

YOSEMITE

NATIONAL PARK · CALIFORNIA

VISITOR GUIDE · 2026 SEASON · FREE — TAKE ONE

Plan by season

When the falls run, when the high country opens

Walk the valley

Seven classic trails, from stroll to scramble

Ride, don't drive

The free shuttle and where it stops

Half Dome at first light, from Sentinel Bridge.

WELCOME

One valley, four worlds

Yosemite protects 3 027 square kilometres of the Sierra Nevada, but most first visits happen in a strip of valley floor eleven kilometres long. That is not a mistake — the valley really is the concentrate of the place — but it helps to know what surrounds it: a high country of granite domes and alpine meadows, two groves of giant sequoias, and a wilderness that covers ninety-four per cent of the park.

This guide is organised the way most people actually plan: by season first, then by trail, then by the practical business of moving around without a car. Cell coverage is patchy and the queues at the entrance stations are real; the more of this you decide before you arrive, the better the day goes.

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What the year does to the valley

4 Trails & wildlife
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5 Getting around
Shuttle, bikes and parking



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- Entrance reservation required on summer weekends
- No fuel sold in the valley — fill up outside the park
- Bear canisters mandatory on overnight trips

1 190 m
VALLEY FLOOR

2 199 m
GLACIER POINT

3 031 m
TIOGA PASS

3 999 m
MT LYELL

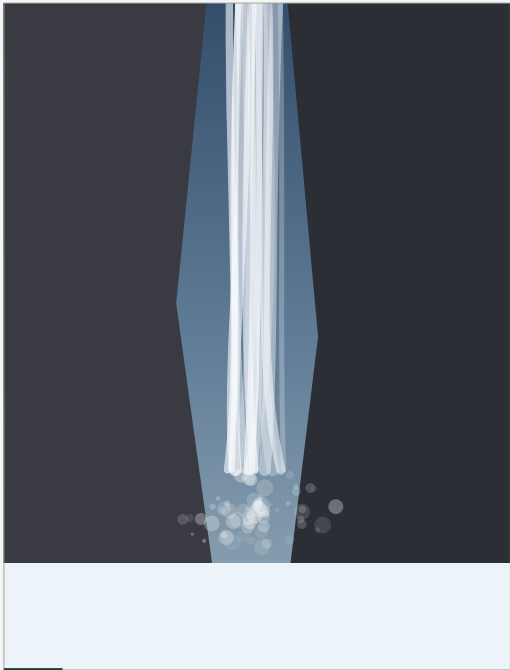
The seasons

Spring is the valley's loud season. Snowmelt peaks between late April and early June, and **most of the year's water goes over the falls in six loud weeks**. The meadows flood, the Merced runs high and cold, and the waterfalls throw spray a hundred metres from the trail.

Summer opens the high country. Tioga Road usually opens in late May or June, and with it Tuolumne Meadows at 2 620 metres: cooler air, bare granite, and trails that start above the tree line. In the valley, expect full car parks by nine and afternoon queues at the entrance stations.

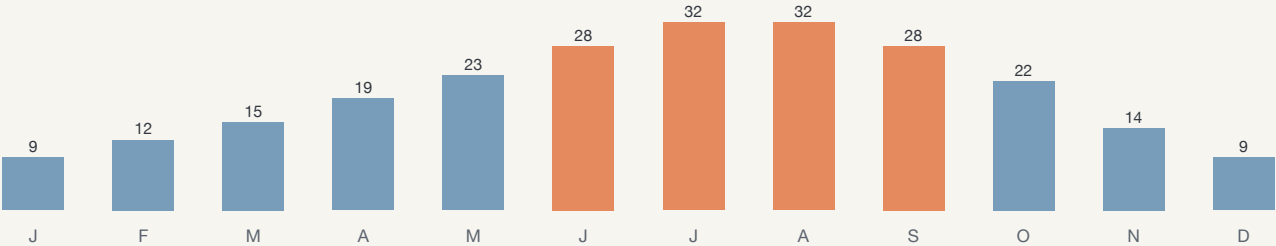
Autumn is the quiet return. The crowds thin after Labor Day, the black oaks turn in late October, and the climbers come back to El Capitan for the cool, stable weather. Waterfalls are at their lowest — some are dry entirely.

