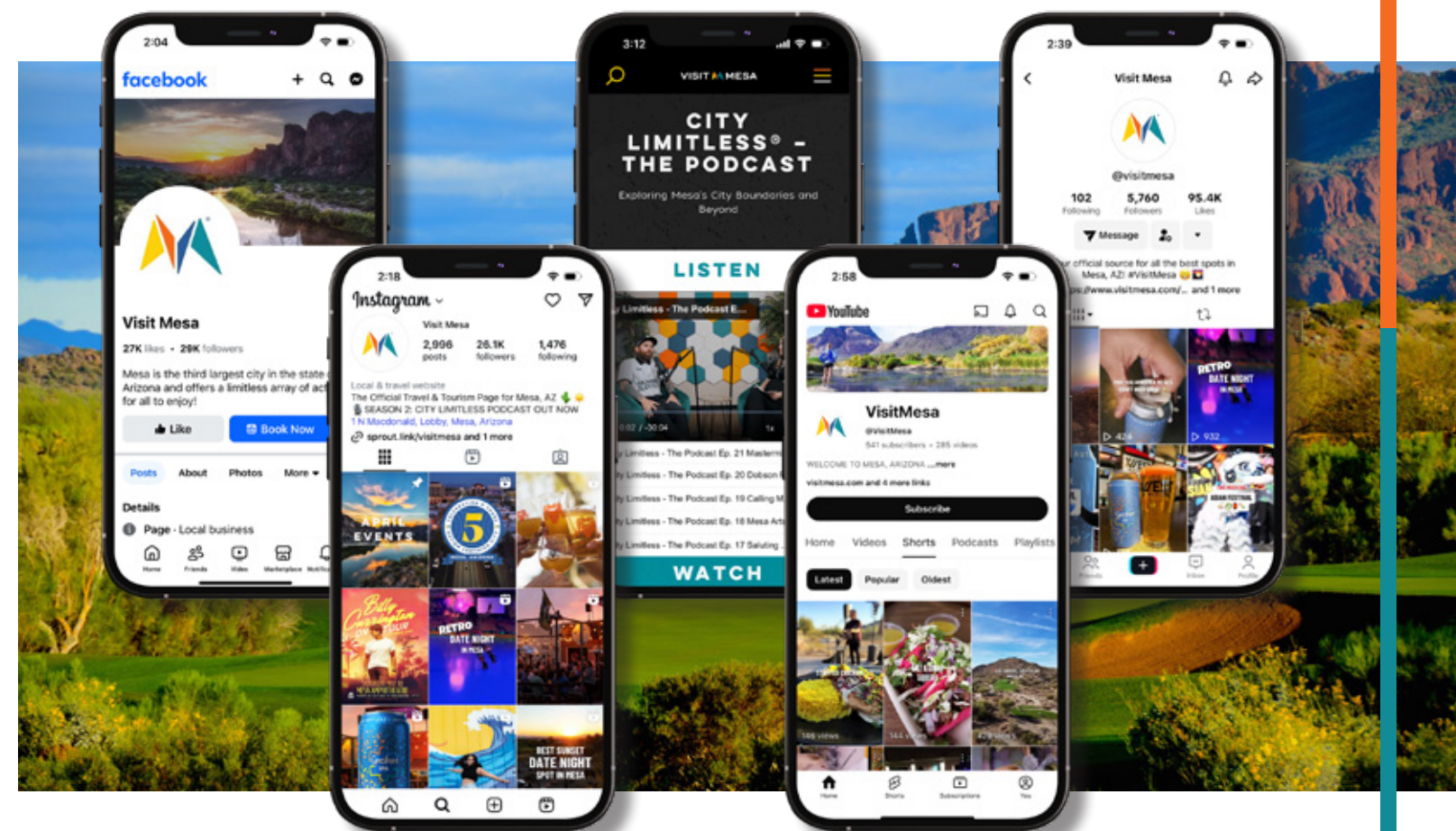


LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Demonstrate success and open doors for adults with autism.

EXPERIENCE MESA THROUGH EVERY SENSE AND UPDATE

Stay Connected and Inspired with City Limitless®



@VISITMESA / #VISITMESA

ARMANI WILLIAMS

TEAM ARMANI RACING

From a childhood fascination with toy cars to blazing down the asphalt, Armani Williams' journey is a testament to the power of passion. Diagnosed with autism at just two years old, Armani didn't let a label define him. Instead, he channeled his unique perspective into becoming the first openly autistic NASCAR driver.



