



DEPARTURES

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HIKE USA

Picture Perfect

Jaded? Venture into Yosemite National Park and let the power of exquisite natural beauty blow your mind >

BY SCOTT HENDERSON, *MH* EDITOR



“Plummeting out of the sky brings an entirely different cavalcade of emotions”

From the moment I arrive in Yosemite, I know I'm in trouble. It's not the prospect of a bear attack or getting lost in the wilderness that has me concerned. No, the biggest challenge facing a journalist visiting this natural playground is finding the words to do it justice. How do you describe the most breathtaking natural beauty you could imagine? Well... I guess that's a decent start.

Have you ever questioned the limitations of the human mind? If your answer was a firm “no” accompanied by an eyeroll, then you couldn't have been to Yosemite. Fair warning: this piece will contain the kind of purple prose usually confined to B-grade fiction. But in this case, I reckon it's warranted. The walls that form the Yosemite Valley are awe-inspiring. To stand among the sheer granite rock formations is to experience a humility bordering on the indescribable. This is a beauty not replicable in any architecture and beyond capture in the finest photos.

To prepare for the sensory onslaught, follow this guide. With the help of *trip.com*, we've done the work for you. All you have to do is conquer your fear of fear itself.

GETTING YOUR BEAR-INGS

After an overnight flight into San Francisco, the hop across Central California to Yosemite is a tolerable four hours, with the first

glimpse of snow-capped peaks eliciting the kind of excitement associated with an imminent foray into the wild.

Before the main event of Yosemite National Park, however, I take in the closest town – the charming, Wild West-invoking Mariposa. The wooden facades of its local stores wouldn't be out of place in a John Wayne movie, and you'll be fighting the urge to act out a duel on Main St.

This is a history-rich township that nowadays plays host to the world's rock-climbing elite. And right on cue I bump into climbing pioneer Ken Yager. This man is a legend, evidenced by the excited whispering of locals. Later, on the outskirts of the township, with Yager in tow, I hike the flower-lined hills of the Merced River Canyon, where the ruins of mining huts and carts tease the modern explorer. Before I know it, the sun has vanished and it's time to find rest at the behest of my jetlag.

FREE FALLIN'

On my second day, I awake in my own Airstream camper in the

midst of an immense pine forest, although 'camper' is misleading given the luxurious interior of the AutoCamp trailer. And the touch of luxury is a welcome start as I prepare for a day of death-defying adventure.

My first glimpse of the iconic valley is from the back of a one-seater plane. That's right: a one-seater. It's all that's needed as the plan isn't to stay aboard for long. There's just enough room for the pilot, my Skydive Yosemite tandem-skydive instructor and me. While terror inevitably takes hold as we prepare to jump, seeing the distant outlines of famed rock faces El Capitan and Half Dome lowers my heart rate and clears my mind. It's a view that many guys, including me, might recognise from their screensavers, though the reality elicits a sense of calm never once delivered by a digital facsimile while driving the desk.

Plummeting out of the sky, however, brings an entirely different cavalcade of emotions, encompassing fear, awe and humility. If you ever need reminding of the fragility of the

human state, then hurl yourself from a plane towards a mountain range below.

Feet back on the ground, heart rate descending from triple digits, I make the quick trip to the wholefood markets for a refuel before hitting the rapids for a raft ride on the notorious Merced River. The rapids flow through the middle of Yosemite Valley and out into Mariposa County, where I'm guided by Maggie of Zephyr Whitewater to take on class 2-4 rapids. I'm told this is quite an extreme rating – and can now attest to that fact. While hardly comparable with falling from the sky for inducing naked terror, the duration of the raft ride still has me contemplating my mortality. Having successfully expanded the vocabulary of the young Irish family in my boat, we scramble ashore dripping wet, and I'm primed for recovery in the confines of the Airstream.

FREE SOLO

Day 3 brings a much-anticipated entry to the park. And words begin to fail me. Driving along the Yosemite Valley floor your fixed

notions of nature succumb to new possibilities. The pristine beauty alone is enough to turn any hardened soul into a conservationist.

Of course, like every adventure sports fan, I've been caught up in the phenomenon of *Free Solo*, the Oscar-winning doco that follows Alex Honnold as he attempts to, well, free solo (climb without ropes) El Cap, Yosemite's gnarliest rock face.

Always one to jump on a good bandwagon, I decide that climbing is a must on this trip and my activity for the day. But free-soloing El Cap? No, thank you. I opt for a climb with the Yosemite Mountaineering School, which uses a 400m rock wall just to the side of the behemoth of Yosemite.

“Are you scared of heights?” I'm asked before beginning the ascent.

“I respect them,” I lie.