Winter closes the roads but not the park. The valley floor stays open and largely snow-free; Glacier Point Road becomes a ski trail; chains or snow tyres ride in the boot from November to March. Horsetail Fall catches the sunset in late February, when the light is right, and the meadows are empty at dawn.



Yosemite Falls, 739 m in three steps. By August the wall is often dry rock.

VALLEY FLOOR, TYPICAL DAY °C



Trails & wildlife

The classic half-day is the Mist Trail to Vernal Fall: five kilometres return, three hundred metres of climbing, and in spring a final staircase walked through the waterfall's own spray. Carry a shell layer even in July.

For a flat morning, the Valley Loop between Sentinel Bridge and El Capitan Meadow stays under the pines, crosses the Merced twice, and puts the big walls overhead without any climbing at all. The full loop is twenty kilometres; the western half is the better half.

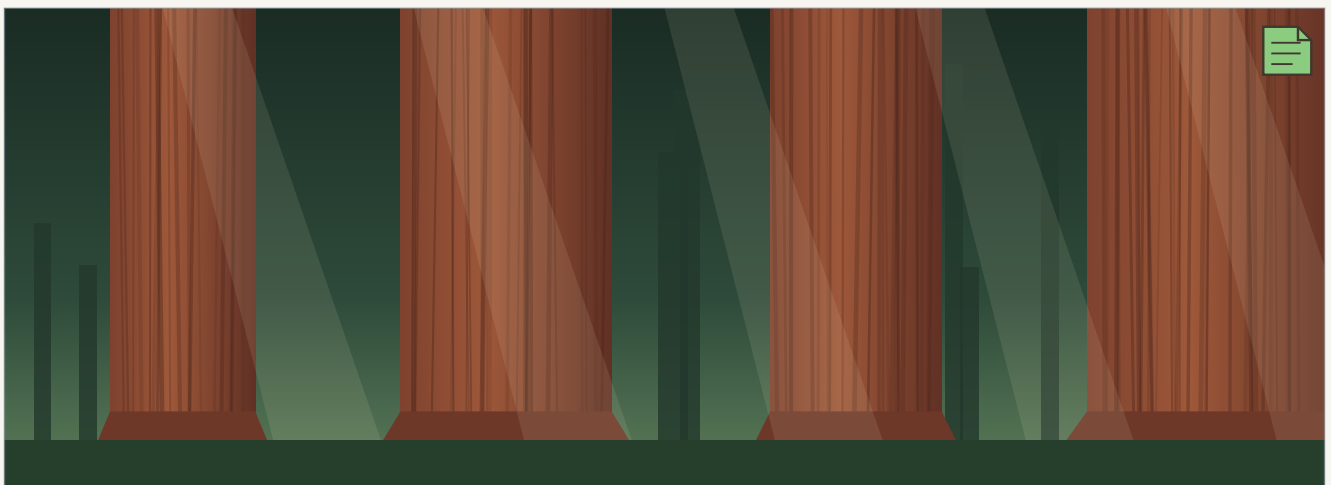
Mirror Lake is the family walk — four kilometres return on a paved lane, best in early summer while the lake still holds water and Half Dome stands in it upside down. By September it is Mirror Meadow, which has its own quieter charm.

Every trail in this guide starts from a shuttle stop. Park once, ride the loop, and the day gets simpler: see page 5 for the map and frequencies.

Black bears are the park's most managed neighbours. Three to five hundred live here, and the rule that protects them is about food, not distance: **never leave food or scented items in an unattended car**, use the steel lockers at every trailhead and campsite, and keep your pack with you on the trail. A bear that learns to associate cars with calories is a bear the rangers eventually have to destroy — the fine for a food violation is real, but that is the actual stake.

