



*The Ahwahnee Hotel photographed from the southeastern side at dusk on a summer evening.
Taken at ISO 500, f/11, 1/8 second with a 17mm lens.*



Ahwahnee Hotel

Why It's Worth a Photograph

Since its opening in 1927, the Ahwahnee Hotel has marveled visitors including several presidents, actors, and international dignitaries. With its unique architecture and Native American motif, the hotel offers a glimpse of the past mixed with the modern. The Ahwahnee Hotel was originally designed to bring tourists to Yosemite Valley and is now a National Historic Landmark.

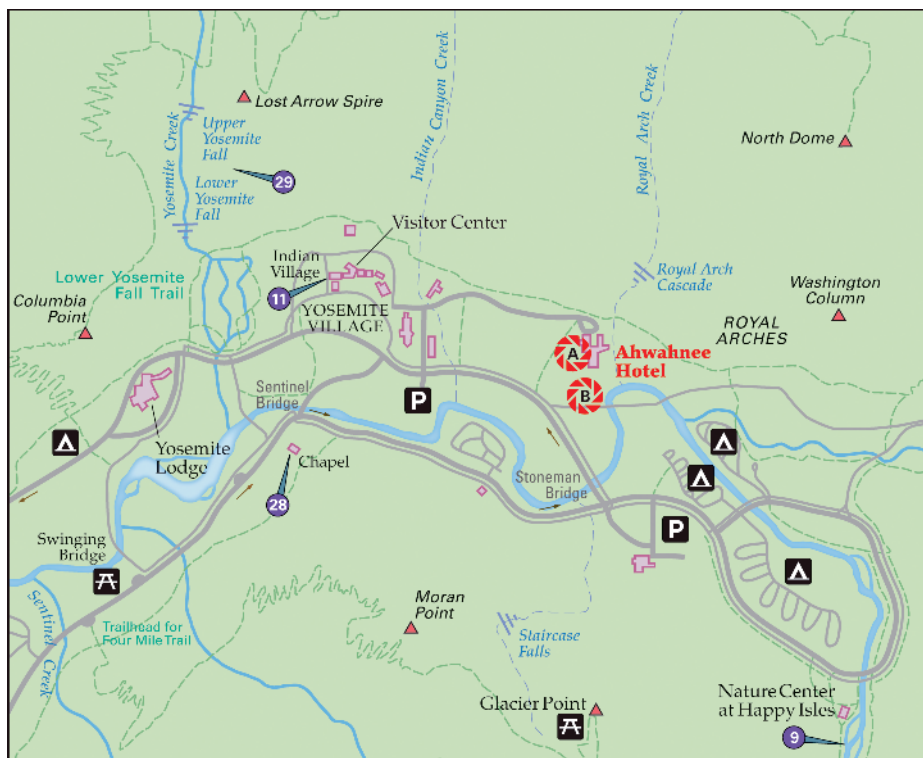
Built from stone, wood, and concrete, the hotel took almost two years to build and used 5,000 tons of stone, 1,000 tons of steel, and 30,000 feet of timber. The “wood” you see on the exterior is actually poured concrete textured and stained to look like redwood! All the material had to come from outside the park because the park’s resources are protected.

The hotel features the Great Lounge with its elaborate stained-glass windows and fireplaces so big you could walk inside them! The fireplaces are made from cut sandstone. The whole building is decorated with Native American art, most of which is of Miwok origin, in keeping with the original inhabitants of Yosemite Valley. As you wander through the hotel, you see themed rooms such as the Winter Club room that houses historical photos on winter sports in Yosemite, the California Room, the Writing Room, and the solarium with views of Glacier Point.

The Ahwahnee Hotel is a luxury hotel and may be beyond the means of most park visitors, but it is open to the public. Anyone is welcome to visit and they even offer tours of the hotel. The Great Lounge with its Persian rugs and massive wooden furniture is a great photographic subject as well as a great place to sit and relax. There are many angles to photograph the hotel’s exterior, each giving a different perspective of the Y-shaped building.

Where Can I Get the Best Shot?

The Ahwahnee Hotel is very photogenic both inside and out. If you are interested in architecture and history, you could spend hours photographing here (see A and B on map).



The best locations from which to photograph the Ahwahnee Hotel: (A) hotel interior, (B) hotel exterior. Other photo ops: (9) Happy Isles, (11) Indian Village, (28) Yosemite Chapel, (29) Yosemite Falls.

Hotel interior

The Ahwahnee Hotel is known for its beautiful surroundings and unique architecture. The hotel's interior features many grand spaces (see A on the map). A few of the most notable are the Great Lounge, known for its enormous stone fireplaces and beautiful stained-glass panels (see figure 1.1), the solarium with a fabulous view of Glacier Point, and the Ahwahnee Dining Room with its impressive 34-foot ceilings and floor-to-ceiling stained-glass framed windows, all making for great photographic subjects.

Hotel exterior

The most photographed view of the hotel's exterior is from the southern meadow looking north, as shown in figure 1.2. The entrance to the hotel is a bit more difficult to photograph; however, if you walk to the far side of the pond located at the front of the hotel, you can get a nice shot.



