



# 12 Costly Mistakes Travelers Make in Yosemite - and How to Avoid Them



BY: YOSEMITE ALPINE QUEST

# WELCOME



I am so glad you're here, and you've decided to take charge of your Yosemite vacation.

Over my years of traveling in Yosemite, I've made every mistake in the book, and experienced many avoidable headaches.

That's why I created this guide. So you can avoid these struggles and build unforgettable memories in this beautiful national park!

## **In this guide you will learn how to:**

- **Maximize Trail Time:** Learn the best ways to avoid crowds, long lines, and parking nightmares to spend less time stressing and more time hiking.
- **Discover Hidden Gems:** Go beyond the typical Yosemite travel plans to find overlooked trails and lookouts.
- **Plan Like a Local:** From parking hacks to dining prep, get insider advice to make your Yosemite adventure seamless and stress-free.

Make sure to save the [list of resources](#) at the end of this guide to ensure a smooth planning and booking experience.

Ready to dive in?

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[yosemitealpinequest.com](http://yosemitealpinequest.com)

# 1. Not having a plan

Growing up in California, I made many trips to Yosemite, and they would usually go something like this...

I would get myself excited, promising that I was going to try new hikes and adventures, only to arrive and instantly be overwhelmed by parking and crowds.

With my plans thoroughly dashed - I would default into the same hike I had already done 3-4 times before.

I quickly found that Yosemite was not the place to wing it - and here's why...

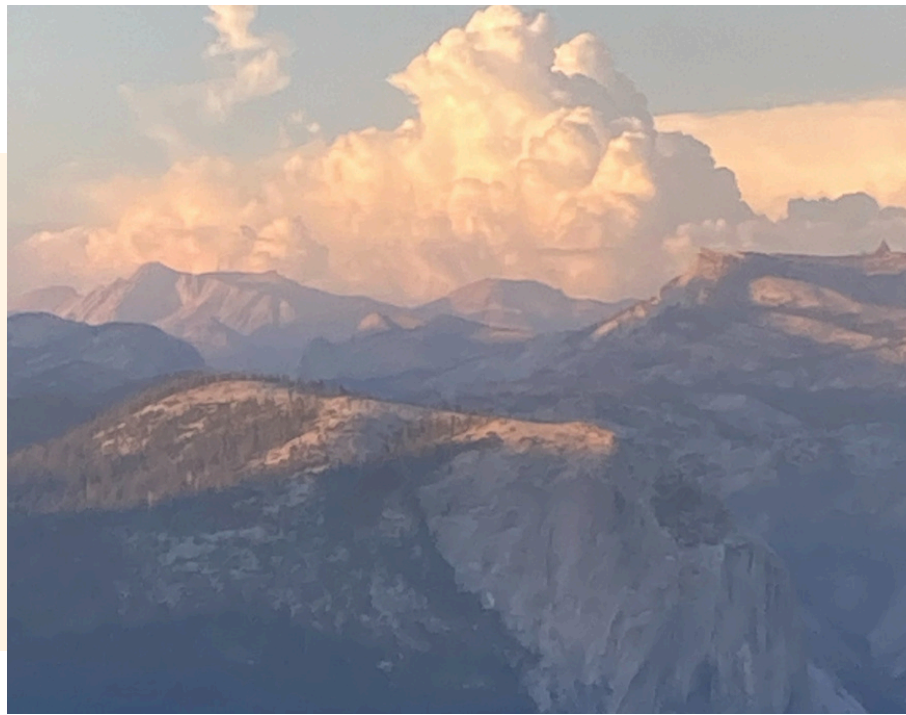
**The Problem:** Yosemite spans over 1,100 square miles and offers endless options. Arriving without a plan is the fastest way to end up overwhelmed and disappointed.

**Solution:** Learn from my mistakes. Before your trip, map out your must-see locations, preferred hiking trails, and ideal activities. Make sure you consider the time of year—summer brings crowds, while winter offers solitude but requires preparation for snow.

And make sure you avoid the 2nd most common headache which is...

“Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees.”

- **John Muir**



## 2. Not Booking in Advance

Accommodations, tours, and permits in Yosemite can book up months—sometimes even a year—in advance. Failing to book early can be disastrous for your trip.