In a world that often overlooks neurodiversity, Armani's presence on the track is revolutionary. He's not just racing; he's rewriting the narrative. He's showing the world that autism isn't a barrier—it's a superpower. His ability to hyper-focus and process complex information simultaneously, traits often associated with autism, are key assets in the high-speed, high-stakes world of racing.

Armani's partnership with Visit Mesa is more than just a sponsorship; it's a shared commitment to inclusivity. 'When I first came to Mesa,' Armani recalls, 'I discovered a city that celebrates diversity. I want to show others on the spectrum that they too can find their place, their passion, their Mesa.'

His message is clear: 'Don't let anyone tell you what you can't do.'

Armani's story isn't just about racing; it's about breaking barriers, inspiring a generation, and proving that with determination and the right support, anything is possible. In 2025, Armani continues to push the limits, both on and off the track, proving that the future of motorsports—and the world—is inclusive.



ARMANI'S MESA HOTSPOTS

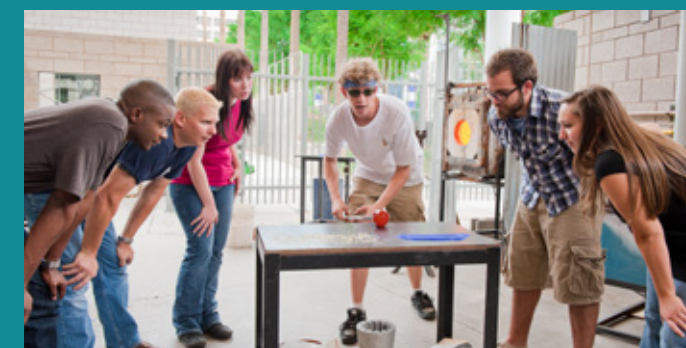
When I'm not on the racetrack, I love exploring the best of Mesa. Here are a few of my go-to spots:

DELTA HOTELS BY MARRIOTT PHOENIX MESA

If you're looking for a comfortable and luxurious place to stay, I highly recommend the Delta Hotels. The rooms are amazing, and they have this awesome outdoor pool - perfect for chilling out in the Arizona sun.

MESA ARTS CENTER

If you're into art and music, you have to check out the Mesa Arts Center. They have these amazing art exhibitions that blow me away, and they also host live musical performances. It's a really cool cultural experience.



12 WEST BREWING

When I want to grab a great meal and drinks with friends, I head to 12 West Brewing in downtown Mesa. They have a diverse menu with something for everyone, and it's just a cool place to hang out.

ARIZONA MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

I'm a big fan of history and animals, so the Arizona Museum of Natural History is a must-see for me. They have these incredible exhibits with prehistoric animals and ancient artifacts that go back millions of years. It's really fascinating.

NOVEL ICE CREAM

Mesa can get hot, so I always make sure to stop by Novel Ice Cream to cool down. They have these unique and creative ice cream flavors that are seriously delicious. Trust me, you'll love it.

OUR LIFE-CHANGING VACATION

TO AUTISM-FRIENDLY MESA, ARIZONA



A few weeks before his 19th birthday, and a week before Christmas 2024, my son Adam Forman, who has autism, embarked on a big adventure with me to Mesa, Arizona, as the guests of **Visit Mesa**.

This was a BIG deal since it was Adam's first flight, from Philadelphia to Phoenix, and our first vacation without a friend or family member in tow to provide both of us with physical and moral support.

**BY
DEBRA WALLACE
FORMAN**



VIEW ADAM
AND DEBRA'S
TRIP
ITINERARY



Not only did we have a terrific time exploring the sights, sounds and flavors of Mesa and its autism-friendly destinations based on a well-planned itinerary from Visit Mesa, but the entire experience showed Adam that despite his anxiety about traveling by air and leaving his comfort zone, he had a blast.

I interviewed my son during and after our trip to Mesa and this is what he had to say. "At first, I was a little scared because I had never flown before and I am not a big fan of heights," Adam Forman explained. "But nothing bad happened, so if I am going to Florida or L.A. I would fly again, especially for a trip to Disneyland. Since Cars is my favorite animated movie, I would love to go there."

