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Springtime in Yosemite, California



An open-air van owned by Tenaya Lodge at Yosemite takes guests on tours of the national park. Katherine Rodeghier photos.

Timing is Everything at this Popular California National Park

By Katherine Rodeghier



Tunnel View overlook inside Yosemite National Park.

“You don’t know how lucky you are,” tour guide Amanda Von Raeder told us as we drove through Yosemite Valley. “The falls are really flowing.”



She repeated herself several times as we passed wow-look-at-that vistas punctuated by roaring cascades of white water.

Another reason for our luck? Fewer crowds.

Summer Parking Hassles

We’d been warned not to even think of visiting **Yosemite National Park** in summer when parking lots fill by midmorning and traffic delays stretch to three hours on roads with posted speed limits of 25 or 35 mph.

The size of Rhode Island, the park in California’s [Sierra Nevada Mountains](#) draws more than 4 million visitors a year, peaking in summer. Weekends are the worst.



Waterfalls engorged with spring snowmelt send up a smoke-like spray when they hit the valley floor.

My husband and I had our hearts set on a trip tied to a conference in Southern [California](#). A midweek stay the first week of June would have to work. It did.

Savvy spring travelers shoot for the short window of time after the snow clears from roads to beauty spots such as **Glacier Point**, usually mid-May, to the beginning of school holidays in early June. They steer clear of Memorial Day weekend.

We managed to hit that sweet spot. Snowmelt in the mountains fueled falls so full even our seasoned guide seemed surprised. By August they'd shrink to a trickle, she told us.

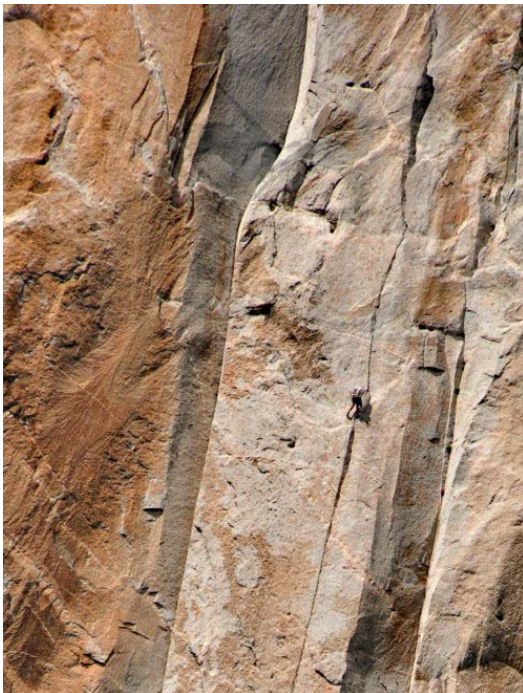
And with a few minor exceptions, we avoided crowds. By the time we drove away on Thursday morning traffic into the park had begun to build.

Lucky, indeed.

Which is not to say we didn't make plans, like booking accommodations months in advance. This is especially necessary for lodging within the park, which recently reverted to former names following the settlement of a lawsuit, including the historic Ahwahnee Hotel and Curry Village cabins.

Tenaya Lodge at Yosemite

We chose to stay just outside the park at recently expanded and renovated **Tenaya Lodge at Yosemite**. Two miles from Yosemite's southern border, it sprawls across 75 acres amid the Sierra National Forest and offers a range of accommodation styles: main lodge, cottages and upscale two-bedroom cabins that opened in July.



A rock climber makes his way along the face of El Capitan.

From this base we ventured into the park, returning to enjoy the AAA four-diamond resort's pools, spa, restaurants, and activities.

One day we drove into Yosemite ourselves; another we took Tenaya's guided tour. Each had advantages and disadvantages.

We took a couple of wrong turns on our own but stopped where we wished and stayed as long as we wanted. Whoever was behind the wheel, though, couldn't enjoy the views we passed.

Narrow, winding roads often along cliffs that seemed to drop into oblivion meant keeping eyes on the highway, one peeled for wildlife that might jump into our path.

Vehicles remain the leading cause of death of Yosemite's bears; about 30 were hit last year.

Going it Alone



El Capitan with a classy red convertible.

Going it alone also meant missing out on backstories about the park, its characters, history, and geology. Von Raeder had plenty to say.

Our twenty-something guide grew up in Yosemite where her father worked as a manager and regaled us with stories of what it's like for a child to live in this cherished wilderness. The number of students in her eighth-grade class: two.

A big advantage of the Tenaya tour is the vehicle, a 19-passenger van with a retractable roof. Many of Yosemite's natural



Amanda Von Raeder leads tours of Yosemite in an open-air vehicle operated by Tenaya Lodge at Yosemite.

features rise above the roadway so we could look up for an unobstructed view as we rolled past **El Capitan** and those magnificent waterfalls. The all-day tour took us to the most popular sites.

We would have preferred to visit others, stay longer at some, shorter at a few, but that's the facts of life on a group tour.