### Some things to keep in mind:

- **Lodging:** Check out [travelyosemite.com](https://www.travelyosemite.com) for a range of lodging options and [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) for campgrounds. [Yosemite Madera County](https://www.yosemite-madera-county.com) is an excellent resource if you need a last minute option outside the park.
- **Permits:** Popular trails like [Half Dome](#) and certain [backcountry camping areas](#) require permits that are often snapped up as soon as they're released.
- **Higher Costs:** Last-minute bookings often come with a hefty price tag. Whether it's lodging or activities, planning ahead can save you significant money.

**The Solution:** Start planning as soon as you know Yosemite is on your itinerary. Research lodging options, secure permits, and reserve tours early to ensure your spot.





## How Early Should I Book?

- **Spring:** Book 6-12 months in advance. By May Yosemite's waterfalls will be at their peak, and visitors will start flowing in to see the show. It's a good idea to get those bookings in soon.
- **Summer (June to August):** This is Yosemite's busiest season, and accommodations often book up a year in advance. If you plan to visit in summer, make reservations for lodging and activities as early as possible.
- **Fall (September to November):** While crowds thin out, weekends and holidays remain popular, so you should consider booking lodging 3-6 months in advance to make sure you're prepared.
- **Winter (December to February):** Winter offers a quiet, magical experience, but limited accommodations and services mean you should book 1-3 months in advance. Popular winter stays like the Ahwahnee Hotel may still require earlier planning for holiday weeks. This is also by far the least expensive season to visit if you're looking to save money!

## 3. Parking and Transportation

When people ask me whether Yosemite is worth the hype, I say absolutely, with one caveat...

If you are planning on visiting during **peak season (June-August)** Navigating Yosemite's parking and transportation can quickly lead to frustration and a questioning of life choices. Arriving with a solid game plan is essential.

Parking lots fill up early, shuttle systems can be confusing for first-time visitors, and traffic congestion can bring your trip to a screeching halt.

Understanding your options and planning ahead can save you time, stress, and energy.



## Practical Tips

- **Arrive Early or Late:** If you're driving, plan to arrive at your destination by 7 a.m. to beat the crowds or visit in the late afternoon/evening when parking spaces start to free up.
- **Use Shuttle Services:** Take advantage of the free shuttle system in Yosemite Valley, but be aware, even this can get bogged down in the middle of the day so plan accordingly. Familiarize yourself with the routes and schedule ahead of time for a stress-free experience. Using [this site](#) will help. Having backup up activities within walking distance can also be helpful.
- **Stay Inside the Park:** Lodging within the park reduces your reliance on daily parking and lets you start your adventures without worrying about traffic.

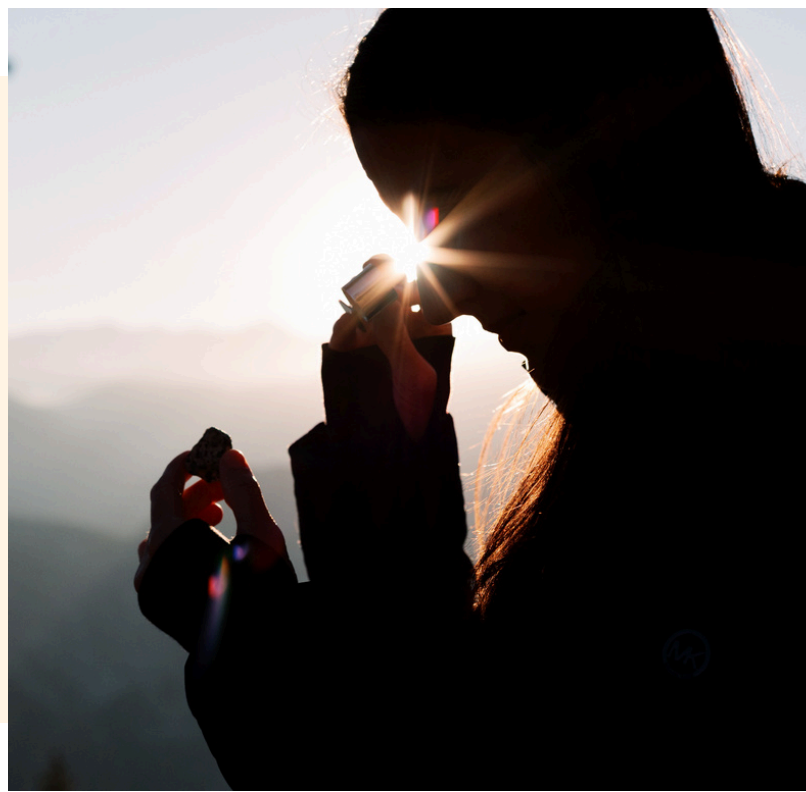
**Carpool or Use Public Transportation:** Minimize the number of vehicles by carpooling or using regional bus services like the Yosemite Area Regional Transportation System ([YARTS](#)), which runs from nearby towns.

