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Introduction to Yosemite and Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks

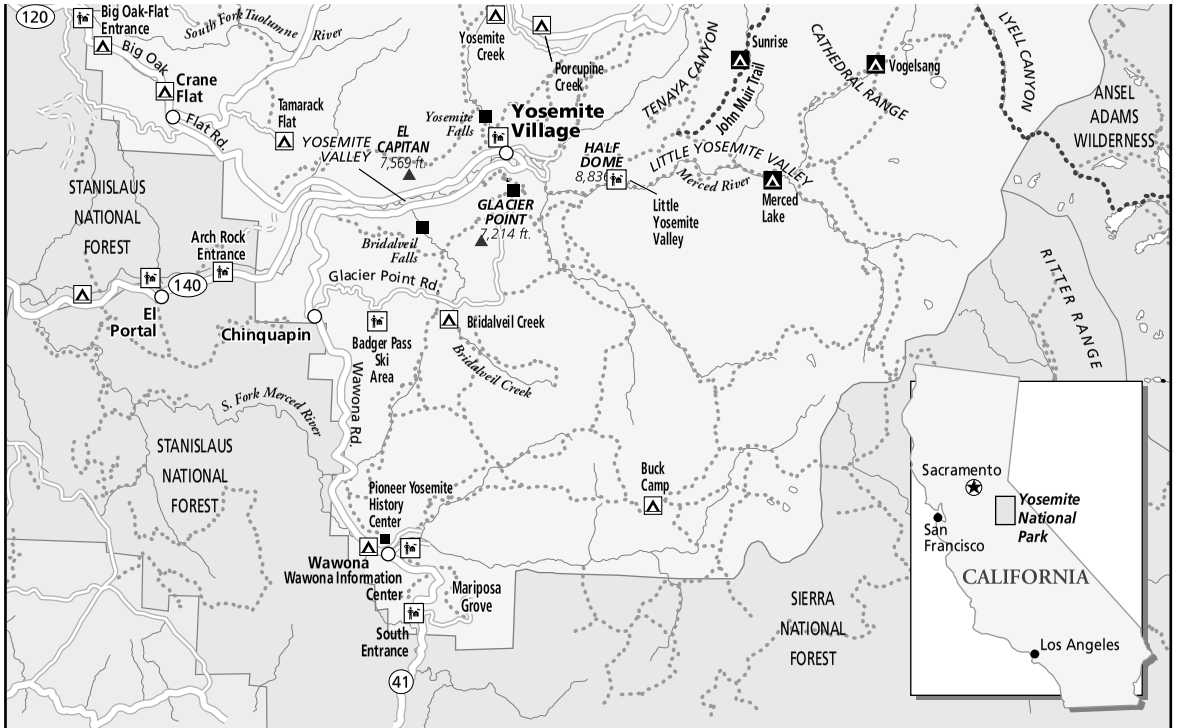
California's Sierra Nevada imposes rugged features on a state that many associate with sandy beaches and palm trees. It's a mountain range of great beauty, hidden amid harsh wilderness, and nowhere is the terrain more dramatic than in Yosemite and Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks. Both combine mountains with meadows, waterfalls with wildflowers, and spectacular geology with awe-inspiring vistas that span, in some cases, nearly the breadth of the state. Together, these parks cover 1.6 million acres (roughly 2,520 sq. miles). They host approximately 6 million visitors a year and are home to thousands of species of plants and animals.

Yosemite attracts more tourists than Sequoia & Kings Canyon, although all three are absolutely delightful parks. Yosemite covers 1,169 square miles—roughly the size of Rhode Island—and 94% is designated wilderness. Here you can enjoy the quiet beauty of a forest or a pristine meadow, observe a sunset from a towering granite cliff, hike a half-mile-high waterfall, enjoy a moonlit night that's as bright as day, climb a world-famous rock, and eat a gourmet meal before falling asleep—be it under the stars or in the luxurious bed of a top-rated hotel.

