

100 YEARS,
100 THINGS WE LOVE



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YOSEMITE IN SEPTEMBER

FOR BACKPACKERS, THERE'S NOTHING BETTER IN THE ENTIRE PARK SYSTEM. HOW MUCH OF IT CAN ONE HIKER SEE IN A WEEK? **BY MICHAEL**

All year, we're counting down the things that make the NPS special. See our progress so far at backpacker.com/nps100.

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We're floating on a granite cloud.

At least, that's the sensation we get starting across the slender spine of 9,926-foot Clouds Rest, which levitates between sphincter-puckering abysses of deep air in the heart of Yosemite National Park. Below my left elbow, the rock plunges several hundred feet to forest. Below my right elbow, a cliff face sweeps downward a dizzying 4,000 feet—that's 1,000 feet taller than El Capitan. Half Dome lies just a few miles away and below us—a view that makes anyone with a camera feel like Ansel Adams. Yosemite Valley sprawls a little lower, and, farther off, the Clark Range, Cathedral Range, and the peaks of northern Yosemite slash at the sky.

We can't help but linger over the vista, which is something considering how rarely we'll slow down in the coming days. My friends Todd Arndt, Mark Fenton, Jeff Wilhelm, and I are 7 miles into the first morning of a roughly 150-mile hike through most of the vast sweep of far-off mountains and canyons surrounding us. First, we're hiking a 65-mile horseshoe-shaped route south of Tuolumne Meadows, then we'll resupply and embark on an 86-mile trek north of Tuolumne.

And we'll do it all in a week.

Todd, Mark, and Jeff share my enthusiasm for hiking distances that most people associate with forced marches or bird migrations. But don't accuse us of "rushing through the wilderness." We're not actually moving much faster than an average backpacker. But by starting early, traveling light, and stopping late, we can hike long days in relative comfort. And our motivation is easy for any backpacker to understand: We want to see as much of this park as possible in the time we have.

After all, Yosemite is not just any flagship national park—it helped jump-start the very idea of national parks. You could say this is where today's 84 million-acre National Park System began. In 1864—eight years before the designation of Yellowstone—President Abraham Lincoln signed a law granting Yosemite Valley and the nearby Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias to the state of California to protect. They were the first land tracts preserved by the federal government purely for their scenery, a novel concept at the time. In 1890, Yosemite became America's third national park, a week after Sequoia.

When asked occasionally which national park is the best for backpacking, I naturally say it's impossible to pick just one. As someone who's left bootprints not just here

but in Glacier, Grand Canyon, Grand Teton, Yellowstone, Sequoia, Kings Canyon, Rocky Mountain, Mt. Rainier, Olympic, North Cascades, Acadia, and Denali, I know the competition is stiff.

But if pressed, I'd venture that Yosemite in September deserves number one. Beyond iconic hikes like Half Dome, innumerable, lesser-known spots like Clouds Rest will completely recalibrate your natural-beauty meter. Then pile on the park's inspirational history, the logistical convenience of free trailhead shuttle buses in the high country along Tioga Pass Road, and a permit system based on trailhead quotas instead of nightly campsite designations (giving you flexibility to choose how far to hike each day and where to camp each night). Finally, top it off with the bug-free, reliably sunny days of late summer and early fall. With all that going for it, you'd think the Yosemite backcountry would be teeming with people. But the park's infamous crowds stick to the tourist-friendly Valley and a few of its trails, like the Mist Trail and Yosemite Falls.

Case in point: We're alone on the summit of Clouds Rest, with easily one of the best views in the entire park. The only problem with our vantage is that we can see our entire route, and the audaciousness of our plan sinks in. I wonder whether our 20-plus-miles-per-day itinerary may be overambitious for Yosemite's punishing contours. I stare out at the Clark Range in southeast Yosemite, which suddenly looks very, very far away. We plan to cross it—tomorrow. Then I spin 180 degrees and look out at the peaks on the northern boundary of Yosemite. They look even farther away in the opposite direction. And we're supposed to reach them in... well... three days.

I swallow hard. From Clouds Rest, it looks like we're just a few bites into eating a whale, and I'm suddenly feeling queasy.