**Stay in the Loop:** Glacier Point Road and Tioga Road may be closed in winter due to snow which may throw a wrench in some plans. Check [this site](#) for updates before planning your trip. You can also text ynptraffic to 333111 to receive updates about current traffic conditions in Yosemite

Yosemite's transportation and parking challenges are manageable with the right strategy. By planning ahead, arriving early, and leveraging shuttle services, you can focus on enjoying the park's awe-inspiring views.

"I knew my destiny when I first experienced Yosemite."

- **Ansel Adams**







## 4. Not Knowing Your Season

If you can, I highly recommend visiting Yosemite National Park during each of its four seasons.. Each one offers a completely different, magical experience you won't want to miss.

That said, arriving without understanding how the season impacts access, weather, and activities can lead to surprises—some delightful, but others downright frustrating. Let's make sure you're prepared for whatever Yosemite has in store.

- **Spring (March-May):** By late May waterfalls are at their peak due to melting snow. The park's meadows burst with wildflowers and the crowds are starting to pick up. High-elevation trails and roads, like Glacier Point Road and Tioga Road, may still be closed due to snow. [Check here](#) for current conditions.
- **Summer (June-August):** All roads and trails are typically open, making this the best season for exploring the entire park, including high elevations. However, it's also the busiest time of year, with crowded trails and limited parking. This is where having a solid game plan will be a life-saver. Get your reservations done early. Park early, use shuttle services, and research lower traffic areas.



- **Fall (September-November):**

Experience cooler temperatures, fewer crowds, and the changing colors of fall foliage. Waterfalls may dry up, but the serene atmosphere makes it a favorite for photographers and hikers.

Reservations may still be needed for weekends and holidays.

- **Winter (December-February):** Glacier Point and Tioga Road will be closed, but Yosemite Valley, **accessed via Hwy 140 from Merced, and Hwy 41 from Fresno**, typically remains open year round. Snow blankets the park, transforming it into a winter wonderland. Activities like snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and ice skating take center stage. Roads within the park can be snowy or icy, and tire chains may be required, even on 4WD vehicles.

**Be Prepared:** Snow or ice could affect your travel plans anytime from November to April. It's a good idea to check road conditions in advance and have a backup plan in case of closures or severe weather. If you feel uncertain about driving, another great option is to take the YARTS bus service, which can handle the snow and takes you directly to the valley.

# 5. Not Understanding the Reservation System

The park's growing popularity has led to the implementation of various reservation policies designed to manage crowds.

For many travelers, navigating Yosemite's reservation system can feel like trying to solve a riddle.

People often confuse entry reservations with those for campgrounds, lodges, or popular trails like Half Dome, which leads to a confusing and frustrating experience.

## When You Need a Reservation

- **Peak Season Entry (May-September):** If you are visiting between 5 am and 4 pm you must reserve your entry to the park in advance. Reservations open on [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) and can fill up within minutes.
- **Popular Trails and Activities:** Trails like Half Dome and accommodations like High Sierra Camps require separate permits or reservations.

“When I was about fifteen, I went to work at Yosemite National Park.

It changed me forever. Nature had carved its own sculpture, and I was part of it, not the other way around.”

- **Robert Redford**





### Pro Tips:

- **Create an Account in Advance:** Sign up for an account on [recreation.gov](https://www.recreation.gov) before reservation dates open. This ensures you can log in quickly and secure your spot as soon as reservations become available.
- **Set Alerts and Alarms:** Reservations for park entry, campsites, and special activities often open at 7:00 a.m. Pacific Time. Set an alarm to log in a few minutes early.
- **Be Flexible:** If you can't secure your ideal dates, consider visiting during shoulder seasons like spring or fall, when reservations are easier to come by and the park is less crowded.
- **Plan for Cancellations:** Check reservation sites regularly for cancellations, which are common as other travelers adjust their plans.
- **Other Options:** If you are unable to secure a reservation all hope is not lost. You can still enter the park before 5 am or after 4 pm, or by taking the YARTS bus from a neighboring town.

