

Yosemite National Park

- Elevations range from 1,230 m (4,035 ft) in Yosemite Valley, 3,031 m (9,944 ft) at Tioga Pass, to 3,997 m (13,113 ft) at Mount Lyell
- Approximately 3.7 million visitors annually, 90% visiting only Yosemite Valley for less than a day
- Peak visitation: May to August

"... That first impression of the valley – white water, azaleas, cool fir hollows, tall pines and stout oaks, cliffs towering to unimagined heights, the poignant sounds and smells of the Sierra, the whirling bustle of the stage stop at Camp Curry with its confusing activities of porters, tourists, office workers and mountain chickens, and the dark green-bright atmosphere of our tent – was an experience so intense it was almost painful. Since that day in 1916, my life has been shaped and modulated by the great earthy shape of the Sierra."
Ansel Adams, *Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada*

How, Where, What

What a valley! You can only guess the river's slight bend between the dense green firs at the valley's bottom from the height of Tunnel View. If you hear the conversations up here about the hustle and bustle in the tents, cabins, and hotels down in the valley, you don't take them at face value. The walls of the gorge staring at each other over a short distance can hardly be called symmetrical, yet they complement each other to form a natural whole. After looking at the entirety of the impressive panorama, one's gaze falls on the large landmarks in the foreground and background. If the first glance was perhaps fleeting, now at the latest, the two mighty rock faces attract all attention, becoming larger and larger and suddenly embodying all the granite of the Sierra. They are high and massive. Their rock is of an almost unworldly gray color, the cheek of one slightly grained, that of the



Yosemite Valley and the landmarks El Capitan (left) and Half Dome (center rear)

other smooth as if cut with a knife. You can hear their names from the scraps of words spoken by the bystanders: El Capitan is the name of the closest one, Half Dome the distant one. One would like to call out “well-chosen” but refrains from doing so in order not to ruin the moment.

Yosemite—the name has a strangely familiar sound. Almost everyone has read about this park or seen pictures. The reports are largely laudatory, and the photos showcase a breathtakingly beautiful landscape, with each photo highlighting a different aspect. It is not without good reason that many ideas and ideals are associated with this place, as Yosemite National Park offers a scenic summary of the entire Sierra Nevada in a relatively small area.

With the changing of the seasons, a varied picture emerges: spring is the time of snowmelt in the higher elevations. The excess water and rising temperatures provide fresh shoots in the valley beginning in April, causing the waterfalls to swell dramatically by mid-May. The Merced River (pronounced “*Mer-sed*”) takes on the floodwaters and carries them out of the canyon in a wider bed. The fast-flowing water is particularly well suited for long-exposure studies. Tioga Road (Rt-120) and Glacier Point Road do not reopen until after the snow melts in late May or early June. The summer months see the highest volume of visitors to Yosemite Valley, which is only 1.6 km (1 mi) wide and 11 km (7 mi) long. By the end of July, Yosemite Valley usually exhausts its winter snow supply, transforming the recently roaring waterfalls into narrow veils of spray or ceasing their flow altogether. This calming benefits the small reservoirs in the Merced River, which show such excellent reflections of El Capitan or Half Dome. July warmth helps wildflowers bloom extensively. Foremost, Tuolumne Meadows near Tioga Pass attract visitors. The onset of fall color in early October heralds the valley’s quieter season of vibrant golden foliage, which can peak as early as the beginning of November. By then, at the latest,

Tioga Road closes again due to the onset of snowfall at higher elevations. *Clearing Winter Storm* was the name Ansel Adams gave to one of his most impressive images of the park, and the black-and-white print perfectly captures the impression of freshly fallen snow. Snow continues to fall even in the valley into April, providing exceptional photo opportunities around the Merced River, El Capitan, and Mirror Lake. The valley is accessible, but snow chains are often a must.

**Like many other valleys
in the Sierra, Yosemite
Valley was carved out of
granite by the force of gla-
ciers. They also provided
the memorable faces of
Half Dome and El Capitan**

Directions

Yosemite Valley is located about 306 km (190 mi) east of San Francisco and is easily accessible from that direction via Routes 120, 140, and 41 year-round. Only Rt-120 enters the park from the east via Tioga Pass, but heavy snowfall at high elevations closes it from November through May. During the season, all routes in the park are easily accessible by RVs, although larger vehicles may experience parking bottlenecks due to crowding. Visitor centers can be found open year-round in Yosemite Valley and at the Big Oak Flat entrance on Rt-120, and during the summer months at the South Entrance/Wawona on Rt-41 and near Tuolumne Meadows on Tioga Road.