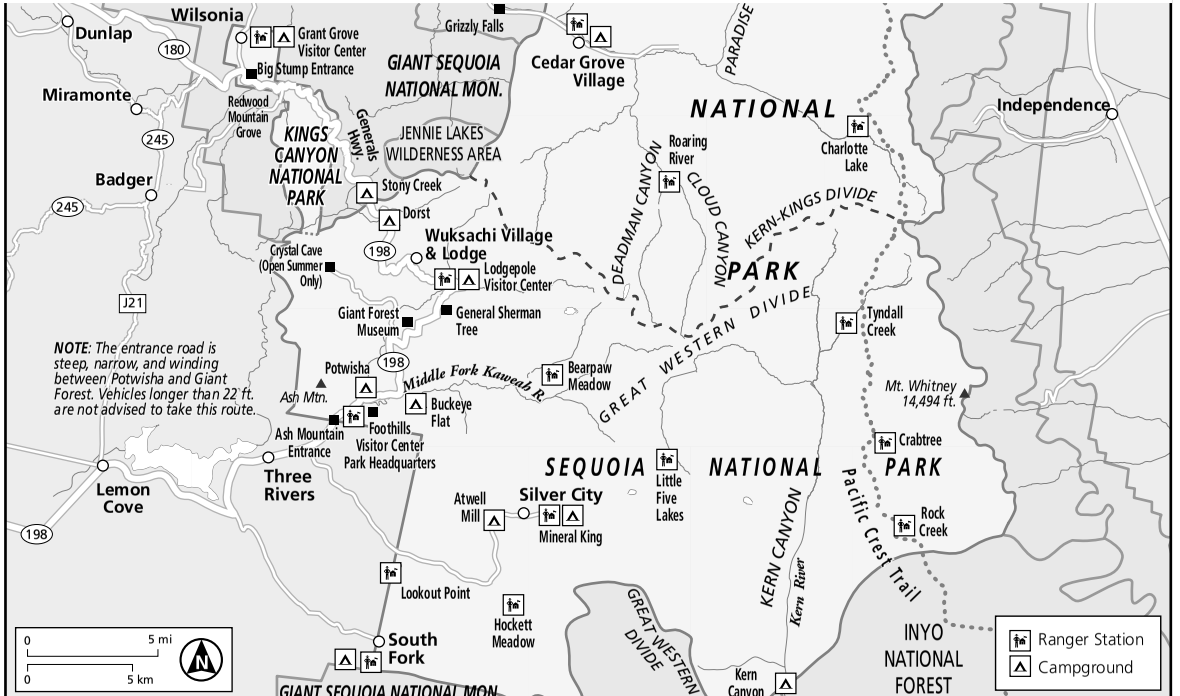
Yosemite Valley, which attracts 95% of all Yosemite tourists, is just a sliver of the park, but it holds a number of the region's jaw-dropping features. An average of 4.1 million people visit here each year. It is a place of record-setting statistics: the highest waterfall in North America and three of the tallest in the world (Upper Yosemite, Sentinel, and Ribbon falls); and the biggest and tallest piece of exposed granite (El Capitan).

Wawona, a small community annexed to the park in 1932, is a 45-minute drive south of Yosemite Valley. Mostly a hodgepodge of resort cabins and private homes, Wawona is also home to the stately

Yosemite National Park


120
Big Oak-Flat Entrance
Big Oak Flat Rd
South Fork Tuolumne River
Crane Flat
Tamarack Flat
YOSEMITE VALLEY
EL CAPITAN 7,569 ft.
Yosemite Creek
Porcupine Creek
Yosemite Falls
Yosemite Village
TENAYA CANYON
Sunrise
John Muir Trail
CATHEDRAL RANGE
Vogelsang
LYELL CANYON
ANSEL ADAMS WILDERNESS
HALF DOME 8,836 ft.
LITTLE YOSEMITE VALLEY
Merced River
Merced Lake
Little Yosemite Valley
GLACIER POINT 7,214 ft.
Bridalveil Falls
STANISLAUS NATIONAL FOREST
Arch Rock Entrance
140
El Portal
Chinquapin
Glacier Point Rd
Badger Pass Ski Area
Bridalveil Creek
RITTER RANGE
S. Fork Merced River
Wawona Rd
Buck Camp
Pioneer Yosemite History Center
Wawona
Wawona Information Center
Mariposa Grove
South Entrance
41
SIERRA NATIONAL FOREST
Sacramento
Yosemite National Park
San Francisco
CALIFORNIA
Los Angeles

Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks


Wilsonia
Dunlap
Grant Grove Visitor Center
Big Stump Entrance
Grizzly Falls
GIANT SEQUOIA NATIONAL MON.
Cedar Grove Village
PARADISE
NATIONAL
Independence
Miramonte
Redwood Mountain Grove
Generals Hwy.
KINGS CANYON NATIONAL PARK
JENNIE LAKES WILDERNESS AREA
Roaring River
Charlotte Lake
Badger
Stony Creek
Dorst
DEADMAN CANYON
CLOUD CANYON
KERN-KINGS DIVIDE
Wuksachi Village & Lodge
Crystal Cave (Open Summer Only)
Lodgepole Visitor Center
PARK
J21
Giant Forest Museum
General Sherman Tree
GREAT WESTERN DIVIDE
Tyndall Creek
NOTE: The entrance road is steep, narrow, and winding between Potwisha and Giant Forest. Vehicles longer than 22 ft. are not advised to take this route.
Potwisha
Middle Fork Kaweah R.
Bearpaw Meadow
Ash Mtn.
Buckeye Flat
Mt. Whitney 14,494 ft.
Ash Mountain Entrance
Foothills Visitor Center
Park Headquarters
Crabtree
SEQUOIA
NATIONAL
PARK
Three Rivers
Lemon Cove
Atwell Mill
Silver City
Mineral King
Little Five Lakes
Pacific Crest Trail
Rock Creek
KERN CANYON
Kern River
Lookout Point
Hockett Meadow
GREAT WESTERN DIVIDE
South Fork
INYO NATIONAL FOREST
Kern Canyon
GIANT SEQUOIA NATIONAL MON.
0 5 mi
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N
Ranger Station
Campground

Wawona Hotel, a nine-hole golf course, and a main attraction—the Mariposa Grove, the largest grove of giant sequoias in Yosemite. There are two smaller groves located near Crane Flat, about a half-hour drive west of Yosemite Valley.

Yosemite National Park's Tuolumne Meadows, an immense plateau peppered with wildflowers during the summer, and the glimmering Tuolumne River are an hour-and-a-half drive northeast of the valley. Tuolumne Meadows is surrounded by a half dozen domes and peaks. The high country also includes White Wolf Lodge, Tenaya Lake, and Tuolumne Meadows Lodge. The two lodges are little more than restaurants with a collection of tent-cabins. All of these, plus backcountry outposts accessible only on foot, are described in chapter 5, "Where to Stay & Eat in Yosemite."

In the heart of the Sierra Nevada, just south of Yosemite, are Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks, home to both the largest giant sequoia trees in the world and a deep gorge of a canyon that rivals Yosemite Valley for awe-inspiring beauty. Sequoia & Kings Canyon are separate parks snuggled next to one another and managed jointly. Combined, they outsize Yosemite. Peaks stretch across 1,350 square miles and include 14,494-foot Mount Whitney, the tallest point in the lower 48 states. These parks are also home to the Kaweah Range, a string of stark and magnificently beautiful mountains nestled among the Sierras. Three powerful rivers, the Kings, Kern, and Kaweah, tumble through the parks. Despite their large size, Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks attract less than half the number of Yosemite's annual visitors, making them an appreciated alternative for those looking to avoid huge crowds.

1 History of the Region

This region of the Sierra Nevada has a rich natural and cultural history. The landscape can change completely from one mile to the next. High mountain meadows give way to turbulent rivers that thunder down deep gorges, tumble over vast waterfalls, and turn into wide, shallow rivers as they meander through the next valley. Such diversity can be attributed to the region's geologic roots, which stretch back 10 to 80 million years when a head-on collision between two immense plates of rock formed this mountain range. The rock, weakened by extreme temperature variations, was later carved by erosion into deep valleys, including Yosemite Valley and Kings Canyon. In a process described more fully in chapter 9, "A Nature Guide to Yosemite and Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks," the Ice Age

brought glaciers that smoothed the faces of rocks such as Yosemite's El Capitan and Half Dome, some of the towering peaks of Yosemite's Tuolumne Meadows, and Kings Canyon itself.