- **Guided Tours:** Many guided activities, such as ours, include a park entry reservation. Confirm whether your lodging/activity reservation covers park entry or if you'll need an additional pass.
- **Weekends, Holidays, and Firefall:** Reservation requirements for weekends and holidays can extend until late October, as well as a few weeks in February, when thousands of visitors flock to Yosemite to see the firefall.



## 6. Neglecting the High Sierra

When planning a trip to Yosemite, **90% of visitors** focus entirely on Yosemite Valley, which is stunning, but makes up only 5% of the beauty this park has to offer.

Many travelers overlook the High Sierra (**Accessed via Tioga Road - Hwy 120**), which is a less crowded, equally awe-inspiring section of the park. By skipping the High Sierra, you miss out on unique vistas, serene landscapes, and an entirely different perspective of Yosemite.

**Visitors often neglect the High Sierra due to:**

- **A lack of awareness:** Most guidebooks and itineraries only highlight Yosemite Valley.
- **Perceived difficulty:** The High Sierra is often associated with rugged trails and strenuous hikes, but there are plenty of options for all skill levels.
- **Limited time:** With so much to see in Yosemite Valley, the High Sierra often gets pushed aside in favor of more popular spots.

“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul.”

- **John Muir**



## Reasons to visit

- **Avoid the Heat and Crowds:** Savvy visitors will use the heat and crowds of summer in the valley, as an opportunity to explore Yosemite's lesser-known, but equally stunning attractions.
- **Don't Miss Olmsted Point:** This easily accessible viewpoint along Tioga Road offers a stunning perspective of Half Dome and the surrounding wilderness.

The High Sierra isn't just an add-on to your Yosemite adventure—it's an essential part of the park's story. It is best to visit during summer and early fall, as snow often closes the Tioga Road during the winter months. Check road and trail conditions before you go.

## Less crowded (but equally beautiful) destinations:

- Tenaya Lake
- Hetch Hetchy
- Lembert Dome
- Glen Aulin
- Soda Springs
- Cathedral Lakes, May Lake, Gaylor Lakes





**Pro Tip:** Avoid the heat and crowds of summer by dipping your toes in Tenaya Lake. One of Yosemite's most underrated attractions.



[yosemitealpinequest.com](http://yosemitealpinequest.com)



## 7. Not Knowing the Dining Situation

**Picture This:** You've just finished a grueling trek on one of Yosemite's epic trails and all you can think about is the delicious meal waiting for you when you get back.

Then reality hits—you're too late, everything is closed, or requires a reservation, and now you are left feeling hangry and disappointed. Let's make sure that doesn't happen!

**Book Ahead for Fine Dining:** The Ahwahnee Dining Room is famous for its stunning views and upscale menu. Reservations are required and should be booked well in advance, especially for dinner or special occasions. The Mountain Room is another upscale dining option that requires reservations.

- **Pack Snacks and Meals:** Whether you're planning a hike or exploring remote areas of the park, always pack enough snacks, water, and sandwiches to keep you going. Bear-proof containers are essential for storing food in the park. These can be found at the start of each trailhead.
- **Hit the Stores:** Yosemite Village and Curry Village both have small grocery stores where you can purchase snacks, drinks, and basic picnic supplies.

“No temple made with hands can compare with Yosemite. Every rock in its walls seems to glow with life”

- **John Muir**





- **Time Your Meals Wisely:** Avoid peak dining hours (12:00-1:30 p.m. for lunch, 6:00-7:30 p.m. for dinner) to skip long lines and overcrowding.
- **Consider Nearby Towns:** If you're exiting or entering the park, towns like Oakhurst, Groveland, or Mariposa offer a variety of dining options that are often less expensive and less crowded.

