

Yosemite: A Natural Wonder

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

It's safe to say there are many wonders of the world. Some, like bustling cities around the world, have been created by mankind over many years, but there are others that owe their origin to nature and have changed very little in centuries. Yosemite National Park in California is one of those wonders that falls into the second category.

Covering almost 1,200 square miles in the Sierra Nevada mountain range, Yosemite is a four- to five-hour drive from San Francisco, making it a popular day trip for visitors staying in the Bay Area for a few days, and that's exactly how we explored Yosemite.

There are many companies offering day-long tours and most will have one thing in common - a very early start and a very late finish to your visit. We were picked up before 6:30 a.m. and didn't get back to our hotel until after 7:30 pm. But in that time, we were treated to some of the most famous sights in the park.

It's believed that Yosemite has been home to Native Americans for something like 8,000 years, but the discovery of gold in the Sierra Nevada foothills in 1849 brought thousands of miners to the area to seek their fortune. Once they discovered the area's wonders, Yosemite's fame quickly spread. Known as the "Incomparable Valley," before long, hotels were being built and livestock brought in to graze in the meadows. Fortunately, before too much damage could be done, President Abraham Lincoln signed a bill protecting Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias. Now, around four million people enjoy the beauty of Yosemite every year.

One part of the park that nearly all those four million visitors head for is Yosemite Valley, and it's no small wonder. Not only can you reach it all year round by car, it's also the best place to see beautiful meadows and get some superb views of the park's most famous rock formations and waterfalls.

Forget the waterfalls you've seen anywhere else, as they pale into insignificance compared to what Yosemite has to offer. The tallest is Yosemite Falls, more than 2,400 feet high. It's made up of three separate falls and even if you don't want to be active on your visit, it's easy to walk to Lower Yosemite Fall. You'll certainly feel the force of the water as you near it, particularly if the wind is blowing in your direction. Even on a dry day, an umbrella or coat is a good idea, as getting close to any of the falls is like stepping out in a rainstorm!

Another fall well worth seeing is Bridal Veil. Although it's a lot smaller than Yosemite Falls, at just 620 feet, if you see this first, as we did on our tour, it'll help prepare you for the breathtaking views you'll get of Yosemite Falls.

It's not just waterfalls that provide a stunning view in Yosemite. All around the valley are rock formations, with Half Dome up there with Yosemite Falls as one of the park's most recognizable icons. Looming almost 5,000 feet above the floor of the valley, it's something you can't fail to see as you travel around. Opposite Bridal Veil Falls is El Capitan, which at nearly 3,000 feet high, is the largest monolith of granite in the world.

While in the valley, it's worth heading for the Yosemite Valley Visitor Center complex, where you can find out more about the history of the area and the Indians who live here. The nearby Ansel Adams Gallery is also well worth a visit, as it displays some beautiful work from a range of photographers and artists.

Although you can see a lot from the floor of Yosemite Valley, even if you're short of time, you should head for some of the Giant Sequoia groves above the valley. Mariposa Grove is the most famous of these and, to give you an idea of the scale of the park, it's located 36 miles south of Yosemite Valley. Even when we visited in late April, there was still a lot of snow around and the trek down there was pretty treacherous, so if you plan on visiting Yosemite during the colder months, you're likely to find the road there closed.

Yosemite is also home to a number of hotels, with the Ahwahnee, a National Historic Landmark, perhaps the most beautiful of the choices for overnight stays there. Completed in 1927, if you like Disney's Wilderness Lodge, you'll love the design of this place. Even if you don't stay there, you may want to visit this beautiful resort.

It's the same story with the Wawona Hotel, which dates from the 19th century. Although not as stunning as the other two resorts, you can't beat the location of Yosemite Lodge at the Falls. As the name suggests, it's just a few minutes walk from Yosemite Falls and very centrally located.

Yosemite is technically open all year round, but parts of the park can be inaccessible by car due to snow between November and May. On a visit with my parents many years ago, we were the last car to be let through the park, as the snow was coming in. That was quite an experience and when they close the roads due to snow, they do so for a reason!

For that reason, most people visit in the summer months, although that's not the best time to see the waterfalls. Because most of the water in Yosemite comes from snow melting on the high ground, the waterfalls are at their best in April and May, which was certainly our experience during our visit. Despite that, if you choose to visit in the spring, bear in mind that you may still see an occasional winter storm.

Whatever time of the year you choose to visit Yosemite, you'll find a beautiful, unspoiled park waiting for you that's truly one of the natural wonders of the world.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

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