
Stop 31. Yosemite

Arrival datetime: Thursday, May 30, 5:30PM
Sites visited: Yosemite National Park
Accommodations: The Ahwahnee
States traveled: California

On the way out of Kings Canyon, we stopped at overlooks to peer through conifer branches at cultivated green valleys. The wildflowers were as beautiful as the overlooks, long white husks on thick green leaved bushes and delicate lavender butter-cup-looking flowers captivated us on our way out. It was a bit buggy, even at 8:20 AM in early June. We remembered that it had also been the night before, and decided that this was not the place to visit in summer.

Once out of the park, we were immediately engaged by a sign for the “USDA Hume Lake Ranger District.” We hastened to tell them about the dead tadpoles lining the edges of Hume Lake. The office was dimly lit. Three plump middle-aged ladies in polyester pants and large glasses huddled in a cluster behind a set of desks. They blinked rapidly at us as we told them about the dead tadpoles we had seen the day before. But they were not concerned.

“We all know who live around here, those frogs are superabundant on our lawns,” one of them began, but as there was no logic tying her statement to the dead tadpoles, she stopped there.

“It has been so hot,” volunteered another, “the water temperature gets to much for them, and they try to leap out.”

The third chimed in, “Or maybe they just jumped out of the water too soon.”

“But there were hundreds of them,” Jennifer protested, “dead in the water, washing up on the edges only after they were dead. It looked like toxic waste. We were afraid to swim.”

The three ladies chimed in chorus of “Oh, nos.”

“That water is tested.”

“We are going up there later today, we’ll look into it, but it is nothing, I’m sure.”

“Just the heat.”

This chorus migrated to a chorus off the subject.

“You were probably better off, it is very cold. I never go in the water until mid-June.”

“Me either.”

“Way too cold.”

The chiming was illustrated by nodding and shivering. We left, feeling at least that we reported the tadpole situation to someone who was responsible for following up and who obviously cared.

We arrived at Mariposa Grove in Yosemite at about noon. We had been there before and remembered it being an easy stroll through the trees. We planned

to do the stroll and go to the Wawona Hotel for lunch. So we took only one water bottle and our camera.

However, we had not recalled, that, unlike Kings Canyon and Sequoia, here the trees were few and far between. There were several hundred yards between trees even in the most traveled area. We paused at each tree to compose a photo from the best angle. Then we could not resist a sign leading to an “upper grove” and a “museum.”



Big trees at Mariposa Grove.

There was at least a mile of uphill travel between the “upper” and “lower” groves. The museum was closed. But just past it, there was a sign for a Wawona Point, just another half mile away, still all uphill. Our water was gone, but again we could not resist. The birds-eye view of the Wawona meadow encircled by mountains of pine forests was worth the extra hike. By the time we got back to the car, we figured we had gone about 5 miles. The Wawona Dining room was closed. We got an ice cream bar in the market and headed onto Yosemite Valley.

As always, the Tunnel View overlook of Yosemite Valley hit us hard. Michael immediately pulled over. El Capitan jutted out its 90-degree angle thousands

of feet above the Valley floor on the left. Bridalveil Fall poured thousands of feet down on the right. In the distance was the distinctive silhouette of Half Dome, its flat rock face turned away at a slight angle to reveal its domed back.

John Muir had said Kings Canyon was “grandier” than Yosemite, but as he said it, he quoted statistics about its size. There can be no doubt that Yosemite far exceeds its southern cousin in its beauty. It has a more aesthetically pleasant sense of proportion. The high sierra peaks of Kings Canyon vie for attention, crowding close together and showing off their unique shapes only when they can be seen through the clutter of cliff walls and treetops. The relatively small peaks of Yosemite do not compete. They respect each other’s beauty and offset it with deference. The wide sloping valley below allows each jewel its own setting.

Though we had been here several times before, we stopped again and again to marvel as we drove into the Valley. The falls were flowing further and faster than we had ever before seen. At four distinct points in the Valley entrance, thousands of gallons of water fell splashing in all directions over the cliff edges, splashing again a few hundred feet down, and repeating these patterns until they reached the valley floor.