American Indians were aware of Yosemite at least 5,000 years ago. While Egyptian scholars were making their first use of numbers, American Indians in California were living as their forebears had for thousands of years. By 1000 B.C., there were tribes—including the Ahwahneeches (Ah-*wah*-nee-ches), a sub-tribe of the Miwok—living in Yosemite Valley. Archaeologists have since documented 36 living sites on the valley floor that supported a vast number of inhabitants with lush vegetation and numerous animals. The largest village lay just below Yosemite Falls.

Despite the fact that the early inhabitants were called Ahwahneeches, the valley was named Yosemite by soldiers sent to oust American Indians who refused to relocate to the plains. While seated around a campfire, a doctor among the group suggested the soldiers settle on a name for the valley. Among the suggestions were Paradise Valley and Yosemite, the name by which the Indian tribes in the region were known. Some were offended by the suggestion of honoring American Indians in the valley, but in the end, the name Yosemite won. Ironically, however, Yosemite was the soldiers' mispronunciation of the word Oo-*hoo*-ma-te, the name of just one settlement of Ahwahneeches, whom soldiers drove from Yosemite Valley in 1851.

The Ahwahneeches' neighbors, the Monaches (also known as the Western Monos), lived in Kings Canyon and met their end during a smallpox outbreak in 1862. The Monaches kept villages in the foothills all year long, although they sometimes moved to the forest in the summer. The Potwishas and Wuksachis were sub-tribes of the Monaches who also lived in the foothills, around Sequoia's Ash Mountain. In today's park, there's a campground called Potwisha and a motel named Wuksachi. Kings Canyon was named in 1806 by the Spaniard Gabriel Moraga—the first European to lead an expedition in these parts. Moraga's party discovered a major river on January 6, the Roman Catholic day of the Epiphany. Being a good Catholic, Moraga christened the river El Río de los Santos Reyes, or "the river of the holy kings," in honor of the three wise men who visited the infant Jesus on the same date, albeit many years earlier. The name was later shortened to Kings River.

The land of Kings Canyon and Sequoia remained untouched until 1827, when trappers arrived. The California gold rush drew

Impressions

The clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness.

—Author and naturalist John Muir, 1938

hordes more in 1849, and abandoned mines dot Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks, especially in Mineral King, a region unsuccessfully mined for silver in the 1800s.

Despite being plagued by natural upheavals such as prehistoric earthquakes and glaciers, Yosemite, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon survived. Then the parks faced another challenge—each was destined for destruction by dams, logging, and consequent flooding. Large stands of giant sequoia were obliterated in the late 1800s. Ranchers allowed their sheep to graze beneath the big trees. Sawmills were built, and zip-zip—down came entire forests. Adding insult to injury is the fact that the wood of the largest giant sequoias is brittle and generally pretty useless. Nevertheless, early loggers chopped down a third of the ancient trees in the region. This travesty would likely have continued if not for a few mid-19th-century conservationists, who pushed the government to turn the areas into parks. In 1890, Sequoia National Park was created, along with the tiny General Grant National Park, established to protect Grant Grove. Unfortunately, the move was too late to spare Converse Basin. Once the largest stand of giant sequoias in the world, today it's a cemetery of tree stumps, the grave markers of fallen giants.

In 1926, the park was expanded eastward to include the small Kern Canyon and Mount Whitney, but rumblings continued over the fate of Kings Canyon itself. For a while, its future lay as a reservoir. It wasn't until the 1960s that Kings Canyon was finally protected for good. In 1978, Mineral King was added to Sequoia's half of the park. The parks have been managed jointly since World War II.