WE CAN SEE OUR ENTIRE ROUTE, AND THE AUDACIOUSNESS OF OUR PLAN SINKS IN.

Scaling Half Dome is a rite of passage for Yosemite hikers, so even though we're just halfway through a monster day that won't end until dark, we're going up it. Beneath a clear sky, gusts of wind buffet us as we haul ourselves up the cable route, climbing several hundred vertical feet of severely angled granite.

Despite the inevitable traffic jams (yes, even in September Half Dome stays busy), a block-party atmosphere prevails. Complete strangers exchange "Well, heck, look at us!" expressions. Jeff, Todd, and Mark can't stop grinning. Halfway up, we chat with three sisters, well into middle age and none of them much for hiking, but one decided they needed to share some big adventure together and, by gosh, now they're going up this thing. On top, we take the requisite photos standing on The Visor, a

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THE FIRST 100 YEARS

During the 1920s, spotting a bear in Yellowstone and Yosemite was all too easy. Park staff facilitated nightly "bear shows" that allowed visitors to grab a seat and gawk at hungry bruins rummaging through open trash pits. The show wasn't without side effects: namely, generations of food-conditioned bears with little fear of humans. By the late 1960s, the Park Service (prompted in part by naturalist Aldo Leopold) implemented the first bear management plans designed to reduce human-bear encounters via the use of metal storage lockers, aversive conditioning, and vigilant litter enforcement. In 1983, the NPS enacted a system-wide ban on feeding all wildlife. The measures appear to be working: A 2014 study found that Yosemite's bears are once again eating a diet similar to that of the early 1900s. *-Trent Knoss*

PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) GENNY FULLERTON; PAT & CHUCK BLACKLEY; ISTOCK-
PHOTO.COM / GREGCHRISTMAN. ILLUSTRATION BY KIM SIELBECK. TEXT BY
MAREN HORJUS (SWIMMING)



All year, we're counting down the



WILDLIFE AT WORK

PRAISE BE TO RANGERS, BUT THESE WORKING ANIMALS HELP MAKE THE PARK EXPERIENCE EVEN MORE UNIQUE.

1) Grand Canyon Mules Want to check out life below the rim? Can't—or aren't willing to—pound out the miles? These long-eared taxis have helped canyon visitors go deep since 1887.

2) Rocky Mountain Llamas Llamas have been working for Rocky Mountain National Park for TK years, primarily packing supplies in and out of backcountry privies and huts. Thank these altitude-adjusted haulers when you aren't packing a wag bag down from Longs Peak.

3) Denali Sled Dogs Logging more than 3,000 miles of patrol each winter, these furry buddies have been helping Denali's rangers patrol the backcountry and move around supplies since 1917. Born and bred in the national park (lucky dogs), they are the only sled dogs in the United States that help protect our public

READER'S CHOICE THEY MAKE US FEEL TINY

When hiking Zion's Narrows from the top-down, the sense of isolation and need for self-reliance was life changing. Feeling small in a very big world is a great thing. *-Robin Pfeifer, via Facebook*



THE FINEST ROADS

The car ride to the trailhead is usually a means to an end, in the most literal sense. Nowhere is that less true than the famed park roads snaking through the marquis national parks. In some cases, the roads were built specifically to show off the best of the scenery. So next time you're in a traffic jam on Going-to-the-Sun Road in Glacier, take a deep breath and enjoy the view.

ledge jutting out over a vertical half-mile of thin air above Yosemite Valley. Then we chat with a couple just finishing their two-day rock climb of Half Dome's famous big wall.

Even though we're on a 150-mile odyssey, we're no less excited for the three sisters on possibly the biggest one-day adventure of their lives. And even though that climber couple just lived for two days on a 2,000-foot cliff, they're no less jazzed for us. Half Dome—like all of Yosemite itself—is a great, big melting pot under the Sierra sun, where people from all over the world cross paths in pursuit of their own favorite flavor of adventure.