### Know What's Available

- **In the Valley:** Yosemite Valley Lodge, Curry Village, and the Ahwahnee Hotel offer dining options ranging from casual food courts to fine dining.
- **Mariposa:** 1850 Restaurant and Brewing Co, Grove House, The Alley, The Health Food Store, Sticks, Frederick's of Savoury's
- **Groveland:** The Restaurant at Rush Creek Lodge, Around the Horn Brewing Co, Lucky Buck Cafe
- **El Portal:** The River Restaurant and Lounge, Parkside Pizza

## 8. Not Taking Wildlife Precautions

As I mentioned before, my first few trips to Yosemite were not done with a lot of forethought, and I am lucky some of them did not go worse than they did.

On one of these early excursions I had heard leaving food in your car was acceptable during the day, just not at night, so I was quite rattled to return from a hike and see this message from a local.

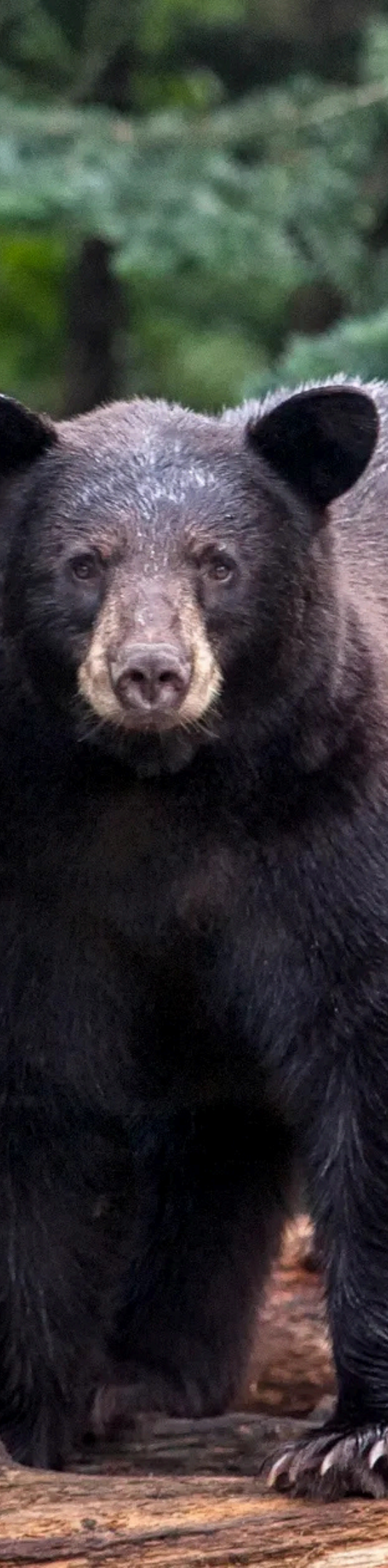


Unfortunately, I took someone's word for it rather than looking up the official stance and recommendations by the park.

Naturally I was mortified, and made sure to always lock up my scented items in a bear locker from then on, no matter the time of day or how crowded an area I was parked in. I was quite lucky this situation wasn't worse, and is what inspired me to do a deep dive into all the rules and best practices surrounding wildlife in Yosemite.

### Pro Tips

- **Use Bear-Proof Containers:** Yosemite requires bear-resistant lockers at all campgrounds and advises their use even for day trips. Store all food, and scented items in these lockers.
- **Never Feed Wildlife:** Feeding animals not only disrupts their natural diet but also makes them dependent on humans. This behavior can lead to aggressive encounters and harm the animals.



- **Keep a Safe Distance:** The park recommends staying at least 50 yards away from bears and 25 yards from other animals. Use binoculars or a zoom lens for a closer look.
- **Dispose of Trash Properly:** Use designated trash and recycling bins, which are designed to keep animals out. If bins are full, take your trash with you instead of leaving it behind.
- **Be Extra Vigilant at Night:** Many animals, especially bears, are more active at night. Keep your campsite clean and avoid leaving out any food or trash after dark.
- **Know How to React to Encounters:** If you encounter a bear, don't run. Make yourself look large, speak firmly, and back away slowly. For smaller animals, simply keep your distance and avoid startling them.

“In my first interview with a Sierra bear we were frightened and embarrassed, both of us, but the bear’s behavior was better than mine”

- **John Muir**

# 9. Trying To See Yosemite in a Day

I have done my share of day trips to Yosemite and it always left me feeling unfulfilled and wanting more.