While the fight to save the giant sequoias raged, a similar battle was taking place over Yosemite. Here the threat came from opportunists hoping to cash in on Yosemite Valley's beauty. Soon after the Ahwahneeches were driven out, homesteaders came in. They built hotels and crude homes and planted row crops and orchards. Somehow, during the Civil War, Congress convinced President Abraham Lincoln to sign legislation protecting the valley and the nearby Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias. Yosemite Valley was, in effect, the first state and national park in America. But the thousands of acres

surrounding these relatively small federal holdings were still subject to exploitation in the form of mining, logging, and grazing. Happily, on October 1, 1890, a week after approving Sequoia National Park, Congress established Yosemite National Park. The new park did not include the valley or Mariposa Grove, which were still part of the older Yosemite Valley Park, but it encompassed enormous tracts of surrounding wilderness. With two administrations—one overseeing the valley and big trees, and one overseeing the new park—the expected overlap occurred and frustration mounted. In 1906, legislators decided to add the valley and big trees to the new park and to reduce the park's size to follow the natural contours of the land, while excluding private mining and logging operations. Everyone was set to live happily ever after. No one would have predicted that Yosemite would become one of the most popular places on the planet. (Some argue that tourism has accomplished the destruction that logging couldn't.)

Recent years have brought a sense of foreboding to this wilderness haven. Take one trip during peak season and you'll understand why. Traffic backs up for miles; trees and branches along the Merced River become clotheslines; and candy wrappers, cigarette butts, and other paper products litter the valley. The songbirds can barely be heard over the din of voices yelling and hooting. This is the biggest challenge facing Yosemite, and to a far lesser extent Sequoia & Kings Canyon, today. Big changes are expected as the National Park Service grapples with the best way to permit access without causing more irreparable damage to this natural wonderland.

Who would have thought that preservation would wreak its own brand of havoc here? But we can only imagine how this beautiful place would look today had it been left in the hands of profiteers.

2 The Parks Today

In Yosemite, rock slides and torrential flooding in the mid-1990s forever changed the park's appearance; but to be fair, we have to admit that human influence has had an even greater impact. Attendance has doubled in the past 20 years, and now more than 4 million people visit Yosemite annually; in the summer, the average daily census hits 20,000! The major difficulty facing park officials today, due to the park's increasing popularity, is balancing humanity's access to Yosemite's wonders with the need to maintain and improve the park's health. The National Park Service issued a master plan in 2000, aimed at reducing vehicle traffic in Yosemite Valley. Parts of

this plan have already been put into effect, and additional changes are planned that will somewhat limit access, especially personal vehicle access, to the park. Many who love Yosemite say this is a small price to pay to protect a treasure.

It's a far different scenario at Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks. They get crowded in summer, too, when RVs and slow drivers can turn into a convoy dozens of cars long—but it's nothing like Yosemite. Sequoia & Kings Canyon are much less developed, and the spots that are developed are much more spread out. Frankly, officials here have learned a lesson from Yosemite and work hard not to make the same mistakes. The park is awe-inspiring, with voluptuous canyons and some of the most spectacular trees and vistas in the Sierra, but they are not all crammed into a 7-mile valley, and you won't find a crowd three deep jostling for a view, as in Yosemite.

Crowds aside, there's a movement at both Yosemite and Sequoia & Kings Canyon to return the parks to a more natural state. Nowhere is this more evident than in Yosemite Valley, where nature is forcing officials to make changes long planned but never implemented. For the past 20 years, Yosemite National Park had been governed in part by a general plan that called for restoring meadows, phasing out some campgrounds, and moving others away from waterways to reduce the human impact on rivers, streams, and wildlife. However, little progress had been made. Then in January 1997, during one of the valley's swanky annual winter events, nature took charge.