We checked into the Ahwahnee at 5:00PM, showered and dressed for dinner. We had also been to the Ahwahnee before, and expected dinner to be a rewarding experience. Alas, the chef had recently changed and the menu was so eclectic as to be uninterpretable. Steak served with “tobacco onions,” “potato cannoli,” everything written in



Yosemite Valley.

what appeared to be English, but with unrecognizable metaphors. The food we ordered was edible, but certain ingredients on each plate had to be avoided. This was a great disappointment as we had made reservations to eat there every evening.

We took an 8:30AM bus to Glacier Point, the edge of an overlook on the southeast side of Yosemite Valley. The driver narrated the scenes as we drove by them, naming the falls on our way out: Yosemite on our right, Sentinel on our left, then Ribbon on our right and Bridalveil on our left. His voice was soothing and low. He chatted about the different types of pine and fir trees and how to tell them apart, making us aware of term for features like “puzzle bark.” We were very interested in his dialogue, having just examined these

trees and noticing their differences in many long walks while keeping an eye out for Sequoias. But we were sleepy and the driver’s voice was so soothing that we did not take much in. Jennifer napped on Michael’s shoulder.

From Glacier Point, Yosemite falls sprung from the side of the opposite valley wall. The Ahwahnee appeared as a small brown rooftop at the edge of a light green meadow. Even more impressive was the view of the High Sierra range beyond the eastern end of the Valley. Melting out of the snow-covered mountains, we could see two waterfalls not evident from the Valley floor. Nevada Fall thundered down 594 feet. Below it, Vernal Fall created an equally commanding thunder. We sauntered around the top, taking in views



Starting down the Panorama Trail from Glacier Point.

of the valley, filling our water bottles, and reading all the plaques in the Geology Exhibit. We started down the trail at 10:30AM.

It was all downhill to the top of Illilouette Fall, which we had not seen from the top. This fall faced the opposite side of a deep ravine. There was a rocky overlook opposite. We sat on the closest rock upon which we could comfortably balance on our feet, then slid to sit on a rock a bit closer to the edge, then once more until we were close enough to look down. From that vantage point, we could see the broad stream narrow into a tight crevasse that turned it into water white and forced it to fall 370 feet into a

swelling pool that continued into another stream that fell out of sight.

We crossed the stream that had helped create the part of the ravine just beneath us, then moved on to Illilouette Creek, from which Illilouette Fall fell. We reached there about noon. Sitting on a tabletop-flat rock that jutted out over the edge of the river a few hundred feet above the falls, Jennifer took off her hiking boots, dipped her feet in the icy cold water, and ate an apple. Between us and the edge of the fall was a bridge. All around was rushing river. Michael did not eat an apple or relax too much because he was thinking of the 760-foot climb upon which we were about to embark to the top of Nevada Fall.



Illilouette Fall.

The climb was a full-length hike of its own, much longer and harder than our spring ritual climb up Mount Tammany at the Delaware Water Gap in New Jersey. But it was just a small leg in this otherwise downhill odyssey of glorious scenery, so we did not mind the challenge. The reward was the idyllic rock pasture at the top of Nevada Fall, smooth white slabs, gently sloping like a meadow, encased in lush green walls and broken only by a large pool of powerfully rushing white water. The water enveloped tree trunks and lapped over fences meant to keep people at safe distances. The cool spray of foam was colder and proportionally more refreshing than any mist invention we had appreciated in

Palm Springs. The shores of its edges narrowed as it approached a bridge. On the other side of the bridge, it fell away. Great surges of white water dropped from sight, hitting rocks on its way down that splashed it back up again, at our feet, into our faces, or over our heads.

We sat at the edge of the pool about 50 yards above the bridge. This time, Michael also put his feet in, but we could leave them in for no more than a few seconds at a time. They came out bright red, tinged with blue. Michael tossed pebbles at the squirrels to keep them at bay while we ate lunch. Then we headed down the Mist Trail.



Nevada Fall.

The trail was steep and rocky with switchbacks like those at Walter's Wiggles in Zion. There apparently had been some attempt to create steps, but successive rainstorms had shifted the rocks and lodged them deep in the underlying soil. Instead of steps, at times they were more like tile laid at a 45-degree angle. We crept slowly down. At the start, there were views of Nevada Fall. We stopped a lot to take pictures, though the rolling Mist was a continuing threat to camera safety.