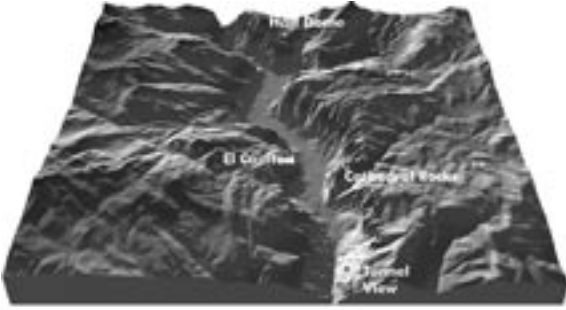
The high number of visitors has now forced the park administration to restrict access during the season. They call it the **Peak Hours Plus Reservation System** in spring, summer, and fall, and it is effective from 5:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. Reservations are required on weekends from April 13 to June 30 and seven days a week from July 1 to August 16. From August 17 to October 27, weekend reservations are also required. Each reservation is valid for three consecutive days starting on the date of entry. Most Peak Hours Plus reservations go on sale at the beginning of January. Additional reservations become available seven days before the arrival date. Fifty percent of the available reservations are released two days prior to a day-use reservation date for last-minute travelers. Entry conditions are announced at the end of each year and may change from year to year. But we should not expect them to be as unrestricted as they were, say, ten years ago ever again!

Most of Yosemite Valley is accessible via a one-way road system. Southside Drive bundles Routes 120, 140, and 41 and takes them east along the Merced River into the valley. At the height of Curry Village, it

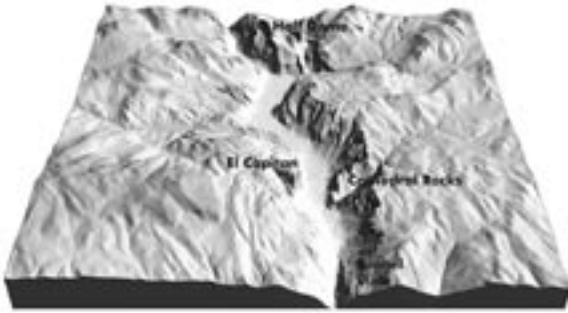
Photo subjects in Yosemite National Park

A park as large and scenically varied as Yosemite presents a challenge to every traveler. This small systematic overview should bring some order into the confusion of formations and viewpoints.

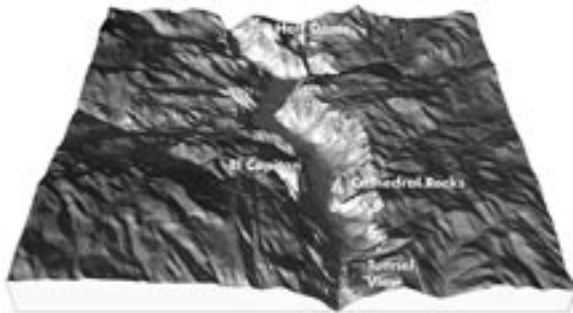
- **Portraits** of the landmarks El Capitan, Half Dome, Three Brothers, Cathedral Rocks, and Sentinel Dome at sunrise and sunset with the Merced River, one of the meadows, or one of the ubiquitous firs in the foreground
- **Overviews** of Yosemite Valley and the major formations from higher elevations such as Tunnel View, Inspiration Point, Taft Point, or Glacier Point
- **Studies** of the seasonally more or less active waterfalls
- **Details** from the river courses, e.g., small cascades or whirlpools
- **Sequoias** in Wawona and along Tioga Road
- The **alpine landscape** along Tioga Road surprises with great mountain panoramas and fragile reflections in the clear mountain lakes. In summer, there are the wide wildflower meadows of Tuolumne Meadows.



View to the east into Yosemite Valley on July 1 at 6:30 a.m.
Sunrise is at 5:45 a.m.



View to the east into Yosemite Valley on July 1 at 1 p.m.



View to the east into Yosemite Valley on July 1 at 7:45 p.m.
Sunset is at 8:24 p.m.

meets Northside Drive, which runs in the opposite direction past Yosemite Village. Three cross-connections allow you to selectively drive down individual segments of this traffic circle.

In the village, you will find the Visitor Center, a museum, the Ansel Adams Gallery, and all the other tourist amenities you might think you need.

Once you arrive, the best way to get around the valley is to take the **free shuttle buses** that run about every ten minutes on two routes. Both run year-round between 7:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. The park newspaper Yosemite Guide, available free of charge, contains the exact schedule. **The Valleywide Shuttle** runs on Northside Drive and Southside Drive through the whole valley between El Capitan Meadow, Yosemite Village, and Happy Isles. **The East Valley Shuttle** operates only in the eastern part between Yosemite Village and Happy Isles.

There are 13 campgrounds in the park area, 10 of which are also suitable for RVs. Again, 7 of the 13 can be reserved, and

this is highly recommended. For the latest regulations, visit <https://www.nps.gov/yose/planyourvisit/camping.htm>. The remaining camp-

sites are allocated on a first-come, first-served basis. BUT: If you can still be lucky enough to get a campsite or room in or near the valley without a reservation on weekdays in the spring and fall, don't give this option a second thought in the summer and on weekends the rest of the time. Reservations run long in advance for these periods.