Speaking of the hit 2006 animated film, Adam noticed that the mountains and landscape around Mesa looked a lot like the desert regions depicted in Cars.

When asked for the highlights of his Visit Mesa hosted adventure, Adam said he loved "...the big mountains, the cactuses, the horses and tour of the Saguaro Lake Guest Ranch and Stables in the Tonto National Forest, the train ride at the Goldfield Ghost Town in Apache Junction, and the Arizona Museum of Natural History." As a longtime budding paleontologist, the museum tour was definitely one of his favorite aspects of the trip.



Adam also gave his wholehearted endorsement to the Sheraton Mesa Hotel at Wrigleyville West, for the caring staff, comfortable and well-appointed rooms and other amenities. "I'm not going to lie, I miss it" he said. "When I first got there, I was feeling a little homesick, but soon after I felt at home. After Mesa I want to go on another vacation on a plane or a train."

So why should other families head to Mesa for an upcoming vacation this year? "It's a fun place where they made us feel comfortable," Adam added. "Also, our weather was perfect - no snow and no rain. It was a memorable holiday."

As a proud mom, my favorite aspect of our trip to Mesa was when my son was enjoying himself and becoming more confident with the adventure. I also loved the Arizona Museum of Natural History, driving around with the majestic mountains in the background, a performance at the Mesa Art Center, exploring Downtown Main Street, and the local outdoor farmer's market where I bought almond lotion and delicious strawberry preserves from local vendors that I wrapped carefully and took home.

Two of my favorite restaurants were the allergy-friendly Intentional Foods Café & Market and the Henhouse Cafe which serves plate-size pancakes. I also loved the comforts of the Sheraton Mesa Hotel, especially the bed, sheets and comforter. I can't wait to return for spring training next year and head to the adjacent ballpark.

Adam tends to be an extremely picky eater, so I fully vetted all of the restaurants before we went to each of them by looking at the website, making phone calls and also checking wait times. There is nothing worse than a hungry teen being asked to wait an hour or more for breakfast, lunch or dinner.

Overall, what made the vacation so memorable is that everywhere we went, we saw friendly faces from people who had been trained to understand that people with autism and other special needs may think or act differently from them, but these quirks or differences make them the awesome young people that they are. As a devoted mom, seeing Adam thrive in a place where he was accepted, cared for, and included was the best Christmas gift I could ever imagine.

7 TIPS FROM OUR TRIP

Debra Wallace shares her recommendations for a positive visit to Mesa with an autistic child.

1. USE YOUR ITINERARY AS A GUIDE.

There may be a restaurant or tourist stop that needs tweaking once you get there, so keep in mind what your children and family love when choosing attractions. Also, leave some room on your itinerary for restaurants or attractions off the beaten path. Don't be too regimented.

2. PICK AN AIRLINE, HOTEL, AND CAR RENTAL THAT CAN ACCOMMODATE THE NEEDS OF YOU AND YOUR FAMILY, ESPECIALLY THOSE WITH SPECIAL NEEDS.

My initial car rental selection did not initially work out, but the employees were more than happy to make changes to my reservation that made us more comfortable.

3. DON'T OVERPACK.

Keep in mind that you and your children are going to have to carry your luggage at some point during the trip. So, bring what you need, but don't bring everything. Also, leave room in your luggage for souvenirs. My son always wants to buy books or collectibles, so don't pack so much that you need an extra bag to bring everything home.

4. EXPECT GLITCHES AND DON'T SWEAT THE SMALL STUFF.

No matter how much you plan, you may pick a restaurant or attraction that one or more vacationers don't care for. It happens. Shake it off, move on, and go out for a family favorite like pizza.



5. LEAVE DOWN TIME.

Just because there is a great deal to explore, when you arrive it may make sense to check into the hotel and watch a movie or favorite TV show before lunch or dinner, especially after a long drive or flight.

6. BE PREPARED.

I contacted TSA Cares (1-855-787-2227) for assistance to help Adam and me through the security screening process. I told them our flight departure and arrival times, and someone met us and helped me navigate taking out my laptop, taking off our shoes, and putting everything on the conveyer, while I kept an eye on Adam. Also, make sure you have everyone's IDs available before you get to the airport, so you are not fumbling while you check your luggage or try to find your gate.