I admit my flavor is an obscure one that most people don't pick. Although I've made several visits to Yosemite, I have an irrepressible, perhaps slightly irrational fear that I might not hike every worthwhile trail and peak here before I'm old—at which point I'll live out my tragic last days drowning in regret over what might have been. I've been told I have a severe case of WOCD (Wilderness Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder). The more I get out, the more I crave the next hike or climb.

Fortunately, my companions suffer from the same malady. Todd and Mark have hiked with me across the Grand Canyon and back—more than 44 miles and 11,000 vertical feet—in a day. The three of us thru-hiked the John Muir Trail in a week. Jeff is a rookie on Team Obsession, but he was given full disclosure before signing on.

So no one complains of fatigue or blisters as we make our way south from Half Dome, even as we hike late into the first evening. We spread out and grow quiet, each falling into his own pace.

As we're crossing a high plateau above the Illilouette Creek Valley, Mark stops abruptly, points, and calls out, "There's a bear!" In the sparse forest, the large black bear bounds away. It stops maybe 50 yards off and stares back at us, as if reconsidering who should be running from whom. The bear has a point. We have a schedule to keep.

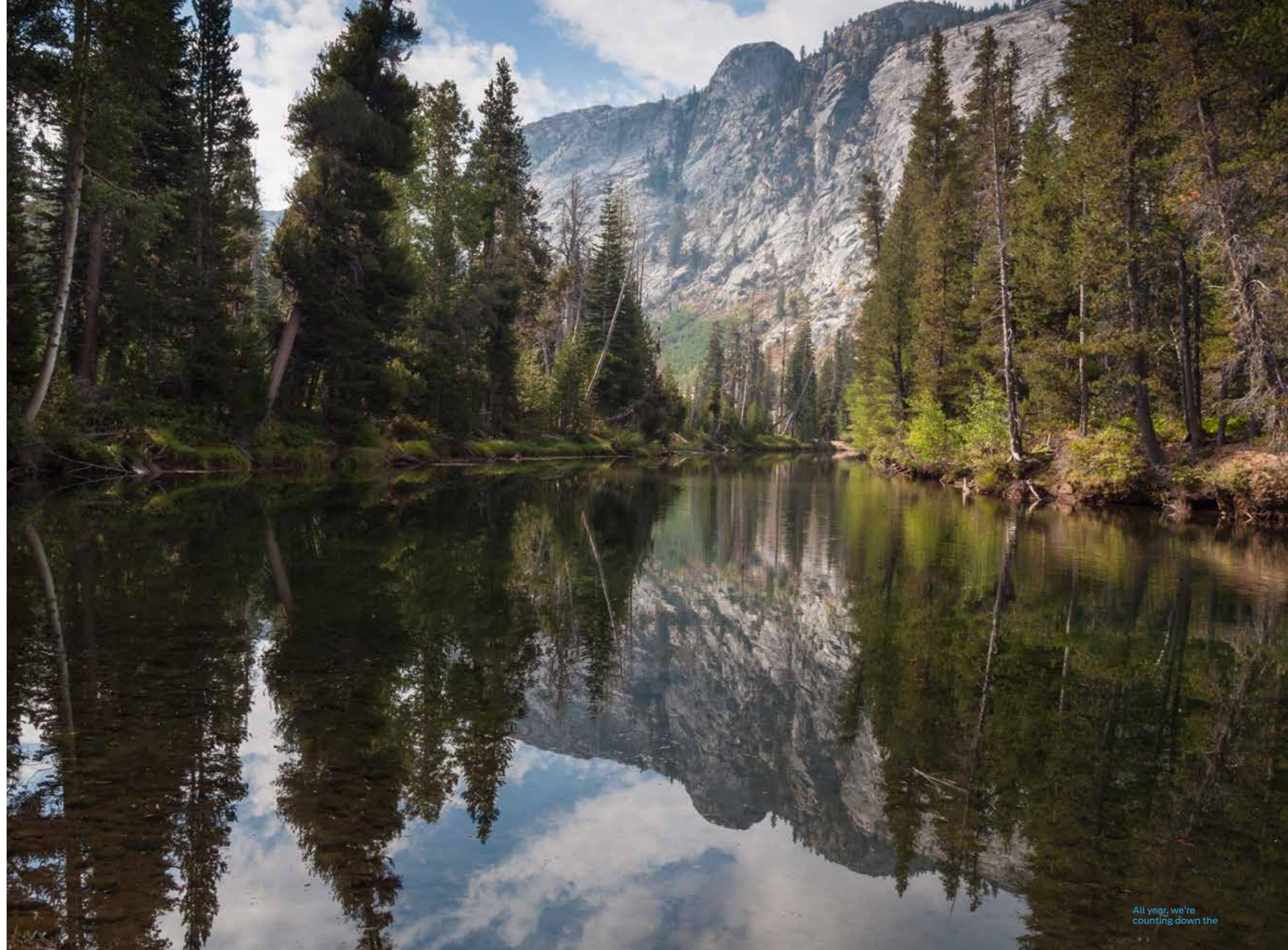
Sucking air on the final switchbacks to 11,500-foot Red Peak Pass—the highest pass reachable by trail in Yosemite—we enter a slender notch that looks like it was chopped into the ridge by a hatchet. A mind-boggling array of terrain sprawls ahead: the busted-up, burgundy face of 11,699-foot Red Peak; the Ottaway Lakes, beckoning overheated backpackers; and ahead of us, a constellation of smaller lakes sprinkled across a plain of reddish-orange rocks.

