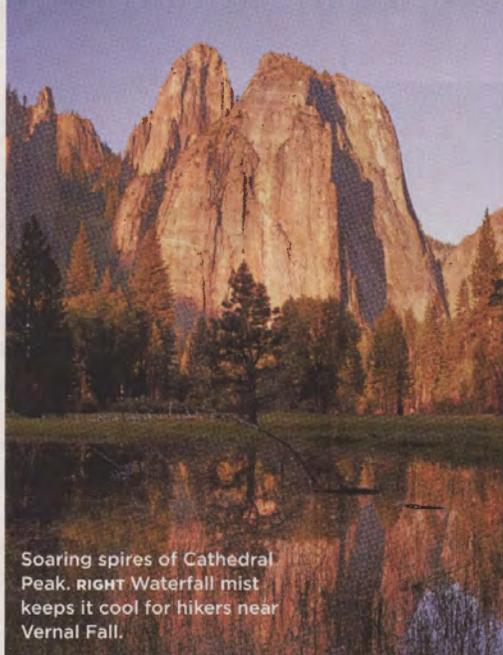


# BEST OF THE BIG THREE

Your ultimate guide to Yosemite, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon:  
California's High Sierra trio of spectacular national parks

**RAINBOW-TRIMMED WATERFALLS**, stark granite spires, alpine lakes, pristine meadows, giant sequoia trees, raging rivers—you'll find them all in three of California's spectacular national parks: Yosemite, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon. What to see first? Here's our "best-of-the-best" picks for this triumvirate of national treasures.





Soaring spires of Cathedral Peak. **RIGHT** Waterfall mist keeps it cool for hikers near Vernal Fall.



Bring a lawn chair for the ultimate spectator sport at Yosemite—spying rock climbers tackling El Capitan.

ALEX FARNUM



## 1 Yosemite National Park

This 750,000-acre World Heritage Site and California's first national park delivers a king's ransom of geologic wonders, including two of the tallest free-falling waterfalls in the world, dozens of granite domes polished by glaciers, and El Capitan, the largest single piece of granite on earth. Here are seven ways to explore and play. **INFO** Parklands and trails: [nps.gov/yose](http://nps.gov/yose); lodging, meals, and activities: [yosemitepark.com](http://yosemitepark.com)

**FLOAT DOWN A RIVER** In Yosemite Valley, the Merced River's summer flow is typically so gentle that your raft lazily meanders; you barely have to paddle. Rent an inflatable raft at Curry Village, float 3 miles downstream, then hop a shuttle bus back to your starting point.

**PEDAL THE VALLEY** Rent a bike (or bring your own) and ride the Yosemite Valley Bike Path, admiring El Capitan's majesty as you pedal 12 miles of level, paved trails. Park your wheels at a convenient bike rack and walk up the short trails to Lower Yosemite Fall and Mirror Lake.

**GAZE AT THE NIGHT SKY** Pack a picnic supper and head up to Glacier Point in time for sunset, when Half Dome turns pink from the bottom up, then watch the sky fill with stars. To have an expert guide you through the heavens, join a Glacier Point Stargazing Tour, a bus trip that departs from Yosemite Lodge at the Falls (summer only).

**WALK TO WATERY WONDERS** Though you can certainly enjoy many of Yosemite's spectacular waterfalls without expending much effort, the challenging 5.4-mile loop hike to Vernal Fall and Nevada Fall is worth the work. Take the free shuttle bus to Happy Isles, then follow the Mist Trail

as it ascends a granite staircase to awe-inspiring Vernal Fall. Continue uphill past the Emerald Pool to Nevada Fall.

**RELAX WITH A COCKTAIL** Order a martini or light meal at the Ahwahnee Bar and enjoy the elegance and architecture of one of America's premier park lodges, even if you're not lucky enough to stay the night. Unlike the dining room, the bar has no dress code—hiking boots are welcome.