7. DON'T GET CAUGHT SHORTHANDED.

Adam only drinks water and apple juice. Several of the restaurants we went to that had scrumptious food did not serve apple juice. So, I would recommend when you arrive, going to a grocery or convenience store and purchasing those beverages and snacks you and your children can't live without—it may help quell some problems later on.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & RESOURCES

Visit Mesa gives special thanks to the organizations that prioritize accessibility and provide services for individuals with autism and sensory-sensitive needs, benefiting both our community and those visiting Mesa.

ARIZONA AUTISM UNITED azaunited.org



The mission of Arizona Autism United is to help as many families as possible through individualized supports. Its vision is to serve as a model of excellence for autism organizations by offering comprehensive services across the lifespan, with facilities located throughout the state of Arizona.

AUTISM LIFE AND LIVING autismlifeandliving.org



Founded by a dedicated mother, ALL serves as a source of support and opportunity for youth and young adults with autism and other intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). The organization provides a range of programs designed to help neurodiverse individuals build independence, form healthy relationships, access competitive integrated employment and participate fully in their communities.

AUTISM SOCIETY OF GREATER PHOENIX phxautism.org



Founded in 1973, the Autism Society is the oldest autism-focused organization in Arizona. Its mission is to foster connections and empower individuals across the autism community by providing the resources needed to lead fulfilling lives. The organization offers a broad range of services, including education, training, social events and ongoing support for its members. It is also strongly committed to advocacy, working to improve systems of care that impact the autism community.

EAST VALLEY AUTISM NETWORK (EVAN) eastvalleyautismnetwork.com



EVAN is a parent-led support group dedicated to providing hope, resources, information and support for families with children on the autism spectrum. The group welcomes all families who are interested in connecting and helping one another navigate the services and education their children need.

FIRST PLACE® AZ firstplaceaz.org



Developed as a residential community to serve as a national and international model, First Place-Phoenix offers supportive apartment housing for adults with autism and/or other intellectual/developmental disabilities, as well as a residential transition program for adults with autism.