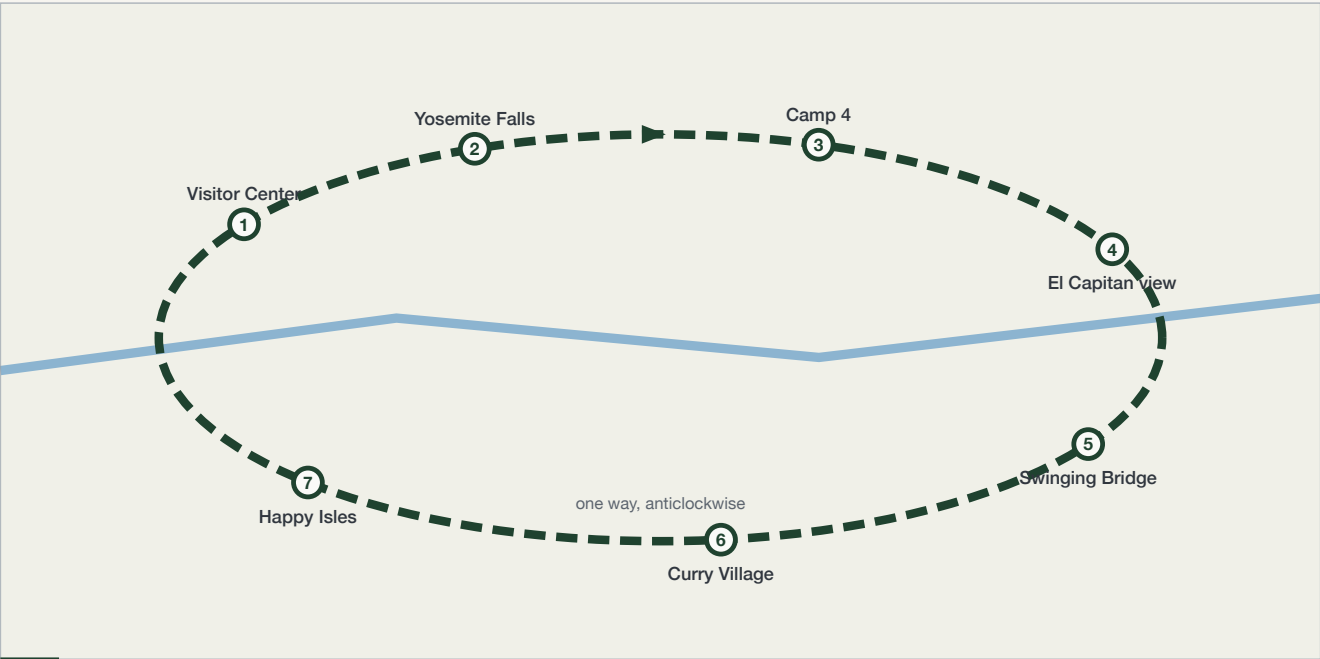
Mule deer graze the meadows at dusk and injure more visitors than the bears do, almost always because someone walked up close for a photograph. Give them the meadow.

Rattlesnakes hold the warm rock below 2 000 metres; they want the encounter less than you do. Watch where hands go on the talus, and the problem solves itself.



Mariposa Grove holds about five hundred mature giant sequoias. The Grizzly Giant has stood for an estimated 3 000 years; its first branch is larger than any whole tree east of the Sierra.

Getting around



Schematic only — stops are numbered as on the buses. The full loop takes about 50 minutes.

The valley shuttle is free, and from spring to autumn ~~it runs every twelve minutes~~ from seven in the morning until ten at night. Park once — the Village day lot fills by mid-morning in summer — and treat the loop as the valley's main street. Nothing in the eastern valley is more than ten minutes' walk from a stop.

Bicycles are the other honest answer: twenty kilometres of paved path run the length of the valley floor, flat the whole way, and racks stand at every trailhead. Rentals operate from Yosemite Village and Curry Village in season.

THE PRACTICAL COLUMN

Shuttle hours	07:00 – 22:00
Loop time, full circuit	≈ 50 min
Valley bike path	20 km, flat
Village day lot	fills ~ 09:30
Fuel	none in the valley
EV charging	Village garage
Road conditions	call 209 372-0200