What began as a torrential downpour turned into one of the most destructive winter storms on record, and when the rain stopped several days later, Yosemite Valley was Yosemite Lake. Swollen streams and creeks swept tons of debris—trees, rocks, brush—into the valley, clogging the Merced River. Campgrounds were submerged, employees' quarters were flooded, and much of Yosemite Lodge was under 2 feet of water. Despite frantic attempts at sandbagging, hundreds of people were forced onto higher ground—the top floors of buildings—and everyone was stuck. The water was so high and so ferocious that it washed out the roads and stranded about 2,000 people in the valley, including the several hundred on hand to celebrate New Year's Eve. So much was damaged that the valley closed for almost 3 months, and, even after it was reopened, travel was restricted for several months to the park's all-weather highway alone. Although park workers managed to clean most of the fallen trees, boulders, and rocks out of the heavily populated areas in the valley

by mid-1997, some backcountry trail bridges were never repaired, and a decision was made to reconsider rebuilding the hundreds of lost campsites.

The storms remind us of the history behind these parks. Millions of years of water, snow, and glaciers have carved the unique canyons of Yosemite Valley and Kings Canyon. So the folks who live here do so with a measure of understanding: They're living at the mercy of nature.

Before this event, officials at both Yosemite and Sequoia & Kings Canyon were already on their way to making some other notable changes. Both parks are renovating and reconstructing. Some meadows are off-limits to foot traffic so that grass and wildflowers can return. When new buildings are constructed, their architecture is designed to reflect or work with the natural surroundings: A restaurant in Yosemite has a wall of glass windows that looks out at Yosemite Falls; a new gift store doubles during the winter as a cross-country ski lodge. In both cases, new structures replaced existing ones, so the impact on pristine wilderness was minimal.

In Sequoia & Kings Canyon, park officials are now putting the finishing touches on a sequoia forest restoration project that they have been working on for the past 16 years. Most of the project's aims affect Giant Forest, one of the most notable stands of trees in Sequoia National Park. Old buildings have been torn down, and roads and parking lots have been moved in an effort to return this area of the park to a more natural state. The goal is ecological restoration—to cease damaging the sequoias' root systems, repair the topsoil, plant sequoia seedlings, and get out of the way while Mother Nature does her thing. An added benefit is that without the buildings this area is more attractive.

Interestingly, park officials also hope that natural fires will return to the area once the heavy human impact is reduced. Fires are an important part of the sequoia's life. The bark of the giant trees is fire resistant, but a blaze will dry out the sequoia's cones, which then open, dropping seeds onto the fire-cleared ground, which is, conveniently, the preferred growth medium for seedlings.

3 The Best of Yosemite and Sequoia & Kings Canyon

It's hard to pick the best of anything, and it's especially difficult to declare something "best" when nature is involved. There are so many heart-thumping hikes, roaring waterfalls, and mind-blowing

vistas to explore in these parks that it's almost impossible to pick our favorites. That being said, we're ready with a few suggestions.

THE BEST VIEWS

- **The Panorama from Tunnel View Outside Yosemite Valley:** If you're approaching the park on CA 41 from Wawona, this amazing panorama will sneak up on you, offering a breathtaking surprise. There's plenty of space in the two parking lots to pull over and look. See "Orientation" in chapter 3.
- **Yosemite Valley from Glacier Point:** The easy drive to the top of Glacier Point (open summer only) will leave you speechless. From here, you'll get an eye-level view of the great rocks, such as Half Dome, North Dome, and Cloud's Rest. The stunning valley and waterfalls are spread far below. See chapter 3.
- **Mist Falls from the Bottom in Kings Canyon:** Standing at the base of this waterfall, you'll really appreciate its force, especially during spring and early summer when it's fed by the snowmelt. The crashing of water onto the rocks below drowns out all other noise, and there are rainbows galore. Keep back from the slippery rocks at its edge! See chapters 6 and 7.

THE BEST CAR CAMPGROUNDS

- **North Pines Campground in Yosemite Valley:** Smaller and slightly more isolated than neighboring campgrounds, North Pines offers a true forest camping experience that makes it the most enjoyable of Yosemite Valley's car campgrounds. See p. 77.
- **Buckeye Flat Campground in Sequoia:** This is a small, especially pretty, and secluded campground in the foothills, with a prime location amid a grove of oaks. The only downfall is that it can get very hot in the summer. See p. 133.
- **Sunset Campground in Kings Canyon:** Spread over a rolling hilltop beneath tall trees, this is a peaceful place that glows late into the evening as the sun goes down. It offers some nicely secluded sites, and it's in a good location to hike to some of the park's most impressive big trees. See p. 133.