Yosemite's Don't-miss Sites

"You're all National Geographic photographers now," said Von Raeder as we stood at **Tunnel View overlook**. Fortunately, a parking lot has been built at the end of the tunnel en route to Yosemite Valley because drivers would be slamming on the brakes anyway at the jaw-dropping view.

This can't-miss photo op has the El Capitan monolith on the left, **Bridalveil Fall** on the right and iconic **Half Dome rock formation** in the distance. Standing in awe before this panorama,



Glacier Point overlooks Yosemite Valley from 7,214 feet.

we fell silent. That's when I heard it, a steady rumble made by the surging waterfall. I checked the distance scale my map; the noise was coming from nearly four miles away.



Burrel "Buckshot" Rambo Maier drives the stagecoach at Pioneer Yosemite History Center.

We drove on for an up-close look at El Capitan rising 3,593 feet from the valley floor, more than twice the height of the Empire State Building.

Those of us with binoculars or telephoto camera lenses could just make out rock climbers moving like ants along the rock face. A short hike led to Bridalveil Fall tumbling 620 feet.

Even wrapped in a raincoat, the spray pushed me back long before I reached its base. I had another waterfall experience after a picnic lunch on a hike to Lower Yosemite Fall.

It and Upper Yosemite Fall—reached on a much longer and steeper hike—form the tallest waterfall in North America, 2,425 feet.

I stuck my smartphone into my empty clear sandwich bag and took photos while I got soaked.

Yosemite History



Giant sequoias in Mariposa Grove

Von Raeder schooled us on Yosemite history as she drove up a snow-lined road to **Glacier Point**.

It's not the first of our nation's national parks, she said, but it provided the inspiration for their creation when President Abraham Lincoln preserved part the territory in a land grant in 1864.

Naturalist John Muir exploration of the area prompted him to lobby Congress to designate Yosemite a national park in 1890.

At Glacier Point, we saw a view Muir and photographer Ansel Adams fell in love with, Half Dome. Rising 8,836 feet, we couldn't stop looking at this odd rock, dome-shaped on one side, a flat face on the other.

Geologists believe it and Yosemite's other granite peaks solidified five miles underground and were exposed when softer rock and soil around them eroded away.

Nature was still at work as two waterfalls below sent white smoke-like plumes in the air when they hit bottom, the sound echoing through the glacier-carved canyon.

Von Raeder told us her parents often took her here to see Half Dome at sunset as the fading light turned the rock rosey. They'd stick around until full dark when "stars looked so close you imagine you can put your hand up and give them a stir."

Walk to Glacier Point

Visiting Mighty Yosemite

Yosemite National Park: Entrance fee \$35 per vehicle, 209-372-0200, [nps.gov/yose](https://www.nps.gov/yose)

Tenaya Lodge at Yosemite: Midweek rates in late May/early June range from \$275 lodge room to \$715 two-bedroom cabin, 888-514-2167, [tenayalodge.com](https://www.tenayalodge.com).

At the end of the road we took a short walk to Glacier Point, a cliff 7,214 feet above Yosemite Valley and yet another jaw-dropping panorama: the two Yosemite Falls on the left, Half Dome on the right and the old **Ahwahnee Hotel** far, far below in the valley.

I watched in horror as an idiot walked around a warning sign to pose on a precarious rock overhang and prayed he wouldn't make the nightly news.



Tenaya Lodge at Yosemite, a four-diamond resort just south of the national park.

Closer to our base at Tenaya Lodge, we stopped at Yosemite's Wawona region just a few miles from the South Gate.

The **Pioneer Yosemite History Center** brings back Yosemite's early days through a collection of historic structures moved to the site: covered bridge, blacksmith shop, homestead cabin and a barn that housed horses at what once was a stagecoach stop.

A stagecoach still gives rides to visitors a few times a week.

We craned our necks at giant sequoias in **Mariposa Grove**. Part of the redwood family, the world's most massive trees can be 250 tall but are even more impressive for their bulk with trunks 25 feet thick. They can live more than 3,200 years, which makes Yosemite's Grizzly Giant just middle-aged at 1,800 years.

We'd managed to see just a small percentage of Yosemite during our three-day stay. **Tioga Road**, for example, crosses almost the entire width of the park passing beauty spots en route to a pass over the Sierra on the east. Snow keeps it closed until summer; in 2019 it didn't fully open until July 1. Next time, maybe. I hear Yosemite's also worth seeing in autumn even without roaring waterfalls.



[Katherine Rodeghier](#) is an award-winning travel journalist. She began as travel editor at the Chicago Daily Herald and continues as a freelance contributor to outlets including the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times, Global Traveler magazine, Dallas Morning News, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Cruise Travel magazine, several AAA regional magazines, and Cruise Critic. She lives in Western Springs IL.

October 8, 2019

<https://www.gonomad.com/142727-springtime-in-yosemite-california>