Travel and Adventure: Tour of California's Yosemite National park reveals picture-perfect vistas at every tu

by Danielle Hatch

So you're thinking about heading for a national park, are you? Dusting off your tent, packing the car with supplies, looking forward to getting back to nature.

Thing is, once you're there it might be difficult to carve out your own little piece of solitude. You might have to deal with bumper-to-bumper traffic, crowded camping sites or exorbitant lodging prices. That is, unless you choose to visit in the offseason.

PERFECT VIEW - Just outside of Yosemite Valley is Tunnel View, a panorama that includes El Capitan. Yosemite National Park is full of stunning vistas like this, as the park encompasses 1,170 square miles with elevations ranging from 2,000 to 13,000 feet. CNS Photo by Danielle Hatch. STAR OF THE SHOW - Half Dome is Yosemite's most famous granite feature, as it dominates most views in the valley. The face of the rock is believed to have fallen during rock slides or because of glacial action. The adventurous can reach the top of the dome by taking a 17-mile round-trip hike. CNS Photo by Danielle Hatch. ROARING RAINBOW - The roar of Yosemite Falls can be heard throughout the valley. CNS Photo by Danielle Hatch. TOWERING OVER THE TRAIL - Millions of years of glaciation, erosion and uplifting of the earth's crust have formed the granite peaks that dot Yosemite National Park, such as this view along the John Muir Trail. CNS Photo by Danielle Hatch. My husband and I were planning a March trip to visit an aunt in central California and found that Yosemite was only a few hours' drive from the coast, perfect for a quick excursion. We weren't sure if we would be able to make the trip since the park was under two feet of snow just a week before we left Illinois. Two feet of snow doesn't seem like that much, but it could lead to problems when driving on unfamiliar mountain roads, and sudden blizzards are common in the Sierra Nevada. We put off making plans until we were fairly sure the weather would cooperate and planned to carry snow chains just in case it didn't.

The more research I did, the more I realized that March would be an excellent time to visit. Yosemite, like other national gems such as the Grand Canyon, has been struggling with overcrowding for several years. I had heard that rangers actually had to turn cars away in the summer of 2006.

Once I decided I wasn't going to fork over $408 a night for a room at the posh Ahwahnee, I settled on Yosemite Lodge. I reserved a room just days in advance, something that would be totally unheard of in summer. The lodge is located right in Yosemite Valley. At $130 a night (around $180 in high season), I was pretty sure the room wouldn't be a dive, but it wouldn't matter if it was; we planned to spend most of the time exploring the great outdoors.

FUELING UP

We weren't sure what our dining options would be once we entered the park, so we scouted out food in nearby Mariposa. My starving husband ate tacos from a truck parked in the Sierra Nevada welcome center. Being much more selective about where our lunch was coming from, my husband's aunt and I held out for Happy Burger, a restaurant boasting the most extensive menu in the Sierra Nevada. The small cafe is wallpapered up to the ceiling with 1960s album covers, and every table has a stack of cheeky books like "How to Cope When Everyone Around You is an Idiot." My kind of place.

This is also the last stop for decent gasoline prices. We filled up, drove a few miles and gawked as we were detoured around a rock slide that had washed out a road and crushed electrical towers. Spring is prime time for slides, as the weather warms up during the day but drops to below freezing at night. The constant thawing and freezing loosens the rock.

WATER AND ROCK

Park visitors don't have to wait long for breathtaking views. Just miles from the park's southeast entrance is Bridalveil Fall, a skinny waterfall that waves from side to side in the breeze and is as tall as a 62-story building. There was a rainbow at the bottom on the day we visited and a handful of other tourists clambering past the caution signs in pursuit of the perfect photo. We saw deer and jumbo-sized crows on our way back to the parking lot. Disappointingly, this would turn out to be our most notable brush with wildlife. Despite the park being home to up to 500 black bears and an unknown number of mountain lions, we didn't see any.

