



I've spent quite a bit of time road tripping across the USA, visiting many of its amazing national parks. However, Yosemite is by far one of my all-time favourites.

Yosemite National Park is about a 3-hour drive east of San Francisco in Northern California and is part of the Sierra Nevada mountain range. The Yosemite Valley was sculpted by glaciers from one-hundred-million-year-old granite. This created some of its most recognisable world-renowned landmarks – the granite summits of Half Dome and El Capitan.



*The legendary Yosemite has been on my list to re-visit for years.*

## My first trip to Yosemite National Park

I first visited Yosemite National Park way back in 1997. That trip was little more than a hit and run day drive out of San Francisco. I was so blown away by it, I promised myself I'd go back and have a proper look around.

It took me almost 20 years, but I finally managed to squeeze it into my road trip itinerary a few years back. I still didn't get to stay as long as I wanted to, but a short trip there was better than no trip at all. I was pretty enthusiastic and energetic so I managed to take in quite a few sights in just two days.



*Half Dome and El Capitan are two of the most recognisable rock formations in the world.*

## Why it's just as amazing as people say it is

In a time where all sorts of fancy adjectives get thrown around at the drop of a hat, and every other place on the planet is a supposed 'must see', for me Yosemite deserves every single superlative you can throw at it. It truly is a magical, natural wonderland. And then some.

One of the main entrances is through Wawona Tunnel – a 1,290m long tunnel that emerges at what is known, somewhat unsurprisingly, as 'Tunnel View'. It's here that you'll catch your first glimpse of the valley, and you'll soon see why I say that because it's like entering Narnia. Not that I've ever been to Narnia, but it's what I imagine it would be like. I fully expect that unicorns live in Yosemite but I just haven't seen any yet. I'm sure it's only a matter of time.

The official website has all kinds of useful information, but like most places, a little bit of planning ahead can go a long way. With that in mind, I've put together my list of ten things you'll want to know before you visit this place, based on my experiences.



*When you drive through the Wawona Tunnel, you can catch your first glimpse of the park.*

## 1. Book your accommodation months in advance

If you're planning on spending more than a day there, the first thing you'll need to do is make sure you've got a place to stay. Which is not so easy to do during peak season. There is quite limited accommodation in the valley itself. Rooms and even campsites can book out months in advance. So, while I'm the kind of guy who likes to fly by the seat of my pants and make things up as I go along, this is one place where it's difficult to do that. It definitely pays to



plan and book ahead.

The good news is if you do miss out, there are a few options not so far out of the valley. Sure, it will add an hour's drive each way to get there, but it's a great drive so there are worse outcomes. I stayed at the Yosemite Westgate Lodge which was more than reasonable.



*This park is so popular that it's essential to plan and book ahead of your trip.*

## 2. Choose a good time of year to visit

The best time to visit Yosemite is spring when the many waterfalls are falling and the weather is pleasant.

If you're really into bucket list items and awesome Instagram pictures, consider going when the 'Firefall' phenomenon is on. You'll have to get your timing just right because it only happens for a handful of days in February each year. For a minute at dusk, the setting sun hits Horsetail Falls in just the right way and it looks more like fire than water.



*Spring is arguably the best time of the year to visit the park.*

## 3. Check the roads before you set off

When planning your trip, it's also worth pointing out Tioga Pass (Hwy 120E) which cuts across the park from west to east, is not open all year round. It usually closes in October and opens again early May when the snow thaws. But the actual opening day can vary, which I found out the hard way when I was there.

So if you're planning on shooting out the east side of the park like I was, it's worth making sure the road is actually open. Otherwise, you're in for a really, really long detour out the south side of the park.



*It's a good idea to plan your route in advance.*

## 4. Make the most of the trip by visiting the nearby parks

Speaking of the south entrance/exit, if you do happen to come in via one of the entrances on the west side of the park, a trip to the south end of the park is definitely worthwhile. Down there, you can visit Mariposa Grove where you'll find some mega redwoods – including two of the top 30 largest Giant Sequoias on the planet. While these aren't the biggest trees in the general area, they're pretty spectacular. You can even walk through one of them.

Another quick tip is if you do plan on exiting the park here, you'll also be within striking distance of the nearby Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. These are home to the world's two largest trees – The General Sherman Tree (274.9ft tall) and the General Grant Tree (268.1ft tall), which should be on your radar as well.



*You should make a point to check out the magnificent trees at Mariposa Grove.*



## 5. Be aware of dangerous wildlife

As magical as it is in Yosemite, the area is not without its fair share of nasties. Specifically, they have bears and rattlesnakes. In the time I've spent there, I've never seen a bear, but I've almost stepped on a rattlesnake. A really big rattlesnake. They say if you hear them, it's probably too late. I didn't see it at all in the shadows, and only missed stepping on it because I heard its warning rattles. Apparently, that makes me pretty lucky.