I had to face it....

Trying to fit everything Yosemite has to offer into a single day see was a recipe for frustration, exhaustion, and a rushed experience that misses the park's essence.

## Why it's a Headache:

- **Overwhelming Options:** Even within Yosemite Valley, the sheer number of highlights—like El Capitan, Half Dome, Bridalveil and Yosemite Falls—can be paralyzing. Where do you even begin?

- **Crowds and Traffic:** We've already discussed the struggle of crowds, but watching long lines of cars eating into your one and only day in Yosemite is enough to make you weep.
- **Physical Burnout:** Rushing between spots without breaks can quickly turn your dream trip into a stressful marathon, leaving you too tired to enjoy the views.

“Adopt the pace of nature: her secret is patience.”

- **Ralph Waldo Emerson**





### Tips to Make the Most of Your Time:

- **Plan for more days:** If you can, choosing to spend an extra day or two in Yosemite will allow you to slow down and take it all in.
- **Start as Early as Possible:** This will not only avoid crowds but allow you to experience the magical Yosemite sunrise.
- **Plan for Another Trip:** Accept that Yosemite is too vast and diverse to experience in a single day. Think of your visit as an introduction, leaving room for future adventures.

“A man came up to a Yosemite ranger who was sitting at the front gate and said,

“I’ve only got one hour to see Yosemite. If you only had one hour to see Yosemite, what would you do?”

And the ranger said, “Well, I’d go right over there, and I’d sit on that rock, and I’d cry.”

- **Nevada Barr**

# 10. Not Preparing to Navigate

Yosemite's roads wind through towering granite walls, lush meadows, and dense forests, but for the unprepared they can be dangerous and stressful.

From hairpin turns to unexpected closures, understanding the challenges ahead can help you relax and enjoy the journey.

## How to Prepare

- **Plan Your Routes:** Yosemite has 5 different entrances. Research the specific roads you'll be traveling and check for seasonal closures or construction updates on Yosemite's official website before your trip.

- **Drive Early or Late:** Avoid peak traffic times by hitting the road early in the morning or later in the evening.
- **Be Ready for Mountain Driving:** Check out [this guide](#) to prepare your vehicle for a long road trip. Check your brakes, tire pressure, etc. If you're not confident on steep or winding roads, take it slow. Always pull over in designated areas to let faster traffic pass.
- **Check the Weather:** Always check the forecast before heading out. Pack chains for your tires in winter months and prepare for sudden weather shifts year-round.

"I crave time in Yosemite like I crave food and water."

- **Tommy Caldwell**





I've found one of my biggest challenges driving through Yosemite is simply keeping my eyes on the road.

It's hard not to feel the pull of these towering walls drawing you in, but on these already steep and dangerous mountain roads, these kinds of distractions can be deadly.

I can't really count how many times I was driving near someone doing a dangerous amount of rubbernecking, instead of simply pulling over and taking in the views safely.

**Conclusion:** Don't be this person. If you've planned out your trip properly there should be plenty of time to pull over and take in the sights.



# 11. Not Having a Backup Plan

I know how much work you put into planning this vacation, and how important it is for everything to go right, but let's face it... things don't always go according to plan.

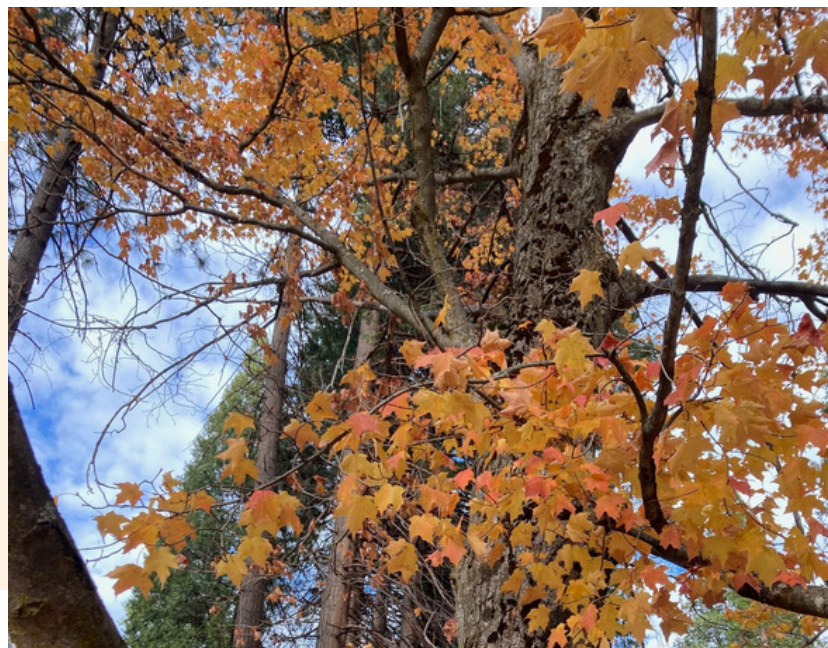
Flexibility is key to enjoying the park to its fullest.