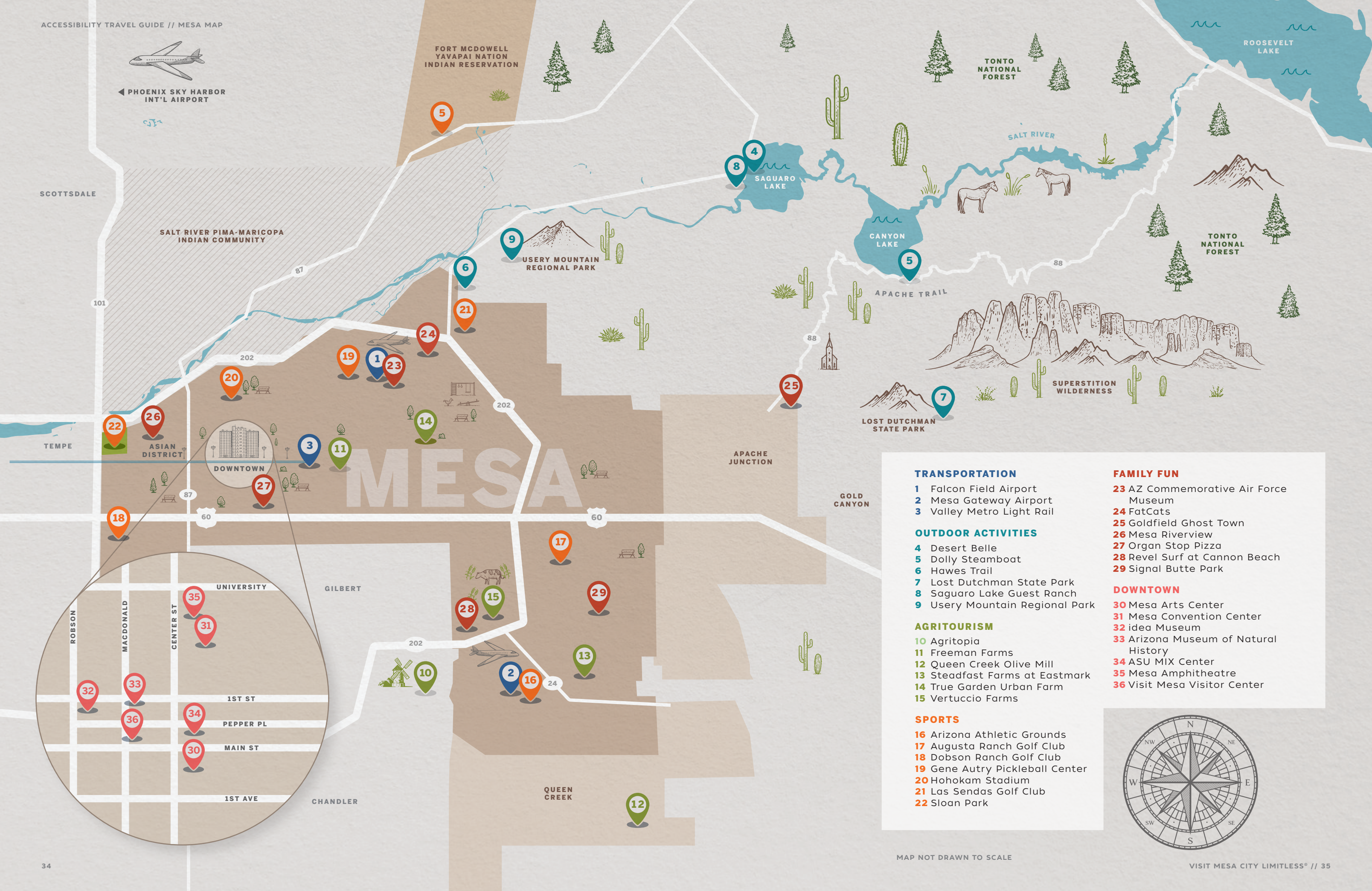
POLARIS ACADEMY polarisacademy.org

Located in Mesa is a K-8 academy specializing in education for autistic and neurodivergent children. They offer a unique learning environment with integrated therapies (BCBA, Speech, Occupational), a sensory-friendly design, and experiential programs like STEM, culinary arts and a student business center to empower students towards a more independent future. They are also the first school in Arizona to be recognized as a Certified Autism Center.

SOUTHWEST AUTISM RESEARCH & RESOURCE CENTER (SARRC) autismcenter.org



Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center (SARRC) is an internationally recognized nonprofit that conducts innovative research, promotes evidence-based practices, disseminates effective training and builds inclusive communities for individuals with autism and their families.



TRANSPORTATION

- 1 Falcon Field Airport
- 2 Mesa Gateway Airport
- 3 Valley Metro Light Rail

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

- 4 Desert Belle
- 5 Dolly Steamboat
- 6 Hawes Trail
- 7 Lost Dutchman State Park
- 8 Saguaro Lake Guest Ranch
- 9 Usery Mountain Regional Park

AGRITOURISM

- 10 Agritopia
- 11 Freeman Farms
- 12 Queen Creek Olive Mill
- 13 Steadfast Farms at Eastmark
- 14 True Garden Urban Farm
- 15 Vertuccio Farms

SPORTS

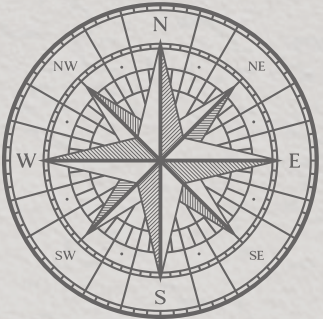
- 16 Arizona Athletic Grounds
- 17 Augusta Ranch Golf Club
- 18 Dobson Ranch Golf Club
- 19 Gene Autry Pickleball Center
- 20 Hohokam Stadium
- 21 Las Sendas Golf Club
- 22 Sloan Park

FAMILY FUN

- 23 AZ Commemorative Air Force Museum
- 24 FatCats
- 25 Goldfield Ghost Town
- 26 Mesa Riverview
- 27 Organ Stop Pizza
- 28 Revel Surf at Cannon Beach
- 29 Signal Butte Park

DOWNTOWN

- 30 Mesa Arts Center
- 31 Mesa Convention Center
- 32 idea Museum
- 33 Arizona Museum of Natural History
- 34 ASU MIX Center
- 35 Mesa Amphitheatre
- 36 Visit Mesa Visitor Center



A stylized graphic of a mountain range, composed of several overlapping triangles with a fine, parallel line texture, rendered in a light blue color against the dark blue background.

visitmesa.com