As we continued, we encountered people who were on their way up. Most of them were very wet. The steep rocky trail occasionally afforded views of water, but we saw nothing that could have caused the drenching until we came upon Vernal Fall. It was shorter but broader than Nevada Fall, with a very uneven array of rocks along the top. We crossed over the top too far away for a direct overview, but came up alongside it. We stepped into a haze of fog and mist that was not due to any change in the weather, but rose from thunderous water pounding rock below. There were rainbows at the base of the fall. We hugged a moss-covered cliff and descended roughly hewn steps of weak rock surfaces strewn with puddle-like pools of water. Water condensed on the side of the cliff. As we descended and the cliff got higher over our heads, the water started descending on us. Soon we were in rain. There was a short tunnel that provided a moment's respite, and we stayed as long as we could. But standing in the drenching rain, it was hard to appreciate the view of the falls. An outcropping of the cliff edge had been built into an overlook a hundred feet away, and it was raining even there. Below it, a few feet over the stream, a

circular rainbow hovered around the base of a large tree.

The footing was treacherous, but our mood was light as we emerged from the mist. A gentler slope led us back to the valley, affording a view of the Illilouette Fall, looking thin from the side through its crevasse. We strolled around Happy Isles Nature Center, taking in the scene of a rockslide the size of a football field, glad we were not around when it happened.

We took a bus back to the Ahwahnee, flopped on the bed and avoided the eclectic menu by ordering room service for dinner. Even the room service menu disappointed. Michael at least liked hamburgers, but Jennifer ended up with a turkey quesadilla. If no Mexican restaurant in the world has tried it, there is probably a good reason. It is that eight quarter-inch cubes of turkey do not fit well into bites when randomly hidden between flat tortillas.

The next day was dark and overcast. We spent the morning at the Visitors Center and galleries. We then drove to Tuolumne Meadows, thinking we would lunch in the lodge. We planned a short hike to the top of Lembert Dome, which overlooked Tuolumne Meadows. We were first struck by snow along the side of the road. We had seen some snow in Kings Canyon so we were not too dissuaded. However, it became deeper and covered more and more ground. Also, the temperature was dropping. By the time we reached Olmstead Point, it was 38°. We were at 8400 feet, whereas the valley floor was at about 4000 feet. We looked out at the peaks we saw from the Valley at a very different angle. It was a lesson in elevation. The wind was bitter. We raced

to the trunk to get sweatpants and changed from our shorts in the car.

We next stopped at Tenaya Lake, clear blue oval alongside the road, nestled in trees at both ends with tall deep blue mountain peaks towering above. The woods around it were so surrounded with snow. We could not attempt to walk around it. But the snow patterns on the mountains surrounding it reflected beautifully in the water.

Tuolumne Lodge had not opened yet for the season, so we drove on to Tioga Pass and lunched in the Tioga Pass resort, a little diner-like restaurant just past the National Park entrance station. We were now over 9600 feet and it was wintry

cold. So it was mostly a drive through scenery day, though on the way back, we stopped at the Valley entrance in Tuolumne Grove for a last walk through big trees.

We showered and again cancelled our dinner reservations. We strolled around the meadow and found a footpath that took us to the Village. We easily found a pizza place that served edible food and stopped at the Village Store to buy an ice cream bar for desert. The way back was not as easy to find. It was pitch dark and there were no streetlights. Eating our ice cream, we remembered all the warnings about not leaving food in your car at night because of the bears. Here we were, carrying food with us in the pitch



Tenaya Lake, June 1, 2002 (38 degrees).



Vernal Fall.

dark, feeling around for our hotel. Luckily, Michael had stashed a pen flashlight in the camera case, but its battery was weak and we used it sparingly. We could not keep good track of the footpath by which we had walked into the Village, so we abandon it and used the road instead, walking right on the yellow line except when headlights in the distance warned of a coming vehicle. The cars were welcome because we figured the bears avoided the moving ones. We found a parking lot by the meadow with garbage cans, so we ditched our ice cream wrapper, but Michael put his foot in a puddle and that made the rest of the walk very uncomfortable for him. We reached the parking lot of the Ahwahnee with our hearts in our throats, but still beating.

