



Tahquitz 101

The natural beauty and intriguing history behind Tahquitz Canyon continues to enchant those who wander beneath its rocky outcroppings and linger near its trickling stream.

To fully appreciate the beauty of Tahquitz Canyon and to understand the importance of this sacred place, one must start with the migration story of the first people who settled here.

The tale is just one of many symbolic narratives of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians that illustrate how life was in the beginning.

In the beginning, there was a great and powerful leader named *Evon ga net*, “the fox,” who lived in what is now known as Moreno Valley, located about 45 miles west of Palm Springs.

There were many people living in the area, and as a result, the resources began to dwindle. Being a wise leader, *Evon ga net* set out to find a new home for his people. He traveled to the San Jacinto Mountains, giving names to everything he saw along the way: springs, canyons, rocks, and hills. He crossed the mountains and entered the Coachella Valley, marking the land for his people and the generations to follow. As he journeyed through the San Gorgonio Pass, he felt his power dissipating and knew his work was done. He passed into the mountain and re-emerged at the top as a great white rock in the shape of a dome called *Kow wish so kalet*. This rock remains to this day and can be seen from Interstate 10 between Whitewater and Cabazon, looking south up on the ridge.

“It is said that his spirit is in that rock,” says Ralph Chapparosa, Agua Caliente Tribal Ranger.

Around the same time, the Fox Clan settled near Soboba hot springs north of Hemet. Their leader, *Ca wis ke on ca*, which means “the fox’s horns,” was a man of great power who also gave names to places. As he traveled around the countryside, he noticed the marking left by *Evon ga net* for his tribe. *Ca wis ke on ca* came over the mountains and saw the green spot, now known as Palm Springs.

Upon reaching the hot mineral spring, he called it *Sec he*, meaning “the sound of boiling water.” Seeing that this part of the countryside had also been marked by *Evon ga net*, his tribe followed him over the mountain, arriving at *Chee mo ke wen e*, meaning “a deep narrow canyon,” and *Kak wa wit*, also known as “Tahquitz Canyon.”

For thousands of years, Agua Caliente people called Tahquitz Canyon home. They thrived on the area’s abundance of wildlife, which included rabbits, squirrels, lizards, snakes, and quail. They also sought nourishment from honey mesquite beans that were ground in stone mortars. “A woman’s character was judged on how well she prepared a meal in the stone mortar,” Chapparosa says. “Keeping the stone mortars clean and covered would have been important.”

ABOVE: According to Agua Caliente legend, Tahquitz, the first shaman created by Mukat and the inspiration behind the canyon’s name, sometimes appears as a large green fireball streaking across the night sky.

JOEY JARECKI (PHOTO ILLUSTRATION)

RIGHT: Tahquitz Canyon features some of the most striking rock formations in the Palm Springs area. OPPOSITE: The water that flows through Tahquitz Falls is believed to be rejuvenating and healing.



Many people have come to know of Tahquitz Canyon because of the legend of Tahquitz. As the story goes, Tahquitz was the first shaman created by Mukat, the creator of all things. Tahquitz, who was very powerful, initially provided for the good of all people and became the guardian spirit of all shamans. But over time, he began to use his power selfishly, which brought harm to the Agua Caliente people. Angered by this, the people banished Tahquitz to the canyon that now bears his name. He made his home high in the San Jacinto Mountains in a secret cave below the towering rock known today as Tahquitz Rock. It is said that his spirit still lives in this canyon. According to the legend, he

sometimes appears as a large green fireball streaking across the night sky, and the strange rumblings heard deep within the San Jacinto Mountains — the shaking of the ground and the crashing of boulders — are believed to be the result of Tahquitz stomping about the canyon.

The Agua Caliente stories that tell of *Evon ga net* and the shaman Tahquitz transforming into rock formations and living within these outcroppings illustrate the significance of the area's unique geology.

"The rock formations you see in Tahquitz Canyon are mainly composed of schist and gneiss," Chapparosa says. "They are metamorphic rocks formed under tremendous pressure and heat.

The area is formed primarily of granitic rock derived from the upper reaches of the canyon. Granite is formed from magma and is the coarse-grained rock cooled below the surface. Experts believe the mountain range was formed about 60 million years ago.

"We are on the Pacific Plate, and just across the valley is the San Andreas Fault and the North American Plate," Chapparosa continues. "Below us is the Palm Canyon Fault, and just over on the other side of the San Jacinto Mountains is the San Jacinto Fault. The movement of the Pacific Plate and the North American Plate is the primary reason these mountains formed."



MILLCENT HARVEY (ALL)



Tahquitz Creek, a seasonal water source, flows through Tahquitz Canyon.

