

Yosemite NP in Winter

© by Tibor Vari

Yosemite National Park (<http://www.nps.gov/yose/home.htm>), is considered by many to be the crown jewel of America's park system. Encompassing some of the most spectacular mountain and valley scenery in the Sierra Nevada range. The "incomparable valley", is a dramatic glacier-carved canyon that has inspired countless visitors, painters, poets, and photographers (including the famous Ansel Adams). The park contains a wonderful collection of waterfalls, forests, meadows and giant sequoia trees. Yosemite was set aside as a national park in 1890 at the urging of the great naturalist John Muir.

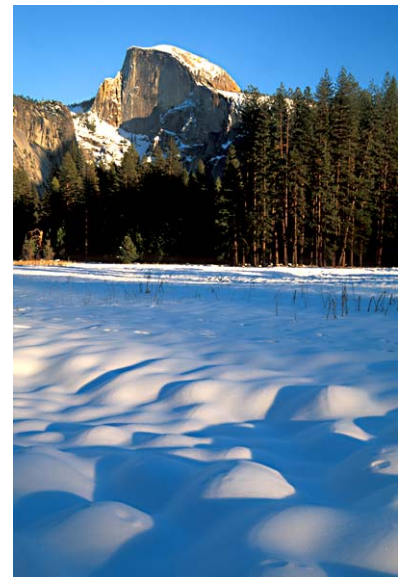


I went to Yosemite the weekend of January 9th 2004 for 3 full days while out west on a business trip. I rented a room at the Cedar Lodge Motel (www.yosemite-motels.com/cedarlodge), which is 8 miles from the park entrance and 20 minutes from the valley floor. The rooms are very nice and the rates much cheaper than staying in the park. The dining room was closed for the winter but the bar did serve food.

With much of the park closed and inaccessible due to the winter conditions. You should obviously plan for and bring cold weather gear with you before adventuring into this winter wonderland. A four wheel drive car is also a good precaution as the park service will close the roads into Yosemite to all vehicles unless they have road chains during snow storms. Fortunately, the temperatures throughout the 3 days stayed around 31 degrees, with no wind and blue skies. I was quite comfortable in the Gore-Tex, layered gear I was wearing.

The Tioga Road (Hwy 120), through the park to Lee Vining (and nearby Mono Lake), was closed for the winter (generally from November through June). As was the Glacier Point road beyond the Badger Pass ski resort. Though you could rent cross country skis to get to Glacier Point. Sadly, Mariposa Grove containing hundreds of Sequoia trees was closed as well. So for this trip I stayed in the valley.

Though the park contains 761,266 acres of land. The valley floor is actually rather small and is about 1 mile wide by 3 miles in length. One of the challenges I found in photographing while in the valley was that it seemed much of it was always in shadow this time of year. The sun never seemed to rise very far above the walls of the mountains lining the valley. So I was chasing the light and having to use my neutral density filters and a warming filter to reduce the blue cast that would appear on film. I used Fuji Velvia 50 speed film throughout the weekend. I was also careful not to over polarize my shots and backed off a little with the filter.



I saw numerous coyotes in the early mornings and evenings walking through various meadows looking for prey still active under the snow. They did not seem to fear people and would seemingly pose for photographers from as little as 20 feet away. Of course, I did not have any luck in seeing any of the Yosemite black bears. The park rangers and Yosemite literature all warn of the danger of leaving any food in your car. The bears are legendary for their ability to break into cars to steal food.

The Merced River was flowing slowly, but I was surprised at how much water there actually was (in the fall it's a trickle). In fact, Vernal (317 feet), Nevada (600 feet), Yosemite (2425 feet), and Bridalveil Falls (620 feet), were all flowing in their majestic glory. The classic valley view of El Capitan (a 3000 foot giant), Cathedral Rocks, and Bridalveil falls was excellent with rocks and grass clumps covered in snow making these mounds wonderful foreground subjects. The best light seemed to be in the afternoon but generally the Merced River did not get any direct light.



For sunrise shots I concentrated along the Merced river near Cathedral Beach and Sentinel Beach. It was a bit challenging to find a pull out for the vehicle and then hike over to the river. Fortunately, the snow was “frozen” so it was easy to walk on top of it rather than trudging through a foot or more of it. I tried to get some reflection shots of El Capitan but found that my 24mm was simply not wide enough. I made a mental note that for the next trip to pick up an 18-35 mm wide angle zoom lens.

After sunrise I went over to Bridalveil Falls to discover that it was completely in shadow. So I basically chased the light around the valley stopping to shoot subjects whenever the light was good on them. By lunch time, Yosemite Falls was basked in direct light which created a gorgeous rainbow at the base of the falls. A good spot to shoot this was from the Swinging Bridge, which has a nice curve of the Merced River to use as a foreground. Another good location was directly across from the falls in Cook's meadow. A short hike to the falls was also well worth the close up view.



For sunset, I went to Sentinel Bridge for a straight on shot of Half Dome using the Merced River as a foreground S curve. Again, the contrasting range of the fading warm light on Half Dome and the Merced River (which was in shadow), forced me to use a neutral density filter and a warming filter. One evening after the last ray of light disappeared off the top of Half Dome. I got a beautiful alpine glow of red and purple to finish off the days shoot. Other sunset opportunities I tried the Tunnel View.

The Tunnel View gives you a wonderful elevated view of the valley below where you can see El Capitan, Half Dome, and Bridalveil Falls. A little further up the road through the tunnel (driving away from the park), gives you a different perspective of El Capital and Half Dome where they appear to be almost the same size.

Other activities besides photography in the park that are worth visiting are the skating rink at Curry Village, shopping at the Village Store, Ansel Adams Gallery, Yosemite Museum, Yosemite Chapel, and the Ahwahnee Hotel.

If you ever find yourself in California, take the drive and a few days to visit this incredible park. Though visiting Yosemite at any time of the year is a delight. Winter brings the added charm of snow covered landscapes, smaller crowds, and the opportunity for incredible photography after a storm.