These are the headwaters of the Merced River, which, many miles downstream, thunders over 594-foot Nevada Fall and showers heavy mist onto hikers below 318-foot Vernal Fall before meandering through Yosemite Valley. There, thousands of people clamor nose to butt along popular trails. Here, we see no one. Even in remote areas where we might expect to encounter a few other backpackers, we feel like we have the park all to ourselves. That's in part because traffic fades everywhere in September, but also because we're hiking from early in the morning until late into the evening, when most other backcountry travelers are lying in their bags or lounging in camp chairs.

We hike into our second evening over a 9,500-foot plateau above the Merced Canyon, around mile 40, through a forest of widely spaced pine trees, glacial-erratic boulders, and deafening quiet. After dark, we lay out our bags on a yard-size granite slab sitting midstream in the Lyell Fork of the Merced River and watch shooting stars flash across the sky.

We're all tired, of course, but no one is wrecked. When Mark says, "I'm feeling pretty good, actually," he gets nods from Todd and Jeff. That's a relief to me—I have a personal stake in their comfort.

Our ultra-hiking adventures share one common denominator: me as Planner-in-Chief. Truth be told, I have,



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at times, pushed us beyond everyone's comfortable physical limits. (After seven days averaging 30 miles a day on the JMT, we all suffered bloody socks.) It's to my friends' great credit—and my good fortune—that they refrain from blaming me for any collateral damage from our escapades, and keep coming back for more, knowing the payoff far exceeds the pain.

The creek in Virginia Canyon runs shallow but energetically on this September afternoon. Water pours over granite ledges into pools where a sun-blasted backpacker can acquire an ice cream headache by sitting neck-deep for 15 seconds. When Todd and I ease our sizzling-hot feet into one frigid pool, we both sigh with relief.

It's the first day of our four-day, 86-mile hike north of Tuolumne Meadows. Work demands forced Mark and Jeff to skip this second leg of our Yosemitethon—and it's their loss. We cruise past views of the famous spire of Cathedral Peak and 12,000-footers like Mt. Conness. We waltz through a wonderland of anonymous domes and valleys.

I think of Yosemite Valley as the park's polished stone, clean and shiny, the place that inspired John Muir to write: "Every rock in its walls seems to glow with life." But in the backcountry, which of course Muir also championed, you find Yosemite's rough cuts—cliffs shattered by time, boulders strewn about meadows. This is Yosemite's unglamorous, starkly beautiful side, only accessible through hard work and sweat.

That effort rewards us with vistas like Burro Pass, at 10,650 feet, where Todd and I look down on upper Matterhorn Canyon's boulder gardens and meadows ringed by cliffs, pinnacles, and 12,264-foot Matterhorn Peak. Beyond Burro, we cross a cirque below aptly named Sawtooth Ridge, followed by arduous climbs to two more passes over 10,000 feet. By evening, we cross Seavey Pass, then make a quad-jellying, 1,500-foot descent.