The next day, we had scheduled a mule trip to the top of Half Dome. It was 8.4 miles one way, too far for us to attempt walk in one day. The mules would bring us to the base of a rocky outcropping behind Half Dome, called Quarter Dome. There were steps and well defined rock ledges that would allow us to climb up and over Quarter Dome to the base of Half Dome. The last few hundred feet of the climb was on smooth rock, requiring gloves to hold onto steel cables. Of course, the mules would not make that part of the climb, but the idea was that they would get us to the point where we could. We were at the stables at 7:00AM, munching on granola bars because the Ahwahnee did not open for breakfast until 7:00.

We knew from speaking with the reservations clerk over the past few weeks that it was the first trip of the season, but the stables' staff confessed to

not knowing there was an all day ride scheduled, and five of us waited for the trip to be prepared, finally taking off at about 8:00AM. The beginning of the ride was uphill through the same part of the Valley we had walked down the previous day, though not the Mist Trail. We enjoyed forest and falls views, frequently asking the guide questions about the trees or the flowers. But she could answer none of them, so we stopped asking.

After two hours, we stopped at a clearing just above Nevada Fall where there was a restroom. In ten minutes, we were pushing on. Apparently, the mules were slow. Whenever our guide made estimates of how long it would take to reach this waypoint or that one, and they were always way too optimistic. So we were not surprised when we reached the base of our planned Half Dome hike at noon instead of 11:00 or 11:30 AM as advertised. However the guide informed us that we still needed to be back at 1:00PM for the trek back down.

We hastily assembled our gear from saddlebag to backpack and started scrambling up the rock. There was no time to be scared or to look past our feet. From the top of Quarter Dome, the cables looked way to intimidating to continue. They seemed to go in a 90-degree angle straight up the side of the dome. Two other people from our ride had gotten there first and were also contemplating the climb. It had taken almost a half hour to reach the base of the cables. We all knew there was no choice but to abandon the climb or to be late getting back. They decided first, so we knew we would be safe in being late. From the base of the cables, the climb

did not look as steep as it had when viewing it vertically, so we decided to make an attempt as well. We took the cables in each hand, and placed our feet firmly on the ground, leaned forward, and thus began the 60° angle climb. We had gone fifty feet when we encountered one of our riding companions coming back. It had been too much for his fear of heights.

Jennifer knew from past experience that she had a fear of heights that may kick in at any time as well. To see just what she would be facing were that to occur, she looked down the mountain. Sheer drop-offs in every direction she looked made her decide that a quick climb up and down may not be possible or even advisable. So she bade Michael to continue and she turned back as well. Jennifer sat on a large rock about 25 feet from the base of the cables with binoculars in one hand and a camera in the other, watching Michael make the climb. Several times, he had to wait for people ahead of him to move before he could continue. But he did make it, disappearing over the lip of the cliff.

Jennifer waited for an inestimable amount of time. Neither one of us can decide just how long he was up there. He had decided that having made it to the top he should continue over the dome to the edge to view the valley below. He was richly rewarded by the experience. But finally, he appeared at the cliff top again. Again, he had to wait for people in front of him. He adopted a technique of leaning against the cables while waiting that made Jennifer shudder. But he was down within ten minutes. We raced back to the horses, arriving fifteen minutes late.

Jennifer was visibly upset about not making it up, blamed it on the lack of time for clear thinking and told the guide as much. The guide made false promises to stop at the top of Nevada Fall for a walk if there was time. The mules were downhill adverse and the trip down was even slower than the one up. We stopped once at the Ranger Station in Little Yosemite Valley for a restroom break. Jennifer and one other woman got off. The rest of the riders waited on their horses, thinking they would be able to take a break at Nevada Fall. But the guide crossed the bridge over the fall and just kept going. We made it to the bottom only fifteen minutes late, the guide having covered perfectly for not getting the horses to move at all by blaming our fifteen minutes late coming back from the hike.