THE BEST PRIMITIVE CAMPGROUNDS

- **Yosemite Creek:** Just outside Yosemite Valley on CA 120, you'll find this great out-of-the-way campground. It lacks amenities but is far enough off the beaten path to offer solitude. Few venture down the 5-mile dirt road to this campground, but those who do tend to prefer roughing it. See p. 78.

- **South Fork Campground in Sequoia:** This is the smallest developed campsite in the park. It's just inside the park's boundary, set at 3,650 feet along the south fork of the beautiful Kaweah River. See p. 133.
- **Atwell Mill Campground in Sequoia:** The site is situated along Atwell Creek near the east fork of the Kaweah River in the Mineral King region of the park. You'll need time and patience to reach it—allow at least an hour for the 20-mile drive—but it's well worth it. See p. 133.

THE BEST DAY HIKES

- **Vernal Fall in Yosemite:** A must-see for anyone with the stamina. It's just 3 miles round-trip if you follow the Mist Trail, but it requires a strong heart and enough gumption to make the last quarter-mile, ascending 500 stairs. Once at the top, hikers are rewarded with fabulous views and enough space to lounge around like marmots in the sun before the hike back down. See p. 45.
- **Moro Rock in Sequoia:** A short but steep climb up a historic staircase that snakes through rock crevices to the top of Moro Rock. Rewards include one of the most awe-inspiring views in the Sierra Nevada. The walk offers plenty of places to rest on the way up. See p. 111.
- **Mist Falls in Kings Canyon:** This 8-mile round-trip hike climbs 1,500 feet to the spectacular Mist Falls. Along the way, the hiking ranges from moderately strenuous to easy strolling through woodland areas that have lots of places where you can catch your breath. See p. 115.

THE BEST HIGH-COUNTRY HIKES

- **May Lake in Yosemite:** This is an easy 2.5-mile hike that begins near Tioga Road, east of White Wolf (accessible by motor vehicle in summer only). This picturesque walk offers fishing but no swimming. May Lake is dead center in Yosemite National Park. It's a good place to survey surrounding peaks, including the 10,855-foot-high Mount Hoffman rising behind the lake. See p. 52.
- **The High Sierra Trail in Sequoia:** This popular backpacking trail offers day hikers a glimpse of what's out there. It's a moderate, 10-mile hike with pretty views of the middle fork of the Kaweah River and the Kaweah Range. See p. 123.

- **Paradise Valley in Kings Canyon:** This hike extends beyond Mist Falls to a broad valley bisected by a welcoming river. The long 14-mile round-trip hike is a bit much to do in 1 day, but it is possible with some planning and an early start. See p. 116.

THE BEST MEALS

- **Ahwahnee Dining Room in Yosemite Valley:** No surprise here—it's a knockout feast. Every course is almost worth its weight in gold, which is about what it'll cost you, too. See p. 83.
- **Mountain Room Restaurant in Yosemite Valley:** Some people like the Mountain Room even better than the top-rated Ahwahnee. Not only is the food here top-notch, but you also can't beat the views of Yosemite Falls. See p. 85.
- **Wawona Hotel Dining Room in Yosemite:** Located outside the valley, this spacious restaurant is a favorite of locals for miles around. The excellent chef concocts delectable meals, and the views through the expanse of windows provide food for the soul. See p. 86.

THE BEST PLACES FOR REFLECTION

- **Yosemite's Glacier Point at Night:** You're sure to be quietly overwhelmed, either by the number of stars or the way the moonlight reflects off the granite domes surrounding the valley. See chapters 3 and 4.
- **Tenaya Lake in Yosemite:** The solitude and beauty of this high-altitude, crystal-clear lake (accessible by road in summer only) outshines others in the park. Tenaya Lake is larger and more dramatic, edging up against an iridescent granite landscape. See chapters 3 and 4.