Keep your eyes and ears open. Don't be like me, otherwise, it could end very, very badly. There are also various protocols for keeping food stored to avoid bear encounters which is something I highly recommend paying attention to.



*Yosemite is home to some dangerous creatures, which include rattlesnakes.*

## 6. Keep an eye out for rodents such as squirrels

While they're not as nasty, another tip I can offer is to watch out for the local squirrels. Those guys may look cute, but they're very destructive. If you leave your pack unattended, they're likely to chew their way through it in search of food in the blink of an eye. They may not be dangerous, but if you don't want your fancy hiking pack to end up like a piece of Swiss cheese, make sure it doesn't leave your sight.

This is particularly relevant at the base of Half Dome where some people choose to leave their packs behind for the final push to the top. Do that at your own peril. Or more to the point, your pack's peril.



*Squirrels are pretty adorable, but don't let them fool you!*

## 7. What to see if you're pressed for time

If you're pushed for time, even a cruise around the loop road on the valley floor will dish up some epic sights. With very little physical effort and even less time, you can see the imposing rock face of El Capitan, the Merced River that runs through the valley, Yosemite Falls (at 2,425ft it's one of the tallest in North America), Bridal Veil Falls and a few other bits and pieces. You'll kick yourself, twice, if you don't spend more time there. But if you literally only have a day, it can be done.



*Bridal Veil Falls can be visited on a shorter trip to Yosemite.*

There are a few legendary hikes in the park. The Mist Trail up past Vernal and Nevada Falls is mind-bogglingly good. It takes in a fair bit of elevation including some rough, rock stairs that can get quite slippery in the mist blowing off the waterfall. And thus the name, 'Mist Trail'. There are a few options here. You can walk to the bottom of Vernal Falls, further up to the top of the falls, on to Nevada Falls, and make a loop of it and come back down the John Muir Trail. For the more adventurous, you can push on to the legendary Half Dome.



*The Mist Trail is one of the most popular shorter hikes that you can do.*



## 8. The best days to get a permit for the Half Dome

Half Dome is one of Yosemite's most recognisable natural rock formation and climbing it isn't for the faint-hearted. It also requires a little planning. In official climbing season (May to October) when there are cables and handrails for safety, you'll require a permit. Permits are given out via a lottery system in March and are strictly limited (225/day) to avoid overcrowding on what is a precarious final slog up to the top.

A little hint, Tuesdays and Wednesdays are statistically your best chance of snagging a permit. You can also request up to seven different dates to increase your chances.



*You can't go to Yosemite without catching a glimpse of Half Dome.*

## 9. If you miss out on a permit, there are other ways to go about climbing it

There's a chance you will miss the draw, but 50 permits are given out in the daily lottery. If you don't snag a permit and are there out of season, there is still hope to climb it. The final section of trail is a steep climb up an almost smooth surface. In peak season, they lift the cables so you can walk upright using them as handrails.

But during the offseason, they sit flat against the rock and navigating your way up requires gloves and more guts than I had when I was there. Make no mistake, this final part of the hike is dangerous and discouraged, but possible. People can, and have, died up here so just be aware of that and exercise caution.

Even if you don't plan on climbing the last section, the views from up there are pretty spectacular so I highly recommend it. Just make sure you allow yourself plenty of time as it's a full day's hike to get up and down again. It's worth double checking the current rules as they can change. These were accurate as of January 2018.



*You'll need a permit to tackle Half Dome at Yosemite.*

## 10. Grab yourself an annual pass for access to other parks as well

Like many places around the world, in America, you need to pay to enter National Parks, including Yosemite. You can pay \$30 USD for a regular car or RV to enter Yosemite for up to seven days. But if you're road tripping around and plan on hitting some other national parks, it's well worth grabbing the America the Beautiful National Parks Annual Pass. This costs \$80 USD and it will get you into all national parks. Although, just be aware the pass doesn't usually include access to State Parks which require a separate entry fee.



*You can kill two birds with one stone if you get an annual pass for the other national parks.* The short time I've spent there isn't anywhere near enough time to explore Yosemite properly. I could easily spend a week there hiking all the different trails, so I strongly suggest if you're in the area, you stay for at least four or five days if you can.



I know I can't wait to get back and check out new mountains, trails, waterfalls, and to hopefully not see any more rattlesnakes.

***For more travel destinations, head [here](#). Have you ever visited any of the National Parks in the USA? Did they live up to your expectations?***