

A trip to Yosemite National Park via YARTS is a must for valley residents

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BY: Beverly Barela

The YARTS bus sped up Highway 140 from Merced into the foothills. It passed Mariposa and stopped at the entrance to Yosemite National Park. A sign read, "Chains required."

The driver parked, and deftly fitted the chains over the tires. A horde of enthused travelers lined up outside the bus, but there were no more seats. Instead of turning them away, the kindly driver allowed them to board the bus and stand in the aisle for the remaining 13 miles of the trip.



Packed with tourists, the bus made its way more slowly up the mountain into winter wonderland. The landscape turned a bright, soft white.

The beauty drew gasps from those who had never been to Yosemite National Park or had never been in winter.

Suddenly, the powdery snow was everywhere. Every tree branch was covered. Small trees were bent under its weight, like crooked-backed old men. Large trees looked like twisted, glistening snow monsters.

The travelers began to chatter excitedly in anticipation of their arrival in the national park.

A passenger from Finland explained that in her country, everyone learns to ski and to ice-skate, starting at age three! Skis are used for sport, but also for getting around town. Several young men from India were laughing, talking and sharing.

They explained that they had been living in Michigan for six months while engaged in a project at General Motors for Hewlett Packard, India, their employer.

They would soon be returning to South India, but while in the United States, they were taking a "Christmas trip" to Yosemite.

A lady who lives and works in the national park reminisced about her brother's first job as a firefall worker. She said, "My brother has lived in the park on and off since 1966. His first job right out of high school, was pushing the fire off Glacier Point!"

In the days of the firefall, her brother and the other workers went to Glacier Point, which is 3,200 feet above Yosemite Valley, and gathered chunks of wood into a 4' x 4' x 4' pile. They started the fire at 9:30 a.m. That night, to the delight of the crowds of tourists on the valley floor, he called, "Let the fire fall," as he took a 4' x 4' metal rake and pushed the glowing embers off the pile so that they fell in a cascading bonfire down the cliff. Sadly, the awe-inspiring ritual was ended in 1968.

The YARTS bus arrived at its destination, and everyone departed to take the free shuttle which loops around Yosemite Valley, stopping at Curry Village, the Ahwahnee Hotel, and Yosemite Lodge. The shuttle driver entertained the guests with witty comments, and when no one wanted to stop at the hiking trail heads because everyone wanted to proceed on so they could eat at the lodge, stop number 8, she shouted, gaily, "One for all, and all for 8."

After a hot meal and soup at Yosemite Lodge, near Yosemite Falls, it was time to visit the Ahwahnee Hotel near the Merced River. The Ahwahnee, a grand hotel surrounded by stupendous granite cliffs, opened in 1927 and was designated a historic landmark in 1987. Its cozy and warm atmosphere welcomes guests. Its decor features enormous fireplaces, antique paintings and photographs, American Indian baskets and kilim rugs. It offers a Sunday brunch until 3 p.m.

In the snowy meadow back of the Ahwahnee, families were having fun. People in waterproof snow boots were hiking along the bike trail. Others were building snowmen and throwing snowballs.

Up at Badger Pass, there was skiing and snow tubing. A free shuttle took guests there from the lodge at 10 a.m. and returned in the afternoon.

At Curry Village, the ice skating rink was open.

There were gift shops and a visitor's center to browse, as well as an Indian museum.

After being active all day enjoying the park, it was a relief to get back on the YARTS bus and let the driver

take over for the return trip to Merced.

YARTS stands for Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System. YARTS is public transit, like The Bus. It is a stand-alone entity — a type of governmental agency. It is a partnership with Merced, Mariposa and Mono Counties as members. It runs 365 days a year, and there are multiple runs a day. A round trip from Merced to Yosemite National Park costs \$25 for adults, and \$18 for seniors, and children ages 12 and under.

What most people don't know is YARTS has a relationship with Amtrak and provides through-way service. For example, you can go to the Amtrak station in Sacramento and buy a round trip ticket to Yosemite National Park. You would depart from Sacramento on the train, and take the YARTS bus from Merced to Yosemite.

During the summer, when Tioga Pass is open, the bus runs to Mammoth Lakes, which is about 125 miles from Merced. You could buy a ticket to Mammoth Lakes and take the YARTS bus from Merced. There is a four-hour layover in Yosemite National Park both ways.

Besides avoiding the \$20 gate fee at the entrance to the national park, YARTS is about watching the scenery, not the road, and is economical, comfortable and convenient. For further information about YARTS, those interested can go online to www.yarts.com.