Shuffling wearily up to Benson Lake at dusk, we find an unlikely sight: a sprawling, sandy beach that looks like it got lost on its way to Southern California. After hiking almost 23 miles today, I'm ready to peel myself out of my achy body like a snake shedding its skin. Todd and I exchange tired smiles and he says, in perfect understatement, "That was kind of a long day." Wriggling our bare feet in the cool sand and wading into the numbing water fires every pleasure neuron in my body. It's a sensation every backpacker knows, but a gonzo hike like this magnifies the feeling. A gargantuan moon rises over 10,000-foot peaks awash in dusky red light.

On the sixth afternoon of our week in Yosemite, Todd and I discover The Worst Trail In Yosemite. That's what we dub the Rodgers Canyon Trail, which descends 5,000 feet over more than 9 waterless, scorching miles. As we drop in elevation, clouds of gnats swarm our heads. We run out of water before hitting a stretch of shadeless, sagebrush slopes.

As the heat sautés my brain, I think: *Fool. This is the price of hubris.* Between mouthfuls of dust and bugs, I'm cursing my decision to pile on so many miles that we ended up on this godforsaken path—until we reach the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne River and step through an invisible doorway into paradise.

Crystalline water tumbles over rounded, golden river stones. Cliffs rise on both sides. Todd and I wade in and sit chest-deep in the water. Todd says what I'm thinking: "I'm glad we hiked The Worst Trail in Yosemite, because it brought us here."

The Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne resembles Yosemite Valley, but twice as long, without all of the people, buildings, and cars. Waterfalls and cascades roar



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ARCHES

Lower 48 has worked itself deeper into the collective consciousness than this towering mass, hanging over Seattle with an air of power and mystique. No doubt it's a beauty, decorated with tumbling glaciers the same way a classical sculpture wears her marble shawl. In late summer, the wildflowers

PHOTOS BY (FROM LEFT) ISTOCKPHOTO.COM
FOTOSTOCK. ILLUSTRATION BY JOE CIARDIEL

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THESE THRONE ROOMS

1) Desolation Peak, North Cascades National Park This privy has arguably the most backside-exposure, but the draft is well worth it: A visit to this loo feels like releasing your payload right off the side of a cliff (not that you would, of course). And with the 6.8-mile hike it takes to get there (22.8 without taking the Ross Lake water taxi), the commode's likely to be all yours.

2) Boulder Pass, Glacier National Park Boulder Pass Campground lies 18 miles from the Kintla Lake ranger station, but there's no better end to a long day like a good stint on the throne. This open-air privy has you facing the soaring facades of Kintla and Kinnerly Peaks (both around 10,000 feet). Go earlier in the season to conclude your experience with a handful of snow.

3) Hermit Creek Campground, Grand Canyon National Park Ascend the stairs to this raised platform 7.5 miles from Hermit's Rest trailhead. Shade trees and wooden-slat walls protect your modesty but block none of the views: stratified canyon walls rise on either side, and the sense of majesty will inspire your best work on the can.



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THE PASSPORT

Now here's some philately we can all get behind: Since 1986, the NPS has offered visitors unique park stamps free of charge at nearly all of its 407 units. Kids' stuff? Maybe it started that way, but now, getting that stamp is one small part of what you love about seeing a new park. And you're almost certainly eyeing your next trip already. Maybe you'll pass this precious heirloom down to your kids someday. More likely, they'll want to start their own. *—Trent Knoss*

