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First-timer's guide to Yosemite Valley

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Sydney Hale has traveled many places but said she always wanted to visit Yosemite National Park.

She has a longtime admiration for John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club and advocate for the preservation of America's wilderness areas, and Ansel Adams, a photographer known for his black-and-white photographs of Yosemite.

"It's just been my dream," said the 74-year-old from Preston, Idaho, while riding a bus with her husband, Nathan. "So, I'm dragging him."

The couple rose before sunrise on a recent weekday for the four-hour ride on the Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System, YARTS, from Mammoth Lakes, Calif., to Yosemite Valley.

"This is pretty nice to have someone else do the driving," she said.

It's also a pretty nice way to visit one of the most famous national parks in the world, which boasted almost 3.9 million visitors in 2009. Because of its popularity, lodging and campsites in the park must be booked months in advance.

For the late planner who lives on the east side of the Sierra Nevada mountain range and wants to visit this majestic area, staying in Mammoth Lakes is a good alternative. Not only is it close to the national park via a scenic drive on Tioga Road, Mammoth Lakes also offers an abundance of outdoor activities.

YARTS' slogan is "You Could Drive, But Why?" That was the question I, too, asked.

Like Hale, and for many of the same reasons, desired to visit Yosemite for many years. Because of the crowds, a lack of camping gear and my inability to plan a year in advance, it stayed on the wish list.

The comfortable, air-conditioned tour bus makes four stops in Mammoth Lakes, the first at 7 a.m. The bus was about half full as it headed north on U.S. 395 to make more stops before taking the Tioga Pass into the national park. For someone curious about the area, a window seat was a great way to get a glimpse at spots others have marveled about.

The bus takes the June Lake Loop, an 18-mile scenic byway of waterfalls and granite cliffs that traces June Lake, Gull Lake and Grant Lake. Cute cottages, perched beside the road, are added to the list of places to visit.

The bus then heads north to Mono Lake, with its magnificent tufa formations, and the neighboring town of Lee Vining. After turning onto Highway 120 (Tioga Road), the bus stops at the Tioga Mobile Gas Mart, which has the well-known Whoa Nellie Deli. On the return trip, the parking lot was full and the outdoor patio was bustling.

The bus made four stops in Yosemite National Park before it arrived at Yosemite Valley, all the while passing impressive vistas. The waterfalls and creeks were too many to count. Four hours later, the bus arrived in the valley, with views of Half Dome, El Capitan and Yosemite Falls, the tallest waterfall in North America.

The bus driver warned the passengers to be at the bus stop by 5 p.m. for the return ride or risk spending a night in the valley with no guarantee they would find accommodations.

There was enough time to eat lunch, walk to the base of Yosemite Falls, walk to Mirror Meadow with its view of Half Dome, visit the Indian Cultural Museum and talk to 81-year-old Julia Parker as she made the baskets of the Miwok tribe, explore the visitor center to learn about the area's history and geology and wish there was more time.

The YARTS bus was an informative way for a first-timer to visit Yosemite National Park. The next trip will be during the week in the autumn when children are back in school and summer tourists are home, but before the risk of treacherous weather on Tioga Road.

Additional Facts

Yosemite National Park

- » Established as a national park in Oct. 1, 1890
- » The park is open year-round and reservations are not required to enter Yosemite, but you need them for lodging and most campgrounds.
- » Tioga Road, the entrance on the east side of the Sierra, is closed from November to May.
- » Permits are required to hike to the top of Half Dome. All people using the Half Dome Trail above the subdome must have a permit on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays and federal holidays when the cables are up. Permits aren't required Mondays-Thursdays (except on holidays).
- » Details: www.nps.gov/yose/index.htm

Things to do in Mammoth Lakes

- » Ride the gondola to the top of Mammoth Mountain for views of the area's many lakes and the many mountain peaks, including the jagged Minarets in the Ansel Adams Wilderness. Mountain bikers enjoy the many trails down.
 - » Explore Devil's Postpile National Monument on the Sierra Nevada's western slope and Rainbow Falls, where rainbows are visible in the mist on a sunny day.
 - » Visit hot springs: The area south of Mammoth Lakes is known for its geothermal activity and hot springs. The springs dot the area about nine miles south of Highway 203.
 - » Stop at Whoa Nellie Deli at the Mobile Gas Mart, intersection of U.S. 395 and Tioga Road. The store hours are 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., seven days a week. Open seasonally, from the end of April to the first weekend in November.
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