TAHQUITZ CANYON

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Tahquitz Canyon is one of the most beautiful and culturally sensitive areas of the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation in Palm Springs. The canyon is home to a spectacular seasonal 60-foot waterfall, rock art, an ancient irrigation system, and native wildlife and plants. Located at the entrance to the canyon, the Tahquitz Visitor Center offers educational and cultural exhibitions and features a display of artifacts, an observation deck, and a small theater room for viewing *The Legend of Tahquitz* video. When planning a trip, hikers must carry water, wear hiking boots or sturdy shoes, and dress appropriately for the weather conditions to protect themselves from the sun. The canyon has little shade and no drinking fountains.

Today, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians shares Tahquitz Canyon with visitors year-round so they can enjoy the beauty of their sacred ancestral homeland. Visitors enjoy hiking along the 2-mile looping trail that leads to Tahquitz Falls and back to the Tahquitz Visitor Center. While exploring the canyon, hikers may see such birds as the phainopepla, the red-tailed hawk, or Costa's hummingbird. Several snakes and lizards also make their home here, including the desert spiny lizard, the granite spiny lizard, and the king snake. There are also mammals; a fortunate few may catch a glimpse of a gray fox or even a bighorn sheep.

In addition, the landscape boasts a beautiful assortment of desert plants and cacti as diverse as the canyon's fauna. Hikers can expect to see the beavertail cactus, the California red barrel cactus, and the hedgehog cactus, to name just

a few. Other plants, such as brittlebush, honey mesquite, wolfberry, white sage, desert apricot, and the Western sycamore also grow in the canyon. Visitors won't, however, find any palm trees here.

Tahquitz Canyon and three southern canyons are listed on the National Register for Historic Places. From the Visitor Center (516 feet) to Tahquitz Falls (867 feet), hikers gain 351 feet in elevation along a groomed but steep and rocky trail. Hikers should have good balance and be able to climb up and down rock steps that may be as high as 12 to 15 inches.

"This is a place of contrasts," Chapparosa says. "It is a place of ancient and new. It is a place of peace and turbulence. It is a place of power. The Agua Caliente people saw this land as a gift from their creator.

"The canyon is sacred, and for the Tribe to open it to the public, it is a gift."
— KATE ANDERSON



LANDMARKS

Don't miss these 10 Tahquitz Canyon sites.

- 1 Kak wa wit (mouth of the canyon):** This is the entrance to Tahquitz Canyon and was named more than 3,000 years ago by *Evon ga net* "Great Chief" of the Agua Caliente people. Visitors can look up into the canyon from this point. The site of the path is not much different from when ancient ones would have walked the canyon. Artifacts found here date back 3,000 or more years ago.
- 2 Mi as kalet (A gray top):** A large, white-tipped

rock located in the middle of the mouth of Tahquitz Canyon and named by *Ca wis ke on ca*, leader of the Fox Tribe, who first settled here.

- 3 Sacred Rock:** One of the oldest Agua Caliente Indian dwelling sites. Rock art and bedrock mortars mark this sacred place. Some of the artifacts that have been found here are more than 1,500 years old and include rock-lined storage bins, arrow points, grinding stones, beads, and bones. Mortars in this

area indicate that many families would have lived here on the terrace in ancient times.

- 4 Cow is ic ela:** A large rock that sits on a boulder. Agua Caliente legend tells of a young maiden who had the power to turn herself into that rock, which now bears her name.

- 5 Ton wen neval (place of wasted mescal):** Remnants of the Lebacho-Tahquitz Creek Ditch mark this area. The Agua Caliente Indians wanted

to bring water from Tahquitz Canyon to the village in what is now downtown Palm Springs for drinking and irrigation. "This ditch was originally built in 1830 by a man named Jose Lebacho who wanted to do something for his people," says Tribal Ranger Ralph Chapparosa. "So he gathered the men together and they helped him dig a ditch several miles long to divert water from Tahquitz Creek to the main village to grow corn, beans, melon, and squash."

- 8 Lookout Rock of Kak wa wit (mouth of the canyon):** This rock overlooks the village of *Sec he* (sound of boiling water) and the site of the Agua Caliente Hot Mineral Spring in downtown Palm Springs.

- 9 Cock wo wit (piled boulders):** An ancient rock shelter where artifacts dating back thousands of years have been found.

- 10 Echo Cliff:** A large cliff area to the left of the mouth of Tahquitz Canyon.

By 1906, the Agua Caliente people had lined the ditch with rock to prevent seepage. Eventually, when the U.S. government wanted to increase and improve the flow, the ditch was lined with mortar cobblestone, and a diversion dam was created and used between 1914 and 1926. In 1926, a flash flood came through and wiped much of it out.

- 6 U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Gaging Station:** Built in 1947 by the USGS, this water measuring station is still in use today.

- 7 Tahquitz Falls:** This 60-foot waterfall was originally named *Pal hani kalet* by *Ca wis ke on ca*. On Jan. 9, 1857, the Fort Tejon earthquake changed the water flow in Tahquitz Canyon. Tahquitz Creek switched from a year-round flowing stream to a seasonal water source. The Agua Caliente believe the falls are a place of power: When you enter, you are tired and weak, but when you leave, you feel rejuvenated and energized.