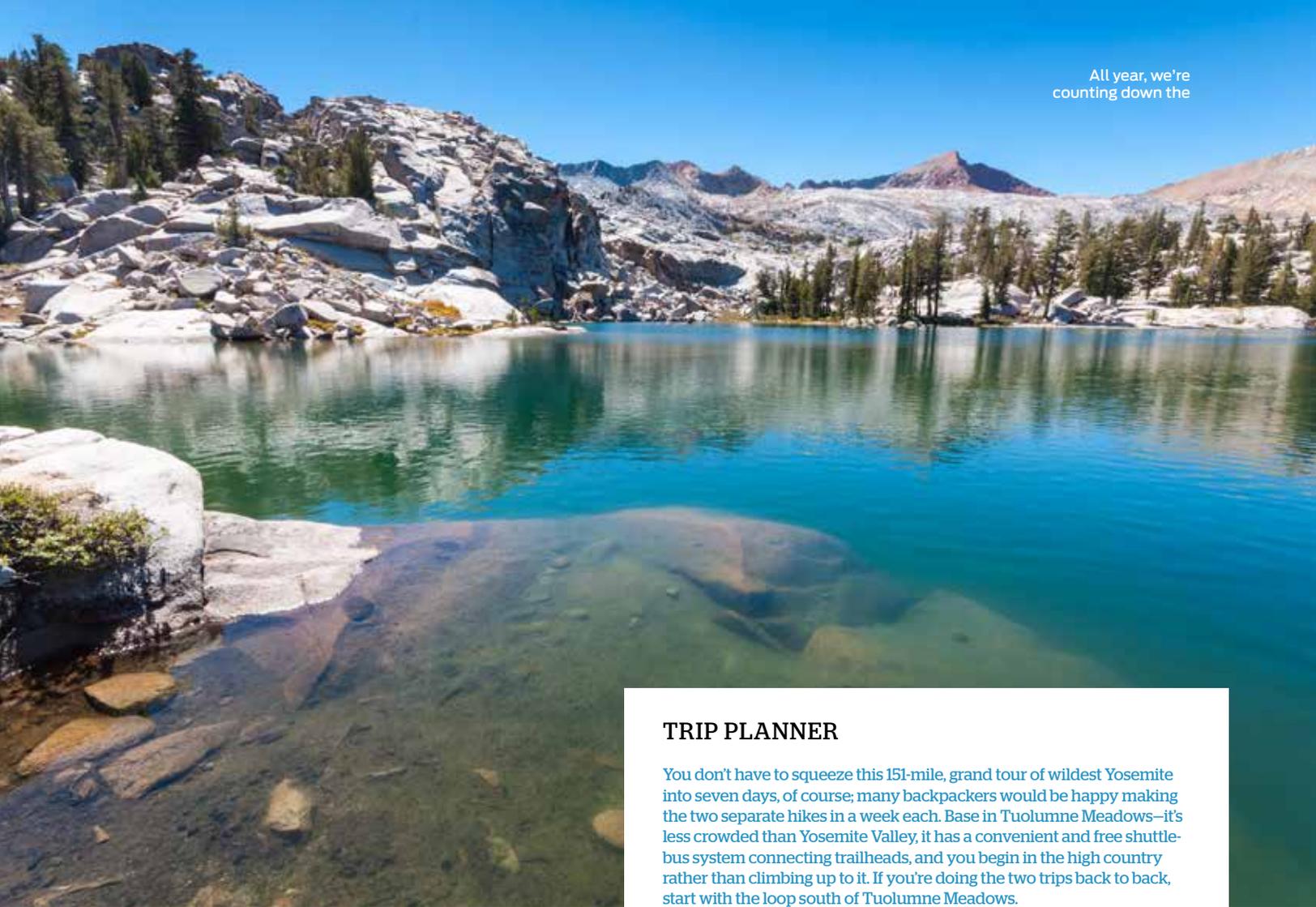
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WALK-IN PERMITS

With all due respect to the planners among us who get the *exact* itinerary they dialed in six months before their trip, there's a certain something gratifying about showing up, bag packed, at the backcountry permit office and throwing yourself at the mercy of the rangers. Simply put: It lets you explore the places they love. Often that's the less-tracked but no-less-stunning spots with all the charm and none of the name recognition. There's plenty of park to go around, even for the procrastinators. *—Casey Lyons*

THE NEXT 100 YEARS

It's one thing to generate your own power. It's quite another to generate such a surplus you give back to the grid. But that's what the ranger station at John Day Fossil Beds National Monument in Oregon does. Boasting a wide array of energy-nipping features (like argon-filled, triple-glaze windows), the structure is becoming the model for new, energy-efficient construction around the park system. To wit, the NPS opened a net zero visitor center at King Gillette Ranch, California. *—Catherina Leipold*



around every corner. Boulders choke the streambed. Green conifer forest climbs canyon walls. The trail ascends switchbacks above the Muir Gorge, where granite plunges straight into whitewater, delivering us to a broad ledge overlooking the canyon.