The road into the valley winds past El Capitan and the Merced River. We took our time taking pictures and exploring on our way to Yosemite Lodge.

The lodge turned out to have a charming, cabinlike feel, with a balcony from which we could hear the roar of Yosemite Falls, the tallest waterfall in North America at 2,425 feet. It was starting to get dark by the time we checked in, but we were eager to explore. The lodge was a short walk to the famous Half Dome, and we watched the park's granite towers turn from gray to shades of pink, orange and lavender as night fell.

PICTURE-PERFECT VIEWS

The next day we woke up early and hit the trails. We spent most of the day enjoying the views along the John Muir Trail. The path wound through boulders bigger than houses and along Vernal Fall and the Merced River. The best view was a sunny panorama of Nevada Falls, Liberty Dome and parts of the high country. It was a welcome sight after scrambling through snowy switchbacks.

The next morning we hiked to Lower Yosemite Falls to snap some pictures of the rushing waterfall, which dropped down into misty rainbows and piles of boulders.

Although the scenery at Yosemite can make anyone think of himself as a master photographer - who could mess up these views? - a visit to the Ansel Adams gallery put us in our place. Adams didn't have the luxury of an 8-megapixel digital camera with adjustable zoom. It was the 1920s. He took his mule into the back country, lugging heavy equipment and a huge camera that resembled an accordion. He trekked through dust and over switchbacks in boots that didn't cost $150 to capture photographs that will always make mine look amateurish. A visit to the gallery is a must for visitors.

We planned to exit the park at the south entrance, after swinging by Mariposa Grove to see the giant sequoias. Our last vista on the way out of the valley was Tunnel View, just off of Highway 41. This is a good stop for anyone in search of a breathtaking sight who isn't up for hiking several miles to get it. It's one of the most photographed spots in the park, with a sweeping view of Yosemite Valley, El Capitan, Half Dome and Bridalveil Fall.

TOWERING SEQUOIAS

Although the sun was shining and there was little snow to be found in the valley, some trails and roads at higher elevations were closed when we visited, including the last part of the road into Mariposa Grove. We hoofed it two miles up a winding highway to enter the grove, then more hiking to reach the Grizzly Giant. It was quite snowy and colder here, because of the elevation as well as the shade from these towering trees. The Grizzly Giant, which is estimated to be 2,700 years old, has a height of 204 feet and a base diameter of 29.6 feet. It was worth the hike just to see the Grizzly's pinecones, which were nearly as long as my backpack.

Because it was the offseason, we didn't have to deal with the buses and constant traffic that normally would congest the area. We saw only a handful of other hikers, and it was peaceful and quiet in the grove. We felt like tiny specks next to the giant sequoias.

Unfortunately, an offseason visit isn't without minor disappointments. The cables that are constructed up the backside of Half Dome are accessible only in summer. The 17-mile trip allows hikers a view that once would have been available only to experienced rock climbers. So I will have to make a return trip to scale the granite monolith - and buy a T-shirt that says I did.

No problem - there are still hundreds of thousands of acres to explore, and I still want to see a bear or a mountain lion, if only from a distance. But going in the offseason was a nice introduction to what some call one of the nation's most impressive parks.

IF YOU GO

- Fees: It's $20 per car to enter the park. Snow chains can become required for on occasion through May. We bought an $85 set, which we returned, unused, when we were through.

- To check weather conditions at Yosemite National Park, call 209-372-0200.

- Lodging: For reservations at Yosemite Lodge or any of the park's lodging options, call 559-253-5635 or visit www.yosemitepark.com.

- Happy Burger: www.happyburgerdiner.com or 209-966-2719.

- Ansel Adams Gallery: www.anseladams.com or 209-372-4413.

Danielle Hatch is entertainment editor for the Journal Star in Peoria, Ill.

Travel and Adventure: Tour of California's Yosemite National park reveals picture-perfect vistas at every turn by Danielle Hatch