## How to Prepare a Backup Plan

- **Choose Alternate Activities:** Before you arrive, research lesser-known trails and attractions. If your first choice is unavailable, you'll already have another option in mind.
- **Pack for Any Weather:** Bring layers, rain gear, and extra water so you're prepared for sudden changes in temperature or conditions.
- **Stay Informed:** Check the park's [official website](#), visitor centers, or rangers for real-time updates on closures, weather, and crowd levels.
- **Be Willing to Pivot:** If your plans don't work out, embrace the opportunity to discover something new. Sometimes, the best experiences happen when you least expect them.

"The clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness."

- **John Muir**





## **CONGRATULATIONS!**

You are now one step closer to enjoying the vacation of your dreams and avoiding the most common headaches guests experience when traveling to Yosemite.

Once your trip is planned out, accommodations are booked, and you have a dream list of hikes to complete and landmarks to visit, the only question left is... will you explore Yosemite by yourself, or with the help of an expert guide?

**This leads me to the final costly mistake on our list:**

## 12. Not Finding the Perfect Guided Tour

Coming up with a game plan for navigating the roads, reservations, crowds, and dining challenges is an excellent place to start.

Solving these problems is the baseline for a relaxed, stress-free vacation, but **they are just the beginning.**

Yosemite is so much more than a list of boxes to check off.

It is a living breathing organism with a story of its own.

Join us on our **fully immersive** walking or hiking tour **to learn about:**

- **The miracle of its birth**, and why for many reasons, it is so unlikely to exist at all.
- **Its first steps**, going back hundreds of millions of years, as these granite walls first began to take shape.
- **The teenage years**, when it was riddled with volcanic activity, erosion, and quite a few growing pains.
- **And finally... How it has matured across time**, forging itself into a breathtaking monument, eventually giving birth to its very own civilization.



But that's not all!

**As a Bonus** you will also learn about 5 incredible characters, some real and some fictional, who truly embody the spirit of Yosemite. These stories of courage, resilience, tragedy, and lost love will help you build a deep connection with this land and its history.

Click below to learn more about who we are, what we do, and decide if we are the right fit to take your Yosemite adventure to the next level.

Until then, get your plan together, get those bookings in early, and we'll see you out on the trail!

[Find a Tour](#)





Download our FREE Yosemite [scavenger hunt](#) for children (or adults!)

Download our Ultimate [Pre-Trip Checklist](#)

### **Resources:**

- Book your [lodging](#)
- Campground [reservations](#)
- Last minute gateway [lodging options](#)
- Half Dome [permit information](#)
- Backcountry [wilderness permits](#)
- How to [prepare your car](#) for a road trip
- [Shuttles and Public Transportation](#)
- Yosemite Area Regional Transit System - [YARTS](#)
- Get up-to-date weather, road conditions, seasonal and fire information, and much more [right here](#)
- Get your day use reservations at [recreation.gov](#)
- Day use reservation [FAQ's](#)
- [Bear Safety](#)
- Yosemite [wildlife and safety information](#)
- Ahwahnee dining [reservation](#)
- Mountain Room dining [reservation](#)
- Text “ynp” to 333111 for travel notifications
- Yosemite medical services: (209) 372-4637
- Links to the Yosemite NPS [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#) for updates.
- Up to date [trail information](#)
- Interactive [park map](#)
- How to download and use offline maps using [Gaia](#)

### **Supercharge your entire vacation:**

Book a [guided tour](#) with Yosemite Alpine Quest