**NAB AN ALPINE TENT CABIN** Imagine hiking deep into Yosemite's wild and rugged high country, and ending the day there with a first-rate dinner, a bunk in a tent cabin, and a hot breakfast the next morning. Five Yosemite High Sierra Camps are spaced miles apart along a loop trail that begins at Tuolumne Meadows. Though spots tend to get booked in advance, give it a go even later in summer, when last-minute cancellations make tents available. In summer, check current availability at [yosemitepark.com](http://yosemitepark.com).

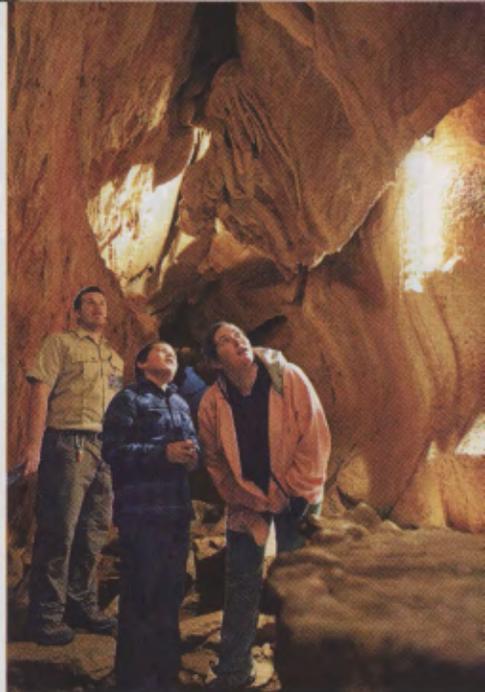
**HIKE AND BE AWED** If you have only one day to hike in Yosemite, opt for the spectacular 8.5-mile Panorama Trail, which is downhill most of the way and delivers nonstop views. Take the morning tour bus from Yosemite Lodge at the Falls to the trailhead at Glacier Point.



### 3 Kings Canyon National Park

The canyon of the Kings River is carved to a depth of 8,000 feet, making it one of the deepest in North America—even deeper than the Grand Canyon. The Kings Canyon Scenic Byway (Highway 180) winds its way through the canyon, uncovering these five top spots.

**INFO** Parklands and trails: [nps.gov/seki](http://nps.gov/seki); lodging, meals, and activities: [sequoia-kingscanyon.com](http://sequoia-kingscanyon.com)



**CLOCKWISE** Bird-watch from boardwalks protecting sensitive meadows; the General Grant Tree, third-largest tree in the world; Boyden Cavern.



**SAUNTER BY THE RIVER** The 1.5-mile self-guided loop trail around fern-filled Zumwalt Meadow shows off the best of Kings Canyon, including a close-up look at the master carver, the South Fork Kings River, and big views of Grand Sentinel and North Dome.

**TOUR A CAVE** Magnificent Boyden Cavern hides beneath the 2,000-foot-high marble walls of the Kings Gates. A 45-minute guided walking tour through the cavern's main passageway shows off its highlights (bring a sweater or fleece; the cave can be surprisingly chilly).

**CATCH A BIG ONE** Lucky anglers brag about a catch-and-release rate of more than 100 trout per day in the South Fork Kings River at Cedar Grove. To bypass

the crowds, hike the Mist Falls Trail from Road's End. Just below the falls the water swirls with trout, but the action doesn't start until July or later.

**TAKE A STROLL OR ROLL** The Roaring River Falls make a powerful noise as water funnels through a narrow gorge into the South Fork Kings River. This boisterous cascade is accessed by a short (less than ½-mile) paved trail, a perfect choice for wheelchairs, baby strollers, and explorers of all abilities.

**COZY UP IN A CABIN** For a rustic, old-fashioned lodging experience, reserve a stay at Grant Grove Cabins. Best bets are the upgraded historic cabins with private baths, but any cabin makes a great base camp for visiting the giant sequoias at Grant Grove.

—ANN MARIE BROWN



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