1.1 The Great Lounge features period furniture and massive fireplaces at each end. Taken at 500 ISO, f/16, 2 seconds with a 17mm lens.



1.2 The Ahwahnee Hotel as seen from the south meadow (see B on the map) at sunset on a summer evening. Taken at 100 ISO, f/11, 0.6 second with a 17mm lens.

How Can I Get the Best Shot?

The Ahwahnee Hotel is photographer friendly; just be sure not to make a nuisance of yourself. Set up your tripod so that other visitors can easily get around you. Plan to photograph the interior of the Ahwahnee in midday when most guests are out in the park, to avoid people walking through your images, and to be less of a hindrance to other guests.

The exterior that appears through the windows will be totally washed out when you expose for the interior. Many photographers choose to make one exposure for the interior lighting conditions and another for the exterior and combine the two images in an image-editing program. An advanced technique to try is High Dynamic Range photography, known as HDR, to get a full tonal range image.

Equipment

When shooting architectural subjects, using a wide-angle lens and tripod are equipment essentials. Because you are photographing in tight quarters, you will have to tilt the camera upward to include the ceilings. Doing this causes some distortion, which you can correct during post-processing. If you are really into architectural photography, you may want to rent or buy a tilt-shift lens designed to reduce the distortion inherent in wide-angle photography.

Lenses

As with most types of architectural photography, a wide-angle lens is the most effective when photographing the hotel. When photographing in the interior, a wider lens produces a better image. If you're fortunate enough to have a tilt-shift lens, it will help you keep all your lines straight when working in the hotel. Lenses in the range of 14-24mm work the best. If you are photographing the details, a short telephoto in the 85-250mm range will allow you to isolate those details. When photographing the exterior, you can use lenses anywhere from 14-55mm.

Filters

When photographing in the interior, no special filters are needed. A polarizing filter may be useful in eliminating glare from reflective surfaces. Star filters can add a unique quality to your images: All the light sources in the hotel will have star-like flares.

Extras

A flash is useful when photographing in the interior of the hotel. You want to use daylight as the main source of light, and the flash to fill in the shadows. A tripod, a cable release to ensure sharp images with no camera shake, and a bubble level to insure straight lines and vertical walls, are also useful tools when photographing the interior.

Camera settings

The interior of the hotel has a mix of lighting sources. You will have daylight and tungsten light. Shooting on Auto White Balance or better yet, creating a custom white balance gives you the best color. Set the lens to a small aperture, called *stopping down*, to get greater depth of field, which will result in using slower shutter speeds. Adjust your ISO accordingly for the low-light conditions. You may be dealing with shutter speeds of several seconds to get enough light to see into all the corners of the interior.

Exposure

You can successfully photograph the Ahwahnee Hotel at any time of day or night. However, if you follow the guidelines listed in the next section, you will have an easier time balancing the extreme contrast differences that can occur in this location.

Ideal time to shoot

The best time to take your pictures of the interior of the hotel is on an overcast day or closer to dusk (see figure 1.3). These lighting conditions make it easier to balance both the interior and exterior light.

The best time to capture exterior shots of the hotel is at sunset, or just after sunset, when the sky has just enough light present and the exterior hotel lights are coming on. The combination of the warm artificial lighting from the hotel and the cool light of dusk give a lovely mix of tonality as well as some dramatic lighting effects to your photos, as seen in figure 1.4.



1.3 The Solarium photographed close to sunset. Taken at ISO 500, f/16, 2.5 seconds with a 17mm lens.



1.4 The south side of the Ahwahnee Hotel at dusk on a summer evening. Taken at ISO 100, f/11, 3 seconds with a 17mm lens.

Working around the weather

When the weather gets nasty, photograph the interior of the hotel. A bit less light will come in the windows, and your exposures will be longer, but at least you will be dry! However, if you choose to work outside in inclement weather, always be prepared by bringing plastic bags to cover and protect your camera, lens, and other photo equipment.

Remember the hotel looks great year round. The Ahwahnee Hotel is absolutely beautiful to photograph in the wintertime. If you are able to go outdoors to shoot the hotel as snow gently falls, do it! It can add so much character and dimension to your photographs (see figure 1.5)



1.5 The south side of the Ahwahnee Hotel in winter in early afternoon. Taken at ISO 100, f/9, 1/20 second, 24-85mm zoom lens at 28mm.

Low-light and night options

Most of your interior shots are taken in low-light conditions, whether that is on overcast days or at nighttime. If you photograph at night, you won't need to worry about the contrast differences between the interior lighting and exterior lighting that can often make daylight images more challenging to capture. The key is to get the interior exposure correct and not worry about the exterior exposure. When photographing the inside of the hotel at night, use a tungsten white balance or custom white balance to get the best color.



Photographing the outside of the hotel at night is not ideal because it becomes more difficult to balance the bright exterior lights against the dark building.

Getting creative

One way of exploring your creativity is to try low angles when photographing both the exterior and interior of the hotel. Another example might be to take all your interior photos from a sitting position so that the viewer has the feeling of sitting in the hotel. You can try light painting the exterior with a flashlight or use HDR to capture the great range of contrast.