We decided that if the company admitted to itself how hurried and uncomfortable the trip really was, they would have to do something to speed it up. As part of the introductory “safety” lecture, a stablehand had bragged that they had not bought an animal in twenty years. The brag was that they treated the animals so well they were all still healthy though they were all over twenty, also that they were all well trained. We decide that the bottom line is that they are all too old to make the trip as scheduled and the company would have to spend money to do something about it.

We were too exhausted to bother avoiding the restaurant. The food was bland, but at least the elegant atmosphere lent itself to a celebration for Michael. He had already written a postcard with a picture of Half Dome to his oncologist, “I made it to the top! Thank you!” For Jennifer, to share in his jubilation made up for not making it to the top herself.

We spent our last day in Yosemite on the Valley floor. We had a leisurely room service breakfast, then rafted down the Merced River. There were views of Yosemite Falls for most of the way and we got a lot of great pictures of the Falls framed by meadows and trees. There was no white water and only one simulation of a rapid, where the river passed through a rock area under a bridge. We pulled up on a sandy beach to stop for a swim. But it was too cold and the water moved too fast. We got back in and floated to the Sentinel Bridge.



A sandy beach on the Merced River.

We had rented the raft at Curry Village, and a tractor-trailer like vehicle brought us back to our car. The trailer carried some ten rows of seats, supposedly four

across. We had seen the same vehicles giving guided tours of the Wawona Groves. It afforded great views of the valley waterfalls, cliffs, and meadows.

After a fast food lunch at Curry Village, we rented bicycles. Our first stop on the



Michael at the top of Half Dome, starting to descend.



View of Yosemite Falls from a raft on the Merced river.

bikes was Mirror Lake, a shining pool at the east end of the valley, just below Half Dome, and usually reflecting its image. But it is not really a lake, just a place where Tenaya Creek swells up a little over its banks as it descends into Yosemite Valley. At this time of year with this amount of snow melt, there was no question of it reflecting. Rather, it was swirling. We crawled onto huge boulders near its banks and dipped our feet in. We had worn our bathing suits for rafting and so there was no barrier to taking a plunge. At least, that is what we thought until we did shallow dives into the 40° water, leaving us swimming in indisputably recent snow melt. We managed to scramble up onto another boulder and contemplate how we would get back to the banks. We has seen a few families with small children that appeared to be frolicking in the water, but on closer inspection, we found that none of them were in more than calf-deep water, and that the duration of their pseudo-plunges were less than 15 seconds. We had no choice but to take the same plunge back. We again swam through twelve feet of snowmelt, arriving at the warm rock on which we had left our clothes. We had brought one towel from the Ahwahnee. After quickly drying ourselves, we sat for a moment to appreciate our surroundings, and the towel somehow slipped into the water. Jennifer used her hat clip to rig the wet towel on the men's center bar of Michael's bicycle.

The Park Service did a good job of keeping the bike paths separated from the roads. We drove through Yosemite Village without being distracted by it, and ended up at Yosemite Falls. We wanted to go onto Bridalveil Fall, but the



The meadow.

bike path ended, so we could only go if we biked on the roads. We decided it would be more enjoyable and safer to check the bikes back in and drive to Bridalveil. We parked on the meadow across from the fall and walked there.

We had serendipitously taken that path less traveled. We did not know there was an official Bridalveil parking lot, but everyone else seemed to. After walking a few hundred yards on a lovely quiet trail in the meadow by ourselves, we met up with them, the pilgrimage to Bridalveil. We shared only 50 yards of rough granite paths and stairs. We appreciated seeing the wordless reaction of those who were mist-covered for the first time, who were that close to rushing water for the first time. We felt it as well, the perspective on Bridalveil was a striking alternative to others we had seen. It was stark white and crimped at the top and progressively more translucent as it widen toward the bottom, thus earning the name "veil." Its thunder was instantiated in mist that soaked liked rain.

Our last night at the restaurant proved again disappointing. But we had



Bridalveil Fall.

breakfast at the hotel as we had a long
drive and convenience won out.



Miles traveled: 318
Departure datetime: Tuesday, June 4, 8:10AM
Departure weather: 58° Sunny