Climbing is a must-do while in Yosemite, which has become the unofficial home of the sport in the US – perhaps the world – with climbers young, old, experienced and green flocking to the granite

cliffs of the valley. Truth be told, the climb is hard. Surprise, surprise: it turns out there's a vast difference between your local climbing gym and the sheer vertical faces found in nature. I place a lot of faith in my climbing partner and find myself testing his attention and willingness to catch the rope should I fall.

My reward comes on reaching the top, where the view is something you'd never see from a campervan window. It's nothing short of breathtaking... or perhaps that sensation is a result of the arduous climb.

A change of accommodation to the Yosemite Blue Butterfly Inn provides a dose of classic American hospitality, as well as a safe haven to lick my wounds.

A home-cooked meal with authentic company makes me feel like I'm staying at the home of a lifelong mate, rather than a B & B in the world's most famous national park.

INTO THE WILD

After such an adrenaline-filled few days, a spell on terra firma is more than welcome. A solo run at sunrise would have, in and of itself, made this trip worthwhile, and on my final day I grab the chance to explore the valley floor on foot.

Staying in the park and rising early affords me the rare opportunity to experience the park in peace, free from the campervans and tour buses that haunt it by day. I stop mid-run to take in the

Dawn Wall (yes, the one from Netflix). It's then I hear scratching behind a fallen tree some 50 metres away. The journalist in me needs to investigate, and I approach less cautiously than I might have given this is bear-infested woodland. Sure enough, Yogi's head pops up and checks me out.

It's all par for the course in Yosemite, I realise, as another tourist jogs past, notices the bear and continues on his way unruffled. Apparently there's never been a bear attack in Yosemite's history. Nonetheless, I keep a respectful distance.

The bear encounter kicks off a day of hiking, during which I'm schooled in the history of the valley by Yosemite local and business owner David Gregory of Yosemite Outfitters. If adventure sports aren't your thing, this is the one experience not to forgo. The natural history, indigenous mythology and pioneer heritage are so rich in these valley walls, and I feel the stories I've heard from Gregory merely scratch the surface. Our hike culminates in a cliffside meditation – not normally my thing, but this one allows me to absorb my surrounds and try to come to grips with the past few days.

Upon reflection, I realise my visit to Yosemite National Park has ignited a fire within, a burning desire to better myself as a writer, conservationist and athlete. As a result of my immersion into this natural wonder, I want to climb higher, explore further and do more to protect these pockets of perfection that still exist in our world.

These ideas dominate my thoughts as the peaks of Yosemite shrink in my rear-view mirror and notifications begin lighting up my phone. As I slip back into the world of 24/7 connectivity, I'm reminded of an anonymous quote: “There's no Wi-Fi in nature, but you will find a better connection”. I've always loved this quote. And now I'm convinced that whoever first spoke these words must have visited Yosemite Valley. ■



FLY Let *Trip.com* take care of it all. They have a dedicated Yosemite page for adventurers too busy exploring the real world to surf the net.

STAY **\$** Yosemite Blue Butterfly Inn
yosemitebluebutterflyinn.com

\$\$\$ AutoCamp Yosemite
autocamp.com

\$\$\$ Tenaya Lodge
tenayalodge.com

DO Skydive Yosemite
skydiveyosemite.com
[@skydive_yosemite](https://www.instagram.com/skydive_yosemite)

Zephyr Whitewater Expeditions
zrafting.com/rivers/merced
[@zephyr_whitewater](https://www.instagram.com/zephyr_whitewater)

Yosemite Mountaineering School
travelyosemite.com

YOSEMITE OUTFITTERS
yosemite-outfitters.com

EAT **EAT**
\$ Food Trucks

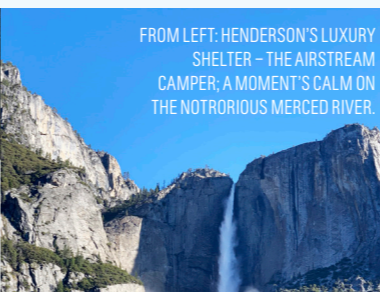
Sample international flavours, Cali-style, in Mariposa, next door to the Mariposa Museum & History Center
mariposamuseum.com

\$\$\$ Tenaya Lodge's Sierra Restaurant

Classic American cuisine in the luxury surrounds of Yosemite's top lodge. The perfect post-massage indulgence.
tenayalodge.com

\$\$\$ The Mountain Room Dining Cedar

Take in Yosemite Falls as you enjoy equally wonderful cuisine.
travelyosemite.com/lodging/dining/yosemite-valley-lodge



FROM LEFT: HENDERSON'S LUXURY SHELTER – THE AIRSTREAM CAMPER; A MOMENT'S CALM ON THE NOTORIOUS MERCED RIVER.