



Yosemite: Our October National Park of the Month (from SmarterTravel) Deb Hopewell

Yosemite National Park, perhaps more than any other, is responsible for the broader vision of wilderness conservation in this country, thanks to a Scottish immigrant named John Muir who fell in love with this land, fought to protect its natural wonders and in the process founded the Sierra Club.

Famous for its spectacular, towering granite formations, think iconic Half Dome and El Capitan, arguably the most famous climbing faces the world – Yosemite is the nation's fourth most popular park with nearly 4 million visitors last year, most of them converging on the 1 by 7.5-mile Yosemite Valley. From the valley, nature-lovers can gaze on or hike to famous falls including Yosemite Falls (the highest in North America at 2,245 feet), Bridal veil, and Nevada falls. But surrounding Yosemite Valley is nearly 1200 square miles of high meadows, crystalline lakes, ancient giant Sequoias and evergreen forests – a vast Sierra wilderness that remains relatively untouched.

Why October is the Perfect time to go: Two words – fewer people. From May through September, the valley floor takes on an almost festival-like atmosphere as hundreds of thousands of visitors' crowd into the park. But come October, traffic gridlock on the valley floor eases considerably and hikers on even the most popular trails – like the Mist Trail and the Muir Trail – no longer resemble lines of marching ants.

While the higher elevations are evergreen, Wawona Meadows and Yosemite Valley have started turning fall colors. Daytime temperatures are comfortably warm in the valley (high 60's to low 70s) but higher elevations at night can be chilly, so be sure to bring layers. This isn't the time for waterfall viewing (most have dried to a trickle by now), but that is a small price for the peacefulness you will enjoy.

Why it's Great at Other Time of the Year: Winter in Yosemite can be nothing short of magical. While Tioga Road and the Road to Glacier Point are closed by November (which makes most of the backcountry inaccessible), Yosemite Valley and Wawona are open year-round. Sip hot chocolate in the warming hut after ice skating at Half Dome Village; enjoy downhill skiing, snowboarding and snow tubing at Yosemite Ski and Snowboard Area; or cross-country ski on the trails at Crane Flat. Park rangers also guide snowshoe tours from mid-December through March. Of course, once the snow melts, the waterfalls will be in full glory as spring comes to the park – with tourists not far behind.

If you Go, Don't Miss: John F Kennedy, Judy Garland, William Shatner, Steve Jobs, Lucile Ball – these are just a few notables who have bunked down at the historic Ahwahnee Hotel in Yosemite Valley. It's more than just a shining example of what has become known as Parkitecture: Its grand public spaces and dining room where Stanley Kubrick's inspiration for the hotel's interior in "The Shining". You don't have to book a (pricey) room to enjoy the hotel. The magnificent Great Lounge, flanked on either end by enormous cut-sandstone fireplaces, is open to the public for sitting and relaxing. Dinner at the Grand Dining Room with its views of Yosemite Falls, is a bucket-list must – but for a lower price tag, try the newly renovated bar with its tasty small plates and nice cocktail menu.

October Bonus Pick: Mammoth Caves National Park: Central Kentucky's hardwood forests are bedecked in full fall foliage by October, covering the rolling hills of Mammoth Caves National Park in vivid hues of gold, orange, purple and red. Days are typically mild and warm (low to mid 70s) – perfect for hiking the park's 85 miles of trails or lazily paddling down the Green River. But beneath the autumnal carpet of color lies a completely different world: the park's titular cave system, the longest in the world and a UNESCO World Heritage site. More than 400 miles of passageways have been mapped to date with "no end in sight," as explorers continue to discover more. Park guides lead a number of cave tours, ranging from easy one-hours tours to an 'extremely strenuous' six-hour exploration that requires climbing, hiking and crawling through the passage.

Want to learn more about Yosemite National Park? Check out Oyster's Ultimate Yosemite National Park Travel Guide.