The Worst Trail in Yosemite suddenly seems like the best.

In late afternoon on our last day, Todd and I scramble 200 feet to the crown of 10,850-foot Mt. Hoffmann, about smack-dab in the middle of Yosemite. I turn to look at Clouds Rest—some 6 miles south of Hoffmann as the crow flies—where our odyssey began. Hoffman's exciting finish and commanding vista reduce us to giggling children. Todd—a Midwest-raised, mild-mannered physician—hops around burbling, "This is unbelievable! It's incredible! What a view!"

From this windy summit, we can see virtually the entire park: Half Dome, Yosemite Valley, the Clark and Cathedral Ranges, the peaks of northern Yosemite. In other words: We're looking at where we've hiked for seven glorious days. All that remains are a few easy, downhill miles to our car at Tenaya Lake.

"Wow, we actually did everything," Todd marvels.

Before this week, I thought I'd seen the best of this flagship national park. I was wrong. Its remotest corners are where backpackers find the raw Yosemite. It's where we find the reasons we go out there: the quiet forest, the solitary campsite, the glassy lake reflecting a rampart of granite pinnacles.

Don't settle for Yosemite's marquis features—that's like licking off the frosting but not eating the whole cupcake. Sure, hike Half Dome, the JMT, and the Mist Trail, but then go deeper. That's where you'll find the best argument for calling Yosemite America's number one park for backpacking.

I recommend doing it in September. But you might want to take more than a week. ■

TRIP PLANNER

You don't have to squeeze this 151-mile, grand tour of wildest Yosemite into seven days, of course; many backpackers would be happy making the two separate hikes in a week each. Base in Tuolumne Meadows—it's less crowded than Yosemite Valley, it has a convenient and free shuttle-bus system connecting trailheads, and you begin in the high country rather than climbing up to it. If you're doing the two trips back to back, start with the loop south of Tuolumne Meadows.

SOUTHERN LOOP: 65 MILES From Sunrise Lakes trailhead on Tioga Pass Road, connect the following places: Clouds Rest, Half Dome, Illilouette Creek Valley, Red Peak Pass, Triple Peak Fork of the Merced River, Lewis Creek Valley, Vogelsang Pass, Rafferty Creek, and the JMT/PCT. Finish at the Rafferty Creek/Lyell Canyon trailhead (where you can catch a shuttle bus back to your car if you're done).

Option: Take a night off the trail at a lodge in Lee Vining, 30 minutes from Tuolumne outside Yosemite's east entrance. Scarf a dinner of fish tacos (and a breakfast burrito the next morning) at the Whoa Nellie Deli, in the Mobil station at the junction of CA 120 and US 395; whoanelliedeli.com.

NORTHERN LOOP: 86 MILES From Tuolumne Meadows, hike counterclockwise starting on the PCT and connect these places: Glen Aulin, Virginia Canyon, Matterhorn Canyon, Burro Pass, Mule Pass, Rock Island Pass, Rancheria Creek Valley, Kerrick Canyon, Benson Lake, Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne River, Glen Aulin, and May Lake. Descend to Tioga Pass Road and walk east less than a mile to your car at Sunrise Lakes trailhead.

Note: If you plan to start the second hike immediately, leave a resupply of food in the bear lockers at the trailhead (stash it there before the first hike). Buy fresh food like cheese at the Tuolumne Meadows Store.

MAP Trails Illustrated *Yosemite No. 206*, \$12; natgeomaps.com

PERMITS Apply for wilderness permits up to 26 weeks in advance (\$5 plus \$5/person). If you want to climb Half Dome, specify the request in your application and you'll be eligible for permits reserved for backpackers. Half Dome permits cost an extra \$8/person.

CONTACT (209) 372-0740; nps.gov/yose