If you don't have a tent or something similar, you can stay in the cabins at Housekeeping Camp, in the tent city at Curry Village, at Yosemite Valley Lodge, or, most luxuriously, at The Ahwahnee. Outside the Valley, other options include the Wawona Hotel to the south and White Wolf Lodge and Tuolumne Meadows Lodge on Tioga Road. Outside the park area, you can still find one or two campgrounds in the adjacent National Forests, as well as hotels in El Portal on Rt-140 to the west or in Lee Vining on Rt-395.

Restrictions for vehicles apply on the following routes:

Rt-41/Wawona Road: length maximum 45 ft for single vehicles. Height restriction toward Yosemite Valley 10 ft 2 in. In direction Wawona 13 ft 6 in.

Rt-140/El Portal Road: length maximum 45 ft for single vehicles, 60 ft for vehicle-trailer combinations, 35 ft for trailers. Height restriction 12 ft 10 in.

Rt-120/Big Oak Flat Road: length 45 ft for single vehicles. Height restriction in the tunnel in direction Yosemite Valley 10 ft 3 in. In the opposite direction 13 ft 8 in.

Rt-120/Tioga Road: is closed due to snow between November and May. Between Tioga Pass and Rt-395, the roadway rises/falls 760 m (2,500 ft) over 13 km (8 mi). As a result, some sections have an 8% grade. Travelers with RVs should keep this in mind and slow down accordingly to avoid overheating the engine. Downhill, it is advisable to use a low gear to avoid overheating the brakes. Also, use the occasional pullout to allow following traffic to overtake.

Glacier Point Road: length 35 ft for single vehicles behind Sentinel Dome/Taft Point Trailhead, closed between November and May. Overnight parking between Badger Pass and Glacier Point is not permitted between October 15 and the spring opening.

Mariposa Grove Road: maximum length is 25 ft while shuttles are operating. Trailers are not permitted.

Hetch Hetchy Road: length maximum 25 ft. Open April 1–April 30 7:00 a.m.–8:00 p.m., May 1–Labor Day (first Monday in September) 7:00 a.m.–9:00 p.m.

Geographical orientation and the most photogenic times of day

Yosemite National Park encompasses a roughly circular piece of the Sierra Nevada 97 km (60 mi) wide and 113 km (70 mi) long, and is surrounded on all sides by various National Forests.

Yosemite Valley extends south of the centerline marked by Rt-120, slightly northward from west to east, thus recommending itself and the large rock formations for fine side light in the morning and afternoon.

A subalpine plateau extends along Tioga Road (Rt-120). Although the flat light in the morning emphasizes the reflections of the trees in the many small lakes, you can also effectively capture the bright granite formations at Olmsted Point or Tenaya Lake at midday.

Photographic features

Beyond the normal lens selection, it is recommended to pack macro accessories during wildflower season. To be able to stage the small, colorful wonders of nature well-illuminated, an off-camera flash or reflector foil can also be useful. If you shoot film, a graduated neutral-density filter helps to bridge the large contrast differences between the illuminated cliff tops and the foreground, which is then mostly still or already in shadow, during overviews in the morning and evening.

Motifs along Route 41 - Between Wawona and Yosemite Valley

If you are traveling from the south on Rt-41, you will first pass the turnoff to **Mariposa Grove** right at the South Entrance (48 km / 30 mi south of Yosemite Valley) of the park. It is only 3.2 km (2 mi) from here to this largest sequoia grove in the park, and there is a distinction between the Lower Grove, which is directly at the end of the road, and the Upper Grove, which is 3.2 km (2 mi) farther and 240 m (787 ft) higher. The road from Wawona up to Mariposa Grove is closed from November until at least May because of snow. During the rest of the year, the road closes multiple times daily due to the high number of visitors filling the limited parking spaces. To get around this, you should use the free shuttle buses that connect the Mariposa Grove Arrival Area with the sequoia forest. They give you access to Mariposa Grove, regardless of visitor volume.

Once you enter the forest on the main trail, you will see the **Fallen Monarch** on your right. Biologists suspect this tree has been there for several hundred years.

Tannic acid in the wood prevents the initial formation of fungi and bacteria and holds off the decay of an uprooted sequoia for a long time. Only when the tannin has been washed out of the wood by rain and melted snow does the tree begin to decompose. Look at the roots of the giant. Sequoia trees do not have deep taproots. Instead, the roots spread out to absorb water just below the soil surface. The roots usually go no deeper than 2 m (6.5 ft), but they can spread farther than 45 m (148 ft) to give the tree a stable base for its massive trunk.